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Mahar–Dalit–Buddhist: The history and politics of naming in Maharashtra

Shailaja Paik

By examining practices of naming, especially the recent adoption of a 'Buddhist' identity by middle-class Dalits in contemporary Maharashtra, this article analyses the multiple, shifting, and contested meanings of being Dalit. Examining the politics of this plurality shows the varied concerns at work in applying and contesting different names, especially the social and psychological challenges inherent in such acts of self-identification. By investigating the ambiguities and ambivalences of being Dalit and Buddhist, the article demonstrates that the strategies of naming struggle against the burdens of a stigmatised past as well as the challenge of exclusion and inclusion vis-à-vis different Dalit castes.

Keywords: Dalit, Buddhist, subaltern history, socialisation, Maharashtra

I *Introduction*

Names are symbols. Each name represents association of certain ideas and notions about a certain object. It is a label. From the label people know what it is. People must go by the name that is why all advertisers are keen in finding a good name.

(Ambedkar 1989: 419)

It has often been noted that the particular names allotted to subaltern groups become synonyms for negative attributes, even terms of abuse. The fusion of name and stigma naturalises and legitimises group

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subordination. For instance, the Hindi–Punjabi epithet *kaminey* (untrustworthy), a term of insult is derived from the name for those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy who worked as bonded farm labourers. The struggle to break out of the negative stereotypes imposed by dominant groups and to demand greater respect is well-illustrated by the history of the civil rights movement in North America and the consequent shifts in nomenclature: ‘nigger’, ‘Negro’, ‘coloured people’, ‘Black’, ‘people of colour’, ‘Coloured Americans’, ‘Free Africans’, and ‘African–American’. All these categories were social constructions that reflected the cultural, economic and, in particular, political context in which they were formulated. The debate around the use of different terms for the subordinated is tied to the community’s ideological struggle to arrive at a single self-defined and definitive social taxonomy. Often, the dominant nomenclature is reproduced and legitimised by the state. Against this, a subaltern group may deploy a different term to assert its positive identity, for example the category ‘Dalit’.

The Mahar–Dalit–Buddhist community is found mainly in the Indian state of Maharashtra, where it makes up a little less than half of the total population of communities that are classified as ‘Scheduled Caste’ (SC). In all, 16 per cent of the state population is SC (Government of India 1991: 66–67). Though the category Dalit has in some respects become an ‘umbrella’ term for all SC, the Mahar adopted the term ‘Dalit’ before other SCs, especially after the Dalit Panther revolution of the 1970s.¹ Other ‘Untouchables’ in the SC category have rarely used the term; preferring specific caste names such as Matang, Charmakar or Dhor. The word ‘Dalit’ literally means ‘broken’ or ‘crushed’. As a term of self-definition that refers to a process and a relationship of oppression, it emerged from the SC political struggle. It is therefore a confrontational and militant category, with a positive potential to resist and challenge social hierarchies and dominant discourses. In the case of the category ‘Buddhist’, it was mostly Mahar who followed their leader B.R. Ambedkar and

¹ The Dalit Panther Party, formed in 1972, which took its name from the militant anti-racist Black Panthers organisation of the USA, grew out of Dalit alienation from Mumbai working class life and its continued apathy to caste oppression and anger. Primarily an intellectual and cultural formation, the Panthers represented Dalit life and experiences in new ways, giving rise to a powerful genre of literature that brought the term ‘Dalit’ into popular usage.

converted to Buddhism in 1956,² and called themselves *Bauddha* (Buddhist). In this article, by Dalit I generally refer to the SC category as a whole. However for those who generally do not like to refer to themselves as 'Dalit', I have retained caste names like Matang (Mang) or Charmakar (Chambhar). By 'Buddhist', unless otherwise specified, I refer to the interconnected categories of Mahar–Dalit–Ambedkarite–Buddhist.

Harold Isaacs' interviews with urban Mahar in the 1960s brought out clearly the dilemma faced by members of this community in asserting their new identity. Isaacs noted that 'ex-Untouchables' did not know what to call themselves for they were people trying to cease being what they were and to become something else, though they were not sure what. The data in my study reveal that the subsequent five decades have only caused more turmoil, with a plethora of new terminologies adding to the confusion.

An insightful article by Gopal Guru (2001) deals with the historical and epistemic foundations of the Dalit category and analyses the different categories that represent multiple identities in the context of Dalits. Guru argues that different categories in politics can be complementary and not in permanent opposition to each other. Eleanor Zelliot (1992) and Gail Omvedt (1995) did not perceive a difference between Dalits and Buddhists, and perhaps their view was correct at the time that they were writing. Subsequently, Johannes Beltz (2005) discussed the multiple meanings of the notion of Buddhist in contemporary times. Building on this scholarship, I historicise the category 'Dalit' and 'Buddhist' and analyse the changing semantics of 'Dalit' and 'Buddhist' in time and space, and investigate what Buddhists say and feel about their social recognition in everyday practices in the post-Ambedkar era. In particular,

² In the years immediately following Ambedkar's adoption of Buddhism, it was estimated that 55 per cent of Untouchables in Maharashtra converted to Buddhism, such that the number of Buddhists in the state rose from 2487 in 1951 to 2.79 million in 1961 (Jaffrelot 2004: 140); According to Zelliot, some 80 per cent of the Mahar caste converted during this period (Zelliot 2004: 179). Every year on 14 October, the day of *Dharmadeeksha* (conversion to Dhamma/Buddhism) and 27 May, the birth anniversary of the Buddha, hundreds and thousands of lower castes convert to Buddhism. See 'Thousands Embrace Buddhism on Dharmadeeksha', <http://news.outlookindia.com/item.aspx?476596>. Accessed on 12 February 2011. I also witnessed *Deeksha* celebrations on my field trips to Nagpur.

I explore the processes of ‘becoming Buddhist’³ in a Maharashtrian setting. Scholars have tended to portray the history of caste as a story of collective upward mobility; however, I trace deeper socio-historical contradictions to show that such a story of triumph is punctuated by many ambiguities, failures and reversals.

II

The Mahar

In Maharashtra, the largest of the so-called ‘untouchable’ communities was that of the Mahar. There are many theories about the origin of this term, several quite speculative and, indeed, fanciful. For example, the British ethnographer R.E. Enthoven held that the term was derived from *maha-hari* or ‘great eater’ (Enthoven 1975: 402). Speaking at a conference of the Depressed Class Mission in Poona in the year 1912, Ramakrishna Bhandarkar traced the origins of the term to the caste *mratahara* mentioned in the Markandeya Purana (Robertson 1938: 76). Some scholars argued that the word was a Prakrit derivative of the Sanskrit word *mrataharin* (dragging away of the dead). The last two derivations refer to the traditional occupation of the Mahar that involved removing the carcasses of dead animals. Alexander Robertson questioned this interpretation, asking how a name of Sanskrit origin came to be adopted by people who were ignorant of Sanskrit, and wondering why its use was restricted to Maharashtra:

Further if the name is Sanskrit why is it not found with this meaning in other parts of India besides Maharashtra where the village economy required the removal of dead animals by a special class of people? Sanskrit is behind the Hindi language as it is behind the Marathi, but there are no Mahars as an untouchable class in other parts of India. (Robertson 1938: 76)

Elsewhere, Robertson pointed out, the name was employed with a different meaning. In the Punjab and in Rajputana, it was deployed as an

³ Jayashree Gokhale-Turner (1980, 1986) has described the political origins of Buddhist conversion, Ambedkar’s formulation of an ideology around it, and consequent social change. There is an extensive and in-depth literature that discusses the many terms used for ‘Untouchables’ (Beltz 2004; Charsley 1996; Massey 1995; Webster 1999).

honorific. He states: 'Both in the Punjab and in Rajaputana the title of respect to a Gujar is Mahar, Mihir, or Mir' (Robertson 1938: 76).

Similar contentions have been raised regarding the term 'Maharashtra', the more probably origin of which is in fact *Maha* (great) and *rashtra* (nation). Another argument was that there were people by the name of *rattha*, with Maha and rattha being combined to make 'Maharashtra' (Deshpande 1970: 7). However, it has also been suggested that the word 'Maharashtra' was a shortened form of *Maharanche rashtra* (nation of the Mahar), just as Gujar Rashtra was combined to make Gujarat. The idea appears to have originated with the mid-19th century Scottish missionary and educationalist, John Wilson, who, as a part of his polemic against Brahminism, sought to elevate a group that was despised in Hindu society (Molesworth 1975: 492; Robertson 1938: 77; Somvanshi 1989: 11). Others who came to support this theory were the revolutionary social reformer Jotiba Phule and S.V. Ketkar (Kharat 2003: 8), who reinterpreted elements of the past to serve as catalysts in the social and political transformation of the Mahar. This 19th century belief re-surfaced in the 20th century when some Dalits described themselves as the 'original' dwellers of India. Babytai Kamble declared:

I am a native of this land of Maharashtra. I am not a vagabond who arrived here and doesn't know from where. This land is my home and the Mahar is the mother who bears testimony to this. Because even today, this country, this rashtra takes its name from us, Mahar. (cited in Poitevin 2002: 179)

Phule also argued that the term Mahar was possibly derived from the phrase *maha-ari*, meaning 'the great foe' (Phule 1991: 157, 160). This could be read in two ways: either upper castes used the term in a hostile way to describe their 'great foe', which then raises the question of why certain castes saw the Mahar as their great enemy; or the Mahar might have described themselves thus because of their pride in the bravery with which they had fought Aryan invaders.⁴ The higher castes sometimes called the Mahar *thorle-gharche*, an ironic expression meaning

⁴ Drawing upon Hindu legends and ancient Indian chronicles, Phule constructed a counter-history of the struggles of the *shudra* and *ati-shudra* against the Brahmin. He recounted the *Maha-ari* (Mahar) attack on Brahmin invaders and political usurpers (as symbolised by the mythical figure of Parashuram), in order to free their *shudra* brothers.

'noble born'. Some have argued that this indicates their original position as Naga kings as stated by Robertson (1938: 76) and Ambedkar (1946: 121). If so, they were not always seen as a debased community. Such attempts at revising and re-visioning history challenge traditional Brahminical accounts of the caste system and have been a key part of lower caste strategies to establish new identities and status. Significantly, this reclamation of the past is also a process of the production of history. Furthermore, by writing Dalits into history, Phule and Ambedkar in Maharashtra, like Periyar and Iyothee Thass in south India, set in motion the ethnicisation of caste (Omvedt cited in Jaffrelot 2004: 139). By eschewing the strategy of upward mobility via Sanskritisation and endowing the lower castes with an alternative value system, non-Brahmin and Dalit leaders presented these castes as 'ethnic groups' whose culture was distinct from that of the wider Hindu society.

The Mahar were also known in the past by other names. Robertson (1938: 77) noted that they were sometimes called *Chokha* (excellent). The name could also have been based on the fact that they were followers of the 14th century saint Chokhamela, a Mahar who was persecuted by Brahmin priests and was barred from entering temples. In some cases, occupational terms were applied. *Kathivale* or 'men with sticks' indicated one of their traditional duties as security guards. Similarly, the term *Veskar* or 'gatekeeper' described the Mahar serving as night watchmen of the village *ves* (gate) (Mate 1933: 33; Molesworth 1975: 492). Other terms of reference were *Taral* and *Mirashi* (Kharat 2003: 39), derived from the occupational rights and duties performed by the Mahar, such as assisting the *Patil* (village headman) with maintaining law and order, guarding village boundaries, disposing dead cattle and so on.

Parvari, a term often applied by the Europeans to all the Mahar, referred to their occupation as musicians (Mate 1933: 41). Robertson observed that the term *parvari* was a common and inoffensive epithet used in the early days of British rule in Bombay and the Deccan. According to him, this term too could be interpreted to reveal the respectable status held by Mahar in the past:

[...] some Mahars say that it is an objectionable word. If it means the person who has a right to the grain left about the threshing floor, and

According to Phule, Parashuram started the practice of calling these Maha-ari *Kshatriya* by the names *Ati-Shudra*, Mahar, *Antyaj*, *Mang*, and *Chandal* (Phule 1991: 157, 160).

if it is also the word used by the Greeks, who traded with the Bombay coast at the beginning of the Christian era, we may infer that the *Mahars* are revealed by it also as an ancient people whose modern prerequisites are derived from ancient natural rights. (Robertson 1938: 78–79)

The word ‘parvari’ could also be derived from *pattawari* or ‘holder of a land grant’. The Mahar sometimes called themselves *bhukari* (‘tillers of the soil’ or ‘dwellers on the land’), *bhumiputra* or *dharnicheput* (sons of the soil), terms that parallel *bhudeva* (lords of the earth) which is commonly used for Brahmins (Dhere 1978: 59–60; Mate 1933: 32–33; Robertson 1938: 77). This suggested their caste occupation of farming. ‘Bhukari’ was commonly used in Ahmednagar district (Robertson 1938: 77). However, only the Mahar would refer to themselves by such a dignified appellation.

The Mahar also took pride in and referred to the heroic sacrifices of their ancestors such as Amrutnak (Zelliot 1978: 5). When the Mahar served the British as soldiers in the colonial Indian army they often applied the suffix ‘nak’ to their names, yielding names such as Vitthunak, Dhondunak, Aapnak, and so on (Mate 1933: 226–27; Robertson 1938: 70).⁵ Robertson argued that the term was taken from the Sanskrit *ninaya* (to lead), and that it was the same as *naik*, a title of subordinate rank still used in the army (Robertson 1938: 77). He further noted that this nomenclature should not be taken at its face value, because not all of the Mahar who fell in the 1818 battle at Bhima Koregaon that marked the end of Maratha rule were leaders; yet, the term ‘nak’ occurs in many of the names inscribed on the monument that commemorates the battle.

III

Untouchable

In the Brahmin *dharmarajya*⁶ of late 18th century Maharashtra (Bayly 1999: 65–69; Chakravarti 1998: 9–31), the hierarchy of purity and pollution prevailed with the Brahmins considering themselves the most pure,

⁵ The ‘nak’ suffix was not confined only to Mahar in military service, as attested to by 17th and 18th century documents (Sumit Guha, personal communication).

⁶ In 18th century Maharashtra, the ruling Brahmin regime legitimised its claim to the highest ritual position as well as to social and political power by referring to their state as *dharmarajya* (the rule of righteousness) (Chakravarti 1998: 31).

and the *Antyaja* (the last-born) as the most polluted, and thus the lowest in the social scale. This was valorised through reference to the ancient text of the Manusmriti, or Laws of Manu, which endorsed a four-fold varna system, outside of which lay a range of people: ‘the “fierce untouchable”, “tribals”, fools, arrogant men, men of the lowest caste, and “Those Who End Up at the Bottom”’ (Doniger 1992: 81). The ‘fierce untouchable’ were known, generically, as the *Chandala*. The *dwija* (twice-born) were commanded not to have any social interaction with such people.

Following this, James Mill, in his influential history of India published in 1818, spoke of ‘the wretched Shudra’ who bore the cross of ‘inadequacy’. Based on what he called the ‘Code of Menu’ (*sic*) he named the ‘not yet civilized of Brahmin India, the lowest of all classes, the “chandalas” the offspring of a Sudra with a woman of the sacred class’ (Mill 1968: 139). Following this, a range of different communities who were considered to be at the bottom of the social scale were labelled as ‘Untouchables’ and an effort ensued to define exactly which groups should be included within this category.

This agenda informed the ethnographic surveys, gazetteers of tribes and castes, and census reports that the British compiled in the latter part of the 19th and early 20th century (Dirks 2001: 43–60). Since there appeared to be no unified scheme of classification, the census officers applied a pseudo-scientific racial theory of distinguishing castes in India (Metcalf and Metcalf 2006: 112).⁷ In these writings, terms such as *Atishudra* (lower than the *Shudra*) and *Ashprusha Shudra* (Untouchable *Shudra*) were used for those considered ritually polluted and outside the pale of respectable society. The term ‘Untouchable’ appears to have become a widely used category around the turn of the 19th and 20th century. In 1909, a compilation of writings on the ‘Depressed Classes’ stated that Maharaja Sayajirao Gaekwad of Baroda endorsed the term ‘Untouchable’ and attributed its origin to Justice Chandavarkar who had argued

⁷ Late 19th century British anthropology elaborated an array of ‘racial’ differences that not only distinguished Indians from Whites, but also mapped racial attributes to various castes and tribes. In turn, many upper-caste Indians were eager to embrace racial theories that ‘proved’ their superiority by placing them closer to White Europeans and that distanced them from lower castes (see Guha 1999).

that ‘the specially disadvantaged needed another title: “untouchable”’, because they ‘suffer from a peculiar difficulty of *untouchableness*’ (Anon. 1909: no page number, emphasis in original).

Indian social reformers were less happy with the term, preferring instead *bahujan samaj*, which was coined around 1906 within the *Satyashodhak* (Truth-seekers’) movement, Phule’s non-Brahmin organisation. Literally, the ‘majority community’ or the ‘majority of society’, ‘*bahujan samaj* retains widespread positive and powerful connotations in Maharashtrian social and political life today’ (Omvedt 1976: 4–5). We may note in passing that the term ‘bahujan’ has become significant in recent times especially in Uttar Pradesh, with the political rise of leaders like Kanshiram and Mayawati and their party, the Bahujan Samaj Party.

Gandhi also rejected the term ‘untouchable’, replacing it with *Harijan* (people of God), which he borrowed from the 14th century Gujarati saint and poet, Narsinh Mehta, a Brahmin who rejected untouchability. Most Mahar Dalit including Ambedkar expressed anger and insult at being referred to as Harijan. Ambedkar challenged a Congress supporter who said that the name ‘Harijan’ was sweet, exploding: ‘Don’t call me Harijan! That name is an affront to our self-respect. As soon as I hear the name Harijan I am on fire from head to toe, and I get so angry I start shaking’ (cited in Kardak and Pagare 1978: 184–87). Shantabai Dani, an Ambedkarite woman activist recalls that Dadasaheb Gaikwad (1902–1968)⁸ publicly rejected the term ‘Harijan’. Gaikwad argued:

What is the meaning of *Harijan*—well our Gandhi Baba thinks that it is a name of the Gods. I think it differently, I think *Harijan* means the tails of a sheep [...] It’s a kind of tail, which helps her neither to hide her honour nor keep the flies away! (Dani cited in Rege 2006: 111)

According to Ambedkar, when the Congress government introduced a measure giving legal sanction to the name Harijan, all the representatives of the Untouchables protested by walking out of the House en masse (Ambedkar 1989: 363). Similarly, none of my Maharashtrian informants accepted this Gandhian term. Ambedkar argued that the name

⁸ Gaikwad was Ambedkar’s chief lieutenant during the Nasik temple-entry Satyagraha, 1930–35.

'Harijan' only invited pity from upper caste tyrants and did not allow Untouchables to escape from the curse of untouchability. Ambedkar opposed Gandhi's move by not only retaining the term 'Untouchable' but using it with an assertive capital letter. He agreed that though the name 'Untouchable' was 'a bad name that repels and stinks', he preferred it because: 'it is better for the wrong doer that the wrong is there still to be redressed' (Ambedkar 1989: 363). He also disapproved of the term 'ex-Untouchable' which appeared to deny the fact that untouchability continued to be practised. Despite Ambedkar's endorsement, the term was rejected emphatically by many in the Dalit movement, due to its extreme negative connotations.

The term 'Depressed Classes' (DC) appears to date back to the 1870s. The Depressed Classes Mission Society of India was formed in Bombay, largely by members of the Prarthana Samaj which from 1898 worked for the uplift of the people so described. However, as far as the census was concerned, the term was applied officially only in 1912. In the early 1930s, the Census Commissioner J.H. Hutton argued in his census report that the previous 'unfortunate and depressing label' should be abandoned for 'exterior castes' (Charsley 1996: 7). According to Justice Chandavarkar, 'Depressed Classes' was an elastic term which could be applied across all of India.⁹ However, Chandavarkar went on to reject the term and instead supported the use of the term 'Untouchable' as discussed above.¹⁰ Significantly, it was members of the so-called 'Depressed Classes' who questioned the category as a separate interest deserving special consideration. In 1931 at the All India Round Table Conference, Ambedkar and R. Srinivasan observed that the term 'DC' was degrading and contemptuous. They therefore proposed alternative terms such as 'non-caste Hindus', 'Protestant Hindus', or even 'non conformist Hindus' (Ambedkar 1977: 317), terms that reflected Ambedkar's keen desire to mark a sharp break from Hindu identity. However, Ambedkar's attempts failed; the Government of India Act of 1935 replaced the term 'DC' by 'SC' or 'Scheduled Castes'. However, analogous to the Ambedkarite logic of embracing the term 'Untouchable' as a mark of oppression, an attempt

⁹ A similar discussion erupted in 1933, when the All India Women's Conference was dealing with the need for special provisions for the inclusion of women from Depressed Classes.

¹⁰ 'The Depressed Classes', Excerpts from *The India Review*, 1909.

was made to give the initials 'DC' a more militant connotation by interpreting them as standing for 'Discriminated Castes', a term that brought out the suffering of such people in a more assertive manner.¹¹

The colonial authorities first applied the term 'Scheduled' in 1928; and census officials and various government committees were subsequently ordered to create lists of Scheduled Castes, a project that was completed in 1936. This list became the basis for subsequent lists of SC drawn up by state governments after Independence, and the people thus identified were popularly referred to as 'SCs'. This became an official code for such castes. While, there was no agreed definition that was used to place a caste in this category, some broad considerations were taken into account, such as the historical position of certain castes in Hindu society who were denied access to temples, or had to use separate wells, were not allowed to attend a school, or had to suffer similar discrimination. Marc Galanter designated this process of official listing of castes, primarily for electoral purposes, as the 'invention of the SC' (Galanter 1984: 121–30). It is the SC category which has become popular in general and legal usage and forms the basis of policies of positive discrimination. Thus caste became legal and groups had to obtain caste certificates to prove their membership and hence validate their claims. There is great contestation over inclusion into the categories of SC, Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC). However, the identity of various Untouchable castes as a unitary SC gave them the power of collective resistance; while earlier they might have suffered in isolation, now they could resist together (Kaviraj 1997: 9). Therefore this common identity could lead to the invocation of a 'class language' rather than a 'caste language', and this strategy could work towards consolidating power. However, this interpretation of the politics of naming overlooks the fact that such a clubbing together has to contend with what are often long-standing, even irremediable, differences between different castes and sub-castes. It leads to a fundamentally false perception that 'Untouchables are united' and that they are not fractured communities. In the context of Maharashtra, the Mang and Chambhar have been traditional rivals of the Mahar, in terms of occupational duties, education, and employment. In contemporary times, this rivalry has been further deepened

¹¹ I am grateful to Chithrabha Kudlu for this point.

due to the scramble over the 'reservation pie'. This picture is repeated for other SC communities in India as well.

Although the Indian Constitution legally abolished the practice of untouchability in 1950, my interviews corroborate the scholarly, literary, and journalistic evidence that discrimination has continued in practice. However, with growing political assertion by communities such as the Mahar, the issue of naming became increasingly contentious. This was played out against a backdrop of rising urbanisation, as more and more Mahar left the villages and moved to the putatively anonymous and potentially 'free' space of the town or city.

IV *Dalit*

Ambedkar had used the term 'Dalit' in his writings in the journal *Bahishkrut Bharat* (India of the Outcaste) in 1928, where he had sought to define Dalit as a stigmatised community exploited by the social, economic, cultural, and political domination of the upper castes' Brahminical ideology (Guru 2001: 100; Omvedt 1994). Such a formulation allowed Ambedkar to unite ascriptive groups that were victims of discrimination rather than only those who suffered from economic hardship. This strategy of Dalit self-fashioning enabled a secondary socialisation; nevertheless, such constructions were not uncontested. Although the word 'Dalit' was first coined in the 1920s, it only came into common usage with a new wave of self-assertion in the 1970s. For Gangadhar Pantawane, a Dalit ideologue, and founder editor of *Asmitadarsh* (Mirror of Identity),¹² 'Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution. The Dalit believes in humanism' (Pantawane 1986: 79–80). Dalitness was therefore a means towards achieving a sense of identity—social, political and cultural. It signified a site of confrontation, a willingness to struggle for justice and equality, for self-elevation and self-pride for all who were oppressed. Dalits deployed a revolutionary socio-political identity to dismantle the caste system and rebuild society. The Dalit literary movement in Maharashtra added a new dimension and content to the traditional meaning of the term 'Dalit' (Dangle 1992: 265).

¹² *Asmitadarsh* (Mirror of Identity), published from Aurangabad, is a key resource for the dissemination of Dalit writing among Marathi readers.

Following Ambedkar, Dalit ideologues like Baburao Bagul, Sharankumar Limbale, and those affiliated with the Dalit Panthers tried to give a much wider definition to Dalit—as the oppressed in general, including the Scheduled Tribes or adivasis, other depressed castes and classes, working people and women who were exploited politically and economically (Guru 2001: 99; Limbale 2004: 11). In this sense, the category of ‘Dalit’ was perceived as inclusive, building on Ambedkar’s pragmatic strategy of strengthening horizontal solidarities among lower castes to resist the Brahminical elite. Here, Dalit became a mobilising slogan/agent or master-word that could bring under its umbrella all the subalterns and oppressed social groups. It was a political move, in that Dalit was not limited to the Mahar or neo-Buddhist/Buddhist community but included all other ‘excluded communities’, and thus adopted a language of class so as to forge a solidarity of the oppressed.

However, the term ‘Dalit’ is still contentious today. Some educated, middle-class Dalits believe that the category connotes a negative description since Dalits are no longer ‘oppressed’. They feel the label ‘Dalit’ is derogatory since it ignores the tremendous social, political, and religious transformation of the community as a consequence of conversion to Buddhism. Raja Dhale, a prominent leader, asked:

Why should we call ourselves Dalit? This term should not concern *us*. To say ‘I am Dalit’ is negative. The Dalits have to rise and fight for themselves. If some writers use it, they don’t understand anything. There has since been a great deal of social transformation (cited in Beltz 2005: 244, emphasis mine).

Thus, for some, ‘Dalit is for the most part merely a veneer that has little relevance in everyday life’ (Guru 2001: 106). A category that emerged out of a social, historical and political movement was being deployed mainly in literary and political circles and did not have much resonance in the consciousness of many groups thus labelled, whose identities were still rooted in their particularistic experiences of social difference.¹³ For most Dalits and non-Dalits, it was caste and untouchability alone that

¹³ Such examples are found in Maharashtra when Dalits are simultaneously Mahar, Mang Buddhist and Charmakar; in Karnataka where identities like adi-Karnataka or adi-Dravida still prevail; and in Andhra Pradesh, where some Dalit leaders still underline their caste identities as Mala or Madiga (Guru 2001).

determined who was a unique and inerasable Dalit, and not economic class or gender. Despite its claim of inclusivity, the Dalit movement in Maharashtra was almost exclusively associated with the Mahar. The Matang and Charmakar rejected the term and disliked being associated with such a stigmatised term. For them, the label meant the 'Untouchable Mahar', associated with Ambedkar, a 'Mahar' and 'Buddhist' leader. Thus 'Dalit' became another term for 'Mahar' and has been generally understood as such in Maharashtra.

V *Buddha*

Ambedkar attacked Brahminism and re-interpreted the past to write an alternative genealogy of Dalits as Buddhists and Broken Men.¹⁴ The Buddhists, like the Vanniyar, Nadar, Jatav, and other mobile castes, sought independence, equality, and dignity through a re-examination of the past and reconstruction of myth and history. However, this process of self-assertion and self-making had some limitations.

Ambedkar used Buddhism as a social revolt, a form of resistance, by reinterpreting it to further his mission of establishing a socially just and egalitarian society. He perceived Buddhism to be the only hope for an alternative to the Brahminical Hindu social hierarchy. He sought also to remake the Dalit self, in order to construct a unique non-Hindu identity. Ambedkar's form of Buddhism placed much emphasis on self-transformation (Omvedt 2008: 16). It sought to subvert old definitions and forge a new consciousness and creativity, a process that Margo Perkins has called 'rewriting the self' (Perkins 2000). This rewriting and reclaiming of the self and the past, as Frantz Fanon argued, 'triggers a change of fundamental importance in the colonised psycho-affective equilibrium' (Fanon 2004: 148). This Fanonian 'psycho-affective equilibrium' is analogous to Michel Foucault's conception of 'technologies of the self' which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with

¹⁴ Ambedkar was influenced by V.R. Shinde's argument that Dalit communities were originally Buddhists vanquished by Brahmins (Mangudkar 1963: 53–54). Ambedkar's teacher, K.A. Keluskar, presented him with a Marathi biography of the Buddha in 1898 and triggered his interest in Buddhism.

the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality (Foucault 1988: 18). A similar change can be discerned in the process of self-recovery by Buddhists who both reject caste and seek a state of happiness and wisdom.

Many Dalit Buddhists have undergone a secondary socialisation, a form of self-emancipation and politicisation after conversion to Buddhism, due to their participation in the activities of *Mahila Mandals* (women's organisations), youth associations, Ambedkarite study circles, schools and hostels, gatherings and speeches. For example, Mukhtai Sarvagod organised adult literacy classes, sessions on the importance of sending children to school, newspaper reading, and the importance of hygiene and smallpox vaccination as a part of Ambedkarite Mahila Mandals in BDD and BIT chawls of Mumbai. The simultaneous aim of this initiative was to form a group that would help raise consciousness about Ambedkar's message. She tried to spread the activities of the *mandals* beyond the organisation of Ambedkar and Buddha *Jayanti* (anniversary) celebrations. Another activist, Babytai Kamble, recalled that her father would read Ambedkar's speeches from newspapers over and over again to the entire *Maharwada* (Mahar quarter), thereby bringing *Bhimvaara* (Ambedkarite winds of change) to this marginalised part of the village (Kamble 1990: 113). As Ambedkar's speeches began to be practiced at the local level, many Dalits were politicised into challenging ascriptive markers and abandoning their traditional tasks. In this way, though few alive today have seen Ambedkar in person, his words have become like an elixir of life, inspiring and radicalising Dalit Buddhists (Kamble 1990: 108).

Buddhism brought to the Mahar a new self-esteem and a sharpened sense of their separate identity as being non-Hindu. Shankarrav Kharat, a Buddhist intellectual, declared:

I have accepted the Buddhist Dhamma. I am a Buddhist now. I am not a Mahar, nor an Untouchable, nor even a Hindu. I have become a human being. I am now equal with high caste Hindus. I am equal with all. I am not lowborn or inferior now. (cited in Gokhale-Turner 1993: 182)

In a similar vein, Baby Kamble recounted that:

Strength, intelligence and Baba[saheb] Ambedkar's principles brought us life, magnificence and immortality. The speeches of Baba spoke about personality, about righteousness of spirit, justice, and integrity. It was the moment when we began to understand his speeches. I resolved to make mine these principles and to shape my life to come by them. We became human beings. Thanks to Baba[saheb] the Mahar retrieved their souls when the situation radically changed for the better (cited in Poitevin 2002: 257).

The inner world of Dalit Buddhists was thus electrified and many Mahar Buddhists decisively snapped their links with Hinduism and followed Ambedkar. Vasant Moon provides a compelling picture of groups of educated and vibrant youth in the Mahar community who began to challenge Brahminical domination and broke the idols of Hindu deities, started a Buddhist library and began to read about Dhamma (Moon 2001). Mahar and Dalit socio-psychological conversion to Buddhism led them to rebuild a new future by bringing about an internal and external change: in social status, ideology, education, dress, intellectual control and religious identity. Buddhists thus rejected their past life as Mahar and Dalit and distanced themselves from it. Dalit-Buddhist conversion was thus a becoming, a making of a community—a community coming into consciousness due to particular historical conditions and political practices. However, though conversion brought about considerable emancipation, a closer investigation reveals that the situation was more complicated and contradictory: the journey from Mahar to Dalit to Bauddha was enabling and disabling at the same time.

VI

Ambiguous struggle and social change

Although many Dalit Buddhists found a new recognition as Bauddha, this success was limited in certain ways. The 2005 *Akhil Bharatiya Bauddha Mahila Conference* (All India Buddhist Women's Conference) in Nagpur stressed that Buddhists should follow the precepts of the Buddha and give up fasting, worshipping Hindu gods and goddesses and

Contributions to Indian Sociology 45, 2 (2011): 217–241

even wearing the *mangalsutra* (necklace worn by married Hindu women as a mark of their auspicious state). They asked women to wear white or yellow beads instead. Such an appeal has had only limited success. While some staunch Buddhists assert that they are no longer Hindu and have regard only for Ambedkar and the Buddha, and keep only images of these two figures in their homes along with the blue-covered copies of Ambedkar's writings, the majority of Buddhist converts have merely added the images of the two to the other deities and saintly figures such as Sai Baba, Ganpati, Khandoba, Durgadevi and Krishna, that they keep in the *devhara* (household shrine for Hindu gods). Shantabai Punekar, whose Pune home I visited in 2003, identified herself as a Bauddha, but her living room had, along with an image of the Buddha, a pantheon of Hindu gods, Jesus Christ, and her parents' images, with lamps as would be lit for Hindu deities. One family in Nagpur observed the anniversary of the Buddhist conversion on Dussara (a Hindu festival) by lighting a lamp for the Buddha who was now turned into a Hindu deity. The woman of the house placed *naivaidya* (food offering) in front of the Buddha as is customarily placed in front of Hindu deities. Like practicing Hindus, the family members in this household ate their lunch only after this ritual was performed. In this way, they merely added the Buddha and Ambedkar to the Hindu pantheon. One scholar referred to this as 'village Buddhism' (Fitzgerald cited in Nanda 2007: 67), though it is found just as much—if not more so—in the cities. Such practices indicate the Bauddha struggle with their double consciousness (Du Bois 1994)¹⁵—to be Hindu 'or' Buddhist, or to be Hindu 'and' Buddhist?

While some Buddhists see Dalit and Buddhist identity as complementing each other, for others 'Dalit' has become a pejorative term. One activist thus argued: 'Being Dalit implies an inferiority complex. The word Dalit is an insult. We are all Buddhists and shall remain so' (Beltz 2005: 243). On another occasion, a Buddhist informant in Mumbai passionately argued with me over the use of the category 'Dalit' in the title of my Ph.D. dissertation. Like many urban, educated, middle-class Buddhists who had gained a higher social position, he did not like to be

¹⁵ The split life of some Dalit Buddhists resembles the 'double consciousness' state that W.E.B. Du Bois described among Black Americans, namely, a sensation of "two-ness", two souls, two thoughts, two un-reconciled strivings' (Du Bois 1994: 3–4).

associated with the term Dalit. This anti-Dalit trend is today seen most strongly within a new middle class that has emerged amongst Buddhists in recent years.

In a similar way, many Buddhists disassociate themselves strongly from the category of 'Mahar'. When I interviewed the Dalit feminist intellectual Urmilatai Pawar in Mumbai in 2004, she was visibly upset when I used the term 'Mahar' to describe our shared community. She said that she felt violated by the term. She felt that it associated us with the degraded occupations and stigmatised labour of an 'Untouchable' caste, asking rhetorically: '*Apan janaawara odhato ka* (Do we drag carcasses)?' I answered Urmilatai in the negative. She announced that she would stop the interview if I used the word again. She affirmed that *apan Bauddha aahot* (we are Buddhist). We should note that the everyday usage of the plural *apan* in Marathi, invokes a collective identity of and for Dalit-Buddhists.

In Nagpur, Jyoti Lanjewar, a Dalit scholar who is also prominent in the Maharashtra wing of the Republican Party of India, stated in an interview:

The Mahar-Buddhists are not very co-operative with other SCs. They are involved with themselves and their uplift without taking cognisance of others below them. If they continue this they would be isolated. We should not force everybody to become Buddhist in order to be in our camp. (emphasis added) (Jyotitai Lanjewar, Interview, Nagpur 2005).

Significantly, Jyotitai pointed out differences among SCs. She also added that the Bauddha were spoken of as a unity. However the fragility of this religious unity, the argument over 'Us' and 'Them,' surfaces once we deal with the divisions even among Maharashtrian Bauddha.

Some Mahar and Matang informants revealed that Matang who converted to Buddhism felt alienated from the Buddhist community. This is because they were 'converted-Matang', or 'Matang-Buddhists' as opposed to 'Mahar-Buddhists'. 'Matang-Bauddha' continue to have a hyphenated identity; they are under a question mark—Hindu or Bauddha? Mahar-Bauddha had to a large extent shed their earlier hyphenated identity of 'Hindu-Mahar' after their conversion to Buddhism in 1956, so that for many years there has been a tendency for 'Bauddha' to be equated with Mahar. This history acts as an obstacle for the assimilation of more

recent Matang converts into the Buddhist fold, thereby re-inscribing differences between the Mahar and Matang within an ostensibly homogenous religious identity.

It should be noted that middle-class Matang prefer the Sanskritised, Hinduised label of 'Matang', rather than the older 'Mang', just as the group that used to be known as 'Chambhar' now prefer to be called 'Charmakar'. While the 'Matang' and 'Charmakar' name adoption can be seen as a political and social strategy of seeking mobility within Hinduism, on the other hand we need to investigate their dislike for the Mahar who sought mobility outside Hinduism. Most Charmakar disapproved of Ambedkar and Mahar for their rebellion (Kondvilkar 1985: 154–55 as cited in Beltz 2005: 99). They have, in their opinion, 'polluted' themselves by adopting Buddhism. The Charmakar leader P.N. Rajbhoj and Matang leader Sakat expressed their full confidence in Gandhi and the Congress and declared that Ambedkar had no authority to talk on their behalf as he was not their elected leader.¹⁶ Madhav Kondvilkar, a Charmakar poet also asked why Ambedkar could not inspire confidence in them (cited in Beltz 2004: 100). Many Charmakar and Matang accuse Ambedkar and the Mahar of exclusiveness. Matang–Mahar relations were also throughout marked by feelings of competitiveness, domination and subordination (Kotani 1997: 60, 64 and Pillai-Vetschera 1994: 46 as cited in Beltz 2004: 101). However, the issue of exclusion is complex. The competition between untouchable castes situated close together in the social hierarchy generates an antipathy such that the preferred Matang and Charmakar strategy is to not ally with the Mahar because that would mean being dominated by them within the unitary category, whether SC, Dalit or Bauddha. As less numerous and powerful groups, the Matang and Charmakar strategy is to precisely keep their distance from the Mahar and maintain their distinctive identity, one that is less stigmatised than before.

¹⁶ *The Bombay Chronicle*, 13 October 1931. According to Zelliott, 'Ambedkar, the Mahar leader, could not command the loyalty of either the Matangs or Charmakars. Nevertheless, two Chambhars served as Ambedkar's organisational men, Shvrtarkar from 1925 to 1935, P.N. Rajbhoj from 1942 to 1955. Shvrtarkar's primary disappointment was that Ambedkar failed to allot enough seats to non-Mahars on the Independent Labour Party's ticket' (Zelliott 2004: 100, 188–89). In 1952, Ambedkar lost a seat in the Lok Sabha to the Congress Charmakar candidate, Narayanrao S. Kajrolkar.

Besides group strategies, individual Dalits have also changed their surnames either in an attempt to seek a higher status or to proudly claim a distinctive identity that revalorises their stigmatised past. Family names associated with menial labour, names taken from the Hindu pantheon or those that were seen to be derogatory have been dropped. Some surnames such as Jatav, Mahar or Dalit assert the caste background of the person. Others such as Maitreya, Gautamiputra, Dhammaputra, Gautama, Siddhartha, Kanishka and Ashoka, borrow from Buddhist texts and history. Yet, these new names remain anchored in old associations. Some middle-class Dalit–Buddhists who wish to escape the burden of the past have sought to improve their status by adopting names that do not reveal their caste or traditional occupation. Some change the suffixes to their names, or alter them entirely; thus Salve becomes Puneekar, Tirmare becomes Ray, Kamble becomes Karmarkar, Nagare becomes Nagarkar, and so on.

There was an interesting way in which the English language became handy for the community. Several people of Urmilatai's [Pawar] generation and even some older ones changed their derogatory or godly first names by adopting English initials—like L.R. Tambe or K.D. Kadam for instance (Rege 2006: 289).

Pawar observed that her sister changed her family name from Kamble to Dabholkar, taking on the name of the village. She went on to say that '...perhaps I could have changed my name to Bhirwandkar but Pawar can also be mistaken for a Maratha surname and that is why it was probably never done!' (Pawar 2003: 126). However, such caste concealment can cause chronic psychological tension, for there is always a fear of 'being revealed', so that a person has to constantly guard her or his public identity.

The everyday practices of some non-Buddhists add to the desire of some Bauddha to conceal even this identity which was meant to obliterate their stigmatised caste status. Non-Buddhists call them *Jaibhim* or *Jaibhim wale*, as Dalit–Buddhists salute each other with *Jai Bhim* or 'Victory to Ambedkar', whose first name was Bhimrao. This greeting also signals a change from the traditional caste Hindu greeting *Ram Ram* or *Namaskar*.

Bauddha are also called *neele* (the blue ones) because of their association with the *neela handa* (blue flag). Or they are derisively called *zhenduchi phule* (marigold flowers), mocking the colour of Buddhist monks' robes; or even *shevchivada* (a non-entity or one that is mixed/confused). A Dalit has to decide what her or his public persona is going to be and has to live with that choice.

VII *Conclusion*

This article has sought to underline the many dilemmas that people within the Mahar–Dalit–Buddhist category have faced in their process of recognition and representation from pre-colonial to colonial to present times. I have tried to show how they have deployed names and new religious identities in an attempt to produce themselves anew both socially and psychologically. Upward mobility and social movements have engineered a secondary socialisation, and have made Dalits active agents of social and self-transformation. The Dalit revolution was bolstered by the political and social changes around them and their efforts to create a just society are still in the making. These efforts seek to dissolve traditional caste structures and norms and create an alternative community of the oppressed. However, the process of renaming is problematic for two reasons: the new Buddhist names are still perceived as markers of a historically stigmatised identity and do not allow for a forgetting of the past. Those who wish to do so have to adopt more neutral or ambiguous names, a strategy which is accompanied by the risk of being 'exposed'. The terms Bauddha and Dalit, while aiming towards the inclusion of all SCs, re-inscribe the differences between the Mahar and other castes such as the Matang and the Charmakar who see their own distinctive identity being smothered and erased under these unitary labels. The dilemma of inclusion and exclusion remains unresolved.

For Dalits, identity is a contradictory and continuing problem that arises out of the constant dialectic between social structure and psychological reality. At times, the very variety of names by which people of this category are known has become a historical and political burden and humiliation. Again and again, they have agitated for a 'meaningful'

nomenclature that they can assert with pride. Naming is thus an ongoing and continuing social and historical process, being born from a longing for social recognition. Although this quest never quite achieves its elusive goals, it creates new realities that are in themselves important and meaningful.

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Contributions to Indian Sociology 45, 2 (2011): 217–241

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