



Conversion as Emancipation: A Study of Dalit Women's Life narratives in Maharashtra

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Article Info

Received: 19 Jul 2022,

Received in revised form: 09 Aug 2022,

Accepted: 15 Aug 2022,

Available online: 21 Aug 2022

Keywords— Dalit Women's Life Narratives in Maharashtra, Conversion to Buddhism, self-reflexivity, Religion, Emancipation, Dalit Literature.

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Abstract

Millions of dalits converted to Buddhism in 1956 under the inspiring leadership of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar. It was hoped that it will mark their socio-cultural emancipation from the clutches of erstwhile oppressive religion. Dalit women's life narratives start appearing in public domain in Maharashtra from the late 1980s. A significant part of dalit women's life narratives in Maharashtra is engaged in critiquing the still prevalent superstitions and ritual practices, and they wish to highlight the change and awareness brought in by ideological mobilization of Ambedkar led Dalit movement and conversion to Buddhism. Many life narratives recall how, with the conversion to Buddhism, the sense of shame, inferiority and degradation was washed away and document the intense feeling of liberation they experienced. In this paper, I wish to examine select life narratives written by dalit women in Maharashtra in order to analyse the role of religion, and conversion to Buddhism both as an actual event as well as a symbol of cultural regeneration in their self-assertion. There is a great element of self-reflexivity in the life narratives as they comment on the hold of Hindu cultural assumptions and traditions on their mind. I hope to trace this self-reflexive element as they introspect whether the community has lived up to the emancipatory hopes and expectations of Dr Ambedkar post conversion to Buddhism.

I. INTRODUCTION

. Dalit life narrations are primarily products of a search for identity, self-respect and dignity ignited by Ambedkar's ideology. There is a significant element of anger and protest against the excesses of the Hindu religion and the so-called cultural mainstream. They are one of the most direct and accessible ways in which silence and misrepresentation of dalits have been countered. Dalit women's life narratives started appearing in the public domain in Maharashtra from the late 1980s and since then have successfully questioned the hegemonic Dalit discourse and the basic assumptions of mainstream feminism. They also provide a fascinating glimpse of the complexity and internal hierarchy of the subaltern discourse in India. Historical development of the Dalit movement, the presence of strong Dalit politics and the presence of a vibrant feminist movement in Maharashtra

have given a special edge to the emancipatory struggles of dalit women. The narrative self in dalit women's autobiographies is deeply rooted in the community mores. It is deeply embedded in their social history.

Ambedkarism is the backbone of Dalit literature. It has provided the major frame of reference for their literary and intellectual activities. Majority of Dalit autobiographies in Marathi try to trace the Ambedkar movement from various entry points on the axis of space and time. All major autobiographies written by *mahar* women refer to Ambedkar-inspired conversion to Buddhism in 1956 as a watershed event that marked the psychological emancipation of the dalits in Maharashtra. The conversion of untouchables was not altogether unknown in India. Both Islam and Christianity had drawn a large number of their converts from the lower castes for centuries before Ambedkar wanted to use conversion to

Buddhism in his fight for justice, equality and cultural freedom for the scheduled castes in India. In this paper, I will examine select autobiographies written by dalit women in Maharashtra in order to analyse the role of religion, and conversion to Buddhism both as an actual event as well as a symbol of cultural regeneration in their self-assertion and the writers' take on whether it has lived up to expectations and hopes of Dr Ambedkar in the aftermath of his untimely death.

II. DALIT WOMEN WRITERS AND THE POLITICS OF WRITING

The sheer range and versatility of marginalised women's discourse in Maharashtra is remarkable. They represent not just the voices of the dominant *mahar* community but also those written by women from nomadic and tribal communities. While they all belong to the larger universe of the Dalit movement, their politics differ by region, and ideological position. While the *mahar* women's narratives inscribe memories of various phases of transition from the *mahar* to the neo-Buddhist community, it is not a prominent part of narratives by women from nomadic and tribal communities. Though the politics of dalit women's writing has become more diverse over the years, it has retained its group identification. Contrary to general expectation, these narratives do not provide monolithic images of hardship, discrimination, humiliation and struggle to fight adversity. Dalit women in these narratives are not simply long-suffering passive victims or subservient, docile stereotypes portrayed in the male dalit literature. They are lively and energetic individuals who come across as strong, compassionate, and rebellious women. They fight adversities with dogged determination.

The life narratives do write about their struggle against poverty, caste-based discrimination and the search for identity and self-assertion but there is lot more to them. In some of the life narratives, especially those written by Baby Kamble, Shantabai Kamble, Mukta Sarwagod and Urmila Pawar, there is a conscious attempt to move beyond the anger and protest to present a more nuanced and multi-layered representation of dalit socio-cultural way of life. These narratives do not simply posit the 'good', 'innocent' dalit in antagonism to the evil Brahminical patriarchy. There is no attempt to either hide or ignore the defects and flaws, hold of superstitions and ignorance within the community. Their criticism of the upper-caste attitudes is presented along with a frank admission of internal problems. There is a strong realization that, if the existing unjust social structures are to be changed, they first need to transform themselves and their community. In the course of narrating their struggles

out of a life of poverty and deprivation, they also identify features of their culture that are worthy and those that need to be discarded. There is a greater degree of self-reflexivity, introspection, and the realization that without proper education, progress is not possible.

The Dalit literary movement in Maharashtra should also be viewed as "a collective effort of the dalit elites to modernize dalit communities. Modernization herein means a change in attitude and outlook from traditional, religious, and fatalistic to rational and scientific" (Murugkar,59). Accordingly, these narratives offer a very significant element of self-reflexivity. They tend to interrogate the evil practices, superstitions, internal rivalries/ divisions in the community. They are worried about the rigid caste hierarchy among dalits, resistance to change, and progress from within. The social aspect of the dalit protest in Dalit literature is quite significant. It is because of its social consciousness that the movement aims to revolt against social, religious and cultural slavery. The life narratives offer significant internal critique even as they question the larger social system for its anti-dalit stance. They are aware of the challenges facing the community. All writers have become part of the dalit middle-class and they share a common anxiety about the Dalit movement losing its momentum even squandering the gains made thus far. Recording the social, cultural history of the bygone era in their life narratives is also their way to keep the expanding dalit middle-class (their likely readers along with the upper-caste readers) grounded lest they forget their roots.

III. DEPICTION OF THE SOCIO-CULTURAL UNIVERSE AND THE DISCOURSE OF DALIT MODERNITY

A significant number of early dalit life narratives in Maharashtra are written by women from the *mahar* caste. The *mahars* emerged distinctly as an assertive and militant group due to several reasons including social movements within that caste, communication network, education and availability of new economic opportunities in the urban areas. As a result, Maharashtra has witnessed a powerful and vibrant anti-caste movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and has been instrumental in highlighting the issue of caste oppression in the very decades in which the debates about anti-imperialism, nationalism and national identity took shape. The life narratives under consideration in this paper roughly map the transformation brought in the decades from the 1930s to the end of the 20th century.

A number of autobiographies written by dalit women in Maharashtra such as *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha* (1983), *Aaydaan* (2002), *Jine Aamuche* (1987) and *Teen*

Dagdanchi Chul (2001) present a rich and varied treasure house of memories of rituals, superstitions and traditions of now almost a bygone era. They write extensively about devadasi practice, *potraj*, *vaghya*, *murali*, *Vasudev*, *yeskarki* (caste-based labour of *Mahars*). Interesting details of customs, traditions, superstitions, festivals, and systems of settlement of disputes prevalent in their communities are narrated in elaborate manner. The idea is to present the community bonding and socio-cultural history as well as to provide an internal critique of the superstitions, blind faith in rituals, and ignorance and forcefully put forward the need to modernize and improve themselves by embracing a progressive outlook. Accordingly, they write about the ritual-inscribed, fearful and superstitious community life of the pre-Ambedkarite period and changes brought in, in the wake of the Dalit movement, by education, conversion to Buddhism and their individual growth as a person in interestingly varied tones.

Almost every writer mentions the month of *Aakhadh* (*Ashadh*- a rituals-oriented month in the Hindu calendar) as the most significant one in the lifestyle of the community. Baby Kamble, Vimal More recall the hustle and bustle of the annual buffalo fair and fair at the temple of Goddess Margamma respectively. The ritual procession, animal sacrifices and the feast afterwards, were very significant for the communities and every ritual, including thoroughly cleaning every piece of clothing in the household and premises was keenly observed. Wedding, naming ceremonies, festive meals, fulfilling of vows taken to appease Gods to prevent any bad omen etc. are elaborately described with the sole purpose of bringing the cultural universe of the community to life. As the marriage ceremonies that lasted four days were replaced by simple, austere Buddhist weddings with white saree-clad brides, Urmila Pawar describes the initial disappointment felt by women and gradual acceptance of new cultural norms. These descriptions mostly form part of their childhood memories because times were rapidly changing and there is an unmistakable sense of living in the times of rapid change even as they are growing up. They present their cultural life which is a thick bed of ritualistic practices.

Traditions, rituals and superstitions had a great hold on the community. In the absence of any medical facilities, Godmen were in great demand. Either the doctors were not available or people simply had more faith in appeasing Gods for casting off the so-called evil eye. People suffered a lot and still do, as Vimal More's narrative tells us, due to ignorance and superstition. Fear and helplessness were the pervasive features of their condition and they often prompted ritualistic practices. For instance, a touch of

crow on Wednesday was supposed to bring death, and therefore fake messages of death were sent to close relatives and were quickly denied. The panic and grief of the person as well as his relatives, and subsequent relief on knowing that nothing of this happened is narrated with great relish in *Majya Jalmachi Chittarkatha*.

Shantabai Kamble writes that it was believed that repeated pilgrimages to Pandharpur averted sterility. Diseases and ill-health, in general, made one resort to local godmen, who then cast spells on lemon, ordered the patient to wear amulets and prescribed that holy ash (*vebhuti*) be smeared on the forehead. The Godmen generally demanded yellow rice, eggs, cock even a goat sometimes (generally in the order of the seriousness of the problem) to be offered to pacify the evil powers, demons, ghosts or the particular village deity (*Chittarkatha*,34). She recalls that several people in the community would perform rituals for their children's survival. The survival of babies was a cause of deep anxiety. It even prompted the author to yield to rites suggested by elder women (101-2). Urmila Pawar writes that people whose relatives were ailing or possessed by spirits would also seek her father's help with mantras and holy ash. There was a great hold of superstitions, Godmen and their tantric practices in the community in the Konkan region as well.

Dalit women's life narratives extensively document the various superstitions and rituals prescribed by Godmen. Poverty, ignorance and lives mired in superstition are often highlighted in the spirit of self-mockery or reproach in order to contrast it with the change in the post-Ambedkar era. In the discourse of Dalit modernity, women were assigned this special responsibility of rejecting the deadwood of tradition and rituals. Baby Kamble quotes the activists in the Dalit movement as saying, "look, it is women who are in charge of homes. And it is therefore they who have contributed to the superstitious 'God culture'. They are always leaders in such things. It is always women who become possessed by spirits. They have played a big role in making superstitions so powerful. It is the woman who is the real doer. So, if woman can bring darkness, they can also bring light into our lives" (Pandit, 139). Writers like Kumud Pawade, Mukta Sarwagod, and Urmila Pawar are social activists in their own right. They are engaged in the task of consciousness rising among fellow dalits. Accordingly, they write about the material difficulties and psychological hurdles faced by the community, they tick off fellow dalits for their shortcomings and harp on the need to change their mindset.

In *Antasphot*, Kumud Pawade writes that before *dharmanr* (conversion to Buddhism), her grandparents observed all Hindu rituals and festivals. A significant part

of her life narrative concerns the change in her attitudes and beliefs and subsequent questioning of the patriarchal practices/ conditioning of women with the traditional upbringing. *Aaydaan* by Urmila Pawar bears testimony to routine subservience and exploitation of the dalits at the hands of the upper castes during various festivals in the villages. The humiliating practices and cultural subjugation of the community were obvious even in the way traditional festivals were held. For example, during the *Holi* festival, the *mahar* boys would collect logs of wood to light the ceremonial fire but they were not allowed to participate in the ritual of actually lighting the fire and ensuing festivities. In fact, the marathas, the *bhandaris*, and the *kulwadies* who were at the forefront of the rituals sought the blessings of the Goddess saying, "Let all the evil and trouble leave our path and go the *mahar's* way" (*Aaydaan*,38). In screaming out the customary abuses exchanged at the *Holi* festival, they would throw an array of abuses at *mahars*, who were not permitted to retaliate. Boys from their community would want to take part in the festivities and the upper-caste people would abuse them and fights would ensue. Often the festivities would end with mothers (of the drunken and bruised *mahar* youth) wailing and nursing their son's wounds. Increasingly, educated dalits were finding these practices humiliating.

IV. CONVERSION TO BUDDHISM: ASPIRATION, CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

The lack of separate and distinct culture and social order irritated Ambedkar at every step in the struggle for the emancipation of the dalits. He believed that religion was a necessity of human existence and had a humanistic, rationalistic notion of religion. In his early writings, he attacked the doctrine of Karma and Rebirth for providing a rationale to the caste system as well as the social and religious inequality in Hinduism as he hoped to reform it. However, at the Yeola Conference in 1935, he declared that he would not die as a Hindu, thus, firmly establishing his theoretical rejection of Hinduism. Historically speaking, the conversion of untouchables was not altogether unknown in India. Both Islam and Christianity had drawn a large number of their converts from the lower castes. The dalits, deprived of every social right and human dignity within the Hindu fold, have searched for alternatives in Islam, Sikhism and Christianity. For a time, Ambedkar seems to have contemplated choosing either Islam, Sikhism or Christianity. However, evidence indicated that none of these religious conversions had brought dalits the expected release from caste-based oppression or social stigma. In Buddhism, Ambedkar

found an Indian, not a foreign religion which could legitimise the claims of the *mahars* (Zelliot, 215)

Ambedkar believed that conversion to Buddhism will act as a catalyst in bringing social equality. It will instil a sense of self-respect and bestow a new identity. He believed that conversion would offer a dignified exit and complete rejection of caste Hindu society. Responding to the call given by Ambedkar, thousands of *mahars* converted to Buddhism in 1956. It was in a sense the climax of the social revolt as Ambedkar saw it, where, for the oppressed, the conversion signified a social rebirth. It was an attempt to build a conscious non-Hindu identity for the depressed classes and provide them with a rallying point. The conversion was expected to usher in a stage where the untouchables would cease to do things the Hindu way, that is refuse to carry out the demeaning tasks which the Hindu social order required of them. A large number of Buddhists in Maharashtra, illiterate as well as the educated elite were held together by the common belief that the Buddhist conversion had liberated them and that it held out the only hope for the enjoyment of full human rights and dignity. On the whole, most significantly, it set in motion the consciousness of the dalit identity. Dalit women's life narratives testify to the blow their ancient world has suffered, and how conversion replaced an old era of cultural practices with a new one.

The conversion to Buddhism certainly had a psychological dimension. As P. G. Jogdand writes, "freedom from the sense of being a polluted person is a major achievement of the conversion to Buddhism and it has also created an ethos to preserve group unity" (Jogdand, 153). Shantabai Kamble writes that in 1957, the people in Kargani village had organized a conversion ceremony for people in the seven villages around despite severe resistance from the village. People gathered in huge numbers, the ceremony was carried out in joyous atmosphere, and the *mahars* vowed that they would refuse to perform caste-based labour like dragging dead animals hereafter, "We began to live as human beings after having embraced Buddhism" (*Chittarkatha*,123). Shantabai Kamble rarely loses her poise and composure in the narrative. However, the harassment and threats by village elites post conversion seem to have provoked even a reticent and mild-mannered woman like her into an angry outburst, "Because we are *mahar*, we should do all the dirty work; because we are *mahar*, the higher caste would give us food in an iron *tawa* (girdle) rather than in a plate; because we are *mahar*, they would not permit us to touch them! How long would we rot like this? That is why we embraced Buddhism. Dr Ambedkar showed us the new path. Where was the injustice in this?" (*Chittarkatha*,123)

Reacting to the anger among *upper-caste* Hindus against conversion and allegations of foreign money and material rewards for conversion to Buddhism, Kumud Pawade writes that millions of people converted to Buddhism at the behest of Ambedkar, “Did he distribute money? To this day, they live in poor conditions...those who treat others like human beings often belong to other faiths. Why did the religious Hindus never accept this policy of humanism? Can they deny that they have more money than what is given in foreign aid?” (*Antasphot*,80) Urmila Pawar writes that there was an increase in abuse after their conversion to Buddhism as they began to give up caste-based labour and protest against discrimination. Other people, particularly the powerful middle castes like the *marathas*, the *bhandaris*, and the *kunbis* reacted strongly to conversion. The casteist slurs and insults did not stop with their improved standards of living that came in as benefits of education and job security. People looked for opportunities to vent their resentment and hostility because of their progress and self-improvement. Needless to say, the experiences were harsher in rural areas.

Memories of conversion *are* sharply etched in Urmila Pawar’s mind as the pace of life changed considerably afterwards. Conversion to Buddhism marked a new way of life that had enormous social strength. She recalls how, with the conversion to Buddhism, the sense of shame, inferiority and degradation was washed away and she writes about the intense feeling of liberation they experienced when they gathered up all the images and idols of worship from their households and threw them into the river (*Aaydaan*,92). Her cousin Govind dada was at the forefront of this movement. The sentiment of liberation from the confines of the old religion was very powerful. With respect to religious practices, the conversion was followed by the replacement of all the pictures of Hindu Gods and Goddesses with the portraits of Buddha and Ambedkar. She writes that the observance of most Hindu ceremonial practices ended. Conversion to Buddhism was meant to result in an adoption of a rational and scientific way of life, based on reason. However, Urmila admits that the ideological change was by no means uniform throughout the community. There were difficulties in throwing off the ideological baggage and cultural practices of erstwhile religion, like the practices of putting on colourful silk saris or wearing black beads in the *Mangal sutra* after marriage, and so on. She mentions how, over the period, Buddhism had become institutionalized through the Buddha Jana Panchayats that laid out rules and some monetary obligations for marriage.

Getting used to a new religion and associated practices did not come easily to the neo-Buddhists. Pawar writes about initial confusion and fumbles regarding the

prayers and rituals in practicing Buddhism, the disappointment of women about discontinuing the earlier wedding rituals and festivities, singing and fun associated with it. Compared to the traditional marriage ceremony, marriages performed according to Buddhist rites appeared banal and boring. She mentions how women missed the games, songs and the rituals of the traditional wedding ceremonies and ridiculed the table and chair arranged for the bride and groom to take oath. Getting used to wearing white saris for marriage and wearing white-beaded *Mangal sutra* also took some time. Even in the seemingly simple matter of saying prayers, she writes, “We used to sing in different tunes. The words would be mixed up... the words also used to come out wrong. All this led to a lot of laughter. In the end, however, we did manage to learn the right prayer... birth, marriage and death rituals began to be performed according to the Buddhist Dhamma” (*Aaydaan*, 92-3). Pawar also admits to her own flip-flop between the internalized cultural, ritual practices of Hinduism and the rationality and scientific attitude based on reason advocated by Buddhism post conversion. She writes that, as dictated by Hinduism, she would not enter any temple during her periods but if her school friends insisted, she would defend herself by saying that now as Buddhists, they have nothing to do with Hindu Gods. Her reactions, expectations and disappointments on many occasions also illustrate the hold of Hindu cultural assumptions and traditions on her mind.

While the life narratives published during the 1980s, like those by Baby Kamble or Shantabai Kamble unequivocally celebrate conversion to Buddhism as a revolutionary development that marked the cultural regeneration and revival among the *mahar* community in Maharashtra, Urmila Pawar’s *Aaydaan* takes a more nuanced look at it. There is a greater degree of self-reflexivity and maturity in her acknowledgement that those who converted to Buddhism were not socially emancipated overnight by virtue of conversion. Much of the same pressures continued to operate upon them even after their conversion. Buddhism presents a scientific, individualistic, rituals-free path to salvation. However, the sudden discarding of cultural universe of traditional religion and emphasis on stark simplicity and rationality in every sphere of life also seems to have created some kind of emotional vacuum in the neo-Buddhist community. Urmila Pawar notes that, unable to cope with the emotional void, rural people were reverting to the succour provided by the erstwhile ritualistic practices. She realized this strongly, as several years later she visited her native village to meet her cousins, and was disturbed to find that her sister-in-law had now become a local Godwoman dispensing holy ash and practicing exorcism and her cousin Govind dada once

the harbinger of new faith, now old, merely looked the other way when confronted by her about this. She writes about her inner turmoil “On the one hand, there was the rational, radically transforming aspect of Buddhism, on the other, superstitions’ frightening hold on the human mind was back with a vengeance. It was not very long since Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar had cleansed our minds of them, and yet people got caught in the same web of superstition again and again. It was alarming!” (The Weave, 290). It seems safer to conclude from Urmila Pawar’s account that the most self-conscious Buddhists were more than likely the members of the newly educated elite group, while the rural *mahars* largely retained more of the habits and customs of their erstwhile faith.

Outwardly there has been a sea change that could be observed among dalits after 1956. There is a definite formation of an aggressive cultural identity which expresses itself through massive celebrations of Ambedkar and Buddha Jayanti, dalit melas, a new genre of songs and dramas and so on. However, well-known Dalit Scholar Teltumbde observes that conversion to Buddhism has not significantly changed the dalit way of life (Teltumbde,113). Although rural *mahars* began to refuse to perform traditional duties such as scavenging and have given up the practice of eating beef, their recognition and practice of sub-caste hierarchy and untouchability, lack of inter-caste marriages and worship of Hindu Gods and Goddesses is evidence that they practice the kind of Buddhism “which has not really changed anybody or anything very radically” (Teltumbde,113). It is also pertinent to note that Buddhists in India adhering to the monastic orders have been critical of the Ambedkarite conversion to Buddhism, considering them politically motivated and not in keeping with the true spirit of Buddhism (Chatterjee, 130).

Dr Ambedkar conceived Buddhism as a path to bring about revolutionary change. However, many scholars argue that Buddhism was basically a path of individualistic salvation through renunciation of the world. While it in itself did not subscribe to any of the social evils, it did not fight any of them including slavery and caste. As such, they tend to dismiss any possibility of revolutionary change coming through the spread of Buddhism as imagined by Ambedkar (Teltumbde, 111). Teltumbde dismisses the notion that the dalits who converted to Buddhism made more progress than those who have not become Buddhists. He writes, “In each geographical region, the major or majority dalit caste, irrespective of whether it has converted to Buddhism or not, has made significant progress in relation to other dalit castes, which remains indistinguishable from the progress made by dalit-

Buddhists in its vicinity or in Maharashtra – the prototype state for Dalit Buddhists” (Teltumbde, 111).

The dalit intellectuals proclaim that conversion to Buddhism is a mode of political dissent and a means of moving away from forms of social stigmatisation and subjugation. However, many studies of rural life in Maharashtra characterise religious practice of rural mahars as fundamentally Hindu with a Buddhist exterior. While *mahars* still observe most of the Hindu marriage rituals within the household, the marriage ceremony was performed in a Buddhist way. Noted scholar Neera Burra observes that this dichotomy between private Hindu practice and public Buddhist practice marked other rituals as well. Lucinda Ramberg has observed that a gendered division of religious labour, in which men follow Ambedkar and women keep ancestral gods, is widely recognised and discussed among Ambedkarite Buddhists across India, as a problem for the community. She writes, “Conversion was supposed to be a radical break from the past, a break that somehow fewer women are able to make. In many Ambedkarite, Buddhist households, women are not good subjects of rational modernity. Over and over, they are placed and place themselves on the side of ancestral religion and efficacious ritual” (Ramberg, 46).

The Buddhist identity seems to be important mainly for the outside world. There is an attempt to emphasize one’s distinctiveness and this is achieved by different methods. The inner core may remain Hindu but this in no way reflects the betrayal of the cause. This seeming dichotomy indicates that while their vulnerable lives impel dalits to seek the security of their old Gods and follow the old way of life in private, in public they essentially follow their collective caste practices. This reflects the political imperative of distancing from the Hindus imbibed from the Dalit movement under Babasaheb Ambedkar. Since this practice forbids them from going to old *jatras* and temples, they have developed their own substitutes around the central figure of Buddha and Ambedkar, who just substituted their old Gods in public (Teltumbde, 113).

V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, a significant part of dalit women’s life narratives in Maharashtra is engaged in critiquing the still prevalent superstitions and ritual practices, and they wish to highlight the change and awareness brought in by ideological mobilization of Ambedkar led Dalit movement and conversion to Buddhism. Conversion to Buddhism was not an individual act, it was a massive, life-changing event for millions in Maharashtra. however, contrary to the hopes and expectations, those who converted to Buddhism were not socially emancipated overnight by virtue of

conversion. Dalit women's life narratives clearly indicate how in various ways, the cultural life of dalit women is still thinly anchored in Hinduism. A reading of these life narratives also underlines the fact that religious conversion can remain merely a symbolic change until the torch-bearers of society at the grassroots struggle at every level to implement these changes creatively. In the ultimate analysis, however, it needs to be remembered that social emancipation and empowerment of the dalit communities in India is still a work in progress. Conversion was not perceived by Ambedkar as an isolated tool, but rather as complementary to other tools of protest, which he was developing on a more secular plane.

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