

Exploring the Religious Identity of Dalits through the Lens of Religious Conversion¹

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Abstract. The paper examines the role of religion among Dalits in India, especially focusing on Dalit² religious conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism. It is based on a case study of Dalit conversion in Shabbirpur village in the Northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. In line with the existing research on Dalit conversions, this paper shows that Dalit conversion in Shabbirpur serves not merely as a religious but also as a political and social strategy of Dalits through which they try to negotiate their caste identity. For Dalits, conversion means a resistance to caste oppression as well as assertion of divergent religious identity from the majoritarian Hindu identity. While exploring the Dalit religious identity following their conversion in Shabbirpur, the paper challenges the prevailing notion that religious conversion simply denotes a transfer of religious affiliation. Instead, it elucidates that Dalit religious conversion is a social process wherein Dalits' transition from one religion to another devoid of a fundamental spiritual transformation. Through this case study, I argue that there exists a continuation of the past and present spiritual affiliation which involves hybridization of religious practice, fusing worship of Ravidas with a new Buddhist identity. Interestingly, this syncretization is not unintentional. It is a conscious attempt to keep both pre-and post-converted religious traits as part of their re-invented socio-religious identity.

Keywords: caste oppression, Dalit conversion and spiritual affiliation, Buddhism, *Ravidasiya* identity, political symbolism, religious syncretism, Hindu majoritarianism.

- 1 A detailed aspect of this paper has been discussed in my Ph.D. Thesis entitled "Religious Conversion and Construction of Identity: A Case Study of Shabbirpur Village in Western UP" submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University in June 5, 2023.
- 2 *Dalit* is a socio-political term popularized by *Dalit Panther Movement* in late 1970s. Historically, it is a marginalised group whose members are positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy of the Hindu caste system. Dalits were previously referred to as 'untouchables' as they were excluded from the four-fold *varna* system of Hindu society, which consists of *Brahmins* (priests and teachers), *Kshatriyas* (warriors and rulers), *Vaishyas* (traders and merchants), and *Shudras* (laborers and service providers). They have been facing untouchability, caste discrimination and atrocities (Shah et al. 2001).

Introduction

Religious conversion at a time of social and political crisis becomes a potent instrument of resistance to the powerful social and political structures such as the State or the Church (Wiegers 2016). A similar implication of religious conversion can be observed among Dalits who denounce Hinduism and adopt new faiths (i.e. Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism), in order to challenge the caste system and untouchability in Hinduism.³

Dalits constantly struggle with the challenge of reshaping their marginalized identity through various strategies, including the adoption of sanskritization,⁴ taking part in movements for socio-religious reform, pursuing constitutional and democratic reforms, and more. Among these strategies, religious conversion stands out as one of the significant instruments for effecting positive and profound alterations in their identity. Ghanshyam Shah (2001) classifies Dalit conversion into two categories: one, where external influences drive the conversion, referred to as proselytization; and the other, where Dalits undergo conversion based on their internal motivation which guides them to shift from their current religious affiliation to a new and transformative one. In this paper we will see how both external factors and inner motivations interact in the case of Dalit conversion to Buddhism in Shabbirpur.

Mass conversion of Dalits from Hinduism to Buddhism was started by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar⁵ in 1956. With the idea of religious conversion, Ambedkar attempted to resolve the conundrum of caste discrimination and Dalits' religious

- 3 The caste system in India is said to have originated from several religious practices which legitimized the symbolic power of the priestly caste and political authority of kings in a declining order, respectively, such as *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya*, and *Shudra*. The first three castes (*Brahmin*, *Kshatriyas*, and *Vaishya*) are called *Dvija*, or 'twice-born' castes, as they are eligible to perform the sacrament of initiation ceremony of the spiritual birth and are addressed as the 'upper-castes' throughout this paper. In addition to this, there exists an 'outcaste', popularly known as Dalit and *Ati-Shudra* caste. They are given the lowest social position in the Hindu caste system, which prevents them from receiving the same treatment as compared to the other lower and touchable caste, like *Shudra*.
- 4 "Sanskritization is a process by which a low caste, or a tribe and other groups, change its customs, rituals, and ideology in the direction of high and frequently, 'twice-born' castes" (Srinivas 1995, 32).
- 5 Dr. Bhim Rao Ramji Ambedkar, popularly known as Babasaheb among his followers, is the father of the Constitution of India. He was an economist, philosopher, and scholar. Born into a *Mahar* caste, a Dalit caste in Maharashtra, he was a strong opponent of the Hindu caste system. He entered Indian politics in early 1920s and advocated for the rights of the Dalits and other marginalized communities in India. He started several movements, such as temple entry movement for Dalits. Ambedkar played a dynamic role during the *Second Round Table Conference* in 1932 shaping the demand of a separate electorate for Dalits. It was after this event that Ambedkar emerged as Dalit leader in India and established *Independent Labour Party* in 1936 to provide a political platform for Dalits and other marginalised communities. In 1935 *Yeola Conference* Ambedkar for the first time announced his intention for conversion which later developed into a mass movement (Patankar and Omvedt 1979).

identity (Fuchs 2004; Jaoul 2018; Zelliott 2004). Given that the question of religious identity holds a substantial significance for Dalits as it carries the historical burden of untouchable Hindu identity, it became of utmost importance for Ambedkar to carefully choose what religious identity Dalits should embrace (Mohapatra 2015). For Ambedkar, Hinduism grounded untouchables' exploitation. Religion, in his view, should be emancipatory and have a social philosophy aligned with the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. In his view, Hinduism with its inherent graded inequality through the caste system fails to align with these democratic principles. It justifies untouchability and caste-based exclusion, which contradicts the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity (Fitzgerald 2007). Ambedkar realized that Dalits would never achieve freedom from the caste system and untouchability if they continued to practice Hinduism. As a form of protest against the inegalitarian character of Hinduism, Ambedkar left Hinduism and adopted Buddhism (Mohapatra 2015). The tenets of Buddhism provide equal treatment to all human beings and form the basis of a new consciousness among Dalits. This conversion gave rise to a new social category called neo-Buddhists or Ambedkarites with the potential to challenge the contemporary Hindu majoritarian politics (Mohapatra 1999).

Viswanathan (1998) refers to conversion as a conscious political act ushering in ideas of modernity, equality, and democracy. She argues that any form of dissent that occurs through conversion most strongly manifests among minorities across all civilizations. Several researchers, such as Webster (1999), Viswanathan (1998), Omvedt (2003), Robinson and Clarke (2003), Zelliott (2004), Beltz (2015), Jaoul (2018), documented Dalit conversions from Hinduism to other religions. Their works highlight the change of religious identity through conversion among Dalits as a socio-political move to escape the stigma of untouchability and as a tool to fight against the caste system.

To understand the relationship between Dalit conversion in a broader perspective, one needs to examine the nature of the Dalits' religious identity and its relationship with Hindu majoritarian politics in both pre-and post-independent India. In this context, it is worth discussing Joel Lee's (2015) study on *Valmikis*⁶ and their socio-political transformation from the previous *Lal Begi* identity in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh. *Lal Begis* as per their traditional occupation were associated with sanitation labor. They traditionally had Muslim names and their practices centered on the prophet Lal Beg. In the social history of sanitation

6 *Valmiki* refers to a caste traditionally associated with the occupation of sanitation work. They are not included in the four-fold *varna* system and previously treated as untouchables. They fall under the category of the Scheduled Castes.

labour castes in Delhi, Vijay Prasad (2000) explores the spiritual narratives surrounding Lal Beg, a Sufi figure from the Mughal period. These narratives, which were documented in a mid-20th-century text by a Dalit activist, portray Bala Shah, also known as Lal Beg, as a vocal opponent of caste discrimination, particularly when it is against sanitation and manual scavenging workers. Reacting to the socio-political changes in India, *Lal Begis* adopted Hindu names and began identifying as a sanitation labour caste called *Valmikis* (Lee 2015).

This change was not merely cultural but was also a strategic adaptation to socio-political pressures, particularly influenced by the *Poona Pact of 1932* and the *Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1950* which incentivized Dalits to identify as Hindus to access socio-economic benefits reserved for the Scheduled Castes. Ambedkar's demand for a separate electorate during the *Poona Pact of 1932* for Dalits in order to ensure their political representation in the constituent assembly would have allowed them to vote for their own representatives. However, Mahatma Gandhi's strong opposition to the idea of a separate electorate for Dalits reinforced the idea that Dalits are an integral part of the Hindu social fabric and that their political representation would be within the larger Hindu community (Patankar and Omvedt 1979). By insisting that Dalits remain within the Hindu fold, Gandhi and leaders of National Congress denied Dalits the political and social recognition needed to assert their distinct identity.

This non-recognition of a Dalits' distinct political identity continues to affect Dalit communities even after Independence. Lee's (2020) post-Independence's analysis of the census data from 2011 in several districts of Uttar Pradesh (Lucknow, Banaras, and Mirzapur) provides valuable insights. He observed that the census enumerators overlooked the religious affiliation of converted Buddhists and instead categorized them uniformly as Hindus. This was evident when Dalits with surnames ending in *Gautam*⁷ were recorded as Hindus, disregarding their conversion to Buddhism. Lee also highlighted instances where Dalits intervened during the survey, objecting to being identified as Hindus and asserting their distinct religious identity. Based on these examples, Lee presented two arguments. Firstly, he argued that this practice violated the guidelines provided in the Government's instruction manuals for census personnel. These guidelines emphasize that enumerators should faithfully record the religion provided by the respondents for herself/himself and for other members of the household, without presuming any predetermined relationship between caste designations

7 Gautam is the first name of Gautam Buddha. In this case, it refers to followers of Buddhism who, as symbol of identity, take the first name of Buddha as their surname.

and religious affiliations. Secondly, Lee suggested that the reluctance to recognize the religious identity of Dalits may stem from a broader state-level reluctance to acknowledge this distinct religious identity.

Based on the above discussion, the present paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the multifaceted issues surrounding Dalit conversion in India, shedding light on the intricate relationship between religion, caste, identity, culture, and politics. The paper revolves around the following questions: What socioeconomic and political conditions drove the Dalits of Shabbirpur to pursue a shift in their religious identity? What meanings and interpretations do Dalits associate with religious conversion? How do they express their newly converted identity?

By offering a historical reading of Dalit mobilization in the state of Uttar Pradesh, this paper focuses on their caste consciousness and religious identity. The following section provides a brief description of a case study of Shabbirpur village and its caste composition, and examines their decision for mass conversion to Buddhism. The paper also tries to understand how the converted religious identity of Dalits is built, perceived, and reoriented within the community as well as in the wider caste society. The research shows that in many instances the converted Dalits of Shabbirpur are found to be following multiple religious and spiritual paths guided by Ravidas, Buddha and Ambedkar, which means that Dalit conversion results into a syncretic religious practice, keeping both old and new religious traits. However, what is most important in the conversion act of Shabbirpur Dalits is its socio-political message that challenges the upper-caste-dominated Hindu-majoritarian politics and its attempts to identify Dalits solely with Hinduism.

Historical background of Dalit mobilization in the state of Uttar Pradesh

As mentioned in the introduction, Dalit self-identification encompasses various methods and approaches which include the *bhakti* movement⁸, sanskritization,

8 The *Bhakti* movement began in South India (7th-10th century) with saint-poets like the Alvars and Nayanars. It promoted religious equality and devotional surrender to a personal god. It was later philosophically refined by scholars like Ramanuja. Later this movement emerged in North India during the medieval period (13th-17th centuries) and played a significant role in challenging the Brahminical caste system. Key figures like Kabir, Nanak, and Ravidas advocated for devotional worship accessible to all, regardless of caste. They critiqued the ritualism and social hierarchy enforced by orthodox Brahmanism, instead promoted the idea of a direct, personal relationship with the divine.

socio-religious movement among Dalits, and conversion. Examining the changing political consciousness of the Dalits of Uttar Pradesh in relation to the caste system and the religious identity reveals their unyielding and rich historical struggle for equality and social dignity.

Claiming of Kshatriya status by Dalits in Uttar Pradesh

By the late 1800, *Arya Samaj*⁹ made inroads into *Dalit Mohallas*—Dalit neighborhoods—in Uttar Pradesh (Gundimeda 2016; Jones 1976). *Arya Samaj*'s doctrinal position “Brahman by merit, not by birth” attracted many Dalits to the *Samaj*. They also started several social activities, including schools and hostels for Dalits (Jaffrelot 2003).

In order to remove their untouchable status and stigma, a section of Dalits in Uttar Pradesh followed the path of sanskritization and began claiming the status of *Kshatriyas*. There are a number of historical accounts that have been written on their claim of the *Kshatriya* status.¹⁰ For instance *Jatavs* did not criticize the Hindu religion, but instead emphasized claiming the *Kshatriya* status by recreating myths and narratives around their *Kshatriya* identity. In this process, they were following similar narratives and Puranic sources that the British and Hindus adopted and promoted (Gundimeda 2016).

To further strengthen their *Kshatriya* identity, Dalits passed a number of resolutions in Banaras in 1926. They also urged their members to refrain from engaging in unclean or defiling occupations (Rawat 2011). By 1920, they became politically conscious and began claiming the rights of their community. For

9 The period of late nineteenth and early twentieth century witnessed several traditional socio-religious reform movements across India. Some of these are *Brahmo Samaj*, *Arya Samaj*, and etc. *Arya Samaj* is Hindu social reform movement which was established in 1875 in response to the then socio-political situation in North India particularly in Punjab and its neighboring region. There was a sense of insecurity among Hindus regarding losing Dalits from Hinduism, as they had the fear that Dalits may get influenced by Western modern ideas and deviate from Hinduism. It is argued that although the British were exploitative and controlled the resources and Indian people but they also opened new possibilities of empowerment for Dalits (Robb 1993). Their emancipation gained a new dynamic during this period through Western education and Christian missionaries that helped Dalit intellectuals fight for better living conditions and mobilise other Dalits. In addition, it provided a background for identity-based socio-political movements among Dalits. *Arya Samaj* gained momentum after the conversion of *Mappilas* to Islam in 1921 in Meenakshipuram district of Tamil Nadu which led to the development of *shuddhi* practice as a counter strategy of conversion (Jones 1989; Robinson et al. 2003).

10 Sambaiah Gundimeda (2016) refers to four important books. They are: *Shree Chanvan Purana* (1910–1916) by Raghuvanshi, *Suryavansh Kshatriyas Jaiswar Sabha* (1926) by Jaiswar Mahasabha, *Yadav Jivan* (1929) by Pandit Sundar Lal Sagar, and *Yaduvansh ka Itihas* (1942) by Ramnarayan Yaduvendu.

instance, after claiming a seat in the Legislative Council, they proposed to the Council that one member from the *Jatav* community be appointed to each district board, municipal board, and town area of the state of Uttar Pradesh. Additionally, they also formed the *Jatav Youth League* in 1930 and supported Ambedkar's claim for Dalit representation in the *First Round Table Conference* (Kuber 1991). According to Lynch (1974), the claiming of the *Kshatriya* identity not only shows *Jatav's* social mobility from one caste to another, but it also reflects their political awareness and power.

Asserting Achhut identity and Adi-Hinduism in Uttar Pradesh

The central figure of this movement was *sant guru* Ravidas who was associated with the *bhakti* sect in the 15th and 16th centuries.¹¹ He was a Dalit who believed in the principle of sharing God across all divisions that society instituted, including the significant religious dissection. Swami Acchutanand, ex-Arya Samajist and a 20th century social reformer from the Dalit background, started the *Adi Hindu* movement based on the principles of Ravidas. Through this movement he created a common yet distinct *acchut* (untouchable) identity whose religious belief system is influenced by the *bhakti* tradition of Ravidas (Bellwinkel-Schempp 2007).

According to R. S. Khare (1984), the *Adi Hindu* movement and its ideals not only provided them with a radical perspective to fight against the Hindu caste system, but also created a political culture that supported civil rights and coordinated resistance by organizing *jayanti* (leader's anniversary celebration), *mela* (fairs), street theatre shows, etc. In essence, the *Adi Hindu* movement in Uttar Pradesh re-established a distinct religious identity for Dalits and prepared them for future political struggles (Ram 2004).

As the *Adi Hindu* movement was gaining popularity, Ambedkar announced his decision to convert to another religion and proposed an alternate path for Dalits outside the Hindu religion. Ambedkar's announcement of conversion in 1935 had a tremendous impact on the sanskritization process. For instance,

11 The *bhakti* movement during the medieval period played an important role in providing a socio-cultural consciousness among Dalits in opposition to the Brahminical framework of identity. Kabir, Ramanand, and Ravidas in the North, Chaitanya and Candidasa in the East, Eknath, Choka Mela, and Tukaram in the West, and Ramanuja, Nimbaraka and Basava, Veemana, and Veerabrahmam in the South were mystics who spearheaded the *bhakti* movement. Their opposition to caste differences and their claim of equality before God contributed to the development of the anti-Brahminical worldview among certain social groups and individuals. Even though their teachings were religious in nature, their ideology had strong socio-economic and cultural roots with the egalitarian ethos and values. Due to this, the *bhakti* movement gained popularity among the *Shudras* and other members of the lower castes or Dalits.

a section of *Jatavs* and other Dalits of Uttar Pradesh who were claiming the *Kshatriya* status during that time abruptly stopped this identification. Thus, it shifted the ground of Dalit mobilization outside the framework of Hinduism wherein they started claiming a separate socio-political religious identity as Dalits (Gundimeda 2016; Omvedt 1998).

Following India's Independence, the establishment of the *Scheduled Castes Federation* (SFCs) and the *Republican Party of India* (RPI) in 1942 and 1956 respectively ushered in a new era of Dalit movement. Outside Maharashtra, it was the North Indian Dalits, particularly the Dalits of Uttar Pradesh, who supplied the strongest base to these organizations (Kumar 2001). In the Post-Independence period, several Dalit organizations came into existence such as *All India Backward and Minority Communities Employees Federation* (BAMCEF) and *Dalit Soshit Samaj Sangharsh Samiti* (DS4) under the leadership of Kanshi Ram to mobilize Dalits and other marginalized masses in the state of Uttar Pradesh. The primary goal of BAMSEF and DS4 was to bring attention to the grievances of the oppressed Dalits and to educate them about their rights (ibid.). These organizations worked as a think tank which further led to the establishment of the *Bahujan Samaj Party* (BSP) (Jaffrelot 2003; Pai 2002). Since its formation in 1984, BSP entered into competitive democratic politics and provided a strong political platform for Dalits. The party won the State Assembly election many times and raised an iconic Dalit leader, Mayawati. She headed the Government of Uttar Pradesh four times and made history by becoming the first Dalit woman Chief Minister in India.

From the above discussion, one may conclude that Dalits in Uttar Pradesh have a rich historical tradition of Dalit mobilization. They employ various means to fight against caste discrimination, and advocate for equality and justice simultaneously challenging Hindu majoritarian politics. Throughout these movements, identity politics and caste consciousness remain essential whatever forms it might take—*Ravidasiya*, *Achhut*, *Buddhist* or *Bahujan*.

Shabbirpur village

Shabbirpur village, where I conducted field research in November and December 2022, depends heavily on agriculture which also strongly shapes caste relations. As Paul R. Brass (1965) mentioned, the caste structure in an agricultural society is subdivided on the basis of the “traditional land-owning caste,” “cultivating caste,” and “the caste which provides field labourers.” There are around 300

*Rajput*¹² households in the village, and among the traditional land-owning castes, *Rajputs* hold a prominent position. Dalits occupied 220 households, second only to *Rajputs*. The majority of them were serving as laborers. There are a number of Dalit households who own land and work in their own fields, while the rest of them provide labor to the upper land-holding castes, such as *Rajput*. Thus, a significant proportion of the Dalit population in the village is dependent on *Rajputs* for their livelihood. *Kashyaps*¹³ occupied the third position in the village demography, with 100 households. *Brahmins* (priestly caste), *Dhimars* (fruit and vegetable seller caste)¹⁴ and *Goels* (*Bania* caste-i.e., mercantile or money lending caste)¹⁵ each occupied two households in the village. There were two Muslim castes in the village composed of *Teli-Muslim* (an oil-pressing caste) and *Dhobi-Muslim* (washer man caste). Apart from this, there were ten *Valmiki* (sweeping caste) families.

At the backdrop of Dalit conversion analyzed in this paper is a deadly caste-clash between *Rajputs* and Dalits that took place in Shabbirpur on 5 May 2017. The clash began over the loud music played by *Rajputs* during *Maharana Pratap Jayanti*. Dalits of Shabbirpur raised objections over the loud music. They also argued that *Rajputs* did not have prior permission from the Government authority for the celebration. However, this exchange between the two communities turned into a series of violent confrontations. The clashes took the life of a young *Rajput*, which made the situation even worse. In reaction to this, 12 Dalits were seriously injured and approximately 55 to 60 Dalit households were vandalized as well as Ravidas statue and temple in the village. For Dalits, the temple of Ravidas has been a symbol of great religious and cultural significance and its desecration meant scandalous display of disrespect and hostility towards their community. In response to this violence 180 Dalit households in Shabbirpur village called for

12 *Rajputs* are a warrior caste that fall under the second highest *varna* of Hindu social order. Locally, they are also addressed as *Thakurs*. Historically, they were the predominant landowners in the state of Uttar Pradesh until the abolition of *Zamindari System* in 1950. For instance, “in Ouadh, Rajput were the most prominent *Talukdars* and owned more than fifty percent of land in most of the districts” (Brass 1965, 16). Due to their historical predominance in the state, they still occupy a dominant position and play a dynamic socio-political role in the state.

13 *Kashyap* as a social group is not a caste in Hinduism but refers to a gotra of *Brahmin varna*. However, in western Uttar Pradesh, *Kashyaps* are considered as Other Backward Classes (OBC) as they belong to *Nishad* caste of water-related occupation like sand dredging, boating and fishing.

14 A sub-caste of boatman mostly settled in Central India. In western Uttar Pradesh their traditional occupation is fruit and vegetable selling. They fall under the category of Other Backward Classes (OBC) in the state.

15 In the village they have small grocery shop and a general store.

conversion to Buddhism, a movement later received support from neighboring villages as well.

This study aims to understand the circumstances and motives of Dalit conversion in Shabbirpur after the 2017 incident. For this study, participant observation and semi-structured interview methods were applied to collect data. A total of 40 interviews with males and females aged between 20 to 60 years were conducted along with group discussions. For personal interviews, the snowball sampling method was applied. Group discussions were conducted three times: once with male members only, once with females only, and the third time with both males and females. The participants were informed about the study's objectives, and they were also informed that their responses would be handled as confidential and utilized exclusively for the academic purposes of this specific research. Their names were codified and changed for the purpose of their safety except two names which are mentioned in both the print and digital media.

The attempts of Dalits to embrace any religion other than Hinduism often face criticism on the grounds that they are passive converts who are either forced or lured to conversion. But, if one visits Shabbirpur village, the above perception may appear false. They are not a particularly wretched community in terms of economic and socio-political position. While *Rajputs* have a significant portion of the land, many Dalit families also hold land ownership. The village has approximately 2,400 voters, with 1,200 being *Rajputs*, 600 *Chamars*, and the rest belonging to *Kashyaps*, *Tailis*, *Dhobis*, and *Valmikis* respectively. During the fieldwork, it was observed that the Dalits of the village were not only aware but assertive of their caste position, religious beliefs, and values. They were also playing dynamic and decisive roles in village's social and political life.

Pre-conversion Dalit identity: Dalits as Ravidas worshippers

Before the event of conversion to Buddhism, Dalits of Shabbirpur were recognized as Hindus having a lower caste identity called *Chamar*¹⁶. According to the Constitution of India, they fall under the Scheduled Castes category, encompassing various social groups that previously were labeled as untouchables. In terms of their political orientation, they associate themselves with Ambedkar's and

16 *Chamar* is traditionally associated with leatherworking and tanning, considered impure and polluting occupations in the Hindu caste hierarchy. Because of their defiling occupation, they were previously addressed as untouchables by upper-caste Hindus.

Kanshiram's ideas of social justice. All of the Dalits I talked to claimed that they were followers of the *bhakti* tradition of Ravidas. Hence, while being Buddhist they also called themselves *Ravidasiya*.

Ravidas, a native of Benares, lived during the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries and is regarded as North India's greatest Dalit saint. Born into the *Chamar* caste, he was a leatherworker by profession. George W. Briggs (1920) observed that Saint Ravidas gained significant popularity among Dalits around 1900. They began identifying as *Ravidasis* or *Ravidasiya* to avoid the derogatory term *Chamar*. Addressing the Dalits of Kanpur, Nandini Gooptu (2001) noted that *bhakti* tradition reemerged in the twentieth century as a form of Dalit religion (Bellwinkel-Schempp 2007).

John Stratton Hawley and Mark Juergensmeyer (2007) described Ravidas as a special figure, a poet and singer whose hymns attracted even *Brahmins*:

...Ravidas was special: he was a poet and singer, and the hymns he sang evidently had such a ring of truth that even *Brahmins* came to hear them. His poet's charisma must have been equally powerful, for he says that the *Brahmins* actually bowed before him, in a total inversion of religious and social protocol. (Hawley 1988, 11)

His poetry transcended caste boundaries, and he became admired not only among Dalits but by people from all sections of Hindu society.

Hawley and Juergensmeyer (2007) also argued that Ravidas believed in sharing God across societal divisions, including significant religious divides. Although he did not propose any alternative religion against the Brahmanical social order, Ravidas offered a guiding path for many marginalized people. He adopted unconventional approaches to symbolize his revolt, such as imitating Brahminical lifestyles, which was a radical gesture at that time. Despite continuing his work as a shoemaker, he wore a *dhoti* and *tilak* (clothing style and facial marking practiced by the upper castes, particularly Brahmins) and challenged the Hindu societal norms. His egalitarian and social philosophy significantly influenced Dalit consciousness in north India, especially in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh (Ram 2004). Numerous Ravidas shrines and temples, such as *India Adi Dharam Mission* established in 1957 and *Shri Guru Ravidas Janam Asthan Mandir* at his birthplace in Seer Goverdhanpur, Banaras, were constructed to assert a distinct caste identity (Ibid.). Ravidas is celebrated as a revolutionary social leader among his followers, particularly Dalits, due to his firm belief in equality.

Dalit assertions manifest in both direct and indirect forms. They range from protests, marches, conversions, to folklore, myths, stories of epic heroes. While exploring the socio-political mobilization and cultural transformation of Dalits in North India, Badri Narayan (2011) argues that the use of cultural symbols, narratives of folk heroes, social reformers, and saints played a dynamic role in securing the electoral win of the BSP in the state. The reinterpretation of historical figures such as Ravidas and Kabir into mainstream Dalit politics in the state not only bridged the gap between grassroots politics and mainstream Dalit politics but also represents a reflection of a subaltern history (Narayan 2011).

By celebrating Ravidas and reinterpreting historical figures, Dalits in Uttar Pradesh have created a powerful cultural and political movement that continues to shape their struggle for justice and equality. The pre-conversion identity of Dalits of Shabbirpur village as Ravidas' worshippers reflects the similar essence of socio-political mobilization of BSP. The maintenance of *Ravidasi* or *Ravidasiya* identity as their pre-conversion identity signifies a strategic response to caste-based oppression and a quest for a distinct subaltern religion.

Dalit conversion to Buddhism as resistance and dissent

Following a violent attack by upper-caste *Rajputs* in May 2017, Dalits of Shabbirpur collectively decided to renounce Hinduism. This was done to convey a powerful form of protest against the deep-rooted caste-based atrocities they had been enduring for generations. It is important to note that this caste-clash was not only prompted by sentiments of caste discrimination, but also was a response to the insults directed to the Dalits' belief system. Converted Dalit Buddhists recounted the incident of 5 May 2017 when a young *Rajput* named Sumit Singh entered the Ravidas temple and started breaking the idols. They allegedly narrated that he urinated on the Ravidas statue and set the broken idol on fire. These disrespecting and dehumanizing acts of the Rajput community towards Dalits and their beliefs, along with the violence they were facing during the clash, provoked them to convert to Buddhism as they argued that the incident made them realize that Hinduism would neither accept them as equal nor would it respect their native religious belief.

This pivotal event prompted their official conversion to Buddhism, which marked a significant shift in their religious identity. As a result, they proudly identify themselves as Buddhists, embracing the inclusive principles and

teachings of Buddhism. Notably, some community members willingly provided their Buddhist conversion certificates during interviews, thereby declaring their commitment to this new faith and their determination to challenge the oppressive caste system that had long governed their lives.

Fakeerchand,¹⁷ a Dalit respondent who denounced Hinduism and became a Buddhist, explained:

They (*Rajputs* and other upper-caste Hindus) practice slavery (*gulami karte hain*) with us. If these people keep considering us as slaves enslaving us, then we will not remain in the Hindu religion and conversion (*dharam parivartan*) becomes the only option left for us.

Referring to the Muslim community, he went on saying:

There are many Muslim families living with us. They also believe and practice the caste system (*jaati vivastha*) and hence have a number of upper castes and lower castes, such as *Sheikh Jolaha*, *Khan*, *Pathaan*, and *Jolaha*, but they do not discriminate against us the way upper-caste Hindus practice caste discrimination. They (Muslims) eat food on the same plate, but this Hindu religion still practices untouchability and discriminates against us (*chhuachut karte hain*), and the worst part is that they (upper-castes) do not even consider us Hindus.

Fakeerchand was not the only one who spoke about the practice of caste discrimination by the *Rajputs* in the village. There were other Dalit respondents who shared similar stories of caste discrimination during the focus group discussion. There was a collective consensus among them regarding the Hindu religion, its followers and their discriminatory behavior towards Dalits.

Rekha,¹⁸ a Dalit woman, shared her grievances and anger when she was asked about leaving Hinduism and converting to Buddhism:

We have completely stopped celebrating Hindu festivals such as *Diwali*, *Dussehra*, *Ram Navami*, *Holi*, etc. and have stopped worshipping the deities of the Hin-

17 Fakeerchand, a Dalit respondent, was interviewed on 11 November 2021. He also took part in the *Panchayat* election of 2020 for the *Pradhan* position (village head), but lost the seat against *Rajput* with a number of 246 votes. Despite his defeat, he is still celebrated as *Dalit Pradhan* among some of his Dalit fellows in the village.

18 Rekha is a converted Dalit Buddhist woman. She belongs to the 50 to 60 years of age group. She took part in a focus group discussion conducted for women on 13 November 2021.

du religion. When I have already lost my young son in this riot, then what is left here for me, why would we celebrate the Hindu festival, what is ours in it?

Another Dalit respondent, named Pradeep,¹⁹ also felt aggrieved, and shared his experience of caste discrimination while explaining the reason for conversion:

The reason for becoming Buddhist was that Hinduism is doing caste atrocities. They do not allow us to sit and eat together with other upper-castes. The upper-caste *Rajputs* misbehave (*badsuluki karte hain*) with us and with our children, what we would do if they continue harassing (*atyachaar karte rahen*) our children? If they keep disturbing us and disrespecting our belief, faith, gurus and leaders, whom we respect, follow, and worship, then we feel pain (*dukh hota hai*).

It was observed that caste discrimination is everyday reality in their life. They argued that it was becoming even more painful for them when their religious beliefs or *guru* were attacked during the clash. Dalits of Shabbirpur were disheartened by the upper-caste *Rajputs* who insulted them and looked down upon them and their belief system.

Ravi,²⁰ another respondent who claimed to be a local artist and who was singing *bhajans* (religious songs) about Ravidas, added that the village had only one primary school which was governed by *Rajputs*, and even the teachers from the upper caste background raised objections if Dalit students greeted them or among themselves with *Jai Bhim*²¹. Students were scolded and asked to greet them with *Ram-Ram*²² only.

While being critically aware of his own community, he continued:

The attack (*hamla*) on us was not a small one. It was very intensive in nature, and it could have killed 20–30 people. So, when we were badly attacked, beaten, and and humiliated, we realized the caste reality of our society that still exists with us.

19 Pradeep was an old man of the age group of 60 years and more. He participated in the focus-group discussion on 12 November 2021.

20 Ravi was interviewed on 12 December 2021. He also shared a piece of his poetry which describes the socio-political awareness of Dalits in the village as well as in the State of Uttar Pradesh.

21 *Jai Bhim* is a slogan and greeting for giving reverence and respect to Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar and his struggle for equality and justice.

22 The phrase *Ram-Ram* is derived from the Hindu god named Ram. The Hindu followers of Ram in northern India generally use this phrase to greet each other.

Ramesh,²³ a Dalit man, about 40-to-50 years old also shared his experiences and explained what motivated him to convert:

The fight that occurred on the fifth of May 2017 made us realize our social position in the eyes of upper-caste Hindus. These people do not consider us Hindus. They treat us as untouchables, but when we are needed, we become Hindus for them. After that brutal attack on us, when our houses were set on fire and our people were badly beaten, we decided that it is better to leave Hinduism and adopt Buddhism. At least we will not face atrocity anymore. So, with this hope we adopted Buddhism.

These explanations and grievances highlight a story of rooted caste politics and the religious rivalry in India where religious conversions are often perceived as a national threat by the supporters of the Hindu majoritarian politics. The believers of the Hindu majoritarian politics oppose Dalit conversion on two major grounds. The first ground is philosophical in nature. The opponents of conversion argue that Indian religious traditions, unlike Christianity and Islam, are non-Semitic and do not interfere with other religions or religious beliefs (Balagangadhara 2012). The second ground is political in nature wherein they argue that changing religious belief is a western phenomenon, or, in more precise terms, they call it an imperial tool to control Indian demography by changing the Dalit religion from Hinduism to Christianity or Islam. They relate such conversion to forced conversion in which Dalits are driven away from Hinduism. Due to this, the conversion of Dalits is often viewed as an 'anti-national' act in India (Bauman 2008; Patankar and Omvedt 1979; Robinson and Clark 2003; Viswanathan 2007).

However, their opposition to Dalit conversion comes from a biased perspective rooted in historical, social, and political motivations rather than a genuine commitment to religious philosophy. This bias is evident when examining the Hindu reconversion movement, particularly through the practice of *shuddhi*²⁴ (purification), which sought to bring converts back to Hinduism. The reconversion movement to Hinduism through *shuddhi* had started in the 20th century, although the initial emergence of this practice occurred earlier in the late

23 Ramesh was interviewed on 13 December 2021.

24 The word *shuddhi* implies purification in the Sanskrit language. *Arya Samaj* used this word to describe the process of purification or reconversion of individuals, particularly Dalits, who had converted to another religion, i.e. a religion other than Hinduism.

19th century with the *Arya Samaj* movement, which was a local reformers' reaction to British colonialism and the Western influence (Jones 1989). Zavos (1999) explains that *Arya Samaj's* core beliefs, including a single God, the supremacy of the Vedas, and the Vedic Age as a golden era, were successfully incorporated in the mainstream Hinduism. This alternative framework was developed in reaction to Christian missionary's conversion efforts and was closely tied to the concept of Hindu *dharma*.²⁵ It served as the foundation for what later became the political nationalist movement with the idea that everyone could be brought back to their 'authentic' Hindu faith. Reflecting on the pattern of the regional configuration of *shuddhi* in the late twentieth century, Patankar and Omvedt (1979) argued that the various meanings and applications of *shuddhi* were being transformed and got radicalized to justify Hindu majoritarian political propaganda.

Commenting on the contemporary *ghar-wapsi*²⁶ campaign, Yashasvini Rajeshwar and C. Amore Roy (2019) highlight the role of such organizations as *Arya Samaj* and *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) in promoting Hindu nationalism. It has been observed that *ghar-wapsi* incidents have gained a prominent increase in recent years, particularly since the *Bhartiya Janata Party* came to power in 2014.²⁷ These conversions are sometimes controversial and often entail intimidation and violence, but the present Government under the leadership of Narendra Modi of the *Bhartiya Janata Party* has been trying to distance itself from the re-conversion activity promoted by RSS (Rajeshwar and Roy 2019).

The contradiction in the opposition to Dalit conversions lies in the fact that those opposing conversions to other religions have themselves actively engaged in reconversion efforts. This highlights a selective application of religious philosophy. On the one hand, they argue against Dalit conversions on the grounds that Dalits are an integral part of Hinduism. On the other hand, they actively pursue reconversion strategies like *shuddhi* to bring back those who had left the Hindu fold, revealing a utilitarian approach to religious identity that serves broader socio-political objectives. It is also important to note that the

25 While often translated simply as 'religion' or 'duty', *Dharma* encompasses a much broader and nuanced meaning. It refers to the moral and ethical principles that govern individual behaviour, societal norms, and cosmic order in Hinduism.

26 *Ghar-wapsi* (in Hindi 'returning home') means reconversion of Dalits into Hinduism.

27 For instance, Pravin Togadia, the leader of the *Vishva Hindu Parishad* organization (VHP), argued that VHP alone has helped over 500,000 Christians and 250,000 Muslims to reconvert to Hinduism. According to the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* data, their annual rate of *ghar-wapsi* surpassed that of the previous year which was 15,000.

supporters of the Hindu majoritarian politics oppose Dalit conversion only in the context of non-Indic religions, namely, Christianity and Islam. They tolerate the conversion between Indic religions, such as conversion between Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism.

Following the preceding discussion, a few questions with respect to the *ghar-wapsi* campaign were asked during the fieldwork. It was highly surprising to note that Dalits of Shabbirpur offered a new interpretation, or one may call it a subaltern interpretation, of *ghar-wapsi*, which is distinct from the idea of *ghar-wapsi* in Hinduism.

Agni Bhaskar and his wife Reena were one of the families in the village who were severely affected by the 2017 caste-clash. Their home was set on fire, and Bhaskar endured several injuries and had nine bones broken. If one visits the village, one can still notice the charred marks on the wall of their home. He also added that, although the people of Shabbirpur village took *diksha* (a Buddhist ceremony of initiation) in 2017, he has been a Buddhist since 1984. He even expressed the desire to show his Buddhist certificate from 1984. Unfortunately, all of his documents had been burnt during the 2017 attack. Bhaskar, while sharing his views on conversion and Buddhism, said:

The Government is asking people to return to Hinduism, we too are returning to our religion, that is, Buddhism. We do not require Hindu practices based on superstition or casteism. We should instead focus on the path of education taught in Buddhism which is our native religion (*hamara mulnivas dharm hai*).

A sense of self-confidence and consciousness was observed among converted Dalits as they proudly claimed that it was their *ghar-wapsi*. Thus, one may say that the religious conversion of Dalits in Shabbirpur should not be observed only as an immediate response to the attack by *Rajputs*. Instead, it suggests the assertion of Dalits for their distinct religious identity which comes from their previous religious tradition of Ravidas worship and continuous through conversion to Buddhism.

Positioning Ravidas in the life of Dalits of Shabbirpur

Most of the Dalits I communicated with during my fieldwork referred to themselves as Buddhists, but they also referred to Ravidas as their prime religious leader or God. They claimed that they were followers of *sant guru* Ravidas and

hence, even after becoming Buddhist, they preferred to give prime importance to Ravidas and his teachings. In this sense, it contradicts the popular notion that religious conversion simply denotes a transfer of religious affiliation (Peel 1977). Instead, it is a social process wherein people change their religious affiliation into another “with or without a spiritual transformation” (Mathew 1982, 1082). Conversion for Shabbirpur Dalits was not a transfer of faith or spirituality, but rather a social and political repositioning. They wanted to change religion, primarily because of social reasons—discriminatory practices that stem from Hindu religion. Religiously and spiritually, they continue to relate themselves to the Ravidas *bhakti* tradition, despite the fact that they had adopted a new religious identity as Dalit Buddhists. Interestingly, this continuation is not unintentional. It is a conscious attempt to keep both pre- and post-conversion religious traits as part of their current identity. For example, a respondent, named Agni Bhaskar,²⁸ said:

Ravidas Ji is our ancestor, who will forget him.

Bhaskar narrated a story about the humanitarian teachings of Ravidas and the importance of him as a *guru* or a religious leader in the lives of Dalits. He recounted:

Some 600 years ago today, Sikandar Lodi²⁹ was ruling the Khairagarh region. During the time, Ravidas Ji was addressing a meeting, he (Ravidas) said in that meeting that everyone deserves clothes, sufficient food, and a place to live irrespective of whatever religion and caste one belongs to. When Sikandar Lodhi came to know about this, Ravidas Ji was caught and arrested.

The majority of the converted Dalits noted that, after conversion, they stopped any kind of idol worship (by idol worship, it means the idols of Hindu Gods and Goddesses), except for Ravidas. They further added that they only visit the Ravidas temple. On this, Bhaskar intervened and said:

We do not bow down to anyone. What is the meaning of worship (*puja-paath*)? These uneducated people do not even know the meaning of worship. The

28 Agni Bhaskar and his wife Reena were one of the families in the village who were severely affected by the 2017 caste clash. Their home was set on fire, and Bhaskar was badly beaten. As a result, nine of his bones were broken. He was interviewed on 11 November 2021.

29 Sikandar Lodi was a prominent ruler of Delhi Sultanate who ruled from 1489 to 1517.

word *poo* means complete, and the word *ja* means information, which means that when I have complete information, only then I will accept someone, only then I will know someone, and only then have faith in him. All this practice of *puja-paath* is made by this *Manuvaad* people, it is not ours. This is the reason that we urge our people to adopt Buddhism and make them aware of the teachings of Gautama Buddha.

However, Bhaskar's narration opens up some crucial points with respect to the Dalit religion, or the religion of the oppressed. The idea of a Dalit religion exists in contrast to the prevailing supremacy of Hinduism which is based on myths, discriminatory caste system, and untouchability. He used the word *Manuvaad* to refer to Hindu people who follow the ancient *Manusmriti*³⁰. Ambedkar, as a reply to Mahatma Gandhi in his undelivered speech written in 1936, laid down his criticism towards *Manusmriti*, arguing that it promotes casteism and patriarchal religious principles, as well as legitimizes untouchability against the lower castes and women (Ambedkar 2014).

For the converted Dalits, religion is no longer confined to the hands of the few privileged and so-called sacred people; it is now reaching out to those who were previously denied access to God. It also challenges the ascriptive monopoly of Brahminical upper caste claims over God, religion, and religious rituals. A similar argument was given by Aloysius in his study of Tamil Buddhists who questioned the whole idea of religion given by Brahminical sources (Aloysius 1998).

Bhaskar, while explaining the importance of *sant guru* Ravidas in the life of the converted Dalit Buddhists in the village, said:

Ravidas was not a *Mahatma* or great. He was just like Buddha, Kanshiram, and Babasaheb Ambedkar. He was a leader of the poor and of the lower caste people. So, we believe in him and in his leadership.

For Bhaskar, Ravidas is as important as other religious and political leaders who have taught about social equality. It is interesting to observe how religious and political leaders are integrated into the coherent ideational universe among Dalits.

30 *Manusmriti* or "The Laws of Manu" is one of the sacred and authoritative books in Hinduism. It prescribes to Hindus their *Dharma* or code of conduct as a member of one of the four social classes of *varna* system. It has influence on all aspects of Hindu thought and lays out the justification of the caste system.

The religious atmosphere in the Dalit households in the village is a clear indication of syncretic religious practice. Conversion to Buddhism has not entirely detached them from their previous cultural and ritual practices. Instead, they have integrated a few symbols to represent their new religious identity. They do not keep the idols of Hindu gods and deities in their homes anymore, but the photos and images of Ravidas, Ambedkar, and Gautama Buddha were prominently displayed at the entrance of every Dalit home. While they could not completely reject their previous marriage ceremonies and other ritual practices that are conducted in the form similar to Hindu practices, they have reinterpreted their cultural and religious practices by imbuing them with new meanings and nuances. For instance, instead of taking blessings from Hindu gods and goddesses, they seek blessings from Ravidas, Buddha, and Ambedkar. They reject the notion of the Brahmin priest as the highest authoritative position, and do not associate priesthood with the birth right. Instead, they have developed their own method of selecting priests from their caste based on knowledge, wisdom, and seniority to conduct rituals. Additionally, the converts have also developed a textual form for their indigenous religious expression through the Ravidas *Chalisa*.³¹

Dalit religious identity appears to be fuzzy and fluid. However, this fuzziness is not meaningless. It represents the subtle resistance against the supremacy of Hinduism and its caste system and the pursuit of equality, justice, and empowerment. Dalit religious syncretism is not bound by any structural religious dogmas rather it keeps accommodating the changes occurring in the immediate socio-political context.

Conclusion

The study reveals that the Dalits of Shabbirpur nominally converted their religious identity from Hinduism to Buddhism after the violent caste conflict in the village in 2017. However, they did not make major changes in their religious beliefs or spiritual life as they were following *sant guru* Ravidas as their spiritual leader even before their conversion and continue his veneration after converting to Buddhism. A similar, yet different approach can be observed in the case of the sanitation labor caste of *Lal Begis* in Lucknow, who despite outwardly adopting Hindu names and *Valmiki* identity, retained their traditional *Lal Begi* practices

31 A small booklet composed of hymns and mantras on Ravidas by Sammandas Maharaj, a contemporary preacher of Ravidas *bhakti* in western Uttar Pradesh.

in private. This reflects a tactical dissimulation where the community appeared to conform to Hindu norms publicly while maintaining their distinct socio-religious identity privately. The transition to *Valmiki* identity was not purely a cultural or spontaneous sanskritization but was a politically motivated move to secure their constitutional rights for reservation (Lee 2015). Therefore, one needs to be critical when discussing religious conversion among Dalits because it is not about a drastic change from one religion to another, but rather about syncretizing religious practices and sociopolitical motives. Dalit religion in Shabbirpur appears to resemble Dalit grassroots politics in a sense that it includes saints, epic heroes, and political leaders into the Dalit ideological and religious fold as long as their thoughts and ideas are centered around critiquing caste inequality and advocating for social justice.

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