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Religion and the Subaltern Self: An Exploration from the Indian Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the interface between religion and the contours of the subaltern self in the Indian context. While the first part of the essay discusses some of the methodological themes of the academic study of the interface, the second part points out to some salient instances of the occurrences of the interface during the pre-modern and modern contexts of India. Since the Subaltern Studies Project (SSP) is one of the significant historiographical efforts that has emerged in the recent past to explore the agency of the subaltern self, the essay begins with critically observing the way the SSP introduced the debate on subaltern agency, and goes on to explore the interface, taking cue from the view of David Arnold, one of the founding members of the SSP collective, that SSP, at the outset, 'failed to take religion seriously enough.' Basing on independent initiatives of studying religion in relation to the subaltern self, the essay goes on to argue that religion needs be approached as a sui generis reality especially when exploring from subaltern perspective, which, according to the present author, is different even from the post-colonial perspective. The second part of the essay, then, cites examples from pre-modern and modern periods, wherein individuals as mystics and religious leaders or socio-religious movements emerged as typical examples of the interfacing between religion and the subaltern self. Based on these examples, the essay concludes that religion has occurred as singular 'experiences of the subaltern self to interpret itself into emancipatory existence.'

KEYWORDS

Subaltern Studies Project, Sui Generis Approach to Religion, Subaltern Religion and Subaltern Self, Emancipatory Interpretive Existence

Subaltern: the concept, the project and beyond

From the year 1982 when a *Subaltern Studies Project (SSP)* emerged with the initiatives taken by Ranajit Guha and his colleagues, the word ‘subaltern’ became widely known in the Indian academic and civil spheres. As we know, the SSP itself did not invent the word, but took it from its earlier usages¹, especially by Antonio Gramsci who used it during the early part of the twentieth century. Gramsci identified two layers of consciousness among the subaltern people: one, that which exists among them, on their own, giving direction or meaning to their spontaneous activity of transforming the world through their labour, and the other, that which they ‘take in’ (oftentimes through imposition) from those who exploit, oppress, and dominate over them. There is then a layer of native consciousness which is free, autonomous and emancipatory, and another a layer of alien consciousness, imposed from outside. This results in a ‘contradictory consciousness’ in the subaltern mind. As for example, the deterministic belief in fate (converging with *karma* in the Indian context), widespread among the subaltern people, goes contrary to their own wellbeing! Gramsci spoke of the possibility of the subaltern classes of people to emerge as ‘agents’ of their destiny only when they acquired ‘critical consciousness’, with the help of ‘organic intellectuals’ who shared the ‘common sense’ of the people but converted it into a ‘good sense’ characterised by critical historical thinking.

Having this Gramscian insight as the backdrop, the SSP researched upon the subaltern consciousness as well as their agency, and published in volumes (12 until now) known under the generic title *Subaltern Studies – Writings on South Asian History and Society*. In the very first volume, Guha clarified the meaning of the term ‘subaltern’ as a “general attribute of subordination ... whether it is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Guha, 1982). Contrasting it with the term ‘elite’, which, according to him, stood for the “dominant groups, foreign as well as indigenous”², Guha used the term ‘subaltern’ interchangeably with the term ‘people’, which stood for “the total Indian population” (Ibid.) differentiating itself from the dominant elite. The SSP revisited the then-existing writings on South Asian history to unearth aspects of subaltern agency that lay buried under the colonial, nationalist and Marxist historiographies, which were then the major historiographical paradigms. It focussed, during its initial phase, primarily upon acts of insurgence or rebellion by peasants against empires of control, the colonial empire in particular. It searched

¹ As David Ludden points out, “[I]n late-medieval English, it (the word ‘subaltern’) applied to vassals and peasants. By 1700, it denoted lower ranks in the military, suggesting peasant origins. By 1800, authors writing ‘from a subaltern perspective’ published novels and histories about military campaigns in India and America; ...” (Ludden, 2001, p. 4)

² Guha identified the foreign dominant group consisting of sections like “British officials of the colonial state and foreign industrialists, merchants, financiers, planters, landlords and missionaries”, and the indigenous dominant ones at the national and regional levels, consisting of ‘biggest feudal magnates, the most important representatives of the industrial and mercantile bourgeoisie and native recruits to the uppermost levels of the bureaucracy’ and the like. (Ibid., p. 8)

such documents as 'police records', 'administrative reports', 'personal diaries', and oral traditions to bring up the elements of peasants' agency that informed their native autonomous consciousness. Thus began a *project* of subaltern studies, which continues until this day with their publications to underscore the agency of the subaltern people.

While this project has initiated discussion and debate on aspects of subalternity primarily in academic circles, we find several social movements, human rights activists, civil rights advocacy initiatives, and 'organic intellectuals', pre-existing or existing parallel to the *project* and contributing in manifold ways for the empowerment and emancipation of the subaltern people in India. The work of Mahatma Phule during the nineteenth century and the contributions of B. R. Ambedkar during the twentieth century are two salient examples among the many. There are a good number of studies upon them, independent of the *SSP*. They have shed more light upon the category of subaltern, treating the latter more emphatically within the Indian specific hierarchy of caste and the conditions of subalternity generated out of it. Caste-hierarchy is perhaps the central problematic of subaltern studies in India. Even the economic problem of poverty, the gender related problem of patriarchy, the marginality of Tribal people and the multiple socio-political exclusions cannot be understood and eradicated without taking into account the way the caste-system works in the Indian society. a plethora of studies have emerged today upon the continuing struggles of the people subordinated by the caste system, especially the most oppressed groups of people called by the generic name Dalits whose life-world, with all its victimhood as well as agency, becomes the anchor of subaltern studies.

Subaltern studies and religion

'How has the *SSP* treated religion?' is a good question to begin our exploration of the interface between religion and the subaltern self in the Indian context. Gramsci, in the context of his thinking of the revolutionary action for socialist transformation, treated religion along with the 'common sense', both of which, according to him, could not produce the critical historical consciousness (individual and collective) necessary for the revolutionary praxis. Religion could not be a critical and historical consciousness premised upon a coherent thinking, because, according to him, religion went with a 'disconnect' between 'thought' and 'action', as he found in the creedal/ institutional religion (rather than in religion in its 'confessional' sense)³. Gramsci was much worried that the institutional religion, as he experienced Catholicism in Italy, would always endeavour to keep the masses under its control and not allow them to acquire the transformative critical consciousness. However, that he bracketed out the 'confessional' religion would mean that his preoccupation was more on the workings of the institutional religion and less on religion *per se*, leaving the question open.

³ In his own words: "... the problem of religion taken not in the confessional sense but in the secular sense of a unity of faith between a conception of the world and a corresponding norm of conduct" (Hoare & Smith, 1998, p. 326).

The volumes of *SSP* carried a few essays, which had direct or indirect references to religion. In one of the pioneering essays, Partha Chatterjee, an important member of *SSP*, related the Gramscian understanding of subaltern consciousness to the reality of caste in the Indian context, touching upon the mediatory role played by religion (Chatterjee, 1989). He wrote that, “subaltern consciousness in the specific cultural context of India cannot but contain caste as a central element in its constitution,” (Ibid., p. 169) and that the centrality of caste in the subaltern consciousness worked in conjunction with religion. In order to explain this, he drew upon the arguments of Louis Dumont, as found in his well-known work, *Homo Hierarchicus* wherein Dumont had spoken of the caste system as premised upon the triple principles of ‘hierarchy, separation and division of labour’, which were based on the ‘tensive unity’ continuously being forged between the opposite principles of purity and pollution. In Dumont’s words:

[T]he three ‘principles’ rest on one fundamental conception and are reducible to a single true principle, namely the opposition of the pure and the impure. This opposition underlies hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure to the impure, underlies separation because the pure and the impure must be kept separate, and underlies the division of labour because pure and impure occupations must likewise be separate. *The whole is founded on the necessary and hierarchical coexistence of the two opposites* (Dumont, 1980)

While this co-existence was not easy, Dumont observed that it was the legitimating role played by the Indian *dharma* (universal religio-ethical code) that ensured its continuance. While relating this Dumotian insight with the Gramscian theme of the two layers of consciousness’, Chatterjee opines that,

Religions which succeed in establishing a dominant and universalist moral code for society as a whole can then be looked at from two quite different standpoints. For the dominant groups it offers the necessary ideological justification for existing social divisions, makes those divisions appear non-antagonistic and holds together a potentially divided society into a single whole. For the subordinate masses, religion enters their common sense as the element, which affords them an access to a more powerful cultural order; the element of religion then coexists and intermingles in an apparently eclectic fashion with the original elements of common sense (Chatterjee, 1989, p. 172)

Chatterjee, thus, sees “religion in class-divided society as the ideological unity of two opposed tendencies—on the one hand the assertion of a universal moral code for society as a whole and on the other the rejection of this dominant code by the subordinated.” (Ibid.) He goes on to add that, “[I]t is the construct of *dharma* which assigns to each *jati* its place within the system and defines the relations between *jatis* as the simultaneous unity of mutual separateness and mutual dependence” (Ibid., p. 180). For the subalterns, it could be religion that works to construct an alternate

dharma to overthrow the caste system; and we do find such instances of alternate religious traditions, operative among the people from the pre-modern through the modern to our contemporary era⁴. Our objective must be, as Chatterjee opines, “to develop, make explicit and unify these fragmented oppositions in order to construct a critique of Indian tradition...” of the dominant *Dharma* (Ibid., p. 185).

Chatterjee’s analysis of the place of religion in the subaltern consciousness could be treated as a good example of the few cases where SSP treated religion in its exploration (Guha, 1986). However, David Arnold, one of the seven founding members of the SSP collective, points out in a relatively recent essay published in a volume entitled *New Subaltern Studies* that “[S]ubaltern Studies failed, at the outset, to take religion seriously enough.” (Arnold, 2015) This was because, according to him, “[T]he initial Subaltern Studies’ view was instrumental in the sense that religion was seen as a means of gaining access to, and locating evidence for, subaltern consciousness and collectivity,” and not as a *sui generis* reality. Taking cue from Arnold’s criticism, Aparna Sundar, in her study of the Catholic Church among the Mukkuvars of coastal Tamilnadu, argues for the “primary mode of religious engagement” in cultivating such values as participation in public sphere, democracy, interrogating authority, etc. (Sunder, 2014, p. 130) The church, in this case, becomes the arena for learning democratic values of participation, election, and democratic authority by which the people not merely enter into the wider public sphere, but continue to contest the lack of democracy and public sphere also within the church. Religious engagement, on its own, becomes the way ‘secular’ ideals are nurtured. Thus, we see the emergence of the ‘new subaltern studies’, which approach religion phenomenologically as a *sui generis* reality, without the modernist and instrumentalist biases. And this approach positions us in a meaningful way to study the relationship between the reality of subalternity and religion.

Exploring ‘subaltern religions’ on their own

It is instructive at this juncture to get to know that a good number of activist-scholars who, though not enlisted among the subaltern studies collective, have studied and contributed to the understanding of subaltern religion. Some selected examples are G. Aloysius, *Religion as Emancipatory Identity – A Buddhist Movement among the Tamils under Colonialism* (1998); Saurabh Dube, *Untouchable Pasts – Religion, Identity and Power among a Central Indian Community 1780–1950* (1998); Manu Bhagavan and Anne Feldaus, *Speaking Truth to Power* (2008); and, Gail Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura – The Social Vision of Anticaste Intellectuals* (2008). These studies explore the emancipatory potentials of subaltern religions, on their own.

The study by Milind Wakankar entitled, *Subalternity and Religion – The Prehistory of Dalit Empowerment in South Asia*, explores insightfully the saint-poet Kabir’s verses as sites, which render the transfigurations of the holy in the lives of the subaltern people. Observing the condition of violence wherein the Dalits were / are “thrown into” by the operation of caste, he notes the “co-existence of the experience of divinity

⁴ Starting with the *charvakas*, Jainism, Buddhism, *ajivikas*, the *saktas*, the *tantrics*, etc., the alternate religious traditions embodying dissent have continued to emerge in the Indian context.

and the experience of violence in daily life” of the Dalits (Wakankar, 2010, p. 8), who, however, refuse to submit themselves into “historically neutral and passive form of existence.” (Ibid., p. 7) Such a refusal finds expressions in poets like Kabir in whose verses divinity and violence converge to construct a subaltern subjecthood. a mystical fountain gushing forth from the *sangamam* of Islam and ‘Hindu’ traditions brought forth a corpus of poems, which dwelt upon a transcendent formless God.

Such studies bear testimony to the positive relationship between religion and the emancipatory aspirations of the subaltern people.

Subaltern and post-colonial studies

It is in place here to clarify the relationship between the subaltern studies and the post-colonial studies that has emerged prominently today. Post-colonial studies, a kindred discipline to subaltern studies, has been developing in literary criticism, historiography, philosophy, cultural studies, religious studies, etc., for quite some time now⁵. Though thinkers like Achebe, Franz Fanon, and Du Bois have been bringing out the voice of the colonized in their literatures, it was the set of writings by diaspora writers like Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha during the second half of the twentieth century, which came to be discussed in the academia as ‘post-colonial’ writings. The central issue being debated here is the nexus between power – colonial power to be precise, on the one hand, and, knowledge, culture, art, religion, etc., on the other. In his much debated work named *Orientalism*, Edward Said problematized the way the colonial creators of knowledge produced the knowledge of the Orient in such a way that they could instrumentalise it for their colonising agenda. Orientalism, then, was part and parcel of colonialism, and it was this that post-colonial studies explored as one of its targets. The perspective, later on, was applied to fields of literature, culture, art, and religion to critically examine the invisible hands of empires operative behind the texts, which were produced in a given historical context.

Debates are on as to whether the very term ‘post-colonialism’ is an appropriate one. There are those who dispute the relevance of the chronological implications of the term. They point out to the fact that empire building with the instrumentality of culture, religion, and knowledge-systems have pre-existed the types of colonialism, which emerged from Europe from sixteenth century onwards. There are others who argue that colonialism was not a monolithic category, experienced uniformly by the ‘colonized’ people; there were variants of colonialism, which were resisted, responded to, or even appropriated by the so-called ‘colonized’ people. Moreover, the way post-

⁵ Some of the important contributions to postcolonial studies include: *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin; *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, by Ania Loomba; and *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: a Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. For more readings, cf. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989). Other often quoted studies by the same authors are Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith, and Helen Tiffin, *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1995), and Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2002).

colonialism premised itself upon a commonality of the experience of colonisation starting with North America, Canada, and Australia, to the 'third' world countries from Asia, Africa and South America 'homogenises' the experience of colonisation without due consideration to the specifics of the varying contexts. For example, the Indian experience of colonisation, in a context of the hegemony of the caste, can never be equated with North American or Australian colonial experiences. And therefore, speaking of exploitation, oppression and domination, even in terms of the epistemic empires, need to be context-specific.

There are several aspects of convergence between the post-colonial and the subaltern studies. Both treat the subject as 'dominated over', and both discuss the subject's conditions of subordination in terms of her / his consciousness. For example, Gayatri Spivak, one of the pioneering trio of the post-colonial studies in academic circles, treats the conditions of subalternity as part of the post-colonial critique of coloniality and its empire in her famous question, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. The voice of the subaltern as the colonized, according to her, is irretrievably lost for contemporary historiography, and the subaltern consciousness, buried under layers of external consciousness cannot stand up. Despite the Spivakian provocative pessimism, the general thrust of post-colonial and subaltern studies is to highlight aspects of agency found among the subordinated or colonized in conditions of subalternity or coloniality.

However, the 'universalizing' tendency of post-colonial critique tends to leave context-specific power-dynamics like caste in India easily elided. Accordingly the subaltern approach to religions and their texts, as they have emerged in the Indian context, is unique and distinguishes itself from the post-colonial approach at least upon the following counts: (1) Subaltern studies in the Indian context deals with the question of subordination especially as it obtains in a hierarchical social condition characterised by the reality of caste, while post-colonialism looks at the universal reality of epistemic and cultural domination as they obtain globally in situations where empires are at work. (2) The reality of caste is more enduring across historical stages of life. The fact that the identity of caste is fixed by birth, and that one cannot wish for changing one's caste, speaks for the truth of its non-negotiability. But, the situation of being colonised, despite the fact that it leaves traces of subordination which are relatively difficult to erase, goes with less 'ascriptivity' and systemic intransigence than caste. For example, identities based on race, colour, gender and caste are more ascriptive and less negotiable than those based on empires, coloniality, first-third worlds, poverty, north-south, etc. Collapsing the subaltern discourse into that of the post-colonial can happen only at the peril of making the emancipatory subaltern discourse dampened.



Religion and the subaltern self in Indian history

the argument of this essay is that religion, considered on its own, could be an emancipatory experience for the subaltern self. The 'Dalit Self' is the typical example of a subordinated self in the Indian context, and it would do well to explore the role of

religion in the history of the Dalit self. Nothing can be more appropriate than taking a look at some of the occurrences of religion in the lives of Dalit individuals and movements:

1. Shankar Deva (15th century) of Assam was a good example of a subaltern religious self (Fuchs, 1992)⁶. Some of his verses, whose translation is given below, make a point that a person, even if he / she eats 'dog's meat' or not able to execute ritual sacrifices because of ritual exclusions, 'purifies himself/herself by singing the name of God':

The *mlechhas* who eat dogs purify themselves by singing the name of God.
The *Chandala* who only sings the name of Hari will properly execute the function of sacrifice...

That *Chandala* at the tip of whose tongue there is the message of Hari is to be placed in the highest estimation...

One is an ignorant boor who vilifies a *Chandala* who has sung the name of Hari (Ibid.).

Shankar Deva's "creed consisted essentially in *Namkirtan*, i. e., keeping the memory of God in mind and heart, and expressing one's love and devotion to God externally by acts of praise and worship." (Ibid., p. 191) Message of equality was an essential part of the religiosity of Shankar Deva. His followers "felt that they belonged to a community to which high and low were treated alike, where all treated each other as brothers and equals." (Ibid., p. 192) The Brahmins complained against Shankar Deva to the king that he "did not sacrifice to the gods; he did not observe the caste rules; and he treated the Brahmins with disrespect." (Ibid., p. 193) Shankar Deva withstood the persecutions, and finally became a well-celebrated subaltern saint to be remembered even to this day by festivities and other religious activities.

2. Ravidas was a pioneering saint-poet of the fifteenth century from the Chamar community in North India to give leadership to the Chamars to construct a new identity for them. He adopted the brahminic markers like the sacred thread, *tilak*, etc., even while continuing to do his job as a cobbler. His very appearance challenged the Brahmins, and motivated the Chamars to take on a new identity. He chose poetry and religion as vehicles of social protest.
3. A nineteenth century illiterate mystic, Vaikuntasamy, religiously treated the bodily selves of the Shanars, a subaltern community, for an experience of emancipatory identity. The mystic instituted rituals, which treated the people bodily, a ritual known as *Thuvayal Thavasu* ('washing penance') was a case in point. It was a context wherein the Shanars were considered "untouchable, un-seeable, and un-approachable", and were chased away from public places on account of these unmeaning restrictions. It was in this context that

⁶ Cf. Stephen Fuchs, *Godmen on the Warpath – A Study of Messianic Movements in India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd, 1992), 187 ff.

Vaikundasamy required them to undertake this *thavasu* (penance). Further, on, in the same context wherein these people were violently denied the right to wear cloths to cover their upper bosom, there arose in his religious assembly a practice of “worshipping” God in a mirror, with a headgear on. It treated the bodily self of the Shanars with a poignant religiosity, which resulted in a liberated sense of the self.

4. Pundit C. Iyothee Doss (1845–1914) is yet another inspiring Dalit self that sought to interpret its existence into emancipation through its religiously oriented hermeneutical propensity. Spurred by a “deep faith in God” (Sanna, 2007, p. 25), he explored the *Advaitic* vision not merely to satisfy his personal religio-philosophical quest, but also to find in it a remedy for the social discriminatory system. However, his struggle for a dignified social existence kept leading him to search for a more effectively transformative religion, and after reading a booklet given by a Buddhist bhikku, he was drawn to Buddhism, and that became his religious home for life. The Pundit embarked upon the task of constructing a variant of Buddhism known as the “Tamil Buddhism”, with the help of Tamil classical literatures. He involved himself in a lifetime hermeneutical task of deconstructing the existing myths, *puranic* tales, and even popular religious practices in order to disclose their original Buddhist character and content, which are liberative.

The religious pursuit of the Pundit went with a sense of enquiry and wisdom. He instructed his readers, or followers, to ‘inquire’ into everything – beliefs, practices, etc., until they got satisfactory answers to enquiry, experience and sight. He treated experience and vision as two epistemological criteria for the truthfulness of claims – religious or otherwise. He said, “Buddha *thanmam* even if handed down by your great grandfather or grandfather, question it in your own enquiry and experience. If you realise its truth that it would lead to your descendant’s, co-villager’s and co-countrymen’s welfare then believe in it; but if found worthless in your enquiry and experience, leave it; that is why Budhha *thanmam* is named as the true *thanmam* (*meyyaram*)” (Ibid., p. 131) an enquiring religion.

The Pundit’s spirit of enquiry shined forth in “deconstructing” some of the age-old *puranic* role models, the role model of Harichandra being the salient one among them. Needless to state the height of normativity this character had obtained in the popular Indian ethos for truthfulness. Gandhi is said to have learned his lesson of truthfulness from listening to the story of Harischandra. The Pundit was quite incisive in deconstructing this ‘myth’ of the truthfulness of Harichandra. He published an article with the title, “The Story of Harichandra’s Truthfulness and the Details of how he became a Liar”. He found this role-model characterised with umpteen number of lies, disloyalty to people, anti-women stances, and cowardice even to the extent of not being able to protect his wife. The Pundit was concerned about the concepts of ‘truthfulness’ and ‘lie’ that were being discussed in this *puranic* tale. He was agitated at the fact that Harishchandra was extolled as truthful king because he, through trial and tribulations, kept his word to the Brahmins, but, on the other hand, disgracefully

denied the request of two women from the lowly community. This contradiction in the characterisation makes Harishchandra a liar, and problematises the very neutrality of the concepts of truth and lie⁷. He accuses the proponents of the story of lacking in discernment of truth and lie, and of propagating such lies in order to manipulate and cheat the gullible.

The Pundit followed a uniquely linguistic approach, aided by his amazing skill to alliteratively search for the semantics of a given linguistic code, and by his grammatically informed wide knowledge of the classical Tamil literary corpus. It was laudable that he could trace out meanings from such classics as *Manimekalai*, *Sudamani*, *Pinkalai Nikandu*, *Veerasoliam*, *Seevakasinthamani*, *Tirukural*, *Silapathikaram*, *Gnavavetti*, *Muthurai*, *Korkaivendan*, and many more. It was not only the knowledge of the literary sources that gave the uniqueness to his linguistic approach, but also a deep confidence in approaching reality through language. Whether be it religious or social domain, he believed in the power of the language to work out transformations. Perhaps, it was this core confidence, which spontaneously oriented him towards a religious solution to social problems, rather than social remedies on their own. He worked with the claim that the 'genuine knowledge of the real and original meaning of the linguistic codes' (words or phrases) would result in ethical behaviour and religious observances resulting in justice, peace and harmony to the wider society, and to the oppressed in particular.

5. *Ad Dharm*, emergent among the Dalits during the early part of the twentieth century, was a "movement in north-western India that aimed at securing a respectable place for the Dalits through cultural transformation, spiritual regeneration, and political assertion..." (Ram, 2004, p. 900). This "movement aimed at securing a distinct identity for the Dalits, independent of both the Hindu and Sikh religions. Its central motif was that Untouchables constituted a *qaum* (community), a distinct religious grouping similar to that of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, which had existed since time immemorial." (Ibid.) This "movement, led by Mangoo Ram, aimed at making Dalits realize their communal pride (*qaumiat*), religion (*mazhab*), and capability for organization (*majlis*), which had hitherto laid buried under the burden of untouchability." (Ibid., p. 901) It "brought about cultural transformation in the lives of Untouchables in Punjab through its emphasis on moral principles. Through promoting a moral code of conduct, the movement tried to bring a sense of self-respect to the state's Untouchables." (Ibid.)

6. Another good example of the subaltern self, pursuing an interpretive religious avenue for egalitarianism was Mahatma Phule (1827–1890). Phule believed in a Creator God—a God who created everything, to whom, we in turn have to offer our gifts in gratitude in the form of 'righteous conduct of treating one another with freedom, dignity and fraternity'. He wrote 33 *akhandas*⁸ wherein he expounded

⁷The Pundit contends, "[I]t looks as if there are 'Brahmin truth and lies' on the one hand, and 'Paraiyar truth and lies' on the other hand." (Ibid., p. 95)

⁸Phule used the term 'akanda' instead of the existing word 'abhanga', which means a devotional poetry.

the ethical conduct as a response to the Creator's gift of creation. In his *Sarvajanik Satyadharm Pustak*⁹, he presents these *akhandas*, which dwell upon the criteria for the practice of righteous conduct. Some of the salient ones are:

- Those who admit that men and women have been born independent from birth and are capable of enjoying every right, can be said to practise righteous conduct;
- Those who do not worship the stars and stones, but have respect for the *Nirmik* (Creator) of the universe can be said to practise righteous conduct;
- Those who do not let other creatures enjoy all the things created by the Creator, but offer them in worship to the *Nirmik*, cannot be said to practise righteous conduct;
- Those who express gratitude to the creator, who has created all things, which we are using in this world, can be said to practise righteous conduct (Malik-Goure, 2013, p. 67).

Phule, thus, related faith in a creator God with the ethical duty of treating everyone as equal.

7. The early twentieth century *Satnami*¹⁰ movement of the Chamar community in North India is yet another example of forging an emancipatory self through religion. They were worshippers of the "true name of God." Ghasi Das, who claimed a "divine mission and authority" to fight for the human rights of the Chamars, initiated this *Satnami* movement, for, as in the words of Stephen Fuchs, ... though the Chamars of Chattisgarh had abandoned their former dishonourable trade as tanners and leather-workers and taken to farming and at the same time strictly observed the traditional Hindu food taboos and rules of behaviour, the higher castes continued to treat them as impure castes with whom they wanted to have no dealings. This social discrimination the Chamars felt the more keenly since by hard work and frugal living they had become fairly prosperous and were in no way inferior to the other farming classes of Chhattisgarh (Fuchs, 1992, pp. 218–219).

In this context, Ghasi Das, an extraordinarily spiritual man, initiated the *Satnami* movement by proclaiming seven precepts, which included "abstinence from liquor, meat, and certain red vegetables such as lentils, chillies and tomatoes, because they had the colour of blood; the abolition of idol worship; ... the worship of one solitary and supreme God," etc. "The *Satnamis* were bidden to cast all idols from their homes, to dispense with temples and fixed prayers, but they were permitted to reverence the sun, as representing the deity... caste was abolished and all men were to be socially equal..." (Ibid., pp. 220–221). As Saurabh Dube, one of the early scholars to study this movement, opines:

⁹ It was written by Phule in Marathi language, and its translation in English would be 'Book of the Universally True Religion'.

¹⁰ *Satnami* literally means 'the true name'.

The close connection between divine, social and ritual hierarchies located the Chamars at the margins of the caste order, and excluded them from Hindu temples. Ghasidas is believed to have thrown the idols of the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon onto a rubbish heap. The rejection of these deities and of the authority of Brahman specialists of the sacred, of temples and the Hindu puja (worship) offered in them was accompanied by the call to believe only in a formless god, *satnam* (true name). The new sect was called *Satnampath* and its members, *Satnamis*. (Dube, 1998, p. 1)

This religious movement contributed much to the emancipatory experience of the subaltern self in the Chattisgarh region of North India.

8. B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), the exemplary subaltern individual to play a vital role in the formation of the modern constitutional State of India, turned to religion in his search for freedom to the subalterns. His search for a transformative religion landed him in Buddhism, which opened up a hermeneutical engagement for his self. In interpreting Buddhism, he envisioned a Dalit self, assertive, autonomous, free, and responsible. He took a conscious and bold decision to convert to Buddhism. At the time of conversion, he rhetorically said: “If you want to gain self-respect, change your religion; If you want to create a co-operating society, change your religion; If you want power, change your religion; If you want equality, change your religion; If you want independence, change your religion; If you want to make the world in which you live happy, change your religion...” (Ganguly, 2002, p. 334)

Ambedkar’s conversion brings to the fore certain questions. As Debjani Ganguly, a post-colonial writer has formulated: “How does one then read this paradox of a secular modern intellectual and political activist seeking recourse to rhetorical devices-genealogies, parables, tales-within-tales-that are the prerogative of men belonging to “archaic” societies?” (Ibid., p. 335). Ganguly herself attempts an answer: “Ambedkar’s history-as-critique ... transforms the given dominant historiographical mode (i. e., Nationalist and Rationalist) from an *authoritative* one to an internally *persuasive* one.” (Ibid.) The power and need of persuasion can much be appreciated in our post-linguistic-turn ethos that values the cultural power for transformation. Ambedkar intuitively took recourse to a source of cultural power with a transcendental reference (religion) that could propose a free self, capable of taking on the dominant self-projected by the traditional Hindu religio-cultural system.

9. Conversion to Christianity and Islam was the other option the Dalit self explored in its saga of struggle for freedom. In spite of the adverse impact of casteism within Christianity, one can still state that Christianity did offer opportunities for the social dignity of the embodied Dalit self. That Christianity mediated a sense of “touchability” of the body is a case in point. The “touchability” Christianity weaned it out from its confinement within an untouchable-touchable ritualised binary. Its religiosity dwelt upon “healing” of the body (Jesus’ touching of the

lepers and healing is typical); its theology dwelt upon the possibility of the redemption of the “flesh”; its religious calendar gave importance to the “passion” and bodily resurrection of Jesus; the missionaries were meat-eaters, and therefore identified themselves with the meat-eating Dalits in dietary system; and so on. These aspects of engagement with the body and the religious provision of redemption by divine grace could be said to resonate well with the aspirations for the “touchability” for the Dalit self. It is in place to note here an observation made by Mathew N. Schmalz in his account of the transformation of a “Dalit” Christian (John Masih) to become a charismatic Catholic¹¹. In his words, “the most crucial aspect of charismatic Catholicism was its denial of untouchability. When John moved through the audience at prayer meetings, he laid hands on all who came within his reach. Once being of ‘something’ that defiled, John now became ‘someone’ who healed.” (Schmalz, 2010, p. 194)

Bodily experience of the self, or of an embodied self, is part and parcel of the life-reality of the Dalits. Their person has been constructed, reinforced, and reproduced within a *varna* / caste scheme of reality in terms of their bodily self. Their physic (raciality) has been essentialised through ritual, literary, religious, cultural and social behaviour to the extent of being identified with an unvarying constant of impurity resulting in chronic untouchability; their bodies have been relentlessly reproduced as ‘labouring bodies’ so as to be ready for rendering their physical labour to the maintenance of a society that is run by a “pure” bodied section of the people (Chatterjee, 1989); their dignity has been affronted with ‘untouchability, unseeability and unapproachability’ because of the empirical experience of the materiality of their bodies; civil liberties and their freedom of movement have been denied on account primarily of their physicality of existence. It is then nothing but an existential fact that the experience of self for the Dalit is singularly and more acutely embodied than for other classes of people in India. Negativity in their living has got accumulated primarily in terms of their body, a thing that had / has become a predicament rather than a facility. a sense of being “imprisoned” in a world wherein the everyday aesthetics, ‘religiosity’, opportunities, and even ethics smacks of a scheme of *varna*-based casteism is inescapable for the Dalits.

¹¹ Schmalz studies John Masih’s (a Dalit) religious vision, which “reflect and embody his struggle to undo the place of untouchability. In his effort, he moves through a succession of spaces in which he progressively assumes or deploys new identities for himself” (187–8). “John’s family and many Catholics felt they had attained a different kind of place in which they could experience a relative autonomy in their distance from their identity as Chamars.” (189) John became a healer and practised a kind of Catholicism “that allowed him to use the power of words to effect the transformation of self. But John’s transformation of self was not a simple change in public persona. Instead, it was an appropriation of an inspired and authoritative identity that could be deployed against the oppressive place of life as a Chamar.” (190) “While John did not write poetry, he did have a large collection of aphorisms that he composed. Many of the aphorisms had clear Christian meanings: ‘if you become trapped “in a cobweb”, call out to The Lord... What unified all of these disparate aphorisms was their focus on general notions of selfhood or identity. Indeed, the sequentially numbered aphorisms constituted a record of John’s own spiritual epiphanies; they were flashes of self-knowledge arranged in a staccato testimony of insight.” (192–3) “These aphorisms were not just tools for memory and mediation; they were weapons for controversy and contestation.” (193)

This pathos-filled condition of life generates a search among the Dalits for different avenues to exist, to have a meaningful sense of one's person, to strike respectful relationships, and so on. Religion had been an intimate ally in this search.

By way of concluding: subaltern self and religion in India

Above-mentioned subaltern individuals and movements are some typical examples of the resurgent Dalit selves that manifested in the history of Indian religions. During the pre-modern and the modern periods, religion had indeed been integrated as a resource for the emancipatory project of the Dalit self. In the traditional context, against the school of *jnana-marga*, for example the *advaitic* philosophical systems, which presented a pursuit for an immutable universal ideal self (*atman*), a pursuit from which the subaltern people were excluded, the Dalit saints took to *bhakti* religiosity, premised on a relationality between the *bhakta* and the deity, and through their religious poems and activities, expressed a possibility for the Dalit self to present itself in history, or as per the Gramscian insight, to emerge out of the 'contradictory consciousness' imposed upon them by the dominant.

During the modern era, various features of the Enlightenment got integrated with religion in the construction of the emancipatory Dalit self. Dr. Ambedkar was a good example. Enlightenment values of individual autonomy, equality, justice, liberty, etc., acquired through the western modern education, had matured in him to a level of inspiring radical protest against the 'demeaning' social conditions of the Dalits. They made him a radical interrogator of the dominant religious myths, which reproduced a hierarchical society. While coming out against the dominating Brahminic religion on the one hand, Ambedkar experienced the positivity of religion, in its emancipatory dimension. It was the latter that steered his person towards an interpretive experience of Buddhism. Religion could be found to be at its best when it inspires a person or a collective to be involved in an interpretive experience of existence. Needless to say that most of the initiators of religions have been not 'founders' in any juridical sense, but interpreters of existing religions. Ambedkar's interpretive confidence cannot be subsumed under an instrumentalist reasoning of a modernist self; but it was a relentlessly searching self that came to religion, the wellspring of transcendence, to nurture the emancipatory identity of the Dalits¹². Ambedkar, thus, in converting to Buddhism was fulfilling less a project of his modern self than entering into a decisive moment in his search for alternatives that could sustain the emancipatory selves of the Dalits. Ambedkar's modernity, thus, was an open-ended, subaltern modernity, that had radical openness to life, and to all that it offers, including the religious experience¹³.

¹² It is in place to note that a contemporary Dalit activist Jignesh Mevani quotes Ambedkar precisely on this point of connection between religion and caste as "the root of the caste system is religion attached to varna and ashram; and the root of the varnashram is Brahminical religion..." (Rajasekaran, 2017, p. 46).

¹³ It is insightful to note the fact that in most of the cases of these subaltern leaders, saints, mystics, and movements, proclamation of faith in a supreme God went along with the ethical claim of equality between human beings. The one God becomes the source of a dialogically forged universality of an egalitarian self. And this faith went with the denunciation of idols, rituals, and priesthood, which stood as the pillars of the caste-based hierarchical society.

Religion appears to be an effective interpretive potential for the subaltern self to take on the caste system, which remains deeply entrenched into the collective consciousness, with its own archetypal binary of purity and pollution. The western Enlightenment modernity empowered the Dalit-self up to a point, as it occurred in Ambedkar during his early development. However, it fell short of taking on the metaphysics of caste. Religion, on the other hand, with its metaphysical depth and transcendental ideal, could give the strength for an emancipatory identity to be situated in its alternate cosmogony and utopia. In its linguistic as well as embodied dimensions, religion came into relief as the subaltern self-interpreted itself into emancipation.

Glossary

Ad Dharm – original ethical religion.

Akandas – devotional poetry.

Atman – soul, self, the eternally immutable inner reality.

Advaita – ‘Non-dualism’, one of the central doctrines of classical Indian philosophical systems; *advaitic* is the adjective.

Bhakti – devotion, piety; *bhakta* – devotee.

Dharma – universal ethical religion.

Dhamma – the Buddhist rendering of the Sanskrit word *Dharma*; *Thanmam* is a Tamil rendering of the same word; *meyaram*, a Tamil word to mean ‘true ethics’.

Dalit – literally, the word ‘Dalit’ means ‘the broken’; in the Indian society, it stands for a conglomerate of a number of communities, which have suffered ‘caste’ oppression in historical past and continue to suffer, in subtler forms, until this day.

Karma – an Indic belief which holds that actions of a previous birth accrue to a person in the succeeding birth in the form of ‘karma’; its implied beliefs are ‘rebirth’, or ‘cycles of rebirth’, and ‘transmigration of souls’.

Mlechas – a derogatory term for foreigners.

Chandalas – a ‘lower caste’ that deals with removal of corpses.

Hari – God Vishnu.

Jnana marga – path of knowledge / wisdom.

Purana – literally ‘ancient tradition’; however, it stands for major epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata; *puranic* is the adjective.

Sangamam – confluence.

Thuvayal Thavasu – It means literally “washing penance”; it was a ritual requiring the adherents to wash themselves, their cloths, etc., in a ritual ambience as a form of penance.

Thavasu – penance.

Tilak – a vermilion mark at the centre of the forehead.

Varna – literally means ‘colour’; stands for the archetypal division of caste.

Vaishnavism – one of the two major theistic religious traditions of India; worships Vishnu as the supreme deity.

Vittobha/Vitthala – a Hindu god, considered as a manifestation of *Krishna*, an avatar (incarnation) of Vishnu.

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