Ambedkar, Buddhism, and Post-secularism: Inner Life, Politics, and Subalternity

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Introduction

1 The current debate on “post-secularism” and “subalternity” opens up a theoretical space for conceptualizing alternative modernities in which caste-based and non-secular practices continue to negotiate with practices of democracy and citizenship. In what follows, aspects of this relationship will be explored in the work of Dalit Neo-Buddhist thought, with special reference to the inner life of those who have converted to Buddhism as a viable tool for self-affirmation and emancipation. The present essay seeks to do this in a way that addresses issues that are currently of concern in social sciences but also offers new ways of thinking about Buddhist perspectives in India and makes them more readily available to a variety of disciplines.1

2 Over the past twenty years, the concept of secularism has been radically questioned (Bhargava 1998). Critical scholarship has taken the lead to develop new concepts and identify practices outside the oppositional construct of secularism and religion. Sometimes it has gone so far as to dismiss secularism as a false ideology articulated in the West and ill-fitted for societies elsewhere. According to Partha Chatterjee, Indian secularism is dictated by the thematic language of post-enlightenment thought, is significantly different from Western secularism, and thus cannot be explained from “the range of referents signified by the original concepts of secularism” (Chatterjee 1995:12). Ashis Nandy has bemoaned the failure of state secularism to check the rise of communalism due to the lack of society’s secularization (Nandy 1998). In a strand of religious studies inspired by Talal Asad, the “secular” refers to an epistemic order that enables a particular way of governing religion in modern nation-states. Since a straightforward “narrative of progress from the religious to the secular is no longer
acceptable” (Asad 2003:1), any effort to understand a meaningful difference between
the two requires a simultaneous effort to understand both concepts. In the post-
colonial era, it has become imperative to look at this relationship with critical acumen
as religion has been reclaimed in matters of faith, or salvation and based on identity in
diverse political settings across the world.

This text explores these theoretical developments in the context of South Asia, where
B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), a leader of the ex-untouchable community of Mahars in
Maharashtra, and the main author of India’s constitution, has provided one of the most
insightful commentaries on Buddhism. On October 14, 1956, Babasaheb Ambedkar
converted from Hinduism, which he had rejected at a conference in Yeola in 1935, to
found Navayana (new vehicle) as a sect of modern Indian Buddhism. On that day, he
publicly adopted Buddhism at a dhama deeksha (religious initiation) ceremony held in
Nagpur and began the mass conversion movement of Dalits away from Hinduism. The
text, The Buddha and His Dhamma, which rewrote India’s philosophical and political
traditions, was published in 1957 shortly after Ambedkar’s death.

Ambedkar’s foundational text on Buddhism exemplified the kind of inquiry that opens
up possibilities for creating new solidarities while mounting a compelling critique of
Vedic injunctions on caste. Its audaciousness motivated hundreds of Dalits who were
assigned a low social status in the caste hierarchy to come together to make its vision
real. Navayana marked its distinctiveness by rejecting the scriptures of three other
accepted ways of Buddhism—the Theravada or Hinayana, the Mahayana, and the
Vajrayana. Ambedkar reconceptualized Buddhism as a religion that questioned the
absurdities and inequities propagated in ancient texts and acted as a guide to the inner
life of its adherents (Omvedt 2003). The apparent capacity of religious protest, long
delegitimized as premodern, to facilitate involvement in the public sphere and ground
civil society in its relations with state power is a centerpiece of his renewed attention
to faith and belief. The essay focuses on Ambedkar’s multi-layered response to the
perennial uncertainty and controversy about the location of Dalits in Hinduism. His
reformulation of Traditional Buddhism that turns into solidarity is an acceptance of the
loss that Dalits might feel when freed of the constraints of an unjust caste society.

In what follows, the first section briefly addresses the interpretive anxiety in Buddhist
literature about scriptural authenticity given the claims of multiplicity and unity in
Buddhist texts. These texts, which present new quandaries for Ambedkar, also offer
hermeneutic tools for making sense of reframing the Buddhist tradition as a whole. The
next section explores methodological questions related to analytical categories such as
“subaltern,” “subalternity,” and conversion. To elaborate on these categories, this
section first begins with a provocation in its juxtaposition of analytical categories from
two different discourses: “subalternity” as a relational position in conceptualizing
power, and “post-secularism” as persistence or resurgence of religious beliefs or
practices in the present. It then turns to examine the concept of “subalternity” to show
whether it is a relevant lens to understand Dalit subjectivity and agency today. The
second part of this text reflects on the term “post-secularism” as a means for
understanding Dalit politics. Post-secularism can generally be understood as raising the
limitations of the secularization thesis rather than initiating its demise. The final
section depicts the complex system of meanings and practices that characterize
conversion and blend with an agency’s turn to Buddhist ethics. Through conversion,
Dalits would inaugurate a new political space and religious authority through a theory
of social action. This implies disavowing a graded society in favor of a new social grouping based on the normative presuppositions of Buddhist ethics. Ambedkar felt the process of critical self-affirmation, techniques of self-restraint, and inclusive empathy would eventually enable the Dalits and other communities to construct radical alternatives to the nation-state project. I argue that Ambedkar’s interpretation of Buddhist ethics is a moral phenomenology concerned with the transformation of experience. The reorientation he envisages when persuading this audience to choose Buddhism eventually appeals to engage in an ethical-political project whose struggles for fairness emphasize the eventual overthrow of a theory of knowledge inspired by Brahmanical texts and verses.

Buddhism, Religion, and Dalits: Research Objectives

6 Issues of chronology and authorship are the main challenges for studying Indian philosophy. Most scholars present a history of Buddhism that originated in India in 563–483 BC and spread across Asia and the world. Gail Omvedt (2003) explains that there is “enough uncertainty in what the words of the Buddha really were, in terms of standards of historical scholarship, to make various interpretations possible” (p. 8). As against those who argued for a Vedic origin to Buddhist thought, Bronkhorst claims that the *sramana* movement was a separate movement that the Brahmins eventually felt compelled to include with their own culture (Bronkhorst 2007). However, most agree that in the earliest Buddhist literature, the Pali canon, the Brahmins have been depicted as the dominant intellectual class. The Buddhist tradition began as a profound philosophy that reacted to the discontent with *srauta* rites (rituals involving sacrifice) and turned Brahmanical ontology on its head, ethicizing even more critical religious terms (Gombrich 1996; Chakravarty 1987).

7 Although this debate alludes to how system construction was emphasized in Indian philosophy it also marginalizes the role of dissidents and freethinkers in providing internal critiques, especially where “boundary-hopping encounters” are now openly acknowledged (Ganeri 2017:3). The lack of doctrinal unity within the Buddhist canon is an extremely fraught task. It is still a point of contention as a shift is noted away from specific themes in Traditional Buddhism. Being aware of this possibility, the Buddha allegedly explained to his disciples how to determine whether a text they have heard can be considered the authoritative words of the Buddha. The core of the canon emerged from a series of councils of learned monks that were held after the death of Buddha (Prebish 1974). However, as Etienne Lamotte discusses, the tradition has accepted those texts that Buddha did not speak as they satisfied the conditions of the *Dhamma* (Lamotte 1984). These issues inspired centuries of philosophical reflection and debate, spanning cultures and continents. Various manuscripts and commentaries by prestigious scholars and monks like Dignaga, Santideva, Atisha, and Nagarjuna were used to canonize the Buddhist teachings. The Theravada monks were the most active historians who produced several chronicles that trace the progress of the religion. The *Mahayana* (Great Way) originated in India, and the pillar and rock edicts of King Ashoka in the 3rd century B.C. indicate the establishment of Buddhist precepts. Buddhism as an institutionalized religion gradually lost ground in India by the 12th century but spread to China, Korea, and Vietnam. These canons gradually diverged as oral traditions peculiar to each school were added. As a result, the complex history of Buddhism

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includes volumes of canonical literature with an emphasis on renunciation and meditative practices. In addition, Buddhism became increasingly involved in political life in countries outside India, with royal favor, sanction, and support.\(^8\)

Buddhism as an organized movement in India began again in the 1890s when Angarika Dharmapala, the Sri Lankan Buddhist, founded the Maha-Bodhi Society in Kolkata and advocated the restoration of ancient Buddhist sites (Zelliot 2006:189). In 1898 Iyothee Thass founded the Sakya Buddhist society, also known as the Indian Buddhist Association in Tamil Nadu that presented Buddhism as a religious alternative for Dalits.\(^9\)

Ambedkar traces the likely origins and development of key ideas and doctrines on careful readings of the traditional Buddhist texts. As I have argued above, any attempt to describe Navayana Buddhism by appealing to essential elements of the Buddhist canon that may exist must be considered cautiously. Most of the discursive practices characterized as Buddhist philosophy are not systematic. Among the problematic aspects of this claim is that while Ambedkar offers a nuanced interpretation of Buddhism, he does so from a position critical of some of its basic tenets (Fiske and Emmrich 2004; Taylor 1972). Christopher Queen addresses these difficulties and examines whether Ambedkar’s dukkha (suffering) as institutionalized oppression or his rejection of karma (action) and rebirth can be counted as Buddhism at all (Queen 1996). This paper does not address whether Buddhism can survive the degree of reformulation that Ambedkar calls for and continue to be counted as a Buddhist doctrine. However, what becomes most striking is the contrast between Ambedkar’s reconstruction and the paucity of sustained methodological reflection on the ideology of protest against upper castes by marginalized groups.

In the last several decades, we have witnessed a proliferation of self-proclaimed Buddhist websites, meditation centers, practitioners, and popular magazines to teach a Buddhist way of living. Thus, we find Buddhism represented as a globalized and all-embracing world religion and a source of individual well-being. Despite the incongruity of these two representations of Buddhism, one feature that marks Ambedkar’s Navayana is that it not only changed the character of Buddhist philosophical discourse to subvert the dominant ideology of the Hindu caste system but is a movement based on “social action” founded on the reformulated ethics of Buddhism.\(^14\) I use the term “social action” to distinguish it from the terms “socially engaged Buddhism” that identified the loosely connected networks of Buddhists in Asia to political activism.\(^15\)

With the adoption of Navayana, Ambedkar expects the new converts not only to abandon once for all the caste iniquities that had utterly ruined their inner spirit and self-respect; it also asked them to embark upon a new journey of inner life, in their choice of occupation, and of ethics.\(^16\) Apart from the doctrinal basis of Buddhism, the choice for Navayana emerged from the decades of political activism began by anti-caste reformers like Jotirao Phule, Iyothee Thass, and Rahul Sankrityayan, who exposed the role of Brahmanical Hinduism (Omvedt 2003; Illaiah 2001). Conceptual tools and vocabulary of Buddhist thought were forged in P. Lakshmi Narasu’s scholarly and persuasive writings. Lastly, at an intellectual level, Buddhist thought denies the existence of a creator God.\(^17\) Without a God figure, Buddhism did not meet the criteria of a Western conception of religion. However, it proposed universal ethics and moral teachings for individual life. These teachings were not simply accepted but investigated as far as possible and confirmed in practice. This combination was attractive for
Ambedkar, who argued for religion beyond state control and for humanistic ethics (Verma 2016).

The theoretical structure of Buddhist ethics central to *The Buddha and His Dhamma* is a subject of great contestation, and further developments are likely with increasing interest in the field. For example, there is a debate whether traditional Buddhist ethics fundamentally espouses an Aristotelian virtue ethic or a utilitarian or consequentialist ethic seeking the welfare of many people (Keown 1990; Goodman 2009). Some also see it as a deontological ethic (Garfield 2015). However, scholars have argued that it is misleading to interpret Buddhist ethics as a systematic theory fitting into different types of ethical theories in the West. Instead, they argue that Buddhist ethics is pluralist and draws on various moral considerations, rejecting the discovery of a set of principles to adjudicate between different cases (Hallisey 1996). Despite the differences in the theoretical structure of ethics, there is agreement that Buddhists have “three treasures”: the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, which I believe Ambedkar accepted (Harvey 2000:8). But unlike other sects, *Navayana* Buddhism, as re-envisioned by Ambedkar, dismisses the Four Noble Truths and doctrine of rebirth as non-canonical interpretations.

To illustrate Ambedkar’s approach and show the superiority of the one I am delineating here, I have chosen to outline the three objectives of this essay. The first aim of this text is to contribute to the discussion on the epistemological basis of religious belief. Wittgenstein has raised the idea of “hinge commitments” that are neither acquired via rational process nor directly responsive to rational considerations. Most postmodern reactions to the enlightenment have resisted the thesis of the hegemony of evidentialism. Is there room for justified beliefs without evidence when the latter is related to sense experience? Ambedkar’s essay and lectures on Buddhism steer clear of these two separate claims that either religious utterances are judged by standards implicit in the religious form of life or are incommensurable with scientific or metaphysical claims. He was well enough acquainted with and influenced by William James and John Dewey to propose a “visionary pragmatism”; arriving at some predetermined destination remains less critical than struggling for some ethical end. One does not arrive at a prescribed fixed end of universal truth but constantly strives for that end. Like Dewey, Ambedkar does not see the choices and aspirations of the individual as opposed to society; instead, there is a symbiosis between individual and society if religious belief is changed to a religious form of life that entails everyday practices and rituals so that the latter is no longer in conflict with their epistemic standards. Ambedkar’s early works show that Dalits share the same epistemic conditions—atrocities, violence, ostracism—that compelled them to convert to Buddhism. These epistemological commonalities between different Dalit groups were related to the everyday caste practices that did not disappear with the onset of modernity (Ambedkar 1989; 1989b). The second objective of this text is to offer conceptual elaborations on the question of agency to generate fresh perspectives on Ambedkar’s interpretation of Buddhism. While defining the path to conversion, Ambedkar proposed agency overlaps with a cluster of concepts that theorists writing on subaltern groups have ignored. For him, it does not make sense to think of Dalit agency as a purely abstract set of autonomous capacities because the ability to act is always mediated by the dominant norms and power relations within the caste system. The content of the Dalit agency for Ambedkar must address social inter-dependence and the idea that agency is articulated through the capacity to transform relations that
cause their marginalization. Finally, conversion marks a break from their political and economic status that provides them with a distinctive set of inalienable experiences. Extending this line of reasoning would enable us to argue that Dalit agency links experience to knowledge formation, thus opening the doors to a canon of “affective practices” that would trigger communities of affect. Ambedkar’s notion of agency displaces the ontological primacy of the agent found in liberal theory, replacing it with an emphasis on the constitution of agency through intersubjective relations founded on Buddhist ethics.

Conversion, Subalternity, and Representation: Some Methodological Challenges

Ever since *The Buddha and the Dhamma* was written, Ambedkarites have been continually challenged to explain the significance of religion in Ambedkar’s writings (Ambedkar 2018). As already mentioned above, scholars from a wide range of positions have given their interpretations of Ambedkar’s transition to Buddhism. For some, Ambedkar’s choice of formal conversion from Hinduism shortly before his death remains incomprehensible because his worldliness and his deep sympathy for western constitutionalism do not conform to the theological concerns present in this essay. Ambedkar’s followers and his critics alike have engaged in impassioned arguments over the so-called religious turn in Ambedkar’s career as a “militant secularist” (Skaria 2015). Attempts have been made to trace a Buddhist lineage for the Mahar-Dalits that have circulated with great potency amidst the debates regarding the cultural status of the Dalits within Hinduism (Beltz 2005).

A first framing of the question: “how did Ambedkar address the religious and secular?” is a way for us to step back and ask new questions about conversion: Why was conversion a solution to overcome discrimination and oppression of Dalits within the caste system? Does it invite new perspectives and generate consciousness for a different future for the Dalits in India? Does emphasizing the vitality and renewal of Buddhism help us rethink the link between Dalit “subalternity” and their agency? Can conversion assume “new forms of agency and thus reclaim or create new idioms of selfhood?”

In the past, one set of responses to Ambedkar’s acceptance of Buddhism was based on it being located in a tradition of social reform and rationality as “the Buddha attempted to counter Brahmanism with a philosophy of spiritual equality and a notion of atheistic morality” (Contursi 1989:447–48; Lynch 1969; Beltz 2005). Though many Marxists could not reconcile conversion to Buddhism within the materialist context of their analysis, Dalit literary figures saw conversion as integrating Dalits into Indian society (Dangle 1992). Ambedkar set aside the “sacred canopy of Hinduism” and adopted Buddhism “that met the complex requirements of reason and morality” (Queen 1996a: 45–46). Gauri Vishwanath writes that Ambedkar affirmed in a speech in 1944 that the “ascendancy of Brahmanism held back the empiricist and epistemological advances made by Buddhism toward laying the foundation for a new and modern India” (Viswanathan 1996:102). A second set emphasizes that Ambedkar translated his faith in rationalism and reform to convert Dalits to *Navayana* Buddhism by reworking some of the fundamental teachings of canonical Buddhism (Zelliot 1992). They argue Ambedkar reinterprets Buddhism so that the power of religious experience and belief could be
transformed in ways that support a conception of democracy. Ambedkar’s interpretation of Buddhism brought the Dalits into a “new secular democratic world” (Tartakov 2003:207). For him, religion should provide people with a history, a story about the larger cosmos, and how they played their role in it. He forged a new consciousness through “rewriting the self” that led to a significant transformation of the Dalit self (Verma 2021).

It is important to emphasize that such readings that view conversion as a secular-historicist notion of belonging to modernity are not faulty. These readings of conversion are not unreasonable as Ambedkar himself projected Buddhism as compatible with democracy, liberal values, and modernity. The secularization of public space, the language of rights, the spread of reason and science opened new avenues for anti-caste struggles under colonial rule. Indeed, the call to conversion was justified as Ambedkar’s reading made an iniquitous religious tradition, insensitive to human rights, the basis through which postcolonial subaltern subjects reconstructed their hybrid modernities.

However, I contend that such readings of “traditional Buddhism” as a social reform movement or one based on rationality obscure the historically conditioned nature of Ambedkar’s vision. Neither gender nor caste relations appear to have been substantially refashioned in response to Buddhist teachings (Inden 1986). Recent research has shown the need to deconstruct the foundational categories and assumptions of scholarship on South Asia forged in the crucible of colonialism. The contact between the colonialists and indigenous peoples resulted in the emergence of dominant notions of Hindu religion with “basic doctrines” influenced by Enlightenment philosophies (Omvedt 2003:12). The idea of Buddha as a social reformer was popular with Western scholars who portrayed Buddhism’s rational and atheistic character while the idea of equality of all species, including animals, gave it a very progressive outlook. Given this interpretation, the “traditional Buddhism” that Ambedkar reconstructed was the product of a tendency to define it in terms of a normative definition of religion based upon Western understanding (Almond 2007; Lopez 2008). Given the limitations of the prevailing analysis on conversion, I now set out to provide an interpretive framework to conversion in Ambedkar’s work and its relationship with agency.

Gramsci, Subalternity and Religion

For many early subaltern historians, a conception of subaltern religiosity is an autonomous and self-enclosed sphere, separated from the more significant mainstream religious movements, such that subalters engage in politics through the idiom of religion. Scholars who view conversion as questioning secular ideologies and colonialism also view ‘subaltern’ consciousness as a form of subjectivity that can develop modes of resistance to the latter. This strand of opposition is seen as evolving into a full-fledged nationalist thought in India. In this context, to account for the role of caste, kinship, and religion in a non-essentializing way has been a source of intellectual debate. If religion was not simply false consciousness, could it be, as the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci says, a way of rationalizing the world and real-life and a basis for political action? Could Gramsci provide a suitable framework to study the resistant practices of groups that convert to another religion?
The term “subalternity” in this text is a useful analytical tool to study contestations regarding the subject’s autonomy. The writings of Gramsci initially inspired a resistant nature of subaltern consciousness that thrives despite being subjected to the hegemonic influence of the ruling classes (Jones 2006). In subaltern studies, it is reconfigured to identify a general attribute of subordination in South Asian society brought about by colonization or other forms of subordination that would not be confined to class (Chaturvedi 2007). Initially, this perspective highlighted the politics of subaltern classes that had been ignored by elite perspectives anchored in colonialist, nationalist and/or Marxist narratives. The Gramscian term “subaltern” was a critical term that was preferred to the Marxian theory of class dialectics that excluded relations of domination and subordination in divergent political and cultural contexts. Ranjit Guha explains that the domain of subaltern politics was autonomous from elite politics: “it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter” (Guha 1982:3). Subsequently, Guha relied on the methodological criteria used by Gramsci to retrace the initiative found amongst subaltern groups and to understand the politics of those who lack political organization and representation (Guha 1982:8, 1998:19). Broadly, this term refers to all the marginalized—peasants, workers, women, Dalits, Blacks, and Tribals who are under the political and cultural domination of others.

The weakness of some of these formulations emerged as Subaltern Studies gave way to a looser definition of “subalternity” inspired by Michel Foucault’s “approach to power” and knowledge (Chaturvedi 2007:12). Subsequently, several theoretical and methodological shifts took place as contributors engaged with the subaltern, not as an autonomous subject outside the domain of elites but as “constructed by dominant discourses produced by elites” (Chaturvedi 2007:17). However, in some of the writings, the paradoxes of power in the dominant discourse arise as subaltern groups are no longer represented outside the elite discourse but are constituted by that same discourse. The shift in the agent’s “subalternity,” in the functioning of the dominant discourse, though not autonomous, remains crucial to measure the heterogeneity in that operation of power. However, this shift also means that these groups cannot claim unmediated access to their emancipatory project. Any effort to retrieve the autonomy of the subaltern subject frequently ended up with the failure of the subaltern agency. The desire to recover the subaltern’s autonomy was frustrated because subalternity rendered autonomy impossible. Gayatri Spivak’s contention that the colonized woman’s subject position cannot be retrieved when that subaltern woman had no voice, takes the debate to a new level altogether. The subaltern cannot speak if representing subalterns finds itself “inscribed” into the dominant elite discourse (Spivak 1988). Her claim of the irreducibility of women’s oppression is an important link with later contestations of the subject found in Dalit scholars.

Inspired by this debate, Cosmo Zene has examined the astute positions of Gramsci and Ambedkar on religion, considering them complementary. He argues that their critique of culture and structures of subalternity is quite similar; both were critical of religion but considered it “culturally and politically relevant to bring about an intellectual and moral reformation.” Both he argues, “stressed the presence of subalterns through social, cultural, and historical analysis, and sought to negotiate a rightful place within the state, society, and history/historiography for these excluded individuals” (Zene 2013:3–4). Gramsci distinguishes between official institutional religion, as a historical
formation able to exert hegemonic power, and the religion of the masses through which they express their “common sense.” Each subaltern group may have its specific religious discourse different from the religious values prescribed to them by the ruling classes. Zene relies on Fabio Frosini, who claims that Gramsci views religion as totally embedded in the realm of culture and language. He reminds us that hegemony is fought not solely on political grounds but also on religious grounds by separating the domain of the State from that of civil society. Ambedkar also views religion as a means for subverting the caste system and asserting an affirmative Dalit consciousness. Like Gramsci’s idea of “common sense,” Ambedkar tried to achieve a better life for Dalits through translating the language of hegemonic power into the “common language” of the subalterns to give space to their voices. Zene moves toward a theoretical integration between Gramsci and Ambedkar, but the results are sometimes contradictory. Both thinkers deeply outlined the conflicts between hegemonic dominance and subaltern groups that arise within the articulation of power. However, differences remain regarding the conditions under which religion promotes social quiescence or opposition to hegemony.

A response to these differences can be found in the question raised earlier in this section: what do we gain in exploring Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism? The immediate response by theorists like Kancha Illaih would be to uncover and revalorize the neglected forms of agency as Dalit-Bahujan perspectives are absent in subaltern studies historiography (Illaih 1996). The principle of inclusion extends naturally from religious liberty to a broad guarantee of expressive liberty for stringent protection to minority groups. In the initial stages of political mobilization against colonial rule, Ambedkar tried to model the politics of depressed classes on the strategies of minority groups. However, he found “protection and inclusion” to be contradictory aims as the untouchables were to be incorporated into the Hindu fold in such a way as to make their difference unnecessary in politics (Dirks 2001:272). The basis of inclusionary nationalism was incapable of recognizing cultural differences. Hence, protection of religious minorities could not simply lie in non-interference in religious and cultural concerns of citizens. To conceive of democratic politics exclusively in terms of a struggle of minority groups is to remain blind to the power relations. I emphasize that for Ambedkar the reasons for liberty abridgments are unacceptably exclusionary as they are unsuited to a democratic system of free and equal citizens.

Given these problems, to begin with, the notion of “subalternity” is a potentially powerful alternative to the term “minority.” To be sure, the term “subalternity” is strengthened if we bring in the idea of hegemony as a balance between the force exerted by state apparatus and the consent that is evoked in civil society. Actors are shaped by the underlying power structures so that their ability to conceptualize a viable alternative is limited. From an Ambedkarite perspective, instead of assuming a consensus (graded inequality), caste “subalternity” makes visible the arbitrary practices that produce the inclusions or exclusions practiced by Brahmanic ideology. The latter constantly struggles to reproduce its hegemony by locating Dalits in a mythical past devoid of any struggle. For this ideology to be sustained, “the Brahmin class” has raised this “enclosure” around itself from the “other” who attempts any subversion (Ambedkar 1989:15). What is fundamental to caste hierarchies is domination exercised over the weak. Ambedkar questions the assumption that power relations embedded in a plurality of caste structures are without antagonism. This is to ignore how consensus has been constructed on the very exclusion or subordination of others.

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Even if resistance against caste servitude is quashed, the claim for autonomy remains as it creates a new possibility on the affirmative principle of equality.

In the light of the Gramscian tension between acknowledging the role of religion in consciousness and being careful not to reify it, I would argue that conversion has affinities with “rebirth” because it evokes two salient features: First, Ambedkar hoped that conversion would move the human species out of sickness into recovery, and even make way “for a new life” (Ambedkar 1989a:78). Ambedkar finds meaning in Buddhist ethics, not because some sacred or coercive authority spellbinds people but because they engage in an authoritative doctrinal critique of that tradition. Aware that doctrine and institutional practices are mutable, he makes them a site of contested knowledge to demand the abolition of castes (Ambedkar 1989a:67, 2018:255).

Second, he recovers conversion as a historical process away from a status of subalternity, or practices of exclusions, towards becoming individuals with agency, potentially full members of a political community. The consensus on the fourfold division of society gradually evolved to adopt Buddhist non-violence and vegetarianism to stigmatize outcast subaltern Buddhists who were relegated to the polluting occupations (Ambedkar 1990). He argues this faulty consensus has no right to claim a prerogative on the interpretation of religion or the modes of knowledge it instituted about a modern secular state. In this context, an inevitable convergence emerges between Ambedkarite thought on conversion and subaltern studies’ case of successful decolonization of knowledge.

‘Subalternity’ and the question of agency

I argued above that an integrative subaltern history of Buddhism provided an alternative because it encouraged an understanding of dominance and subordination under the caste system. However, this construal of the term “subalternity” and conversion are different philosophically, as they exemplify different approaches on the following grounds. While Dalit lives were harsh and impoverished, there was a mixture of representations of these transient (subaltern) groups in the Indian imaginary as Harijans, untouchables, and depressed classes (Massey 1995). But conversion had an additional meaning derived from a phenomenological idea of agency that must be grasped from the subjective perspective of an individual’s experience. Recognizing “experience” as an essential resource for political analysis had implications for Ambedkar’s social theory. Ambedkar’s analysis appears to be determined by how “untouchability” constitutes a definite set of interests that the untouchables alone can speak for (Ambedkar 1989b:256). The way caste and polluting occupations converge served as an important contribution to understanding politics but illustrated an approach about “differentiated solidarity” with “untouchables” as subaltern classes.

While redefining experience, Ambedkar’s interpolations of religious resistance to Brahmanical hegemony of the upper castes get further revised. Does resistance to the Hindu ways of following rituals and forms of worship reveal limitations of the Brahmanical order, or does it destabilize the dominant ideology of the Hindu caste system by stepping outside its notions of power? Is conversion another exit option through which oppressed people actively construct their own oppositional political culture? A possible response from Ambedkar, would be that: “Caste is inconsistent with conversion ... the problem is where to place the convert, in what caste?” (Ambedkar...
In my reading, conversion for Ambedkar interrupts the laws, rules, and structures of power but is also an assertion for separation; mass conversion is as much about challenging caste hierarchies as it is about challenging elite politics. Instead of protecting the interests of elites, *dhamma* becomes a “universal morality that protects the weak from the strong, and safeguards the growth of the individual” (Ambedkar 2018:284–85). Thus, the term “subalternity” in this paper is not simply a marginal position but a kind of “historically unrepresented political marginality” that posits the terms of social relations between different groups in a society and what capacity each of them exerts to determine or alter the terms of that power relation. But the assertion in subaltern and postcolonial historiography that caste is a colonial construction makes the *jati* and *varna* order as an “experience distant” concept. Caste has never found a place in the narrative of some of these scholars who believe that it is a colonial construction and hence they have problems with attempts to conceptualize “subalternity” as promoting agency in the context of conversion (Dirks 2001).

As I further ponder on the question of agency, I would assert that caste and class are analytically distinct concepts (at the abstract level) in Ambedkar’s work. However, I would argue that they cannot be treated as two separate sets of ties or connected in some essential way in strategies of collective mobilization. Caste relations in a material sense shape class structures. Indeed, what appears in the guise of caste and class are several questions about disadvantage, discrimination, and exploitation. Thus, the attempt to subsume caste classification under the term “subaltern” is a problem because these groups cannot be understood outside their class structuration. The argument proposed here is that while caste discrimination is an inter-group social phenomenon transcending class differentiation, poverty and deprivation result from a deeply rooted class structure. Hence any attempt to homogenize the marginalized under the term “subaltern” overlooks the specific nature of the oppression meted out by the caste system that allows ostracism, discrimination, or stigmatization.

Lastly, on my reading of Ambedkar, the effort to retrieve the “agency” of the Dalit subject was central to the conversion without dispensing with ideas of autonomy. Ambedkar sees that the moral and responsible subject develops chronologically and ontologically before those actions become visible. He focuses exclusively on seizing spaces of political action through conversion in the contingent public realm even as norms and practices are not yet available. Hence the exit from caste society is driven by creating a casteless society. Summarizing this section, I argue that Ambedkar aims to caution against characterizing a single underlying consciousness in the notion of “subalternity,” by bringing back to the “subaltern” the differentiated character, the contradictory forces, and tendencies in our political institutions and structures. Representation of the Dalit subaltern in my reading of Ambedkar can only be a claim about the historical agency and belonging in society and being involved in its reconstruction, to which I now turn.

Post-secularism, Buddhist Ethics, and Inner Life: Pradnya, Karuna, and Maitri

The term post-secularism has gained currency in recent years as the following assumptions implicit in the discourse on secularism have been found faulty: citizens with political conceptions generated from their public culture are devoid of any
attachment to religion; religious identity is either privatized or irrelevant in its practical implications for emancipation. If, however, this discourse was unmasked to explore the binary opposition of the religious and secular that conceal histories and engagements of people across these dichotomies, these assumptions would be found to suppress, marginalize, and reinforce dominant discourses. Ambedkar realized that these assumptions ignore that religious identity is one of the many interlocking and publicly salient identities in which contradictions may arise. He believed that the misunderstanding comes from a monolithic view of religion and its conceptualization severed from practical reason and everyday experiences. More recent empirical theories have written about post-religiosity or even de-secularization that find positive meaning in Ambedkar’s work (Berger 1999; Turner 2019). As this is a vast area of research, this section only focuses on the relevance of the Buddhist ethics that Ambedkar explored for the public sphere and inner life, which further leads to questioning the presuppositions of a secularization thesis.

30 Ambedkar’s strategy for addressing the “secular” and the “religious” unfolds in a complex way as it moves from the visible act of conversion to an unarticulated political framework. Insofar as ethics is understood in the Socratic sense of how one ought to live, only a few aspects of his reconstructions are discussed here.

31 When Ambedkar proposes with Navayana a highly secularized version of Buddhism, he elicits perplexity when using the words “religious.” His first move is to resist viewing religion as demonstrating self-estrangement (in Marxist terms) or simply the non-rational expression of a secular rational entity or consciousness. The root of Buddhist morality is not God or some supernatural being or the Buddha himself. In an often-quoted broadcast by the BBC, London, Ambedkar explains that: “I prefer Buddhism ... because it gives three principles in combination that no other religion does. Buddhism teaches Pradnya (understanding as against superstition and supernaturalism), Karuna (love, compassion), and Samata (equality). Neither God nor soul can save society” (cited in Kamble 1979:211).

32 He then distinguished his position from some of the tenets in traditional Buddhism on the following grounds: Buddhism was originally about engagement with the world apart from the practices of truth, compassion, and contemplation. However, the self-understanding of Buddhism has remained shackled to older philosophical categories that it thinks it has surmounted and which have traditionally looked down on action. Before Buddha, the Hindu compositions viewed the movement of beings between punar-janma (rebirths) as ordered by the law of karma (action-consequence) where the latter views beings born according to the nature and quality of their deeds or actions. Nirvana (enlightenment) is the extinction of the three poisons of lobha (avarice), dosa (aversion) and moha (desire) so the goal of the Buddhist path is sometimes seen as the eradication of all causes resulting in the cessation of dukkha. In The Buddha and His Dhamma, the effects of a shift to the notion of Dhamma as civic morality are prompted by the need to shape the conception of citizens as free and equal. This was at the cost of the notions of karma and of the Four Noble Truths, whose introspective and pessimistic content did not fit the purposes of his struggle for the Dalits. He finally turns to give his interpretation of Buddhism, which reflects doctrines as known through the Pancasila (precepts) that constitute the basic code of ethics for the inner life of its adherents (Omvedt 2003; Verma 2010). These are not commands or imperatives but voluntarily accepted. Nevertheless, such teachings are not simply accepted but used as
far as possible in behavior which is greatly aided by following ethical precepts. Although there are several ways of understanding these precepts in different traditions of Buddhism, this is the interpretation that is briefly outlined here.

In Book 1, part V, Ambedkar traces the democratic pedigree that lies at the source of Buddha’s approach to Kapila, an exponent of Sankhya philosophy, considered the oldest of the philosophical systems. The tenets of his philosophy, the Sankhya-Darsana were that “truth must be supported by proof” as the latter is the means which can lead to knowledge (Ambedkar 2018:91–92). Unlike other schools of thought, for Kapila “perception and inference” were epistemically reliable and valid means towards knowledge where perception is “mental apprehension of a present object” and inference is about the cause to an effect, from effect to cause, and by analogy. Kapila questions the theory that there was a being who created the universe, as a created thing exists beforehand in its cause, “just as the clay serves to form a pot, or the threads go to form a piece of cloth” (Ambedkar 2018:91). The empirical universe consists of a change from the most undifferentiated to the most differentiated state of existence that was made possible by the three “Gunas” (elements of nature) of “Prakriti” (nature), namely sattva (goodness, harmonious), rajas (passion, movement), and tamas (ignorance, restraint). If the three Gunas are in balance the universe appears static and ceases to evolve; but the gunas become unbalanced, according to Kapila, when there is the presence of dukkha. It is not surprising that given Kapila’s influence, Buddhism denies the reality of a god, understood as a creator or as an absolute, ultimate entity. Buddha, being mortal, remained only a teacher who was a marga data (guide) one who only shows the way, and not a moksha data (giver of salvation) (Ambedkar 2018:199).

In Book III, Part V, Ambedkar hoped that emancipating religious experience from the Gods, priests, and supernatural elements might direct people towards a common faith, i.e. Dhamma, by elaborating the connection between ethics and knowledge or siła (ethics). It can be broadly understood as virtuous character or dispositions, guided by moral injunctions or precepts, which is not independent of a democratic system. In his sermon reported in Anguttara Nikaya, the fourth of the collections in the Sutta Pitaka, he outlines the vast difference between the “pradnya” of the Buddha and the “pradnya” of the Brahmins. The Brahmins, according to him, regard “vidya” (knowledge) as a “thing of value” in which learning is restricted. It is accessible to only those in the superior classes of chaturvarna (system of four varnas). Ambedkar states that “dhamma is saddhāma” only when it teaches that mere “pradnya” is not enough: it must be accompanied by insight so that “siła” that comprises three stages along the eightfold path—right speech, right action, and right livelihood is possible (Ambedkar 2018:261). But Pradnya is not the foundation of Navayana Dhamma. He explains that the purpose of Buddha was to help the poor, helpless, and the impoverished, who are despised with no opportunities for progress by actions based on karuna toward one another. However, this conception of knowledge and insight cannot provide any foundation for the notion of equality of respect till Dhamma goes beyond karuna and teaches people to practice Maitri (love for living beings) across species differences (Ambedkar 2018:263). He explains that “Maitri must flow and flow forever” and it must remain “boundless as the world” in which “no hatred is thought of” (Ambedkar 2018:264). Thus, Ambedkar conveys how the Buddhist faith relates to rational thought, to welfare not only for humans but also for animals and ecology.
Many scholars point out a paradox of Buddhist compassion as, in principle, karuna is a passion, and the practice of Buddhism is to eradicate passions of all kinds. How is it possible to suffer with and for other beings while at the same time remaining detached? How can someone be free from passion, also exhibit compassion? To address this difficulty Ambedkar’s interpretation is that compassion is an active disposition, designed to remove the troubles of human beings when integrated with pradnya becomes a potent force. Wisdom integrated with the liberating power of Maitri consists of being motivated by great compassion and thereby cultivation of specific virtue in self and others.\footnote{31}

**Conclusion**

This paper examines the contemporary debates on subalternity and post-secularism in the work of Dalit Neo-Buddhist thought developed by Ambedkar. Most of Ambedkar’s formulations defy previous interpretations of Buddhism. Through *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar attempts to trace new interconnections between diverse religious, humanist, and secularist positionalities in the Dalit groups rather than to propose a new project of resurgent religiosity. Perhaps most significantly, it led to a renewed interest in Buddhism as a way of life and a set of doctrines different from prevailing ritualized ordinances present in Brahmanical Hinduism. For the broad sections of the subaltern Dalits that have been confined to lowly occupations, suffering humiliation and low self-esteem, the spiritual path has brought about a major social transformation. This has been done by reappropriating worship sites and publishing and distributing Buddhist texts (Omvedt 2003). An egalitarian ethos propagated by Buddhist conversion involves a re-conceptualization of the relation between ritual status and power.\footnote{32} Even though the hybrid identities of Ambedkar Buddhists have led to many disappointments and confusions increasingly, status is seen by itself as an idiom of power that can be challenged politically (Beltz 2005).\footnote{33}

Initially situated within debates taking place in liberal theory, Ambedkar views conversion as part of an individual’s freedom to associate, form communities, and live by terms based on equal concern in the social sphere. A corollary of this view is that the individual should be free to disassociate from such communities. Equality is restated as a moral postulate that recognizes the distinctively human capacities for rational self-direction and self-respect for others. These restatements of liberty and equality are important, but the most distinctive character Ambedkar gives Buddhism is its emphasis on Pradnya, Karuna, and Maitri.\footnote{34}

I argue that there is much to admire in Ambedkar’s thought as his restatement of Buddhism is nuanced, persuasive, and well moored in the moral intuitions underlying Indian philosophy. But Brahmanical Hinduism is not a necessary telos of subaltern religiosity, nor is it liberalism that grants choice in freedom to association and belief that is the justification for forming the people as a political body. Ambedkar’s critique of normativity in liberal political orders asks us to consider the way conversion to Buddhism also becomes a question about individual freedom and civic communities (Verma 2021). While located within a liberal framework he was aware of the limitations of its moral categories. Ambedkar opens an alternative perspective, especially as he refuses to opt for either secularist or religious rule in the sense of mutually exclusive alternatives. This alternative perspective becomes relevant as classical secularization
theories have been revised in recent decades, with the thesis of the decline of religion as an irreversible development of modernization becoming seriously questioned.

Summarizing the discussion above, conceptualizations of a move from Hinduism to Buddhist ethics through conversion by Ambedkar have the potential to be constitutive of a post-secular ethic. Emotion and knowledge are not separate in Ambedkar’s social epistemology but they draw heavily on the analogous process of change in the relative importance of religion in people’s inner life which accompanied the conversion. The conceptualization of an ideal society is an effort to convert the Dalit’s “subalternity” within the caste order into an identity as a political, ethical subject. But the idiom of religious conversion does not directly promote an ethical life because it needs to be reinterpreted as an inner experience, in which groups and sites of social relations become defined through distinctive recurring “affective” activities and performances (Wetherell 2012). Ambedkar systematically dissects the corpus of the Brahmanical textual tradition viewing it as imposing upon human beings a moral, political, and social vocabulary based on “graded inequality.” He offers the idea of “differentiated solidarity” as an alternative to the ideals of integration of caste subalterns within Brahmanical ideology. He develops the conceptual tools to counterbalance the dangers of involuntary exclusion against the autonomy of groups and persuasively uses Buddhist ethics to mitigate debates over identity and difference. Nevertheless, there must be caution as post-secularism generates a highly misleading view of an unmediated and unproblematic return to religion, making it difficult to see that Ambedkar’s reconstruction of Buddhism sixty years ago resulted from the great transformation of Dalit consciousness. Buddhism cannot explicitly or implicitly privilege a specific way to live a good life or comprehensive ethics that must be followed. I suggest that Ambedkar’s intervention into post-secularism can mark the beginning of an exploration of alternatives to the crises of Indian state secularism as in principle, it requires the relative autonomy of the state with regard to organized religions while holding to the ideals of secularism: equality, democracy, fair and just legal representation of all minority communities. By bringing religion and issues of religious conversion as a factor into the laws, the state has denied the freedom to associate or explore indigenous traditions (bhakti, Sufi, devotional, meditative) other than state secularism which could provide for both a practiced tolerance and inspiring ethics. These traditions are mainly historical and affirm values of tolerance, rationalism, and humanism without having the elitism of state secularism.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. “Subaltern” as a key analytical category was introduced in the 1980s by historians who were dissatisfied with the neglect of subaltern classes in the making of the Indian nation (Guha 1982, 1998).


3. This day is now remembered as *Dhammachakra Pravartan Din* (Dhamma’s Promulgation Day).

4. In recent years, despite criticisms, many anti-conversion laws have been enacted at the state level to regulate religious conversions. Although these debates have an important link to the arguments presented, the social and political implications of these laws are outside the scope of this paper.

5. There is no agreement regarding the actual dates of the historical Buddha who did not write down any of his teachings. Siddhattha Gautama, supposed to be the founder of Buddhism, was born in a wealthy and aristocratic family in North India around 600 B.C.

6. *Shramana* tradition includes Jainism, Buddhism, and others such as Ajivikas and Carvakas.

7. *Srauta* rites of varying duration and complexity are different from the simple *grhya* (domestic) rites of the Veda, still an integral part of Hinduism.

8. Buddhist assemblies or councils to recite the approved texts were supposed to have taken place in Rajagripha, Vaishali, Kashmir, and Pataliputra in ancient India.

9. The “Dhamma” refers to the teachings of the Buddha, and the path to the Buddhist goal.

10. Since several influential texts are attributed to Nagarjuna a lively controversy exists over his legacy.

11. Elements found to bring Hinduism and Buddhism closer in the medieval period include vegetarianism, mysticism, adoption of Sanskrit for royal courts, and acceptance of Buddha as an avatar of Vishnu. For more on convergence and absorption, see Bronkhorst (2011).

12. Translations of works in Pali, Sanskrit, and Tibetan by European scholars in the 19th century also paved the way for reviving interest in Buddhism. See Zelliot (1992:189).

13. He argued that Tamil Paraivas were descendants of Buddha’s clan, the Sakyas. Thus, acceptance of Buddhism would not be a conversion but a return to an original identity (Omvedt 2003:18).
14. For a preliminary discussion on social action, see Verma (2010) and engaged Buddhism, see Queen and King (1996).
15. Issues like global capitalism and the war on terror have animated such groups. See Hanh (2008).
16. See for this period, Moon (2001); Nimade (2010).
17. Scholars have been divided into two camps: did early Buddhism believe in Hindu Gods or were these part of their cultural system? See Bronkhorst (2011).
18. Although outside the purview of this paper, Ambedkar’s frustration with the paternalism and prejudices of existing political parties and their institutions was another factor (Ambedkar 1991).
19. For example, Dalit women’s everyday acts of resistance challenge many prevailing approaches to studying the agency of oppressed groups. They have neither been passive actors nor willing accomplices to their domination. See Rege (2013).
20. Using Wetherell (2012), I refer here to the new worship sites, songs, celebrations and texts for Dalits since the conversion.
21. A day before his conversion Ambedkar announced the draft of the constitution of his new party, The Republican Party of India. For an interpretation of Ambedkar as a constitutionalist only because he is a revolutionary, see Aishwary Kumar (2015).
22. For the association of Buddhism with democracy, see Viswanathan (1998:234). Some scholars question a modernist reading of Ambedkar as they contend his philosophy has roots in Buddhism and not in the French revolution. See Goonatilake (2005).
23. In this section, I borrow the idea of the self from Perkins (2000).
24. Traditional Buddhism in this essay refers to the thought of Buddha as found in the ancient texts.
25. Work by feminist theologians views the roles and images of women in the various schools of Buddhism as unable to offer the full possibility of participation. See Gross (1993).
26. For shifts, see Chatterjee (1994) on separating the cultural and political domain and the elite appropriation of subaltern aspirations.
27. In the constituent assembly, religious identity was the basis of grouping people into minorities: Muslims, Sikhs, Parsees, Anglo-Indians, and Indian Christians. In the earlier part of the deliberations, scheduled castes were also classified as minorities.
28. Four Noble Truths are: dukkha (suffering), to identify the cause of dukkha as ignorance and aversion; to overcome dukkha through nirvana; and to walk the eightfold path.
29. These are the precepts to refrain from: destroying living creatures; taking that which is not given; sexual misconduct; incorrect speech; and consuming intoxicating drinks and drugs.
30. For example, the Carvaka school holds only perception as a reliable source of knowledge. Mimasa and Advaita Vedanta hold all six including testimony, comparison, postulation, or presumption.
31. For the challenge of gender inequalities see Chakravarty (1987). She argues that in the caste hierarchy, control over women operates on three levels: ideology, kinship, and domain of the law.
32. For the challenges to establishing Buddhism, see the amalgamation of ideology and mobilization amongst Sant Dharm, Ravidasia, and Kabirpanthi groups in Bellwinkel-Schempp (2004).
33. Many Buddhist biographies and Dalit autobiographies have been published in vernacular languages showing the transformation with conversion. See Moon (2001).
ABSTRACTS

The work of B. R. Ambedkar has spurred scholars and experts to rethink traditional assessments of both the secularization process and the relationship between religious and secular domains. Two generations ago, Ambedkar evoked conversion to Navayana Buddhism as an alternative to hierarchically ordered caste-based society. Through his landmark essay The Buddha and His Dhamma, he questioned studies on Dalit communities that saw them as trying to define their inner life solely as either a negative or mirror image of the standards set by caste-based norms. In the effort to retrieve the autonomy of the Dalit subject, Ambedkar brought to the forefront of his work that conversion was not simply opposition to the power structure of caste society but also meant to overthrow the false ideals that had historically distorted and degraded the Dalit self. The paper addresses some of the methodological questions in political philosophy and historiography that arise in Ambedkar’s thought regarding the analytical categories related to conversion. It begins with a provocation in its juxtaposition of categories from two different discourses: “subalternity” as a relational position in conceptualizing power and “post-secularism” as persistence or resurgence of religious beliefs or practices in the present. It then turns to examine the concept of “subalternity” to show whether it is a relevant lens to understand Dalit subjectivity and agency today. The paper argues that Ambedkar views conversion as a historical process turning away from a status of subalternity, or practices of exclusions, towards becoming individuals with agency, potentially full members of a political community. It also critically examines Ambedkar’s interpretation of Buddhist ethics as an intervention in the analysis of subalternity, showing that the religious ideology of dharma structures the caste order based on discrimination and exclusion. While displacing the explanatory principle of ritual hierarchy that unites Hindu society, Ambedkar addresses the egalitarian imaginary of modern politics that gives us an account of action based on democratic contest and resistance. The paper also explains why the move from Hinduism to Buddhist ethics by Ambedkar can, I argue, be constitutive of a post-secular ethic. Emotion and knowledge are not separate in Ambedkar’s social epistemology, but they draw heavily on the social transformation and importance of religion in people’s inner lives, which went along with conversion.

INDEX

Keywords: Ambedkar, Buddhism, subaltern, post-secularism, Dalit, conversion, caste, identity, egalitarian, maitri

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