

THE STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION FROM CASTE AND GENDER:
REPRESENTATIONS OF DALIT WOMEN
IN THE NEO-BUDDHIST MOVEMENT

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Abstract

This dissertation analyzes the representations of Dalit neo-Buddhist women in literature, iconography, and media, and situates these representations in a religious context. It fills a gap in the existing research by bringing together three areas of study, all of which are interdisciplinary in themselves and all of which intersect: religious studies, women's studies, and postcolonial studies. A central feature of the contemporary Dalit movement is its response to B. R. Ambedkar's founding of a new sect of Buddhism in 1956; this sect is popularly known as neo-Buddhism. Ambedkar founded this sect as a means to counter casteism and sexism in India. This dissertation proposes that religious experience is central to the neo-Buddhist movement, to the experiences of women within that movement, and to the production of representations of Dalit women.

This dissertation situates neo-Buddhism as a religion which engages with the intersection of gender and caste, and considers the impact of the text *The Buddha and His Dhamma* as scripture. It also situates neo-Buddhism in the context of historical responses to the caste system in non-Hindu traditions, and the contemporary practice of casteism and sexism in those traditions. It argues that in his founding of neo-Buddhism, Ambedkar drew on both indigenous and foreign models in order to challenge both Hindu and colonial oppression. Non-Dalits, Dalit men, and Dalit women all respond to Ambedkar and neo-Buddhism. This dissertation argues that Dalit men's representations of Dalit women tend to reinforce upper caste Hindu concepts of womanhood through the idealization of self-sacrificing devotion, domesticity, and purity. In contrast, in their self-

representations, Dalit women participate in Buddhist feminist theology through engaging with concepts of religion, rationality, and the polluted body. The dissertation concludes that Dalit women's engagement with casteism and sexism both follows Ambedkar's example and provides a stronger means of countering casteism and sexism in their Dalit communities, and in Indian culture more broadly.

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Introduction

The Struggle for Liberation from Caste and Gender:

Representations of Dalit Women in the neo-Buddhist Movement

The caste system and religious conversion both provoke strong reactions among South Asians in India and diaspora. Because of the explicit prohibition against caste discrimination in the Indian Constitution, and because of international condemnation, government bodies in India are particularly invested in understating the persistence of caste discrimination today. Associated with this rejection is a resistance to conversion from Hinduism, stemming from Hindu nationalism which seeks both to keep Dalits (ex-Untouchables) within the fold of Hinduism and to deny the variety of identities within India, and manifesting in laws against conversion in several Indian states.¹ An association between the Dalit movement and religious conversion drives this antagonism in part.

During the nationalist movement in the early twentieth century, Mohandas K. Gandhi famously opposed untouchability, and practised interdining to challenge it. However, Gandhi saw the caste system as an important and valuable aspect of Indian society; he was a Vaishya, among the three upper castes, and his political supporters were upper caste elites. Bhimrao “Babasaheb” Ramji Ambedkar, less famous internationally but arguably more influential, went further and included freedom from caste discrimination in the Indian Constitution; he was a Dalit.² However, an analysis of the

1 States with anti-conversion legislation include Gujarat and Tamil Nadu. See Bharat Desai, “US Report Flays Gujarat for Christian Survey,” *Times of India* 20 Dec 2003.

2 Freedom from caste discrimination is included in articles 15-17, 46, 325, 330, 332, 335, 338-342 in Government of India, “Constitution of India,” (28 August 2007), Ministry of Law and Justice (Legislative Department).

confrontation between Gandhi and Ambedkar as representatives of the elitist nationalist movement and the Dalit rights movement risks erasing women's experiences. Within the context of caste conversion, representations of women in the religious neo-Buddhist movement, and particularly self-representations of Dalit women, are under-represented. Hundreds of thousands of Dalits took the Buddhist vows with Ambedkar; his wife Savita Ambedkar converted with him, among many other Dalit women.

The assumption that men dictate the life choices of "their women" (mothers, wives, sisters, daughters) often erases women's religious experiences. Androcentric, Eurocentric, and religious nationalist attitudes often portray religious conversions as coerced, resulting from male pressure or lack of education, especially when women convert. I challenge these assumptions to examine Dalit women's writing for their representations of themselves and other women in their religious lives. Dalit women respond to aspects of caste and gender in Hinduism after their conversion to Buddhism. I argue that while men's religious representations of women reinforce existing sexism and casteism, Dalit women's religious self-representations are a legitimate and powerful challenge to oppressive gender and caste inequalities.

Studies of women and gender in the neo-Buddhist movement tend to situate the movement in the context of politics rather than religion. This dissertation analyzes the neo-Buddhist movement from a religious studies and feminist theological perspective. In the fifth century BCE, Siddharta Gautama, the historical Buddha, theorized the Four Noble Truths:

- 1) The Noble Truth of Suffering: Clinging to existence is suffering.
- 2) The Noble Truth of the Cause of suffering: Desire leads to rebirth and thus suffering.
- 3) The Noble Truth of the Cessation of suffering: The destruction of desire.
- 4) The Noble Truth of the Path which leads to the cessation of Suffering: The eightfold path leads to the destruction of desire.³

The tension between struggle and liberation is central to Buddhism, and in neo-Buddhism this tension is also central to social justice movements. Ambedkar connected the concept of struggle for justice and liberation from oppression to a modern vision of Buddhism, and revised the core doctrine of Buddhism, the Four Noble Truths, to better reflect Dalit experiences. Feminist theologians likewise note the struggle for liberation from oppressive gender roles. Analyses of engaged Buddhism also examine the connection between Buddhism and social justice. For Dalit women in the neo-Buddhist movement, the struggle for liberation from caste and gender oppression are closely connected.

Context

Ambedkar was active during the Indian independence movement in the first half of the twentieth century, was the first Law Minister of independent India, and as the Chair of the Indian Constitution Drafting Committee, was the Constitution's chief author.

³ I have paraphrased the Four Noble Truths translated from the *Mahavagga* by the Pāli Text Society, "The Mahāvagga," trans. T. W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg, *Vinaya Texts* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1881). While critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have analyzed the process of translation as a colonial tool, Ambedkar would have had access to this text, which I have paraphrased in the interests of accessibility. See Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York; London: Routledge, 1993).

He played a major role in India's independence movement, criticizing British colonizers and upper caste Indian politicians alike. He is best known for his fight for Dalit rights. He is less well known for his fight for Indian women's rights in all castes, partly through his presentation of the Hindu Code Bill. Ambedkar was born in India in 1891, into a Mahar family, considered an Untouchable caste.⁴ His father was employed in the Indian army under the British, had access to education, and educated his children. Ambedkar eventually pursued higher education in the United States and in Britain. He faced caste discrimination throughout his life, and led the early twentieth century fight against the caste system, including satyagrahas—civil disobedience actions—for temple entry and access to drinking water.⁵ He included prohibitions on caste and gender discrimination in the Indian Constitution, and argued successfully for reservations in political office. He popularized the term Dalit, which means “the oppressed.” Many ex-Untouchables use this name to identify themselves as an alternative to other existing and demeaning terms; it has become an important political identity.

After attempting to fight caste discrimination from within Hinduism, Ambedkar concluded that Hinduism as a religion was based on and inextricable from the caste

4 On occasion in this dissertation I use the term “untouchable” to express a religious state identified externally, in contrast with the historical “Untouchable” identity which has been replaced by the Dalit identity. Likewise, the Dalit identity continues to be negotiated. Pawar notes: “dalit does not mean only socially suppressed or oppressed people! It also signals rational, secular people who have discarded the oppressive system and concepts like God, fate and the caste system. ‘Dalit’ is being replaced by ‘Phule-Ambedkarite’ or simply ‘Ambedkarite’.” *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*, trans. Maya Pandit (Kolkata: Stree, 2008) 275.

5 Though Gandhi is most famous for naming and popularizing the satyagraha, he limited his actions to the British, and resisted challenges to his own power and community. As this dissertation in part seeks to resist the centralization and sanctification of Gandhi, I also do not centre him as the referent for various satyagrahas.

system: “Caste has a divine basis. You must therefore destroy the sacredness and divinity with which Caste has become invested” (*Annihilation of Caste* 62). In the Hindu religious texts including the ritual *Vedas*, the mythic *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, and the legal codes of Manu and his followers, the varna—or colour—system considers the upper three castes, Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya twice-born, and individuals may become ritually pure and receive initiation into religious study of the *Vedas*.⁶ The lower caste, Shudra, and outcastes—those without caste, also known as avarna—which include Dalits, are considered polluted, and are prohibited from studying the *Vedas*. Caste observances which appeal to pollution also limit access to clean water, to education, to employment, and to temple entry. The texts explicitly prescribe violence against lower castes who defy their duties.

At the core of Hindu philosophy, karma, or the process of cause and effect, is mutually linked with dharma, or duty, also expressed in the Hindu religious texts. A person born into Hinduism must follow her dharma based on birth: caste, gender and age. The success or failure to follow her dharma results in the effect of karma, which dictates her rebirth into another state. The ultimate goal is rebirth as a Brahmin male, after which it is possible to achieve moksha, or liberation from the cycle of rebirths. The concept of dharma often justifies control and punishment of lower castes and Dalits as the duty of higher castes. At the same time that varna and dharma receive a divine justification, the

6 I cite the translations of these texts with which Ambedkar would have been familiar. See *The Hymns of the Rigveda*, trans. Ralph T. H. Griffith (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series, 1963). See *The Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*, trans. Kisari Mohan Ganguly, 3rd ed. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1973).

practice of caste has metamorphosized over time, and even the Vedic castes have shifted in terms of practice, meaning and occupation. Importantly, during the independence movement, and in the nationalist project since Indian independence, native elites used texts such as the *Ramayana* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, highlighting their concepts of dharma and religious purity to create the Indian nation (Thapar “Historical Perspective”). The writer Bankim Chandra Chatterjee specifically emphasized dharma in the *Bhagavad Gita* so that it “came to include social and political duties; it presented patriotism as a religious duty and, under certain conditions, even sanctioned social and political revolution” (U. King “Some Reflections” 83). Historical religious movements in South Asia, including the bhakti tradition, Islam—and particularly Sufism, the mystic tradition in Islam—Kabir’s devotional path, and Sikhism, have all posed challenges to caste practices.

However, the existing scholarly definition of untouchability arises from an upper caste male understanding of religious ritual which was adopted in colonial Western scholarship, notably in Louis Dumont’s book *Homo Hierarchicus* (1966). Recently, scholars have examined the connection between the practice of caste and access to the means of production (Singh; Gupta). In his book *Khairlanji: A Strange and Bitter Crop* (2008), Anand Teltumbde argues that caste politics reflect class politics in contemporary India, and examines the physical and institutional violence which maintains caste hierarchies.⁷ He points out that religious caste observance has declined in modern India,

⁷ *Khairlanji* was revised and published in Britain and the US in 2010 as *The Persistence of Caste: The Khairlanji Murders and India’s Hidden Apartheid* (London; New York: Zed Books, 2010).

such as prohibitions against interdining, and examines how caste, capitalism, and nationalism mutually reinforce the subordinate position of Dalits (“Dalit Capitalism” 2011). He further argues that caste violence has intensified in response to the social advances made by Dalit individuals and communities. However, this violence still enjoys religious justification. While it is important to recognize that Hinduism is not a monolithic tradition, and that many sects denounce the caste system and its observance, Ambedkar found resistance to the abolition of caste in all of the Hindu sects with which he came into contact, and in fact encountered resistance to Hindu reform as a whole. Thus, he rejected the possibility that Hinduism could ever provide an avenue for liberation.

In 1936, Ambedkar famously stated: “I was born a Hindu, but I will not die a Hindu,” and began his search for a religion that would allow Dalits to escape the caste system. He rejected religions such as Christianity and Islam because of the persistence of caste in those religions in India, as well as on the basis of their import into India and the associated threat to the independence of India:

If the Depressed Classes join Islam or Christianity they not only go out of the Hindu religion, but they also go out of the Hindu culture. . . .

Conversion to Islam or Christianity will denationalize the Depressed Classes. . . . If they go on to Christianity, the numerical strength of the Christians becomes five to six crore [fifty to sixty million]. It will help to

strengthen the hold of Britain on the country. (Ambedkar “Circular Letter of B.S. Moonje”)

He chose Buddhism for three central reasons: its history in India, the value placed on rational thought, and its egalitarian philosophy. Ambedkar attributes rational thought to the Buddha and his teachings; in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* he writes that the Buddha “accepted that reality must rest on proof. Thinking must be based on rationalism” (55; 1.5.2.34). Finally, he interpreted the Buddha’s teachings through the lens of the European ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity: “Did the Buddha teach liberty? Did the Buddha teach equality? Did the Buddha teach fraternity? . . . He answers all these questions” (122; 3.2.1.23-28). I argue that through this interpretation of Buddhism, Ambedkar proposes a religion which draws on South Asian history to engage with the colonial power of Britain, as well as the Indian power of Brahmin patriarchy, as a fully modern religion. Ambedkar founded neo-Buddhism October 14, 1956, when he converted to Buddhism shortly before his death.

Ambedkar included 22 additional vows to the Buddhist conversion ceremony.

Notably, several vows explicitly renounce Hinduism:

I shall have no faith in Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara nor shall I
worship them.

I shall have no faith in Rama and Krishna, who are believed to be
incarnation of God, nor shall I worship them.

I shall have no faith in Gauri, Ganapati and other gods and goddesses of Hindus nor shall I worship them.

I do not believe in the incarnation of God.

I do not and shall not believe that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this to be sheer madness and false propaganda.

I shall not perform Shraddha nor shall I give pind-dan.

I shall not act in a manner violating the principles and teachings of the Buddha.

I shall not allow any ceremonies to be performed by Brahmins.

I shall believe in the equality of man.

I shall endeavor to establish equality.

I shall follow the noble eightfold path of the Buddha.

I shall follow the ten paramitas prescribed by the Buddha.

I shall have compassion and loving-kindness for all living beings and protect them.

I shall not steal.

I shall not tell lies.

I shall not commit carnal sins.

I shall not take intoxicants like liquor, drugs, etc.

I shall endeavor to follow the noble eightfold path and practice compassion and loving-kindness in every day life.

I renounce Hinduism, which disfavors humanity and impedes the advancement and development of humanity because it is based on inequality, and adopt Buddhism as my religion.

I firmly believe the Dhamma of the Buddha is the only true religion.

I believe that I am having a re-birth.

I solemnly declare and affirm that I shall hereafter lead my life according to the principles and teachings of the Buddha and his Dhamma.

(1956)⁸

Ambedkar saw conversion as an essential rejection of the untouchable identity of oppression through the rejection of Hinduism.

Neo-Buddhists have identified Ambedkar as a bodhisattva—an individual who had the potential to achieve enlightenment but dedicated himself to working for the liberation of others—or an incarnation of the Buddha (Jaffrelot 137; Queen “Introduction” 24). They identify his teachings as the fourth turning of the wheel of dhamma—teachings of the Buddha—following the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana turnings (Omvedt *Buddhism*; Queen “Fourth Turning”). The three main streams, or paths, of Buddhism are Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, although different regions practice forms of Buddhism based on syncretism with existing religious traditions and culture. Rather than converting to an existing stream of Buddhism, Ambedkar pursued research to recover an original doctrine of Buddhism.

⁸ These vows have been widely reproduced, including in Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon, *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*, trans. Wandana Sondalkar (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2008).

Importantly, Ambedkar began a dialogue with a Buddhism which contained existing attitudes regarding women. The Buddha's alleged views on women form the basis for the core questions of feminist theologians. The central canonical legend relates the petition of Mahaprajapati Gotami, the Buddha's foster mother, to join the monastic sangha—the monastic community. The legend states that the Buddha first resisted, then accepted women under the condition of eight special rules, then prophesied the death of Buddhism in 500 years as the result of women's admission to the monastic sangha.⁹ Rita M. Gross summarizes the eight special rules as follows:

Any nun, even of great seniority, must always honor, rise for, and bow to each and every monk, even if newly ordained. The nuns must spend the rainy season retreat in a location where they can be supervised by monks. Monks were to determine the dates for the twice-monthly confessional meetings of the order. Monks would participate in the interrogation of nuns who were accused of breaking rules, but the reverse did not apply. Monks would also help determine a nun's penalty for infractions, but the reverse did not apply. Monks must participate in the nuns' ordination, but the reverse did not apply. Nuns could not, under any circumstances,

⁹ This statement regarding the shortened life of Buddhism is attributed to the Buddha, but considering the Buddha's statements that gender is not a barrier to enlightenment, was potentially added to the canon later in the tradition. See L. Friedman, *Meetings with Remarkable Women: Buddhist Teachers in America* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987). See also Nancy Auer Falk, "The Case of the Vanishing Nuns: The Fruits of Ambivalence in Ancient Indian Buddhism," *Unspoken Worlds. Women's Religious Lives*, eds. Nancy Falk and Rita M. Gross (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1989).

reprimand or criticize a monk. Finally, nuns were not allowed to officially admonish monks, though monks could admonish women. (36)¹⁰

Feminist theologians including Gross, Nancy J. Barnes, Diana Y. Paul, and Suwanna Satha-Anand have responded variously to this legend.

Ambedkar's book *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, written in English and published posthumously in 1957, is the result of his analysis and synthesis of Buddhist doctrines and texts, and his rejection of some of these. He points out examples of misreporting of the Buddha's teachings, and outlines the criteria by which he decided whether a teaching was original:

If there is anything which could be said with confidence it is: He was nothing if not rational, if not logical. Anything therefore which is rational and logical, other things being equal, may be taken to be the word of the Buddha. / The second thing is that the Buddha never cared to enter into a discussion which was not profitable for man's welfare. Therefore anything attributed to the Buddha which did not relate to man's welfare cannot be accepted to be the word of the Buddha. / There is a third test. It is that the Buddha divided all matters into two classes. Those about which he was certain and those about which he was not certain. On matters which fell into class I, he has stated his views definitely and conclusively. On matters

10 These rules are also enumerated in "The Admission of Women to the Order," trans. Henry Clarke Warren, *Buddhism in Translations*, Harvard Oriental Series, Volume III (Harvard University Press, 1896). I have used Gross's summary because of its accessibility. Importantly, Alice Collett points out that these rules are translated in a myriad of different ways, in "Historio-Critical Hermeneutics in the Study of Women in Early Indian Buddhism," *Numen* 56 (2009).

which fell into class II, he has expressed his views. But they are only tentative views. (185; 4.2.5.13-15)

Although no Buddhist tradition receives an exemption from Ambedkar's analysis, he draws predominantly on Theravada texts and doctrine, but also integrates Mahayana beliefs, particularly as they recognize lay Buddhism. He omits Vajrayana doctrine and practices from his book, on the grounds of the Buddha's rejection of superstitious ritual. Ambedkar's neo-Buddhist movement also parallels contemporary theory and activism in feminist movements and other civil rights movements.

Some critics refer to *The Buddha and His Dhamma* pejoratively as "Ambedkar and His Dhamma," delegitimizing this scripture within the canon of religious texts (Jivaka). However, feminist theologians argue that all religious texts are written and interpreted from an androcentric point of view. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, who examines Christianity, expresses this view:

Very different feminist analyses agree today not only that the bible is written in androcentric—or, better, kyriocentric—languages and symbols, but also that it is deeply entrenched in kyriarchal cultures and societies. . . . today feminist scholars in religion take it for granted that women are not just objects of biblical studies but that they are subjects of biblical interpretation. (*Sharing Her Word* 66-7)¹¹

¹¹ Fiorenza extends the understanding of hierarchy beyond gender to recognize that cultural systems are not only male-centred, or androcentric, but that they are centred on intersecting systems of power including race, sexuality, class, or ability. See "Text and Reality - Reality as Text: The Problem of a Feminist Historical and Social Reconstruction Based on Texts," *Studia Theologica - Nordic Journal of Theology* 43.1 (1989).

Ambedkar's texts may be critiqued for androcentrism or his interpretation of Buddhist philosophies. However, scholars such as Christopher S. Queen argue that Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhist philosophies stays within the realm of canon (Queen "Dr. Ambedkar"). Critics who simply dismiss Ambedkar, his theories, and the neo-Buddhist movement, attempt to undermine challenges to their own authority. These types of criticism serve an elite agenda rather than justifiably critiquing authorship and text.

Ambedkar's theories have been largely dismissed because of multiple oppressions. First, casteism within India devalues his theories as coming from a Dalit. Second, the intellectual elite in India dismiss him as a theorist. This attitude builds on the existing casteism among the intellectual elite, but exists largely because his theories undermine their authority in intellectual circles, a point which Ambedkar himself notes (*The Untouchables*). Even though Ambedkar asserts in his own writing that he was not a scholar, he was trained in academic analysis, and his scholarship and analyses are solid theoretical works (*Who Were the Shudras?*). Third, Western theorists, when they have access to his writing, despite the barriers posed by the caste and intellectual elites, dismiss him on the basis of racism and colonialism. During the colonial period, Western research was privileged over Indian research, and these processes continue. Most knowledge about India in the West has been filtered through a colonial lens, and furthermore, what is considered important has been managed by caste and intellectual elites in India. Thus, popular knowledge about India in the West does not threaten Indian

elites, and fits into the depiction of India as a Hindu nationalist homogeneous space.¹² Finally, androcentric analysis of his writing has often ignored or erased Ambedkar's revolutionary theories on gender equality specifically.

Androcentric analysis of the neo-Buddhist movement has often ignored or erased women in the movement.¹³ For example, Ramachandra Kshirasagara's book *Dalit Movement in India and its Leaders* (1994) includes a chapter "Principal Dalit Leaders." Of the 154 brief biographies, only seven name Dalit women leaders, or less than five percent. Women contemporaries of Ambedkar faced barriers to full participation in the Dalit movement based on sexism in society, and historians, biographers, and other scholars have since largely overlooked instances when women did participate. Contemporary writers such as Meenakshi Moon, Urmila Pawar, and Sharmila Rege seek to balance these analyses with female-centred compilations. Feminist publishers, translators, and academics such as Gail Omvedt and Eleanor Zelliot, aim to publish autobiographies and critical texts.

However, Dalit women's biographies and autobiographies find publication in the context of multiple layers of marginalization. First, the history of literature both inside and outside of India privileges male writers from a Eurocentric viewpoint. In a

12 Distinctions between West and East are largely constructed for the purpose of developing and maintaining often colonial hierarchies. This dissertation engages more often with the mutual exchange between "East" and "West" when interactions arise, and recognizes the inadequacy of these labels. I use the labels only for lack of a satisfying or accessible alternative; I find the proposed alternatives "global south" or "two-thirds world," inadequate for the purpose of the dissertation, and the terms "developing world" or "third world" are colonialist and outdated.

13 At one archive I visited, I was told that I wouldn't find anything about women in the Ambedkar file. Unsurprisingly, I did find materials on women, but more importantly, within women's studies, often finding an *absence* of materials is just as significant.

specifically Indian context, upper caste women learned to read and write against prohibitions expressed in the *Laws of Manu*: “Orthodox Hindus of those times kept their women illiterate, since there was a firm belief that the educated woman was destined to be widowed” (Sarkar *Words to Win* 3).¹⁴ Second, a caste-bias among publishers ensures that upper caste writers find a privileged space where Dalit writers are disregarded. In 1972, the Dalit writers Arjun Dangle, Namdeo Dhasal, and J. V. Pawar founded the Dalit Panther movement, partly based on the American Black Panther movement; the movement also served as a platform from which to promote and publish Dalit writing.

Upper caste women certainly faced oppression as a result of Hindu doctrines based on religious legal codes such as the *Laws of Manu*, and continue to face it in the context of patriarchy. However, Dalit women experience both caste and gender oppression, with the added indignity of having their concerns dismissed by upper caste women. They are erased as Dalit women in comparisons likening women’s oppression to caste oppression: “women are often equated with the lowest caste called *sudras*” (Katrak 176). Language also constructs women as property when writers refer to Dalits and “their wives and children” (Ambedkar *Annihilation of Caste* 25). Others dismiss them as liberated from patriarchal oppression of women since they do not face the same oppressions as upper-caste or -class women: “the lower the strata of society, the better the status of women. Economic independence of women [is] mainly responsible for this”

¹⁴ Orthodox Hindus historically interpreted the *Laws of Manu* as a prohibition against women learning the Vedas, or even learning to read, despite contradictions within the *Laws of Manu*: “For women no (sacramental) rite (is performed) with sacred texts, thus the law is settled; women (who are) destitute of strength and destitute of (the knowledge of) Vedic texts, (are as impure as) falsehood (itself), that is a fixed rule” *The Laws of Manu 1500 BC*, trans. George Bühler, Sacred Books of the East (1886) 9.18.

(Bhai 22). Urmila Pawar identifies marginalization in the lack of space in both feminist and Dalit movements: “Women’s issues did not have any place on the agenda of the dalit movement and the women’s movement was indifferent to the issues in the dalit movement” (260). Uma Chakravarti (2006) notes how groups gain power within a system that requires their oppression, in this case the Brahmin patriarchy. Though both the Dalit movement and Indian women’s movements oppose the Brahmin patriarchy, upper caste women participate because they gain power through caste; low caste men participate because they gain power through sex and gender.

Dalit women recognize that their concerns as Dalits and as women are important to their entire community, to upper caste feminists and Dalit men. Dalit women write their autobiographies about their communities: “What the writer writes about is social reality, and not his or her individual life!” (Pawar 229-30). In Buddhist philosophy, understanding the connections between beings is important on the path to enlightenment. As Kancha Ilaiah argues in his book *Post-Hindu India: A Discourse in Dalit-Bahujan, Socio-Spiritual and Scientific Revolution*, the Brahmin patriarchal system threatens the entire community of India. Dalit women point out the community’s immediate needs, but also place members of their community in the context of intersectional identities and oppressions.

Academics writing about the Dalit movement, including Ilaiah, state that Ambedkar’s neo-Buddhist movement was political rather than religious: “though Ambedkar embraced Buddhism, it is clear from his writings that he treated it principally

as a political and ideological movement” (Ilaiah *God as Political Philosopher* 8-9). This assertion devalues religious practice and identity, but also creates a distinction between political philosophy as valuable and religious philosophy as not valuable. If the personal *is* political, as asserted in the phrase coined by Carol Hanisch in 1970, and widely repeated in the feminist movement, religious practice is *fully as political* as secular political movements. Dismissing religious aspects of a culture both mirrors and endorses the dismissal of women’s experiences. Without considering religion seriously, a full picture will never appear. Furthermore, damaging features which arise in religious practice itself cannot be addressed, should religious practice be dismissed altogether, especially in the context of women’s lives; under patriarchy, women have more limited options in leaving their family’s religion.

Aim and Scope

Scholars such as Gail Omvedt (2008), Sharmila Rege (2006, 2003) and Eleanor Zelliot (2005, 1992) have discussed women in the Dalit movement; this dissertation aims to analyze the representations of women in a specifically religious sense, and the connotations which those representations of women hold for religion. While Ilaiah’s book *God as Political Philosopher: Buddha’s Challenge to Brahminism* is a key text in the analysis of neo-Buddhism, I disagree with Ilaiah’s explicit characterization of neo-Buddhism and Ambedkar as political rather than religious. I argue that neo-Buddhism is both religious and political, and I focus on the religious aspects as a means of undermining the hierarchy between the religious and the political which has developed in

the academic writing on neo-Buddhism, as well as within sects of neo-Buddhism itself. While Dalit male academics, autobiographers, and fiction writers such as Ilaiah and Dangle analyze gender roles in their writing, they usually prioritize caste; I suggest that this approach is evidence of androcentrism. Female writers have examined the inherent connections between caste and gender hierarchies. Furthermore, Dalit male writers rarely discuss misogyny, patriarchy, and androcentrism in the Dalit community. Dalit women writers offer a balanced representation of caste and gender. Finally, studies of women and religion often neglect the colonial component, and I aim to contribute to feminist theology through the addition of Dalit women's experiences in the context of colonialisms.

I focus on Dalit women within contemporary neo-Buddhism, although I draw on the historical development of Buddhism, and Dalit conversion movements in other religions than Buddhism, to contextualize my study. I begin with Ambedkar's assertion, "I was born a Hindu, but I will not die a Hindu" in 1935, and his subsequent search for a religion in which he could escape the caste system. The pivotal moment occurs in his public conversion in 1956 and develops through the conversion movement up to the twenty-first century, including mass conversions on the fiftieth anniversary of his conversion in 2006. I centre my research within Ambedkar's native state of Maharashtra where this movement has resulted in the highest percentage of Indian Buddhists. I focus on Maharashtrian Dalit writing; Maharashtra is also the location in which the first organized Dalit literary movement arose as part of the Dalit Panthers Movement in the

1970s. In order to limit the scope of the project, I use texts in English translation or written in English, though I studied Hindi and Marathi in the interests of pursuing the project, and reviewed several devotional songs to Ramabai in Marathi. I also focus on the major sites in neo-Buddhist sacred geography: the site of Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in Nagpur, and the site of his cremation in Dadar. Where relevant, I also note the sites of Ambedkar's death in Delhi, and the Buddhist pilgrimage circuit in Nepal and north India, as other sacred spaces important to the movement.

However, I also recognize the complications of studying works in translation, where concepts may be lost. Critics including Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak note the use of translation as a colonial tool (*Outside in the Teaching Machine*). The central texts in translation which I use are both translated by Maya Pandit, who writes on the lack of translations of Maharashtrian women's writing, and the threat this poses in terms of a loss of Indian cultural diversity in the global context ("Voice"). I share her view that Maharashtrian Dalit women's writing contributes to the body of knowledge on Indian women's experiences, and neo-Buddhism in particular, though this project is indebted to Pandit's translation work. Pandit currently pursues the important project of translating Dalit women's writing from Marathi to English, and worked with both Baby Kamble and Urmila Pawar in this process. Pandit has also translated the autobiographical excerpts in Sharmila Rege's book *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, on which I also draw. This dissertation also engages with the process of translation beyond language, where the translation of visual symbols also arises in the analysis of iconography, and where

“Eastern” religions are translated to a Western audience in the process of Orientalism. The translation of culture is critical to this project, which I pursue through the lens of postcolonial analysis.

I begin with the premise that Ambedkar imagined two distinct religious traditions to serve his political purpose, one of which he developed to create a new sect of Buddhism. He acknowledged that the caste system had ‘contaminated’ other religions in India, and rejected those as inadequate for liberation from the caste system. However, Ambedkar could not control what I suggest is the syncretism inherent in *all* religious traditions. I define syncretism as the mutual exchange of religious characteristics. I use syncretism in a neutral sense, neither as a positive demonstration of tolerance nor a negative indication of the loss of Truth, but recognizing the construction of a religious tradition as an ongoing process. In this context, I examine the persistence or adaptation of practices such as oppressive gender roles, androcentrism, sexism or misogyny, and caste within Buddhism, and distinguish Hindu practices from preexisting practices in Buddhism. At the same time, I recognize the influence of the neo-Buddhist movement on the surrounding Hindu community.

It is important to distinguish between “Dalit” and “neo-Buddhist.” Although I focus predominantly on neo-Buddhist Dalit women’s writing, not all Dalit women are neo-Buddhist. The prominent Dalit woman politician Mayawati has publicly expressed her intentions to convert to Buddhism but has not yet done so. Likewise, not all neo-Buddhists are Dalits. Some upper caste Hindus—including Ambedkar’s second wife

Savita—converted to neo-Buddhism because they agree with the religious and political message of neo-Buddhism. Furthermore, neo-Buddhism is a religious movement that may be considered one aspect of the wider Dalit movement. The neo-Buddhist movement coexists and overlaps with other Dalit movements such as the literary or Dalit Panther movements. I use the term neo-Buddhism as a distinct category *within* Buddhism, in order to compare traditions, rather than in contrast to a *real* Buddhist tradition. I choose to capitalize “Buddhist” but not “neo” in neo-Buddhist as a means of highlighting the tradition’s legitimate place in Buddhism while still recognizing its status as a unique sect within Buddhism. I also use this specific term because Buddhists in this tradition use it more often than “Navayana Buddhism,” another term for the movement which literally translates as the “new path” of Buddhism.

When I refer to “Hinduism,” I refer to the contemporary and dominant forms of worship practised by individuals and communities which identify as Hindu. This form of worship, rather than referring to the Vedic textual forms of Hinduism, instead is used as a blanket term to identify those who worship a pantheon of South Asian deities through puja, or devotional worship, at temples and home shrines, and follow doctrines of karma and dharma. While the origins of “Hinduism” arise from orthodox Vedic Brahmanism, contemporary practice has incorporated aspects of heterodox practices from traditions such as Jainism, Buddhism and bhakti—the devotional tradition in Hinduism. As such, while these traditions originally challenged Hinduism, their appropriation has resulted in becoming properly Hindu traditions. The central character of orthodox Brahmanism

persists in core beliefs surrounding karma and dharma, which are expressed and reinforced in the caste system and gender hierarchies.

I attempt to use the translations of Buddhist and Hindu texts which Ambedkar used. Ambedkar's Brahmin teachers discouraged him from studying Sanskrit, based on the prohibition of the *Manusmriti* against Dalits reciting the Sanskrit Vedas. It is also important to explain my decision in presenting non-English words. Usually academic texts italicize "foreign" words. I choose not to italicize them, to give a brief definition on the first introduction of the word, and to include a glossary in Appendix B. I have used English rules in plural construction, and have not used intrusive markers to distinguish an English plural form used with a foreign word. I usually use the more common Sanskrit term rather than the Pali, except in the case of dhamma, which in Pali conveys a different meaning than the Sanskrit term dharma.¹⁵ In terms of transliteration, I tend to follow the Velthuis (ASCII scheme) model, due to my distaste for diacritics, although I use popular transliteration if available.¹⁶ On one hand, English has a history of adopting foreign words. I find it Eurocentric, and specifically colonialist, to assess "Eastern" vocabulary as foreign, while "Western" foreign words are usually not marked in the same way. On the other hand, I would like to encourage the adoption into English vocabulary of words that have no equivalent translation in English but which are necessary in the study of neo-

15 Buddhists seek enlightenment through following the dhamma—teachings of the Buddha—regardless of caste, gender or age; Hindus seek enlightenment through following the dharma—duties conveyed through divine law—according to caste, gender and age. While some writers use the Sanskrit term "dharma" to refer to the teachings of the Buddha, I use the term dhamma to distinguish it from the concept of dharma in Hinduism.

16 For example, the Velthuis transliteration of Ambedkar's cremation site would be Caitya Bhuumi, but it is popularly transliterated as Chaitya Bhoomi.

Buddhism. In the areas of South Asian and religious studies, this vocabulary is particularly essential for research and discussion.

This dissertation aims to examine religious representations of Dalit women in the neo-Buddhist movement in India. It focuses on texts in English or in English translation, within the geographical boundaries of Maharashtra. This project responds to existing studies which dismiss religion as an important factor in the neo-Buddhist movement, exclude women from studies of neo-Buddhism, and overlook the role colonialisms have played in neo-Buddhism—through both external processes of British colonialism and internal processes of Hindu nationalism.

Outline

The first chapter of the dissertation details the theory and methods used to examine the history and context of caste, gender, and religion; to critique the representations of Ambedkar and Dalit women; and to analyze the self-representations of Dalit women in the neo-Buddhist movement. The dissertation draws on religious studies, women's studies, and postcolonial studies, and their intersections. A key tool for the dissertation is literary analysis, in recognition that texts provide important representations of a culture, and in terms of theories of autobiography; however, texts include not only literature, but visual art and sacred geography. I draw on literary theory within each area of study, including hermeneutics, feminist literary theory, and postcolonial literary theory. I draw on religious studies as a means of highlighting the religious aspects of the neo-Buddhist movement, in response to the existing analyses, which frame neo-Buddhism in

the context of political science. I use women's studies as an important response to religious studies, which often universalizes male experiences of religion. Feminist theology likewise examines religious perspectives within women's studies. Including Dalit women's religious experiences within neo-Buddhism is necessary to gain a fuller understanding of this new religious tradition. Finally, the founding of neo-Buddhism, and Dalit women's religious practices occur in India in the historical context of colonialism and the independence movement, and the continuing process of India's external and internal colonialisms. Postcolonial studies provides the means for contextualizing both religious studies and women's studies in India in the context of an ongoing colonizing project. Neo-Buddhist Dalit women's self-representations complicate existing narratives of Buddhism, feminism, colonialism and nationalism.

The dissertation is subsequently divided into three sections. Each section consists of two chapters. The first part, separated into two chapters, presents the history and context of the interactions between caste, gender, and religion in India. Both chapters reference the theme of the wheel, in Buddhism representing the cycle of rebirths, or the wheel of dhamma or teaching. I find this image useful for the analysis of neo-Buddhism, since the movement begins with a return to historical Buddhism, but incorporates significantly different interpretations of the key doctrines in the present. In Makere Stewart-Harawira's work (2005), she proposes the double spiral as representative of indigenous theory, cyclical but with a difference on each return or renewal:

When the metaphor of the expanding circle and debates about the influence of the self and prejudices in understanding and constituting the past are reframed in terms of a “spiral of understanding”, the transformative potential of critical hermeneutics becomes manifest. (51)

This image also references indigenous theory, in which the South Asian religious concept of time is cyclical rather than linear, and acts as an indigenous model of the postcolonial third space.

In the first section, chapter two, “On the Wheel: Buddhism, Gender and Caste in Historical Context,” combines caste and gender analyses of Buddhism in the major Buddhist feminist theology and the major neo-Buddhist caste analyses. Rita M. Gross comprehensively analyzes gender in Buddhism. B. R. Ambedkar and Kancha Ilaiah comprehensively analyze caste in Buddhism, and offer some gender analyses within neo-Buddhism. The chapter connects these theories to examine the intersections of gender and caste in the history of Buddhism, noting the important connections to Hinduism, to provide a foundation for an analysis of contemporary neo-Buddhism. This chapter also includes a feminist theological analysis of gender, in its intersections with caste, in Ambedkar’s text *The Buddha and His Dhamma*.

Continuing the historical and contextual survey, the third chapter, “Wheels Within Wheels: Neo-Buddhism in Context,” is separated into two subsections. In the first subsection, “Off the Wheel: Christian and Muslim Caste Conversions,” I turn to the history of caste conversions in India, with a particular focus on women’s caste

conversions in the modern period, and recognize the role of the colonial and the republican state in conversion. Here I highlight the trend of caste observances in non-Hindu religions which Ambedkar noted during his quest to choose a religion in which Dalits might escape the caste system. I use specific examples from Christian and Muslim caste conversions in their interactions with Hinduism, in the texts of Bama, Sathianadhan, and Chughtai. I also develop these examples to question how conversion is imagined, how neo-Buddhism has developed in relation to other religious communities, and whether neo-Buddhism truly approaches caste conversion in a different manner than previous caste conversion movements, and whether it can expect to achieve greater success than previous movements.

The second subsection of chapter three, “Reinventing the Wheel: Ambedkar and Western Thought,” uses historical and sociological analysis to consider Ambedkar’s use of Marxist and feminist thought in developing the Dalit movement. I examine the compatibility of and the conflicts between Buddhism and feminism, and Buddhism and Marxism. I propose that Ambedkar envisioned Buddhism as a counter to both Western capitalism and Hindu nationalism. I explore connections between religious conversion and political activism. I consider the label of “engaged Buddhism” as applied to contemporary Buddhist movements, specifically neo-Buddhism. The two chapters in the first section of the dissertation together give the theory, history, and context of the gender and caste analysis of Dalit women’s roles in the contemporary neo-Buddhist movement. This foundational material has not yet been considered as a whole.

The second section of the dissertation builds on these foundations. It examines religious representations of women in the neo-Buddhist movement, and develops an analysis of women's roles in contemporary neo-Buddhism. I argue that men's representations of Dalit women typically reproduce upper caste Hindu expectations of womanhood. In chapter four, "Writing Women: Men Writing, Media Writing," I use literary analysis to examine the depictions of Dalits, and specifically Dalit women, in the media, and specifically those representations by Dalit men. Despite sympathetic intentions, upper caste writers, both male and female, depict Dalits in condescending or patronizing ways. I focus on apparently positive depictions of Dalits. As an example of how Ambedkar's political threat is undermined through mainstream literature, I analyze the Amar Chitra Katha comic book biography *Babasaheb Ambedkar: He Dared to Fight* (1979).¹⁷ I examine hagiographical practices to analyze representations of Ambedkar, Ramabai, and Savita, and to consider the influence of Hinduism on hagiographical writing in neo-Buddhism, as well as the implications of the hagiographical process on the representations of Dalits and women in the neo-Buddhist movement.

In the fifth chapter, "Picturing Women: Iconography and Artistic Production," I use theories of art and art history to examine representations of Dalit women in the context of non-anthropomorphic and anthropomorphic iconography, including representations of women and the feminine in two- and three-dimensional art, architecture, and ritual in festivals and temples. I consider posters, calendar art, and folk

¹⁷ Dalits refer to Ambedkar as "Babasaheb," or "respected father."

art among other popular textual forms. Neo-Buddhism has developed and continues to develop a complex iconography alongside the other aspects of religious expression. Existing in the context of Hindu and Buddhist representations, women's role in producing their own iconography and images is restricted; however, Dalit women represent themselves in visual as well as in textual forms. I outline the history of Buddhist iconography to contextualize visual images in neo-Buddhism. In the iconography of neo-Buddhism, androcentrism most immediately arises. Second, I consider representation of the female in Buddhism. This representation includes abstract, symbolic, and anthropomorphic representation, both positive and negative. Finally, I analyze the iconographic representations of women in neo-Buddhism. I specifically focus on the depiction of Ramabai Ambedkar as a female deity in the neo-Buddhist pantheon, where her images complement and reinforce the upper caste Hindu ideal expressed in written hagiography. Androcentric and patriarchal iconography affects the participation of Dalit women in the Buddhist conversion movement and their understanding of liberation. While elements of Hinduism still exist in neo-Buddhist iconography, so too do elements of gender and caste discrimination.

The third section counters the second section, and examines how Dalit women writers disrupt the depictions and expectations of them in the men's religious representations. I contrast the hagiographical writing with the biographies found in Dalit women's writing. Education plays a strong role in this section, as educated women represent themselves and educate others, all within the context of the neo-Buddhist

religious duty to challenge the caste system through education. At the same time, Dalit women undermine elitist concepts of rational and intellectual models of education which devalue emotional and bodily forms of knowledge. I argue that Dalit women's writing participates in Buddhist feminist theology; the women represent their experiences in their religion, through the medium of autobiography. Chapter six, "Polluting the God: Women Writing Religion," contrasts the roles of Dalit women as represented by non-Dalit and male Dalit writers in the second section with Dalit women's representations of themselves. I focus on Baby Kamble's autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* (2009), Urmila Pawar's autobiography *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* (2008). I also draw on interviews with Dalit women in Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon's book *We Also Made History* (2008), and in Sumitra Bhavé's *Pan on Fire* (1988). I also draw on the excerpts of women's autobiographies in Sharmila Rege's book *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios* (2006), and in Arjun Dangle's anthology *A Corpse in the Well: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Autobiographies* (1992). I examine the history of models for women in Hinduism. In their texts, Dalit women challenge the identity set out for them in Hinduism, and as those roles reemerge in neo-Buddhism through syncretism. Importantly, many of the women insert their female bodies into their texts. Dalit women are fully aware of the additional freedoms which neo-Buddhism offers them in terms of both gender and caste, and the restrictions which remain in a predominantly patriarchal and caste-ridden society.

Chapter seven, “Women’s Mission: Education and the neo-Buddhist Movement,” examines how women answer Ambedkar’s call for Dalits to pursue education as a means of escaping caste oppression. Neo-Buddhism empowers Dalits to work collectively to achieve their educational goals. However, literature examining how women play a role as educators is largely absent. I detail the history of access to education for Dalit women. Building on the strong tradition of women’s movements in India and in the Dalit community, and considering the context of the lower position and participation of women teachers in historical Buddhism, I examine the instances in which women play an integral role in educating other women, men, and children. I consider both women’s traditional role as educators of children in the home and women’s participation as educators in schools, women’s organizations, temples, and wider communities. As well, I consider the interactions between education and proselytization; I analyze how women reject, assume, and appropriate pedagogical strategies used by colonizers, by Brahmin Hindus, and by male educators. Building on the written and visual representations of themselves, women educators are in a position to play an integral role in developing other women’s self-conception as Dalits, as Buddhists, and as women.

The conclusion of this project, “Nirvana and Samsara: Successes and Challenges in the neo-Buddhist Movement,” reviews Ambedkar’s and women’s successes in the Dalit movement as well as the challenges of sexism and casteism which remain *within* the movement.¹⁸ This chapter also considers Dalit women’s recognition of their needs to fully

18 Samsara is the cycle of desire and rebirth. Nirvana is the escape from that cycle.

participate in their social, religious, and women's communities. I consider the continuing experiences of women interacting with surrounding Hindu communities and interacting with the men in Dalit communities, and the ways which they challenge their expected roles both inside and outside the neo-Buddhist community in order to fully participate in their communities.

Conclusion

This dissertation seeks to analyze the representation of Dalit neo-Buddhist women in literature, iconography, and media, aiming to mark the successes of Dalit women's responses to Ambedkar as contrasted with Dalit men's writing. The dissertation aims to situate neo-Buddhist Dalit women's writing in the context of Buddhist religious studies and feminist theology. Neo-Buddhist philosophy informs an analysis of approaches to hierarchy in Ambedkar's explicit message of caste and gender equality. As well as examining the responses of the movement to colonialism and nationalism, the dissertation engages with expressions of caste and gender inequality within the movement, and manifested through casteism, androcentrism, patriarchy, and misogyny. Most important is identifying women's self-representation as expressed within the writing in the neo-Buddhist religious context.

Chapter 1

Theory and Methods

This dissertation necessarily takes an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of representations of Dalit women in the neo-Buddhist movement in India. It attempts to construct an integrated approach through bringing together three broad areas of study, all of which are interdisciplinary in themselves, and all of which intersect: religious studies, women's studies, and postcolonial studies. I argue that religious experience is central to an understanding of a culture, including South Asian culture; contemporary studies of South Asian culture develop genealogically from Orientalist models, and examining those roots is essential. Religious experience is central to the neo-Buddhist movement, to the experiences of women within that movement, and to the production of representations of Dalit women. Since this dissertation revolves around a core of biographical and autobiographical texts, literary analysis is an important tool within all three theoretical lenses. However, analysis of texts extends beyond the written word to include visual representations including anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic symbol and sculpture, architectural memorial, as well as sacred geography.

Literary Analysis

The Dalit literary movement promotes written text as an essential means for Dalits to represent themselves, both to their community and to a broader international audience. Likewise, I use literary analysis in recognition that texts provide an important avenue for the analysis and understanding of a culture. The central literary theories I use overlap

with the theoretical approaches of religious studies, feminist theory, and postcolonial theory. I use literary theory as an analytical tool to examine the scriptures of Hinduism, Buddhism, and neo-Buddhism; Ambedkar's historical and political writing; biographies of Ambedkar, Ramabai, and other Dalit women in the neo-Buddhist movement; and autobiographies of Dalit women.

The study of approaches to interpreting religious scripture is known as hermeneutics and used most often with regard to the Christian bible, but also applies in the case of Buddhist texts and Ambedkar's text *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. In one approach, feminist theologians interpret religious scripture to identify a liberating message with regard to sexism. This approach originated in early feminist theology, with specific reference to Christian scripture and exemplified in the writing of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1995) and Phyllis Trible (1982). Rita M. Gross has interpreted Buddhist scripture with the intention of identifying a liberating message with regard to sexism (1998). In another approach, in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* Ambedkar interpreted Buddhist scriptures to establish a liberating message with regard to both caste and gender (Queen "Dr. Ambedkar). He also examined Hindu scriptures and interpreted them through the lens of the caste system, though he rejected the possibility of reinterpretation or reclamation in this case. I draw on these models and argue that, as neo-Buddhist scripture, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* provokes an anti-sexist interpretation as well as an anti-caste interpretation.¹⁹

¹⁹ In his book *God as Political Philosopher*, Kancha Ilaiah examines Ambedkar's reinterpretation of Buddhist scriptures with regard to caste in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*.

In order to recognize alternative types of literacy, such as iconographic literacy, I include visual representations of figures in the religious traditions, including those of Dalit women. Thus, the lens of literary theory is complemented by art historical modes of interpretation, and specifically iconography as the interpretation of religious images. Posters, paintings and statuary, ritual as presented visually in festivals and at temples, women's traditional arts such as textile work and rangoli—artwork in coloured powder—and architectural forms such as the stupa—the Buddhist memorial dome—continue to develop within the movement. Including iconography as a legitimate text also recognizes the inaccessibility of written texts for groups who have traditionally been barred from education because of caste or gender, and who must work with different types of literacy, such as oral or iconographic. Economic status also limits access to written literacy. Furthermore, iconography plays a central role in religious practice in India. It challenges the concept of written literature as central text, and falls within the canon of Hindu and Buddhist religious texts.

Most recently, Dalits are taking advantage of new media such as websites and video. For example, the Symbiosis Society Ambedkar Museum and Memorial maintains a website with a gallery of rare photos of Ambedkar and his family (2007). The Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) posts an extensive archive of newsletters including photos (2009). The blog *Dalit Nation—The Only Authentic Voice of Dalits* maintains archives of commentary beginning in 2007 and continuing to the present day. The International Dalit Solidarity Network links to contemporary news articles (2009),

and hosts the short film *I'm Dalit How are You?* (2002). A keyword search for "Dalit" on the popular website "YouTube" has resulted in an explosion of entries since I began my research. Sourayan Mookerjea's work on Dalit women's educational video production on farming knowledges shows how different types of knowledge can be shared without written literacy (2011). Most importantly, new media offer increased access and promotes awareness to an international audience, and allow the formation of alliances and exchanges between indigenous activists across borders.

Ambedkar plays an integral role in the Dalit movement. His prolific writing includes historical and theoretical articles and monographs, and his book *The Buddha and His Dhamma* acts as scripture in the neo-Buddhist movement. Ambedkar influenced writers in political science such as Ilaiah, Teltumbde, and Prasad. Ilaiah's books include *Post-Hindu India* (2009), *God as Political Philosopher* (2001), and *Why I am not a Hindu* (1996). The Dalit literary movement also emerges out of Ambedkar's writing and activism. Writers such as Bama (*Karukku* 2000) and Omprakash Valmiki (*Joothan: A Dalit's Life* 2003) write in their native vernacular as a means of challenging the Brahmin Hindu nationalism which privileges the Hindi language, and previously denied textual literacy to Dalits and Shudras. The legend of Eklavya in the *Mahabharata* is of special interest for Dalits rewriting Indian mythology, particularly for its relevance in the context of a so-called merit system (Book 1, Adi Parva, Sambhava Parva, Section 134). In this legend, the Shudra archer Eklavya develops a skill superior to Arjuna, the high caste prince. Arjuna's teacher, Drona, demands that Eklavya cut off his thumb as a payment to

a teacher—removing his ability to shoot—and thus maintains the system in which the high caste student is also the most skilled student (Deo and Zelliott). In the Dalit literary movement, the act of writing and rewriting takes on a particular importance for Dalits and Dalit women whose experiences were not represented in the literatures.

Literature plays an essential role in the Dalit neo-Buddhist movement. Major defining moments of the Dalit movement may be traced to literacy, education and literature, including the educational possibilities which emerged when the British employed Shudras and Dalits with salary in the military, Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule's founding of schools for Dalits and girls, Ambedkar's call for Dalits to pursue education, and the Dalit Panthers literary movement. All of these provided Dalits with the ability to challenge the caste system as much as colonialism. Furthermore, when situated in the context of historical Dalit political movements, it appears that Ambedkar does not *create* a political identity for Dalits in modern India, but his specific historical situation during the Indian independence movement and the development of postcolonial theory and subaltern studies allows the language with which to *identify* the Dalit political identity. As a marker of education, autobiography plays a major role in the Dalit movement, and particularly for women in the Dalit movement.

The autobiographical approaches I consider are also influenced by feminist and postcolonial theory. While the Indian autobiography has often challenged the canon of white European or "Western" autobiographical texts, many hierarchies remain, such as gender or caste: "feminist critics have perceived the politics of genre at work in its turn

towards a patriarchal law which delegitimizes women's writing" (L. Anderson 11). While literary critiques, such as Paul de Man's in "Autobiography as De-Facement" (1979), dismiss the autobiographical genre's ability or interest in representing "reality," a feminist or postcolonial stance insists on including multiple experiences in the canon.

Furthermore, feminist analysis has questioned whether women should subscribe to a deconstructionist model before they have accessed self-representation. Nicole Ward Jouve, examining the intersections of race and gender in autobiography, notes: "we have been asked to go along with Deconstruction whilst we had not even got to the Construction stage. You must have a self before you can afford to deconstruct it" (7). This question remains central to feminist analyses of autobiography, and to marginalized communities more broadly.

The autobiography genre within the Dalit literary movement provides important narrative alternatives to the dominant elite culture, including definitions of autobiography itself. In writing their autobiographies, Dalit women seek to claim the truth of their experiences outside of the elite Indian experience, which is predominantly male, and until only recently in literature, upper caste. The universalization of the individual relies on the exclusion of women, thus leading to the universal male subject of the autobiographical genre. Sharmila Rege writes of Dalit autobiography: "In consciously violating the boundaries set by bourgeois autobiography, dalit life narratives became testimonies that summoned the truth from the past; truth about the poverty and helplessness of the pre-Ambedkarite era as also the resistance and progress of the Ambedkarite era" (*Writing* 13).

Dalit women's autobiographies further violate the boundaries set by Dalit male autobiography. Where the universal subject remains male, Dalit women's autobiographies seek to represent the truth from the present as well—truth about sexism and patriarchy in the Ambedkarite movement.

Within the tradition of the Dalit literary movement, Dalit women writers write about their communities as much as their individual lives. The dissertation analyzes Dalit women's autobiography, not as an expression of an individual representing their life as reality, but as an alternative to broader elite narratives of subjecthood. As a representation of a group, rather than an individual, "autobiography becomes both a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through their cultural inscription and recognition" (L. Anderson 104). Analyses of Dalit autobiographical literature note the disruption of the individual, as contrasted with elite modes of autobiography: "Dalit testimonios have not only washed out the "I", an outcome of bourgeois individualism and displaced it with the collectivity of the dalit community but by bringing details of lives into the public domain they have also challenged the communitarian control on the self" (Rege "Afterword" 323). Where autobiography makes the claim to the representation of truth, Dalit women writers appeal to a tradition of Dalit autobiography which seeks to represent the Dalit experience. Linda Anderson notes the role autobiography plays for oppressed groups:

The idea that autobiography can become 'the text of the oppressed',
articulating through one person's experience, experiences which may be

representative of a particular marginalized group, is an important one: autobiography becomes both a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through their cultural inscription and recognition.

(104)

In representing their female bodies through autobiographical text, Dalit women connect the sites of truth, sex and gender: “The body is usually thought to provide compelling, even irrefutable, proof of sex and gender, and ultimately of unique identity. The body coalesces under then name of sex” (Gilmore 131). At the same time, Dalit women have been represented as unable to speak for themselves.

I argue that the act of writing the Dalit female body disrupts the autobiographical universal male self which is free from the limitations of the body.²⁰ In this inclusion they challenge the concept of a universal male subject which is upper caste, and they challenge the understanding of the rational mind as a counter to the polluted female and Dalit body. Dalit women refuse to erase their (polluted) gendered bodies from the text: “To the extent that woman represses the body, erasing her sexual desire and individual identity . . . she positions herself as a proper lady who surmounts her negative identification with the body through selflessness” (S. Smith 16). The inclusion of polluted female and Dalit bodies in autobiography undermines elite claims to rationality and universality which arise through the exclusion of Dalit women as polluted bodies.

20 For an analysis of the development of the universal subject as separate from the body, see Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity, and the Body: Women's Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 1993).

Dalit women's autobiography takes on religious connotations within the context of neo-Buddhism, connecting literary theory to religious studies. The neo-Buddhist movement challenges the practice of untouchability through Dalit autobiography. Raj Kumar argues that "[b]y writing their autobiographies Dalits are mobilising resistance to fight against all forms of oppression" (4). Ambedkar called on Dalits to "Educate! Organize! Agitate!" and burned the *Manusmriti* as the religious justification for caste and gender oppression. The autobiographical approach seeks to challenge elite concepts of personhood which devalue Other representations of the self: "So far as autobiography is concerned, the deconstruction of it as a genre which privileged a white, masculine subject gave way, as part of this same moment of diversification, to a sense of its potential or use as political strategy by these new social groups" (L. Anderson 103). In this context, I use autobiographical texts as a political statement, and as an explicit challenge to dominant narratives, whether Hindu, upper caste, or male.

Feminist theory and postcolonial theory intersect in Dalit women's self-representation through autobiography. In discussing the collusion between patriarchy and imperialism, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak discusses the ways in which women's bodies have been the only site at which a woman can represent herself ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 308). Patriarchy and imperialism intersect in ways similar to patriarchy and caste hierarchy, as a context where women's bodies have been taken up as the only evidence they may give.²¹ In response to the various means of silencing and

²¹ See also Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste* 135.

misrepresentation, the Dalit women writers represent the truths of their bodily experiences through the medium of autobiography. Through autobiography Dalit women writers seek to represent the truth of their experiences as women and as Dalits, and seek to reclaim representation of their own bodies, and not merely through them.

Religious Studies

The existing political science analyses of the neo-Buddhist movement do not provide a substantial understanding of the movement as a religious movement. In order to approach the cultural analysis of neo-Buddhism as a religion, I draw on interdisciplinary conceptual frameworks within religious studies. Literary criticism also provides a useful tool with regard to religious scripture, including Hindu sacred texts and Ambedkar's scripture *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. Important approaches to literary criticism in feminist theology include those of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1995). Furthermore, since iconography plays a central role in religious practice in India, art history, and specifically iconography, must play a part in religious studies. Contemporary religious studies set aside metaphysical questions to examine observable religious practices and the religious experience of individuals, and advocate a neutral stance, free from value-judgements (van der Leeuw). While I recognize the limitations of outsider research, and the impossibility of "objectivity" due to the influence of one's own culture on perspectives and judgements, I approach the study of the neo-Buddhist movement from a neutral perspective, neither condemning nor promoting. Although I was raised in a Protestant Christian family, and my life experiences are coloured by a predominantly

Protestant Christian culture, I currently do not consider myself to follow a particular religious tradition, neither do I consider myself atheist; I pay my respects to the deities in various and multiple places of worship. Furthermore, religious studies uses the framework of cultural anthropology to compare religious expressions of different cultures. Overall, I examine neo-Buddhism within the context of Hindu culture. I examine the relationship between Hinduism, and Christianity and Islam in India, and the relationship between Buddhist and Western cultures within neo-Buddhism.

Influential religious studies scholar Émile Durkheim (*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1912), defined religion through the concept of the sacred.²² Following Durkheim, Ambedkar defines religion as: “a unified system of beliefs and practices which (1) related to sacred things, and (2) which unite into one single community all those who adhere to them” (*The Untouchables* 123).²³ I define religion more broadly as a theory of understanding the nature of the world and the place of a person or their community in the world. A religious theory is complemented by a set of practices which respond to that understanding of the world, and serve to demonstrate a person’s or community’s place in the world. I draw on Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion (1966), which “denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men

22 See also Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (1923), and Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959).

23 Durkheim writes: “a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions—beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church”, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 43.

communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life” (3). While this definition of religion excludes the concept of the sacred, feminist and postcolonial theory have instilled in me a strong suspicion of the concept of the sacred, especially since it is almost always defined in a hierarchical dichotomy with the profane.

Religious studies scholars respond to questions whether Buddhism is a religion, since it has no deity, as late as the 1990s. Ninian Smart (1995) undermines the usefulness of the sacred-profane dichotomy as a means of defining religion, and finds potential for examining the boundaries created between religious and secular: “the washing away of a fundamental distinction between religion and secular worldviews enables us to ask more sensible questions about the function of systems of belief, and perhaps to use religious studies insights in the analysis of modern societies” (163). William Herbrechtsmeier complicates sociological religious methods when he argues that “[t]he attempt to isolate religious phenomena among all social phenomena is a wrongheaded approach to the problem, since social phenomena of any specific type (economic, political, philosophical, artistic, or religious) are so interconnected with those of other types” (10). The purpose of this dissertation is neither to develop a definition of religion, nor to prove that Buddhism is a religion; my intention is to value self-defined religious expressions, to value religion itself as a meaningful life experience, and to value Buddhism as a religious tradition. In neo-Buddhism, a religious identity plays a political role which nevertheless does not undermine its status as a religion.

While Buddhism does not centre any deity in its doctrines, Buddhism is not an atheistic tradition. Rather, the Buddha responded to questions about deity by stating that since there is no salvation—or deity is not the path to enlightenment—the question of deity is irrelevant.²⁴ The Buddha neither accepted nor denied the existence of deity. As such, Buddhism is properly a non-theistic religion, in that its theology is not concerned with questions of deity or the sacred, but of the means to enlightenment for a living person. The low priority of metaphysical concerns is demonstrated in the parable of the arrow in the *Majjhima Nikaya*. In this parable, a man dies of a poisoned arrow because he refuses to be treated until all of his questions about his attacker are answered; this parable demonstrates the Buddha's concern with alleviating suffering in this life, with the means available in this life (*The Middle Length Discourses*). In this sense, I argue that the study of Buddhism may provide an avenue to bridge the gap between religious studies and theology, where it examines theological questions without appealing to metaphysical questions.

As a non-theistic tradition, Buddhist studies poses a potential problem for the God-centred term “theology.” Likewise, feminist theologians highlight the problem which a *male* God-centred term poses, and some propose the term “thealogy.” Unfortunately, this term still assumes a deity at its centre. I am unsatisfied with alternatives to the term theology, so I use the term with a recognition of its problems as well as with an effort to use it inclusively rather than exclusively. I also work under the

24 As mentioned, Ambedkar notes that the Buddha expressed views about which he was certain, and about which he was not certain.

assumption that polytheism and religious pantheons develop even in non-theistic traditions such as Buddhism, and that these are legitimate means of expressing religious faith.

I consider the religious history of the caste system, anti-caste and conversion movements, and colonial and contemporary India as it relates to the caste system. Where possible, I draw on historians who develop anti-colonialist or anti-nationalist perspectives, including Ambedkar in his analyses *Who Were the Shudras?* (1946) and *The Untouchables* (1948), and Romila Thapar (2002). I draw on feminist histories of religion to examine women's role in Hinduism, Buddhism, and the caste system. Feminist and postcolonial theorists have critiqued progressivist histories (McClintock 1993; Chatterjee 1983). I consider the relationship between the Indian state and Buddhist and neo-Buddhist religious geography. I draw on religious demographics with regard to historical conversion movements.²⁵

Within religious studies, the study of syncretism is particularly relevant to this project. Peter van der Veer (1994) defines syncretism in the context of Christianity and power. His definition parallels the Indian context where Hinduism often takes the role of the tolerant and pluralistic religious tradition into which other traditions are assimilated:

the term 'syncretism' refers to a politics of difference and identity and that as such the notion of power is crucial in its understanding. At stake is the power to identify true religion and to authorize some practices as 'truthful'

²⁵ See also Chris C. Park, *Sacred Worlds: An Introduction to Geography and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1994).

and others as 'false'. Syncretism is regarded positively by some, as promoting tolerance and negatively by others, as promoting the decline of the pure faith. (185)

While acknowledging the context of unequal power structures, I use syncretism in a more neutral sense, in neither its positive or negative connotation, but recognize the construction of a religious tradition as an ongoing process.

Syncretism stems from a number of sources. In her book *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, Belief* (1998), Gauri Viswanathan combines religious studies and postcolonial studies to examine syncretism in the Indian context, with particular reference to Ambedkar and neo-Buddhism. Along with a challenge of the androcentric assumptions that erase women's agency in religious conversions, Viswanathan's arguments challenge the concept of a distinct (or pure) religion from which to convert, and a distinct religion into which to convert which factored in Ambedkar's own religious imagination. The practice of caste across religious communities is a further example of syncretism. Although Ambedkar explicitly rejected Hinduism as irredeemably tied to the caste system, close contact between Dalit Buddhist and Hindu communities prevents religious traditions from maintaining distinct characteristics, and here the caste system risks reemerging in practice *within* the neo-Buddhist community. However, I argue that the emergence of sexism or casteism within neo-Buddhism is not due to syncretism as *exchange* between Hinduism and Buddhism, but due to syncretism as *dominance* of Hinduism over Buddhism, a challenge to which neo-Buddhism struggles to respond.

Autobiography also connects with the autobiographical conversion narrative. Viswanathan connects the political and often nationalist nature of the conversion narrative to the political action of Ambedkar's conversion. The theme of caste discrimination in religions other than Hinduism arises in the autobiographical writing of Krupabai Sathianadhan (1878) and Bama (2000), both writing about Indian Christians, and Ismat Chughtai (1941), writing about Indian Muslims. In the connection between literary criticism and religious studies, sacred biography—hagiography—is also important to this dissertation. In this dissertation, I treat the book *The Buddha and His Dhamma* as scripture. By “scripture” I mean the central text for a religious movement which seeks to define a community's place in the world. I do not include a definition of scripture as sacred because of the institutional resistance to attributing sacred status to the Buddha, Buddhist canonical texts, or Ambedkar in neo-Buddhism, and my own resistance to the dichotomy of sacred-profane in religion. In the case of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, as scripture the book outlines the history, doctrine, and to some extent, practice of neo-Buddhism.

Ambedkar intended that *The Buddha and His Dhamma* serve as scripture for neo-Buddhists, to answer questions absent in the existing Buddhist literature:

That Buddhism makes [a] slow advance is due to the fact that its literature is so vast that no one can read the whole of it. That it has no such thing as a Bible, as the Christians have, is its greatest handicap. . . . I received many calls, written and oral, to write such a book. It is in response to these

calls that I have undertaken the task. (*Buddha and His Dhamma: Critical Edition* xxvii)

It has been published by many different companies and translated into numerous Indian languages, and is currently available online through a Columbia University-affiliated website maintained by Dr. Frances Pritchett, http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/ ambedkar_buddha/. The most prominent publication was undertaken by the Maharashtra Government Department of Education as the eleventh volume in the collection *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*; however, a shift in political power at the state level has led to this collection going out of print. The lack of an authoritative publication reflects the democratic approach to religion expressed in the book itself.

While Oxford University Press has published *The Buddha and His Dhamma: A Critical Edition*, edited by Aakash Singh Rathore and Ajay Verma (2011), this edition strips the text of its formatting, reducing it to prose and effacing evidence of its scriptural nature. I argue that their decision reflects the dismissal of the religious aspects of neo-Buddhism, and the need for a religious studies framework in an analysis of neo-Buddhism. In recognizing this book as scripture in the neo-Buddhist movement, I use scriptural citation to refer to the book, part, section, sub-section if included, and verse. I also cite the page number of the Oxford University Press edition as the most readily available print edition, despite its shortcomings.

Theorists within both feminist theory and postcolonial theory challenge the foundations of religious studies as I have defined here. I use their perspectives within the dissertation as a challenge to sexist and/or colonialist perspectives within the religious studies canon, which have led to the marginalization of women's perspectives and non-Western perspectives on religious traditions. In particular, hierarchical binary systems such as the sacred-profane dichotomy are connected to Eurocentric as well as patriarchal worldviews, as expressed by both feminist and postcolonial theorists (Ruether 1979; Said 1978; Stewart-Harawira 2005). A postcolonial critique of the field of religious studies notes that it arises genealogically out of theological studies in European universities in the Middle Ages. Talal Asad (1993), drawing on postcolonial theory, critiques the assumption that religious scholars can take an objective position free from value-judgements, when these methodologies arose in the specific context of Western Christian philosophy. During the colonial period, religious studies developed out of theological studies as a means to address the conflict between Christian theology, and non-Christian religious traditions, but still maintained a colonialist hierarchy which applied the myth of progress to religious experience, in which rational monotheism—as Christian theologians identified their tradition—was the apex of theological achievement. Christian theologians based the definition of religion itself on their own tradition, and often excluded Buddhism as a religion.

Feminist theology arose during second wave feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the foundational work of Mary Daly (1968, 1973, 1978) and Rosemary Radford

Ruether (1974) through the specific feminist analysis of Christianity. Asian feminist theology, at the intersection of religious studies, women's studies, and postcolonial studies, provides a continuing critique of all three disciplines (Kwok 2000). Within feminist theory, Mary Daly critiques the foundations of religious studies as they appeal to objectivity, and definitions of religion which centre the sacred (1973, 1974, 1990). Feminist theologians such as Ruether (1983), Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow (1979), and Mary Daly (1978) have critiqued patriarchal religious traditions in which women are defined as profane in exclusion from men's sacred spaces. Susan Sered argues that "[w]omen's religions are embedded in everyday life, sacred and profane are intertwined" (152).²⁶

It is also important to note that religious studies and theology have been defined in Western academic institutions as academic and religious pursuits respectively; religious studies is defined as the objective study of religion, while theology is defined as the subjective study of the nature of deity. However, feminist and postcolonial theorists, among others, note that the concept of objectivity is based on a white, heterosexual, upper class, able-bodied, male intellectual who studies racialized, or homosexual, or working class, or female bodies as objects:

since historically western science has been practiced almost exclusively by white, middle or upper class males, primarily heterosexuals, and until relatively recently, mostly by individuals who were the products of a

²⁶ See also Victoria Lee Erickson, "Back to the Basics: Feminist Social Theory, Durkheim and Religion." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 8.1 (1992).

Christian tradition, the valued characteristics of intellect and rationality are generalized by the scientist to an extension of the self: all white, middle and upper class, heterosexual, Christian males. The “other,” by definition, is the opposite of the “self,” and therefore comes to be regarded as intrinsically of lesser value. (Halpin 286)

More briefly, Fanon states: “For the native, objectivity is always directed against him” (77).²⁷ The claim to objectivity is reserved for elites, and the definition of objectivity mystifies subjective bias embedded in the elite experience. As such, I argue that the religious experience of Dalit women provides an important and useful perspective within the field of religious studies.

Women’s Studies

I define feminism as the goal of recognizing women, as well as men, as fully human beings, and women’s experiences as human experiences. Feminist theory engages in an ongoing dialogue with feminism as an activist movement, as well as women’s movements which do not necessarily identify as feminist. This dissertation embarks on a cultural study of Dalit communities, with specific attention to the representations of Dalit women within these communities. Within literary criticism, feminist analysis examines the representation of women in texts. Feminist scholars, such as those included in Deborah Cameron’s book *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader* (2005), have shown how gendered language both creates and perpetuates oppressive gender

²⁷ See also “Who knows...?” in Anne Cranny-Francis, Wendy Waring, Pam Stavropolous and Joan Kirby, *Gender Studies: Terms and Debates* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

hierarchies. Therefore, feminist literary analysis also plays an important role in this project, particularly with regard to how Ambedkar and representations of Dalit women use androcentric language, in comparison to how Dalit women use language and representation.

Feminists insist that women represent themselves, just as Dalits claim the right to represent themselves. A key function of the dissertation is to examine women's self-representations, and the oral histories of Dalit women compiled by Sumitra Bhave in *Pan on Fire: Eight Dalit Women Tell Their Story* (1988) and by Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon in *We also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement* (2008) provide a valuable perspective which complements the autobiographies of Dalit women. Alongside these histories, I focus on women's experiences as expressed through autobiography and autobiographical fiction. Feminist histories of India provide an important framework alongside religious histories; where possible, I draw on feminist historians who consider the impact of caste on women's experiences in India. In particular, Chakravarti considers Dalit feminist perspectives in *Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens* (2006) and Thapar writes against the grain of elite Indian history in *Early India: From the Origins to AD 1300* (2002). Furthermore, Chakravarti and Thapar consider the history of religion from feminist and Dalit perspectives. Where the relevant histories have not yet been written using these methods, I apply Dalit feminist critiques to histories of religion throughout the dissertation.

Because of its specific geographic and temporal associations, and because of racism, classism, and heterosexism in certain histories and expressions of feminism, the term feminism is often associated with white, middle-class, heterosexual experiences. In fact, feminism is often defined within a geographical and temporal frame which specifically excludes women of colour. Chandra Talpade Mohanty points out that within much Western feminism, “[t]he assumption of women as an already constituted and coherent group with identical interests and desires, regardless of class, ethnic or racial location, implies a notion of gender or sexual difference or even patriarchy which can be applied universally and cross-culturally” (199). Women’s movements have always existed in India. In her book *The White Woman’s Other Burden* (1995), Kumari Jayawardena notes that Western women have played a role in the Indian women’s movement, but not necessarily either a negative or a liberating one. At the same time, men in the Indian independence movement rejected Western feminism as a foreign influence.

Feminist women of colour, and those who choose not to identify as feminist, provide a necessary critique for feminist theory, and for feminist theology. Ketu H. Katrak writes:

It remains significant for feminists committed to the study of third world women to dig into local herstories and discover *indigenous roots of feminist traditions*, as well as to deploy useful aspects of western feminism such as the theorizing of women’s experience, testimony, and agency. It is

more productive to redefine feminism for postcolonial social contexts, rather than a dismissal of feminism as western. (56)

This dissertation does not seek to claim Dalit women's movements as a form of feminism where they do not self-identify as feminist, but to place an analysis of Dalit women within the context of feminist theory. The perspectives of feminist women of colour provide an overall framework for the dissertation, since Western feminist methods at times prove inadequate or even colonizing with regard to Dalit women. Dalit feminism further provides an important critique of both Western feminism and Indian feminism. Specifically Chakravarti's book *Gendering Caste Through a Feminist Lens* (2006) examines the intersecting oppressions of caste and gender. Sharmila Rege also insists on a Dalit feminist standpoint (2003, 2006). As a key perspective of the dissertation, Dalit feminism challenges Indian feminism and the category of the "Indian woman" as exclusive to upper caste Hindu women.

Women's studies as an academic discipline has also traditionally undervalued developments in the field of feminist theology, based on the understanding that religions endorse patriarchy and oppression of women. Unfortunately, this approach serves to exclude women who exercise agency within religious traditions, and thus to exclude those perspectives. Where the role of religion in women's lives were not dismissed outright as simply oppressive, studies of the role of women in religion predominantly analyze the oppression women face under patriarchal religious traditions. The dismissal of religious studies within women's studies takes on a colonialist component in

considering the role of religion outside of Western individualism and “secular” cultures; I apply feminist perspectives to Asad’s analysis of Western secularism and its relationship with colonialism in academic research. The study of representations of Dalit women allows for the critique of both religious studies and women’s studies as governing frameworks.

The studies which attempt to give women some positive role in their faith often neglect to address the intersecting oppressions of gender, class, and caste within the South Asian context. Several writers highlight the complications of women’s agency in activist movements. In her article “Hindu Women’s Activism in India and the Questions It Raises” (1997), Amrita Basu argues that women in leadership roles in the Hindu right movement often reproduce traditional gender roles and conservative rhetoric in their activism. However, when fundamentalist or conservative women speak for themselves, as in the articles in *Mixed Blessings: Gender and Religious Fundamentalism Cross Culturally* (1997), edited by Judy Brink and Joan Mencher, they often disprove assumptions of their submissiveness, and argue that they challenge patriarchal norms in their own way. As such, it is important to resist progressivist concepts of women’s experiences within religious traditions, just as it is important to resist progressivist histories of religion.

I draw extensively on feminist theology. Christian feminist theologian Ruether defines feminist theology in her book *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (1983):

The uniqueness of feminist theology lies not in its use of the criterion of experience but rather in its use of *women's* experience, which has been almost entirely shut out of theological reflection in the past. The use of women's experience in feminist theology, therefore, explodes as a critical force, exposing classical theology, including its codified traditions, as based on *male* experience rather than on universal human experience. Feminist theology makes the sociology of theological knowledge visible, no longer hidden behind mystifications of objectified divine and universal authority. (13)

As with feminist critiques of gendered language more generally, Mary Pat Fisher notes that religion reproduces these patterns: “[i]f a language uses gender-specific pronouns, a human being is ‘he,’ and even the Supreme Deity is usually referred to as ‘He.’ If women read such scriptures, they risk becoming invisible to themselves or perceiving themselves as inferior, unworthy beings” (26). As with feminist linguistic and literary criticism, feminist theologians, including the Jewish feminist theologian Judith Plaskow in *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (1990), and Ruether in *Sexism and God-Talk* (1983), have shown how concepts of gendered deities, whether male, female, or androgynous, limit possibilities for women and exclude women from dominant understandings of sacred spaces.

Feminist theology combines religious experiences and women's experiences as a legitimate field of study. In this dissertation, the approach of feminist theology allows for

a recognition of Dalit women's experiences as specifically religious experiences and women's experiences. Importantly, following the feminist movement, feminist theology dismantles the boundaries between feminist academics as theory and feminist activism as practice. Feminist theology also challenges the model of "objectivity" in religious studies from a feminist perspective by pursuing activist practice of religion in combination with theoretical analysis. In her book *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*, Kwok defines Asian feminist theology "not only as a form of theological reflection but also as a political movement to transform the church and society so that women's freedom and dignity will be fully recognized" (10). Overall, I focus on the positive representations of women in the Dalit conversion movement with an aim to highlight self-representation, while refusing to ignore or to apologize for the androcentric, sexist, and misogynist aspects of both the Dalit movement and Buddhism which may have arisen in a certain time and place, but impact women now.

I also draw on Johanna H. Stuckey's book *Women's Spirituality: Contemporary Feminist Approaches to Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Goddess Worship* (2010). She outlines four approaches into which feminist theology may be categorized: 1) Revisionist feminist theology seeks to recover the original meaning of a tradition, which will result in a liberating message. Revisionists include gender neutral language, and revisit historical women in the tradition. 2) Renovationist feminist theology seeks to expose and remove sexist aspects of a tradition. For example, renovationist feminists argue for full participation of women in institutions which have historically excluded them, and include

feminine language and imagery. 3) Revolutionary feminist theology imports language or imagery from other traditions, with the intention of adding female language or imagery to achieve a more balanced gender representation. 4) Rejectionist feminist theology judges that the tradition is irredeemably sexist, and discards the tradition. Rejectionist feminists sometimes participate in the development of new religious traditions, such as the goddess feminist movement.

These categories are not mutually exclusive. At the time of writing this dissertation, I define myself within the field of feminist theology somewhere between rejectionist and revolutionary of these four approaches to feminist theology. Stuckey's categories of feminist theology provide a useful tool with which to analyze feminist theology as it engages with religious traditions other than Christianity. Furthermore, in the analysis of the neo-Buddhist movement, I find these categories useful in providing a framework for the development of the neo-Buddhist movement. Because it is a new religious movement, Ambedkar as its founder, and its practitioners, approach the re-creation of Buddhism in ways that may be approached using the framework of Stuckey's categories.

Feminist women of colour critique white Western feminist theologians, who sometimes construct a universalist feminist perspective based on the experience of white middle-class women. In particular, the studies of feminist theology in religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, or Islam reproduce Western feminist representations of non-Western women as "oppressed;" these ethnocentric and colonialist representations

reproduce attitudes toward the Other where “Eastern” traditions are dismissed as misogynist. Kwok Pui-lan (2002), among others, notes feminist theologian Daly’s colonialist perspectives. Western feminist appropriation of “Eastern” traditions which they deem pro-women are equally detrimental. This approach both reproduces colonial strategies of appropriating cultural traditions, and ignores how non-Western traditions and goddesses often *do not* offer positive role models for women, nor do they ensure the higher status of women (Campbell; Pintchman).

Some feminist theologians particularly critique revolutionary and rejectionist perspectives of feminist theology, which often draw from non-Western traditions without acknowledging cultural factors, and without questioning the power and privilege of the white women involved (Kwok “Unbinding Our Feet”). It is important to recognize that the colonial encounter is always an *unequal* relationship, whereby white Western feminist theologians’ inappropriate adoption of cultural models of Indian women risks reproducing oppressive neo-colonial hierarchies, while Indian women’s appropriation of Western cultural models does not necessarily have the same negative effect. Because I was raised in a Protestant Christian family, and my life experiences occur in the context of a predominantly Protestant Christian culture, and because Buddhist feminist theology is often pursued by white Western women, critiques of feminist theology from women of colour are essential to the project.

Contemporary feminist theology is centred in Christian and Jewish traditions (Gross 2009), leading to marginalization and/or Orientalist perspectives within feminist

theology, just as Asad notes with regard to religious studies. I draw on Buddhist feminist theologians wherever possible, particularly Rita M. Gross, as her research comprises the comprehensive Buddhist feminist theological analysis in the field; her writing includes *Feminism and Religion: An Introduction* (1996) and *Buddhism After Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (1993). However, the existing body of knowledge of Buddhist feminist theology is still predominantly white and Western. Feminist theological studies require expansion, and I attempt to address this gap by looking at religious representations of women in selected narratives in the neo-Buddhist movement in the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries, with a focus on the period from Ambedkar's conversion in 1956 to the present day. I also attempt to balance the studies which examine the negative and positive roles of women in religious traditions. I begin with the assumption of and commitment to a recognition of women's agency, not as an individual and decontextualized pursuit, but as a response to a movement and the needs of a community. At the same time I acknowledge multiple complex and intersecting sites of oppression and marginalization.

In her book *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (2000), Kwok embarks on a new field of study which has been addressed sporadically by writers examining the intersections of religious and postcolonial studies, for example in several essays in the book *The Postcolonial Bible*, edited by R. S. Sugirthirajah (1998). Asian feminist theology aims to address the gaps of feminist theology as a predominantly Western pursuit. To some extent, it also addresses the gaps of Dalit feminism by incorporating a

religious studies perspective. However, while Kwok makes some attempts to include perspectives from other religious traditions in Asia, Asian feminist theology is still predominantly a Christian theology. Where Asian feminist theology attempts to incorporate non-Christian perspectives, including Hindu perspectives, it does not address the subaltern perspective in the context of India, where Indian women are not a monolithic “category.” Where neo-Buddhist women arguably pursue the work of Buddhist feminist theology, this dissertation aims to include the self-representation of Dalit women in the canon of feminist research and feminist theology. At the intersection of religious studies and feminist studies, Dalit women demand full inclusion and representation in the Dalit movement and in the international and Indian feminist movements. In my analysis of the factors which contribute to gender inequality in Buddhism, I employ a pluralist feminist methodology and attempt to acknowledge the intersections between gender, race, caste, class, and religion. I examine Ambedkar’s specific response to sexism in the context of religion and colonialism, and claim his development of neo-Buddhism as a project of specific interest to feminist theology.

Postcolonial Studies

In his foundational text *Orientalism* (1978) Edward W. Said argues that European colonialism was justified through the appropriation and construction of the Oriental Other in the European intellectual disciplines of science, social science, and the humanities, but also through artistic representations of the Other, including in literature and fine art. Postcolonial studies developed as a means of destabilizing the assumptions of European

superiority, predominantly through the critical subject perspectives of colonized writers and researchers. Through the production of artistic and scientific representations of India, India came to be represented based on the perspectives and values of the British. Contemporary religious studies and gender studies developed in the colonial context, whereby the current body of knowledge regarding religion and women in India emerges from Orientalist constructions of India. A fundamental theme in postcolonial theory is the relation between representation, ideology and discourse, and colonial power, particularly its legacy after independence.

Attention to native elites highlights this legacy. “Insider” research on India often emerges from the perspectives of native elites, who are trained in Western education; they assume anti-colonial nationalist agency to confront colonial power (Appiah). Native elites in India can continue hierarchies which predate colonial rule, such as gender and caste, and perpetuate hierarchies developed by the British; the systems of colonialism thereby continue in the independent Indian state in the process of internal colonialism (Mignolo “Coloniality”). This internal colonialism occurs in particular against Dalit communities, and against minority religious communities, through hierarchies of religion, caste and class.

In the subaltern studies project, postcolonial theorists such as Spivak, Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee challenge elite nationalist perspectives which frame the response to colonialism as the most important pursuit, often within India. They extend the postcolonial debate to consider how native elites within colonized communities also

appropriate and construct subordinate communities, including women's, peasant and low caste communities. Drawing on this turn to the margins and the disruption of elite representations which claim sole authority over cultural representation, this dissertation takes the position that Dalit women represent themselves in ways that destabilize these assumptions within Brahmin patriarchy. These assumptions arise in the context where upper caste Indian women benefit from the caste system, and Dalit men benefit from patriarchy, even though both groups have been placed in subordinate positions in comparison with upper caste men.

In postcolonial analysis, literature plays a fundamental role in the construction of India as inferior to Britain: "the Orient studied was a textual universe by and large; the impact of the Orient was made through books and manuscripts" (*Orientalism* 52). These same systems persist to the present day, as seen in studies by both Western and Indian writers which construct Dalit women as inferior. Some postcolonial theories argue that formerly colonized peoples are concerned with issues of identity and authenticity in response to colonization. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin argue in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (2002) that postcolonial authors write back to the centre—Britain in this case, in the expression of these identities. Aijaz Ahmad points out that this framework forces a relationship between the former colonizer and colonized, and sets up a colonialist standard by which native authenticity may be judged, in which the difficulty is "not that 'all third-world texts are to be read . . . as national allegories' but that *only* those texts which give us national

allegories can be admitted as authentic texts of Third World Literature, while the rest are by definition excluded” (107). Others suggest that the fetishization of “authenticity” of the “Other” merely continues the exploitation of formerly colonized peoples through the marketing of difference (Huggan).

I argue that the question of authenticity is used against Ambedkar, Dalits, and neo-Buddhism as a means of delegitimizing them as “representative” of India, because they represent neither the Orientalist nor the Hindu nationalist depiction of India. At the same time, the development of a positive Dalit identity is a major factor in the neo-Buddhist movement, in the sense that “internal colonialism” may also be seen as an internalized inferiority. Neo-Buddhism makes a political and religious response to the identity of inferiority conveyed through Hindu religious doctrine, combined with politics in Hindu nationalism. This positive Dalit identity is of particular interest to the religious doctrines of Buddhism in the manifestation of identity as ego, or self.

With regard to questions of representation and authenticity, the question of who is permitted to represent herself arises. The subaltern studies project examines Indian resistance to both colonial and nationalist elites, aiming to construct the narratives omitted or appropriated by Orientalist and internal colonialists (Guha, Chatterjee). Spivak complicates the question of the subaltern and the possibility of the self-representation of the subaltern, and suggests that the paradox of the subaltern is that she cannot represent herself. She implies that the subaltern cannot represent herself when conveyed through or appropriated by ideological discourse, thus undermining the authenticity of Dalit women

as subaltern when they represent their experiences in their autobiographies. Furthermore, Leigh Gilmore examines the paradox of representing trauma in autobiography. She argues that autobiographical representations of trauma in fact resist self-representation because of the belief that trauma is inherently un-representable. As such, Dalit women, avoiding charges of inauthenticity, and following from other models in Dalit literature, propose that they are representing their community rather than their individual experiences (Rege).

Within India, linguistic hierarchies themselves complicate the politics of English as a colonizing language. Many Indians, non-Hindi-speaking Dalits and South Indians in particular, see Hindi as an immediate threat to their culture, more so than English. As a challenge to Hindi linguistic dominance, vernacular language and colloquial style play a privileged role in the Dalit literary movement. Ambedkar wrote most often in English to reach the widest possible audience regionally and internationally. In the fifty years since his death, writers and literary theorists internationally have developed the indigenous language literary movement of resisting colonial and elite language domination (Dua; Thiong'o; Ramanathan). At the same time, other theorists recognize the appropriation of the English language within India (Aijaz Ahmad).

As Ambedkar recognized that writing in English would reach the widest international audience, so too do the English translations of Dalit women's writing. While writing in the vernacular serves as a marker of anti-colonial and anti-Sanskritic movements, Dalits within India do not share a language. Thus English translation

functions as a compromise between—or through acknowledging an Indian English dialect, as a hybrid of—vernacular languages which have a limited audience, and Hindi or English which carry connotations of linguistic colonialism both internally and externally to India. English translation reaches educated Dalits across the multiple linguistic borders within India. Ambedkar noted that the English language played a democratizing role in India, against the language hierarchies beginning with the religiously-connected Sanskrit, co-opted as the linguistic genealogy of Hindi-speaking elite.²⁸

Furthermore, education is a major facet of the neo-Buddhist religious movement. Where English medium education is the highest standard in India, it also represents the highest educational aspirations. I focus on texts in English and in English translation as a means of recognizing the politics of language and education with regard to Dalits in India. At the same time, educational achievement corresponds with social mobility and can have a negative impact, where socially mobile neo-Buddhist Dalits make more rapid short-term gains from emulating upper-caste and -class Hindus. These texts can remind them that they can retain their neo-Buddhist and Dalit identity at the same time as they pursue an educated and upper-middle class urban lifestyle.

A fundamental framework of this dissertation is the concept that “new ways have to be learned and taught, and attention to the margin in general must be persistently renewed” (Spivak *Critique* 176). Though Ambedkar participated in the call for Indian

²⁸ This hierarchy exists even at the level of religion, where Hindi is the language of the Hindu elite written in the Devanagari script based on Sanskrit, while the mutually intelligible Urdu is the language of the Muslim minority, written in the Nasta’liq script based on the Perso-Arabic script.

independence, he and other Dalit writers such as Chandra Bhan Prasad (2004) often argue that the British gave more rights to Dalits than the contemporary ruling elite did, thus destabilizing the understanding of power relationships which recognizes the dynamic of colonizers and nationalists. Postcolonial theorists including Rosalind O'Hanlon point out that in the colonial-nationalist conflict, "the insurgent did not invariably wish to destroy the signs of authority, but very often preserved and appropriated them for himself" (205). I argue that Ambedkar's recognition of the multiple and intersecting hierarchies in India allowed him to construct neo-Buddhism as a way for Dalits, and for India as a whole, to participate in modernity while challenging colonialism, globalism, and capitalism where they mutually reinforce caste and gender hierarchies.

I argue that Ambedkar participated in a critical analysis that prefaced subaltern studies' examination of the interactions between colonial and native elite power relationships, and prefaced feminist theology's critique of the sexism inherent in religious traditions. The subaltern studies project aims to resist elite histories in order to examine the histories of those without access to authority and privilege; Partha Chatterjee defines elite perspectives as colonialist, nationalist or Marxist: "instead of writing the history of the modern nations in terms of a unique and universal bourgeois-feudal opposition, or of the colonies in terms of a unique and equally universal national-colonial opposition, we must break up these false ideological totalities" ("Peasants" 61). I argue that elite perspectives attempt to force Ambedkar into an anti- or pro-colonialist framework.

Ambedkar's analysis of the multiple marginalization of Dalit women may be connected with subaltern studies with regard to race, gender and caste in the Indian context. Spivak notes that narratives of the national-colonial opposition, or the bourgeois-feudal opposition both obscure experiences of women: "Between patriarchal subject-formation and imperialist object-constitution, it is the place of the free will or agency of the sexed subject as female that is successfully effaced" (*Critique* 235). Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty note the shared characteristics of the postcolonial and the colonial/capitalist state in that both "discipline and mobilize the bodies of women—in particular Third-World women—in order to consolidate patriarchal and colonizing processes" (xxiii). Dalit women are marginalized on the basis of colonialism, as well as on the bases of gender and caste in the relationship with native elites. As such, the self-representations of Dalit women, and their understanding of the intersections between race, gender, and caste provides further nuance, and complicates colonizer-nationalist, male-female, and upper-lower caste relationships.

Dalit women writers examine the interactions of caste, gender, religion, race, sexuality, and class within their own communities, hierarchies which exist before, during, and after the colonial period. While British rule influenced hierarchies within India in both negative and positive ways through colonialism, globalization and capitalism, hierarchies of oppression existed prior to British rule. These hierarchies continue to manifest in ways that defy categorization if Dalit literature is reduced or excluded using

Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin's framework. Dalit women respond to and operate in a context of Indian hierarchy as much as in a context of colonialism and nationalism.

Indigenous theory also informs this dissertation; it challenges dominant narratives, often from white, Western, and colonialist perspectives, but including native and patriarchal elite perspectives. Indigenous theory seeks to revalue knowledge bases which elites—both British and Indian—devalued and dismissed, but often appropriated without acknowledgement, predominantly in the colonial project. It reconsiders non-written literacy, labour production, and non-elite social structures as sites of legitimate knowledge which contribute to the knowledge base on a societal and global scale. I draw on Ilaiah's book *Post-Hindu India* (2009) as a prominent example of indigenous theory in the Indian context. This book and his writing in *God as Political Philosopher* (2001), and *Why I am not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (1996) argue for an indigenous theory, and develop the concept that Dalit and Shudra culture—which Ilaiah terms Dalitbahujan, or the oppressed majority—is distinct from the dominant elite Brahmin culture, resisting appropriation into the Hindu monolith.²⁹

Within this framework, rationality, objectivity, and colonialism also come under scrutiny. Walter Dignolo argues that through the use of subaltern methodologies, “one should expect that new forms of rationality, emerging from subaltern experiences made possible by the historical rationality articulated by Descartes and the philosophy of

²⁹ Teltumbde undermines the theory of Dalitbahujan politics when he points out that Shudras have perpetrated the most extreme atrocities against Dalits in the past fifty years (*Khairlanji* 2008).

modernity, will affect not only philosophy and social thought, but the reorganization of society” (“(Post)Occidentalism” 103). Said points out “the theme of Europe teaching the Orient the meaning of liberty” (“Orientalism Reconsidered” 172). In this dissertation, I explore the possibilities for Dalit and neo-Buddhist communities teaching upper caste Hindus and Europeans the meaning of liberty, whereby Ambedkar countered both upper caste and colonial hierarchies by combining Buddhism and Western philosophy. As a participant in the independence movement, Ambedkar wanted liberation from British, but also wanted liberation from caste Hindu elites, and he framed these goals in terms of Buddhist liberation. Overall, I apply arguments of postcolonial theory to the context of neo-Buddhism, to argue that Ambedkar draws on the indigenous knowledge base of Buddhism to propose an alternate modernity which counters both colonialism and Indian elites.

Neither identification with the colonizer nor the performance of difference adequately explain the postcolonial environment in India; instead, a *third space* undermines claims to cultural supremacy. Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of the third space proposes a location where marginalized peoples can contest colonial power by practicing another culture between the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized (“Third Space”). I argue that the neo-Buddhist movement represents a negotiation of the third space in several ways. First, as Kancha Ilaiah articulates in *Why I am not a Hindu*, Dalit culture must not be appropriated through constructions of a monolithic “Indian” culture as a legacy of either Orientalist or Hindutva agendas; Ilaiah claims a third space for

Dalitbahujan culture which is neither British colonialist nor Hindu nationalist. Second, I argue that Ambedkar drew on both Western and South Asian sources to develop neo-Buddhism; rather than being simply a response to the experience of colonialism, this approach can be interpreted as a Buddhist “middle way,” particularly as it relates to non-dualism. The historical Buddha taught that the path to enlightenment lay through neither indulgence nor austerity, but through the “middle way” between these two. Both Buddhism and Bhabha claim to undermine the dualism which persists in the relationship between self and other, Buddhism through non-dualism, Bhabha through hybridity (*Location of Culture*). At the same time, the Brahmin nationalist construction of a homogenous “Hindu” culture—articulated most strongly in Vinayak Damodar Savarkar’s concept of Hindutva—results from both the colonial encounter where elite Indians attempted to define “Indian” culture in contrast with British culture and internal heterogeneity in which marginalized groups within India, including Dalits and Muslims, sought to insert their own understanding of their difference into the conversations which proposed this imagined homogenous and elite Hindu culture.

The concept of hybridity in postcolonial theory derives genealogically from historical understandings of biology, language, and religion, where religious studies uses the term syncretism (*Young Colonial Desire*). These historical roots specifically impose on contemporary postcolonial studies in the focus of this dissertation, at the intersections of caste, gender, and religion. Negative reactions to hybridity in the colonial encounter emerged through the expression of anxieties about race; British and Indians alike

attempted to maintain racial distinctions as they attempted to maintain cultural distinctions. Importantly, while elite Indians constructed boundaries around racial purity in negotiation with the British, their concepts of genetic purity long predated the colonial encounter, in the form of caste purity exercised through strict endogamy. Ideologies of caste purity result in a negative attitude toward hybridity. As Neluka Silva notes in the Sri Lankan context, negative attitudes toward hybridity specifically target women as the site of “miscegenation” and hybridity can be connected to concepts of woman as “racial whore.”³⁰ Ambedkar specifically called for inter-caste marriage as one strategy to break the caste system, another way which he negotiated the third space between colonialism and nationalism.

In addition, the use of English as a linguistic hybrid arises in the Indian context, where it may be seen as a fully assimilated Indian dialect (Aijaz Ahmad). Ambedkar engaged with linguistic hybridity as well, negotiating between English, Hindi, and Marathi depending on his audience; the process of translation occurs in the third space between languages just as it appears in forms of cultural translation. Caste and gender hierarchies are embedded in the language of Hindi and Marathi.³¹ Finally, the study of religious syncretism is relevant in this context, where Ambedkar resisted appeals to both Western secularism and Hindu nationalism using the third or middle way of Buddhism. Caste purity emerges specifically from a Brahmin religious context, and Ambedkar’s

30 This understanding of hybridity as “miscegenation” and its specific use against women may provide another avenue for understanding negative responses to Savita Ambedkar.

31 In her autobiography, Urmila Pawar specifically recognizes the negotiations between dialects of the Marathi and Konkani languages which reflect caste and gender hierarchies.

decision to write in English responds directly to the religious interventions of Sanskrit and Hindi. The third space of neo-Buddhism resonates with hybridity in its reference to race, gender, language, and religion all at once.

Theories of hybridity in postcolonial theory have drawn attention to essentialism in construction of previous “originary” and “pure” cultures, and to the risk of shifting an essentialist position onto hybridity instead of an original culture (Pieterse). Gauri Viswanathan (1998, 2003) and Romila Thapar (1993, 2002) engage with these concepts of hybridity in terms of religion and culture, undermining the construction of a pre-existing pure culture through examining historical practices of hybridity, and demonstrating the influences of third spaces on the cultures which they reference. Likewise, it is important to recognize the power relationships involved in hybridity, in particular in the marketing of difference (Huggan). Although the influences of the third space resonate in the cultures they reference, Bhabha’s conception of hybridity arguably maintains colonial power where it maintains the focus on the colonizer-colonized relationship, or if it fails to engage with the imbalance of power in the construction of hybrid identities. His articulation of the third space may disrupt colonial power (Young *Colonial Desire*). Responses to theories of hybridity as a deconstructive mode have also dismissed it for its inability to meaningfully engage with political identity, where they reinforce modes of capitalist consumption and hybrid identities are consumed uncritically (Hutnyk). I argue that attention to the neo-Buddhist movement and its success in mobilizing the political identity of Dalits undermines this claim.

Neo-Buddhism also allows for a response to this criticism in terms of caste and religion. Buddhism proposes non-duality and undermines concepts of self/other. At the same time, it undermines concepts of identity. This type of deconstruction is easily appropriated by elite interests, as discussed in terms of authenticity. Religious renunciation also reflects these elite appropriative strategies of identity, specifically where Buddhism is more readily recognized as an “authentically” monastic tradition, and lay Buddhists overlooked. The intersecting sites of gender and caste demand engagement with issues of social justice rather than separation from them, and attention must be continually shifted to the margins (Spivak *Critique*).

Hybridity is not only for elites, but as demonstrated in the neo-Buddhist movement, through specific negotiations on the part of Ambedkar and of Dalit women in which they claim the third space, hybridity is both organic and intentional (Bhabha “Third Space”; Young *Colonial Desire*). Indigenous theorist Makere Stewart-Harawira proposes the indigenous image of the double spiral as a model of hybridity which predates colonialism; she recognizes the agency of theory production of indigenous peoples. I argue that Dalit women also use this approach, accessing concepts of the middle way through neo-Buddhism to represent their experiences of oppression and to participate in religion through selective appropriation of colonial and elite culture. I argue that the movement also answers the critique that hybrid cultures fail to challenge the mainstream; Ambedkar’s synthesis of multiple cultural perspectives allow him to counter both colonialism and nationalism in India. Attention to the representations of Dalit

women in the context of hybridity both reveal the risk of reaffirming hegemonic interests and highlight the possibility of continued challenges to these elite interests as they emerge in the Dalit movement.

In Linda Tuhiwai Smith's book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999) and Stewart-Harawira's book *The New Imperial Order: Indigenous Responses to Globalization* (2005), both Maori women theorists develop indigenous theory targeting academic researchers. They challenge the myths of objectivity and insider/outsider research, and stress the importance of working with indigenous cultural models. As such, it is important to acknowledge my limitations in my understanding of South Asian cultures, and Hinduism and Buddhism. I lived in India for a year during the course of my research, studied Hindi and Marathi, immersed myself as much as possible in the culture, and gained a sense of popular attitudes with regard to caste and gender. However, as a white woman, having grown up and currently living in the West in a predominantly Protestant Christian urban culture, I was repeatedly made aware of how superficial my lived knowledge of Indian cultures is. I acknowledge that my own position of privilege in my research, as a white academic raised and educated in the West, poses a risk in further erasing women's experiences which may not fit into my thesis assumptions.

In the context of postcolonial theory, religion operates as a major site for community identity in India. Furthermore, hierarchies of religion also play an important role in the Indian state, in particular through Hindu nationalism against Muslims, but also

as caste has informed attitudes toward religion and religious conversion. The intersections of colonialism, gender, caste, and religion provide an important perspective within postcolonial studies. Importantly, during the independence movement, religion becomes a major site for the creation of a modern and authentic Indian nation. Contemporary studies often examine the competing projects of Gandhi's Hindu nationalism and Jawaharlal Nehru's secular nationalism, or between Gandhi's Hindu nationalism and Muhammad Ali Jinnah's Muslim nationalism. I argue that these studies overlook the alternative to all of these religious models in Ambedkar's concept of an India free of sexism and casteism, a model which transcends nationalism in many ways by challenging both British and native elite perspectives. He based his version of modern India on a Buddhism of ethics rather than a Buddhism of ethnicity: "The purpose of religion is to teach man how he should behave towards other men so that all may be happy" (*Buddha and His Dhamma* 135-6; 3.4.2.46).³² Using Asad's theories, I argue that Nehru's vision of a secular modern India simply mystifies elite Hindu and British perspectives, where secularism arises out of a position of privilege; in this case the privilege is Brahmin Hinduism. I specifically address Hindu and Christian secularism in the context of education.

Ambedkar pursued religious studies in his search for a religion into which to convert, but I argue that his understanding of the relationship between religion, nationalism, and caste was at times superficial; I consider the contributions of Hindu elite

³² Buddhist nationalism has likewise proven to be oppressive; in the contemporary Sri Lankan context it has led to genocide against Hindu Tamils.

perspectives to the status of Christians and Muslims in India. Colonialism affects religious syncretism in two related ways. In one, a culture adopts ideas from the colonizing culture, due to the ideological success of the colonizers' stated cultural superiority. In another, a culture reacts against the cultural exchange which accompanies colonialism by resorting to fundamentalism (Hardy). In both methods, a culture responds to a colonizing culture.

Conversion, while sometimes provoked by colonial missions, also occurs separately from colonialism, although in many cases nationalist movements have blamed all conversion on foreign interests. These narratives draw on the historical narrative which British colonizers produced; they placed their colonial project as the latest in a line of foreign rule. In South Asia, historical conversions have developed among caste groups or within geographical limits (Aziz Ahmad). Subsequently, groups often carry their religious traditions with them upon conversion, including caste practices. When a group within geographical limits does not convert in its entirety, continued close relationships within a community encourage the mutual exchange of religious practices and doctrines. All of these factors influenced early Indian Buddhism and contemporary neo-Buddhism. Although Ambedkar did not recognize the relationship between attitudes toward Christianity and Islam, and Hindu nationalism, he did address the perception of conversion as motivated by foreign interests when he selected Buddhism as a religion indigenous to India. Colonialism and conversion contribute significantly to gender roles in Buddhism and those gender roles which have trickled from Hinduism into Buddhism.

Furthermore, religion played a role for the major figures of the Indian independence movement in their imagination and performance of Indian modernity which drew on religious markers of identity. With regard to visual markers, I note the modes of dress which Gandhi and Ambedkar employed to signify their religious identity with regard to modern India, and I critique the common Western perception of these religious markers. Art history again becomes a useful framework within postcolonial theory, where the context of art, and particularly religious art, differs in South Asia; Orientalist perspectives of images and iconography often overlook specifically religious signifiers. In Buddhism, references come from East Asia as much as from historical Buddhism in India and Hindu contemporary art.

This dissertation draws on theories and methods of religious studies, women's studies, and postcolonial studies to recognize the marginalized location of Dalit women within religious, gender, racial, and caste hierarchies. It draws on Dalit women's self-representation of their experiences as complicating existing narratives of Buddhism, feminism, colonialism and nationalism. As researchers and writers, Dalit women contribute to the body of knowledge on their experiences, at the same time as they demand participation in their communities.

Chapter 2

On the Wheel: Buddhism, Gender and Caste in Historical Context

Within Buddhist studies, gender and caste are approached separately so often that it is difficult to find connections between these two areas of study. Buddhist scholars have often dismissed gender studies within historical Buddhism, assuming that Buddhism has always been as open to women as it is to men. More often they omit any caste analysis of historical Buddhism because of the assumption that the Buddha completely rejected caste as a barrier to enlightenment or to participation in Buddhism. Even B. R. Ambedkar focuses more on the absence of caste in an original Buddhist doctrine than caste practices in historical societies.

In her book *Gendering Caste through a Feminist Lens* (2006), Uma Chakravarti argues that any analysis of the caste system must also take into account how gender roles reinforce the caste system, and how upper caste women gain caste privilege from participating in the Brahmin-patriarchal system which oppresses them as women. Chakravarti argues further that Ambedkar's caste analysis achieved a level of critical interrogation that enabled the excavation of these connections between caste and gender. This analysis also led Ambedkar to include challenges to gender oppression within his anti-caste movement. However, his arguments tend to focus exclusively on the positive aspects of gender in Buddhism just as they focus on caste-positive aspects of Buddhism. Feminist academics working in Buddhism, such as Nancy J. Barnes (1996), Kathryn R. Blackstone (1998), Nancy Falk (1974), Diana Paul (1985), and Rita M. Gross (1993,

1996, 2009), seem to omit caste as irrelevant in Buddhism. Neo-Buddhism does not appear in their work, though important challenges to sexism arise in the movement.

A gender and caste analysis of Buddhism in India's ancient, classical, and medieval periods gives context for the study of women in the neo-Buddhist movement. In his scripture *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar explicitly includes and emphasizes women in Buddhism, and rewrites the major Buddhist legends to demonstrate a rationalist and anti-caste doctrine. In claiming the rational mind for Dalits and for Buddhists, Ambedkar undermines the caste hierarchies in which Dalits are defined as uneducated and irrational in comparison to upper castes, as well as the colonial hierarchies in which South Asians are defined as inferior to the rational British. I argue that he rejects the most misogynist and androcentric aspects of the Pali texts. At the same time, claiming the rational mind for Dalits, Ambedkar risks reinforcing a hierarchy which constructs women as irrational. Rita M. Gross's studies, particularly in her book *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism*, examine gender in Buddhist text and practice, in historical and contemporary Buddhism. As a product of Buddhism's import into the West, Gross's interpretation of Buddhism also carries the legacy of colonialism. Ambedkar, on the other hand, excludes contemporary Buddhist practices, and focuses on the historical Buddhist texts to develop an interpretation of Buddhism as a modern religion which conveys historical South Asian principles of equality, and to identify the origins of the outcaste community. Gross rarely mentions caste, and Ambedkar discusses gender only as a secondary point. Certain

aspects of Ambedkar's central neo-Buddhist texts are androcentric. I argue that Ambedkar and Gross share common goals; they propose that Buddhism offers the most concrete example of an egalitarian religion, in terms of gender and caste respectively, and they propose a future for Buddhism which offers every individual the opportunity for both enlightenment and social equality.

In this chapter I briefly discuss caste-blindness in Buddhist theory, and compare instances of caste and gender awareness in the historical literature. I specifically address the absence of caste analysis in Gross's texts, since her research is the central model of Buddhist feminist theology. Likewise, gender analysis in Ambedkar's and in subsequent caste theorists' texts requires a deeper critique. For example, in his book *God as Political Philosopher: Buddha's Challenge to Brahminism*, Kancha Ilaiah analyzes caste in Ambedkar's text *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, and has extensively addressed Ambedkar's rewriting of the core doctrines on women in Buddhism.³³ I will not repeat Gross's and Ilaiah's existing work on gender and caste in Buddhism.

Subsequent to the integration of complementary caste and gender analysis in the existing texts, I pursue a feminist analysis of Ambedkar's text *The Buddha and His Dhamma* as a core scripture for the neo-Buddhist movement, with specific attention to "The Admission of Women to the Order". First I highlight persistent androcentrism in the text. Second, I examine the positive rewriting of two major Buddhist legends which

33 Androcentrism also arises in Ilaiah's analysis of gender. For example, M. Swathy Margaret points out his inappropriate privileging of oppressive hierarchies within Dalit communities: "Ilaiah compares patriarchy in Dalits and Hindu patriarchy and declares that the former is more democratic! How can any oppressive structure be democratic at all?" M. Swathy Margaret, "Dalit Feminism," *Countercurrents* (2005).

represent women. I then return to the intersections of caste and gender to consider the opportunities for mutual transformation between feminist Buddhism and neo-Buddhism. Although Ambedkar and Gross separately examine caste and gender as central authors in their respective fields, it is important to combine both Dalit and feminist approaches to Buddhist studies, since positive and negative aspects of *both* caste and gender affect Buddhists' experiences within their religion. It is important to note syncretic features with Hinduism, where caste and gender regularly appear as monolithic categories within Buddhist studies due in part to the legacy of colonialism. I look specifically at the intersections of caste and gender, and apply a feminist theological approach to questions of gender specifically, where they have not yet been addressed. These intersections are particularly important to Dalit women's access to and expression of their neo-Buddhist faith.

The Importance of Caste for Buddhist Women

In the historical Buddhist canon, gender seems to pose a greater barrier for women than caste. Both Ambedkar and Gross analyze the canonical Buddhist texts regarding women. While Gross focuses on the Vajrayana tradition, within which she practices, she also examines translations of the ancient Pali texts for the treatment of women in language, representation through legends, and women's participation in contemporary ritual and practice. Gross focuses on gender as a barrier to enlightenment. However, in Hindu doctrines of rebirth, which influence doctrines of rebirth in South Asia more broadly, caste has also posed a barrier to enlightenment. Traditional Hinduism requires an

individual to attain rebirth in both the Brahmin caste and the male sex in order to achieve enlightenment. While Buddhism rejects both these premises, and as Ambedkar argues, rejects the very premise of transmigration in which an individual would progress through the castes, the broader social understanding of rebirth considers gender and caste as factors which dictate one's position in a hierarchy upon rebirth, even if they do not pose barriers to religious practice or enlightenment.

Contradictions about the status of women are matched by an ambiguity about caste in the Buddhist canon. With regard to gender, "Buddhists advocated both that there is some problem with women and that women are just as capable as men of achieving Buddhism's goals" (Gross 30). In terms of caste,

Indian Buddhism includes a contradictory record of references to the caste system among its myriad surviving texts. These include a consistent theme of statements attributed to the Buddha and others, proclaiming that it was how one acted, not one's birth, that made one a Brahman, or a member of any other social class. In early Buddhist texts nearly all the Buddha's closest acolytes are regularly referred to as descendants of Brahman or Kshatriya lineages. Still, a distinct number are from the Shudra ranks ... there were also a number of Chandala (outcastes). (Tartakov 207-8)

In his revision of the life of the Buddha, Ambedkar attempts to remove ambiguities about caste as later insertions which do not reflect the Buddha's teaching.

The *Therigatha* and *Theragatha*, early Buddhist texts compiling the songs of the bhikkhunis and the bhikkhus respectively, include female and male authors from every background of caste, class, and life stage: “The Buddha’s own followers came from all walks of life and included married as well as unmarried women. . . . Among them were poor peasants, small artisans, wealthy wives and daughters of businessmen, noblewomen, and courtesans” (Tharu and Lalita 66).³⁴ The absence of caste as a concern for women does not stem from a lack of diversity among the theris. While upper caste women have the luxury of disinterest in caste, low caste women do not, and yet caste as a barrier to enlightenment is still absent.

In her book *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā* (1998), Kathryn R. Blackstone compares the themes of the *Therigatha* and *Theragatha* texts. She notes that the women have distinct experiences with and responses to enlightenment, particularly regarding their social relationships before and after liberation. She specifically examines women’s relationships to their bodies, and the apparent negative attitudes toward the body. She argues that the theras persistently identify women and sexual temptation presented by women as a major barrier to enlightenment:

[T]he danger of metaphysical contamination is reserved for men who engage in sexual contact with a woman. Apparently this contact has devastating effects. The *bhikkhu* who first transgressed the rule became ill

³⁴ The terms bhikkhuni and bhikkhu refer to Buddhist nuns and monks; the authors of the *Therigatha* and *Theragatha* are also referred to as theris and theras, or the elder nuns and monks.

and began to waste away. These examples highlight the perception of women as dangerous to celibate *bhikkhus* and suggests that women's sexuality is the source of this danger. (62)

Although ignorant people of all castes test the *theris* and the *theras*, sexual contact with women is the central external threat to the *theras*, while sexuality is more often an internal threat to the *theris*.

The monks' discussions in the *Theragatha* of the sexual temptations which women present are not matched by contemplation of temptations presented by low caste in either the *Therigathas* or the *Theragathas*. Furthermore, instead of discussing how men sexually tempt them, the *theris* see their own bodies as barriers to enlightenment, but more often—and arguably more correctly—identify the internal source of attachment rather than an external temptation:

The *therīs* view the problem of the body as an attachment to self that is to be overcome by examining their own life-histories and biological processes. The *theras* view the problem of attachment as desire for other which is to be overcome by projecting images of the true nature of the body as disgustingly impure onto others. (81)

The *theris* recall the gender roles and gender barriers to their enlightenment, for example, in the song of *Mutta*:

So free am I, so gloriously free, / Free from three petty things— / From
 mortar, from pestle and from my twisted lord, / Freed from rebirth and
 death I am, / And all that has held me down / Is hurled away. (“Mutta” 68)

However, the theris do not describe any specific challenges that their caste presented to embarking on the path. In all of the important subject matter regarding barriers to enlightenment, including the songs of the theris and theras, the legends of the Buddha which discuss conversion, and subsequent Buddhist doctrine, gender recurs as a theme, and specifically the female recurs as a problem to be solved. Caste does not.

Stories in which Buddhist women achieve enlightenment give the impression that women are not expected to achieve enlightenment in a female body. Stories where women achieve enlightenment usually conclude when they receive a male body.³⁵ For example, in “The Sutra of the Buddha Teaching the Seven Daughters,” the Buddha predicts that seven women will achieve enlightenment: “When the Buddha Kāśyapa gave this prediction to the seven daughters, they leaped with joy to the sky, about twenty feet off the ground. When they descended from above, they had changed into boys” (Paul 23).³⁶ Buddhist feminist theologians such as Gross argue that stories such as these

35 Nancy Schuster Barnes discusses the legends posing female birth as inferior, and those which change the female body to male, in “Buddhism,” *Women in World Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Albany: State University of New York, 1987). Diana Y. Paul includes translations of these specific legends in her book *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in Mahāyāna Tradition*, Second ed. (Berkeley: University of California, 1985).

36 The legend of Tara provides a notable exception, and feminist theologians find her story particularly important since Tara takes the bodhisattva vow with the specific intention of being reborn into female bodies.

demonstrate social barriers rather than spiritual barriers to enlightenment. At the same time, these stories negatively impact the perception of women in the religion:

I believe that providing women with methods to obtain male rebirth indicates, not misogynistic fear and hatred of women, but pity for those subjected to existence as women in a patriarchal society. Nevertheless, one can only imagine what it must do to a girl's self-concept to be taught such methods as a child. (*Gross Buddhism after Patriarchy* 82)

In terms of the representation of caste within Buddhism, one of Ambedkar's major criticisms of Buddhism in India prior to his conversion was that the sangha was predominantly composed of elite Buddhists who reproduced upper-caste and -class lifestyles: "The Mahabodhi Society, though founded by the Sinhalese Buddhist leader Anagarika Dharmapala, was dominated in India by Bengali Brahmins" (*Omvedt Buddhism* 258-9). Since the tenth century decline of Buddhism in India, both low caste women and men also experienced social barriers within Buddhism. However, these barriers do not arise in their self-representations, suggesting that low caste Buddhists did not meet barriers with regard to their initiation into the monastic life, or to their pursuit of enlightenment within the monastic life. Low caste men's experiences of becoming monastics differ from all women's experiences, even if caste and gender do not pose a barrier to enlightenment.

In the historical canon, the Buddha refused the first women who asked to join the monastic sangha, and only admitted them after convincing arguments. No parallel

narrative exists regarding the Buddha's own introduction of barriers for low castes. Caste is less important to women than gender in the Buddhist community because women from all castes face institutional barriers throughout the history of Buddhism. Ambedkar points out that Hindu hierarchies oppress both women and low castes: "The Shudras were denied the right to education. This rule of Chaturvarna did not deny the right to education to the Shudras only. It denied the right to education to all women including those belonging to the class of Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas" (56; 1.5.3.14). In a superficial reading of caste conversion, women of all castes escape oppressive gender roles through Buddhism.

Contemporary texts from neo-Buddhist writers, including Ambedkar, characterize Buddhism as a challenge to a surrounding non-Buddhist caste-ridden community. These writers predominantly discuss how Buddhism frees them from caste. Ambedkar noted the absence of caste bias in Buddhism in comparison with Dalit Christian and Dalit Muslim experiences.³⁷ Dalit Buddhist women continue to point out the gender barriers across religious communities. In an interview in *Pan on Fire: Eight Dalit Women Tell Their Story*, the neo-Buddhist woman Ashoka states: "if you were asked specifically if you were a Muslim, or a Buddhist, or what, then you'd think about the religion you belong to. Otherwise you are always a woman and your work and duties are cut out for you. In every religion they are the same" (Bhave 137). While it remains to be seen whether neo-Buddhism will reproduce caste in the same ways as have Christianity and Islam, women

37 As discussed in chapter three, part one.

currently experience gender barriers in Buddhism where caste barriers do not pose a problem.

As the central figure in Buddhism, the gender and caste of the historical Buddha must be considered as a problematic ideal for Dalit women. Since Buddhism is a non-theistic religion, Gross concludes that the Buddha's maleness does not pose a conflict for feminist Buddhists: "though some Jewish or Christian feminists might initially expect that the maleness of the Buddha should give me just as big a problem, the Buddha, no matter how interpreted, just isn't as important to Buddhism as God is to the monotheistic faiths" (*Buddhism after Patriarchy* 139). Ambedkar considers carefully the evidence of the Buddha's Kshatriya caste and his rejection of princely status. He highlights the democratic rather than monarchical nature of the existing culture: "there were many ruling families in the Republic of the Sakyas and . . . they ruled in turns" (*Buddha and His Dhamma* 1; 1.1.1.7).

Other texts connect the Kshatriya and Shudra castes. Ambedkar's book *Who Were the Shudras?* analyzes the documentation of the Maratha king Shivaji's coronation. Ambedkar argues that Shivaji came from a Shudra royal lineage, and gained legitimacy as a Kshatriya king through negotiations with a Brahmin from his home province.³⁸ Furthermore, Ambedkar argues that untouchability was assigned to Buddhist converts during the eighth to tenth century struggle for cultural superiority between Buddhists and Hindus, making historical connections between Buddhists and low castes: "the Broken

³⁸ In this text, Ambedkar also responds to the appropriation of Shivaji in the Hindu nationalist project, whereby Shivaji is claimed as the founder of a Hindu empire who resisted both Muslim and British imperialist expansion.

Men were exposed to scorn and contempt on the ground that they were Buddhists[. T]he main cause of their Untouchability was beef-eating” (*The Untouchables* 90).³⁹

Ambedkar’s arguments regarding the connection between rulers, low castes, Buddhism, and democracy disrupt caste distinctions, and revalue low caste identity. They suggest that the Buddha’s Kshatriya caste is unimportant. In combining a caste and gender analysis, the Buddha’s Kshatriya caste and male gender do not affect Dalit women in terms of spiritual development. At the same time, the Buddha’s male gender seems to impact Dalit women in terms of social structure more than his Kshatriya caste. Overall, Ambedkar’s insistence on the Buddha’s humanity rather than divinity provides opportunities to challenge inequalities based on caste *and* gender, which are matched in Buddhist feminist theology.

Ambedkar and Scriptural Androcentrism

Where individual representation of the Buddha may not impact Dalit women’s experience of their faith via the Buddhist pantheon, sexism arises in other aspects of neo-Buddhism. Where Ambedkar’s expertise provided for careful attention to caste in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, some gaps remain with regard to gender. Just as feminist theologians such as Judith Plaskow in Judaism (1990), Mary Daly in Christianity (1973), Fatima Mernissi in Islam (1991), and Rita M. Gross in Buddhism (1996) have interrogated religious scripture in their traditions, so must *The Buddha and His Dhamma* account for attitudes toward women in the neo-Buddhist movement. Ambedkar wrote the

³⁹ Ambedkar identifies references to “Broken Men,” fragments of defeated tribal communities, in Hindu religious texts as the earliest references to untouchability.

book for the people; his insistence on a democratic and rational Buddhist religion requires that Dalit women read this book, and read it critically. An analysis of the book as scripture, alongside its analytical arguments, serves as a complement to the work Buddhist feminist theologians have done on the Buddhist canon. Many aspects of Buddhism which feminist theologians examine also appear in the book. Ambedkar's faith and politics alter the language, legends, and representation of women in terms of both caste and gender.

Although Ambedkar addresses both caste and gender, certain androcentric views are embedded in his texts. An examination of his writing provides a context within which later organizers reinforce unequal gender roles. Sex and gender are embedded in the English language, where singular pronouns must agree in gender with the subject. Feminist scholars, such as those included in Deborah Cameron's book *The Feminist Critique of Language* (2005), have shown how gendered language both creates and maintains oppressive gender hierarchies. Feminist theologians, including the Jewish feminist theologian Judith Plaskow in *Standing Again at Sinai* (1990), and the Christian feminist theologian Rosemary Ruether in *Sexism and God-Talk* (1983), have shown how concepts of gendered deities, whether male, female, or androgynous, limit possibilities for women and exclude women as the site of gender or pollution, from dominant understandings of sacred spaces.

Ambedkar's texts, written in English, use the pronoun "he" to refer to a person, which represents the universal male. The texts likewise use the terms "man" and

“mankind” to represent all people: “The purpose of religion is to teach man how he should behave towards other men so that all may be happy” (*Buddha and His Dhamma* 136; 3.4.2.46). Ambedkar’s texts demonstrate certain blind spots with regard to gender. Sometimes the language conflates women with low caste, or constructs a distinction between women and low castes. For example, Ambedkar comments on “difference between the women and the Shudras” in his discussion of the right to religious initiation (*Who Were the Shudras?* 162). Upper caste Indian feminists have also conflated specific identities, in their claims that Indian women are like Dalits in their oppression; for example, in her 2007 article Sunanda Mukesh states that “women are like Dalits. Both voice their emancipating demands, claim their rights, and assert their existence as both are the have-nots of society” (189). However, women are not just *like* Dalits; some women *are* Dalits, and Dalit women have specific experiences of both gender and caste which they express in their writing.

Ambedkar also glosses over social realities in favour of textual doctrines when he argues that the Buddha “did not observe any distinctions as to caste or sex in admitting persons to his Sangha or preaching his Dhamma” (*Buddha and His Dhamma* 66; 2.1.3.15). Ambedkar rewrites the “Admission of Women to the Order,” and omits from his text the eight special rules for women entering the sangha, but does not consider that admission does not ensure equal treatment. Because the Buddha did not dictate a code for the social interactions of lay practitioners, other religious and cultural codes have taken that place: “[g]enerally, lay Buddhists have followed the norms of their society, rather

than a specifically Buddhist code, regarding such matters . . . [as] sexuality, family relations, diet, or even gender roles” (Gross *Buddhism after Patriarchy* 142). Ambedkar’s exclusion of sexist standards in the texts obscures sexism in social reality.

Furthermore, Ambedkar uncritically accepts Buddhist legends about women, or rewrites them and incorporates attitudes about women which do not provide a sufficiently positive or complex representation. For example, feminist analysis draws attention to a cultural sexism which endorses the Buddha’s abandonment of his wife Yasodhara, and his child Rahula, to pursue enlightenment, as in the legend “Yasodhara, the Former Wife.”⁴⁰ This narrative reproduces elite and androcentric beliefs common to both Buddhism and Hinduism due to syncretism—specifically in the Hindu sannyasa, or renunciate stage of life promoted in sacred texts including the *Laws of Manu*. These Hindu codes privilege men’s need to detach themselves from social relationships in order to seek enlightenment, and assume that women will take up the rejected domestic burdens. Such narratives further reinforce the assumption that men are more suited to achieving enlightenment. Paul Carus’s book *Buddha, the Gospel* gives a typical version of the legend in which the Buddha leaves his wife and son without waking them. These narratives also reproduce the concept that women are unsuited for enlightenment due to their social and emotional attachments. A cultural context which places the responsibility for childcare almost entirely on women and constructs women’s value on the basis of fulfilment of this role, restricts women’s ability to renounce these social roles. When Yasodhara meets the

40 Yasodhara is also transliterated as Yeshodhara (Ambedkar *Buddha and his Dhamma*), and Yashodhara (Manohar).

Buddha again later, the legend presents her as follows: “When Prince Siddhattha entered, she was, from the abundance of her affection, like an overflowing vessel, unable to contain her love. Forgetting that the man whom she loved was the Buddha, the Lord of the world, the preacher of truth, she held him by his feet and wept bitterly” (“Yasodhara, the Former Wife”).⁴¹ This version presents Yasodhara as a woman inappropriately attached.

Ambedkar revises the Buddha’s decision to leave his privileged life, and places the decision in the political context of democratic dispute. Here Ambedkar responds to Orientalist perceptions of the difference between European democracy and Indian feudalism. He draws on Indian history for a model of democracy that avoids situating Britain as more advanced than India. The Buddha’s decision to go into exile is framed as the best possible choice:

Siddharth realised the consequences that would follow if he continued his opposition to the Sangh in its plan of war against the Koliyas. He had three alternatives to consider—to join the forces and participate in the war; to consent to being hanged or exiled; and to allow the members of his family to be condemned to a social boycott and confiscation of property.

(19-20; 1.1.15.13)

Furthermore, he seeks permission from Yasodhara and Rahula. However, this revision does not sufficiently account for the male privilege of leaving his dependents, and may

⁴¹ Carus’s late nineteenth century text compiles several important texts from the Buddhist canon. J. Estlin Carpenter negatively reviewed the selections and the approach to translation in 1895; however, Ambedkar had access to these translations.

yet incorporate Orientalist attitudes toward Indian culture as degenerate or degraded from historical greatness.

Ambedkar positively represents Yasodhara as enlightened, and reinterprets the woman overcome by emotions in the ancient texts as a rational woman: “He expected she would collapse. Nothing of the kind happened. With full control over her emotions, she replied” (22-23; 1.1.17.25-26). Even prior to his religious quest, Ambedkar’s theories were characterized by “a fierce *rationalism* which burned through his attacks on Hindu superstitions to interpret even the Buddhism he came to in rationalistic, ‘liberation theology’ forms” (Omvedt *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution* 224). Ambedkar chose Buddhism because of the value placed on rational thought, and depicts women as capable of rational thought.

However, even an appeal to rational thought may exclude some groups, since women, lower classes, and certain racial groups have been associated with emotion and faced limited access to institutions which value rational thought. With regard to religion, Carol Christ notes a connection between divinity and rationality, “a deep and unquestioned assumption that divinity represents rationality, order, and transcendence, as opposed to the alleged irrationality and chaos of the finite, changeable world of nature and body. The contrast between rationality and irrationality . . . is genderized as a contrast between male and female” (*Rebirth of the Goddess* 76). The Dalit writer Kumud Pawade attacks the myth of objectivity in her autobiography: “My dream of the Outsider’s detachment seems laughable now. With a shock I realise that it is hard to behave with

complete detachment. Impossible. Emotions always flow through our veins” (“Antasphot” 253-4).⁴² The genre of autobiography itself has been limited to elites who have historically been allowed to claim objectivity.⁴³ While Ambedkar revalues Yasodhara as rational rather than reproducing historical emotional representations, he does not consider the importance of revaluing emotion itself.

Ambedkar’s vision of Yasodhara also depicts a woman who must make sacrifices for the good of her husband: “With full control over her emotions, she replied: ‘What else could I have done if I were in your position?’” (*Buddha and His Dhamma* 22-3; 1.1.17.26). This understanding of women’s strength mirrors other writers: “In dalit men’s *testimonios* dalit women were only selectively remembered as sacrificing wives and mothers, or victims of caste-based practices” (Lokhande; cited in Rege *Writing* 74-5).⁴⁴ This representation of women’s strength through sacrifice flattens the complexities of women’s experiences of both oppression and agency, strength and weakness. Ambedkar’s representation of Yasodhara depicts her as strong, but at the expense of independence and agency. In this case, Ambedkar slips from his project of developing a strong Dalit identity which provides space for political engagement in modern India. When Dalit strength relies on the self-sacrifice of Dalit women, the project of Dalit independence is weakened.

42 Kumud Pawade’s surname is also transliterated as Pawde.

43 Consideration of the political purpose of autobiography, as a disruption of the elite claim to universality, plays a major role in this dissertation.

44 Representations of Ambedkar’s first wife, Ramabai, mirror this depiction of the self-sacrificing wife and mother, as discussed in more depth in subsequent chapters. A survey and analysis of Dalit men’s representations of non-pantheon Dalit women falls outside the scope of this dissertation. Sharmila Rege translates this quotation from Pradnya Lokhande in her book *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, but the original Marathi text has not been translated into English as a whole.

Most complex is the inclusion of appropriate roles for husband and wife, for master and servant, and for girls in the Buddha's sermons, included in the Anguttara Nikaya III 37-8, 4:265, and translated by E. M. Hare in *The Book of the Gradual Sayings*. These roles reinforce the concept of women's sacrifice for men. *The Buddha and His Dhamma* reproduces these sermons on female roles nearly word for word:

Then the Exalted One spoke to them and said: 'Wherefor, girls, train yourselves in this way: 'To whatsoever husband our parents shall give us—wishing our weal, seeking our happiness, compassionate—because of compassion for him we will rise up early, be the last to retire, be willing workers, order all things sweetly and be gentle voiced. Train yourselves thus, girls.' (245; 5.5.8.8)

These directions for girls reproduce oppressive gender roles which construct women as property. In this sermon, girls are objects for a parent—properly a father—to “give” to a husband. The sermon also emphasizes female unwaged labourers as “workers” and preempts any challenge of inequality by appealing to feminine sweetness and “gentle” speech, likewise reproducing and naturalizing the gender hierarchies widely critiqued in feminist theology, and recommend a woman's service and submissiveness to her husband.⁴⁵ The sermon justifies the chattel system on the basis of Buddhist compassion; it

45 Brahmin patriarchy also relies on compulsory heterosexuality, though this connection is often absent in literature analyzing caste or gender. See Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs* 5.4, *Women: Sex and Sexuality* (1980). See also Nivedita Menon, “How Natural Is Normal? Feminism and Compulsory Heterosexuality,” *Because I Have a Voice: Queer Politics in India*, eds. Arvind Narrain and Gautam Bhan (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005). See also Jyoti Puri, “Concerning Kamasutras: Challenging Narratives of History and Sexuality,” *Signs* 27.3 (2002): 603-39.

presents a fictional agency or choice of compassion where a woman has none, particularly where women have been discouraged from choosing the monastic life.⁴⁶

While compassion plays a central role in Buddhist doctrine, here compassion is specifically advised for married women. Gross challenges the use of Buddhism to specifically silence women through appeals to ego or self:

In the late 1970s, when I first began to talk as a Buddhist practitioner about the need for feminist assessments of Buddhism, I was usually ridiculed and ignored by other Buddhists, who claimed that Buddhism was definitely not sexist or patriarchal and that any concern about such issues was an inappropriate “attachment”—something any good Buddhist would avoid like the plague. (“Response” 69)

She likewise challenges feminist assertions that women must develop their ego as a response to a sexist culture which has forced girls and women into submissive roles; she argues that the Western meaning of “ego” as “assertiveness” as opposed to “submissiveness” is misleading. In her argument, *both* assertiveness and submissiveness are styles of ego to which *both* men and women become attached: “Ego, as we have seen, is any style of habitual patterns and responses that clouds over the clarity and openness of basic human nature. Self-effacement is just a style of ego different from self-aggrandizement, but both equally cause suffering to self and others” (*Buddhism after*

⁴⁶ See Nancy Auer Falk for an analysis of the presentation of nuns and laywomen in “The Case of the Vanishing Nuns: The Fruits of Ambivalence in Ancient Indian Buddhism,” *Unspoken Worlds. Women’s Religious Lives*, eds. Nancy Falk and Rita M. Gross (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1989).

Patriarchy 162).⁴⁷ In this context, the Buddha's sermon to girls uses compassion to justify attachment to a submissive ego-style; it uses a religious justification for women to subsume themselves into a subordinate role. Since they appear in the scriptures, it is necessary to consider their effect on women's experiences in the neo-Buddhist movement, even at the cost of concluding that Ambedkar did not escape his own gender biases as a man living in an androcentric, patriarchal and misogynist culture.

Ambedkar believed that hierarchical roles and the divisions of labour were necessary for a working social order. However, he insisted that these hierarchies should be truly merit-based rather than based on birth:

Caste System is not merely division of labour. *It is also a division of labourers . . .* it is an hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other. In no other country is the division of labour accompanied by this gradation of labourers . . . This division of labour is not spontaneous, it is not based on natural aptitudes [sic]. (original emphasis, *Annihilation of Caste* 34)

In this analysis, Ambedkar responds to both Brahmins and British. He specifically compares India with other countries; his central critique of divisions of labour based on caste arises in the context of British rule, where racial hierarchies were also based on birth. Since the British ensured labour hierarchies based on race, Ambedkar situates the

⁴⁷ I return to the concept of ego later in this chapter with regard to identity. bell hooks also identifies this concept of ego in the feminist movement with reference to Buddhism. See "Contemplation and Transformation," *Buddhist Women on the Edge: Contemporary Perspectives from the Western Frontier*, ed. Marianne Dresser (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1996).

challenge to the caste system in the context of colonialism. Both upper caste Indians and the British had a specific interest in downplaying their internal hierarchies while drawing attention to hierarchies imposed by the other. Upper castes critiqued colonial hierarchies, while apologising for the caste system; the British critiqued the caste system, while using it as an example of British superiority. As such, Ambedkar carefully removed from his Buddhist scriptures any justification for hierarchy on the basis of caste. His interests lie in caste-role assignment and the racism implicit in colonialism, but his androcentrism allowed hierarchy on the basis of birth to creep in with regard to gender.

Gender-role assignment applies equally in the case of hierarchy and division of labour; Gross argues:

The issue is not abolishing hierarchy, which is impossible, but establishing *proper hierarchy*. This is a complex and difficult topic, . . . but it is important to state that proper hierarchy is not the same thing as what feminists mean by ‘domination’ or ‘power over’ in their critique of the patriarchal use of power. It connotes the proper use of power that has been properly earned. (*Buddhism after Patriarchy* 301)

While Gross focuses on gender hierarchy, her arguments apply to colonial and caste hierarchies as well. Unfortunately the roles for girls as assigned in early Buddhist scripture and reproduced in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* suggest that daughters achieve merit by pursuing a subordinate gender role. Likewise, the British defined Indians as effeminate in the interests of situating them in a subordinate role racially; the caste

system relies on the same hierarchies which parallel gender and race. Importantly, these assigned roles come more from Buddhism's appeal to cultural traditions where the Buddhist code did not define them, although they show that the Buddha intended to include both monastic and lay practitioners in his religion.

In this chapter, I argue that Ambedkar made an effort to recognize the role of women in the movement, but that his efforts fall short in several key areas. Regardless of his intention to practice inclusivity in his writing and his activism, the language is exclusive in the texts. Throughout the scripture *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar takes great care to separate syncretic cultural baggage from what he sees as an original Buddhist doctrine. He revalues caste and attempts to rewrite gender values in much of the book. However, important gaps with regard to gender arise in his texts, as I have outlined. The limits of his attention to the representation of women in the sermons for girls demonstrates that gender simply held less importance for him than caste; his priority was a response to Hindu traditions rather than an examination of gender inequality across cultures, including Hindu and Buddhist, Brahmin and Dalit.⁴⁸ This prioritization contrasts with Dalit women's representation of themselves, whereby gender and caste are equally important, though the focus differs depending on whether they address Dalit or feminist communities.⁴⁹ Ambedkar focuses on caste at the expense of gender; likewise writers who focus on gender include limited caste analysis. It is important to recognize the nuances of

48 Rita M. Gross makes the same assessment about the Buddha: "Overcoming androcentric consciousness and patriarchal gender arrangements was not his issue", *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993) 36.

49 Subsequent chapters will draw out this contrast between Dalit men's depictions of women and Dalit women's depictions of themselves, as a central argument of the dissertation.

gender representation and the potential negative impact of oppressive gender roles on both Dalit women and men in the neo-Buddhist community.

Positive Representations of Women: The Admission of Women to the Order

Although aspects of Ambedkar's writing pose difficulties for women in the movement, he also incorporates women into his texts in new ways which challenge the early Pali texts. Ambedkar includes specific legends in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* to demonstrate his points regarding caste and gender equality in Buddhism. He rejects the Jataka tales—which tell the Buddha's life stories as he progresses upward through the hierarchies towards Buddhahood—primarily because of their emphasis on transmigration, though he upholds Buddhist doctrine through his reinterpretation of rebirth without transmigration. The Jataka tales reinforce the Hindu doctrine that one must progress upward through the hierarchy through successive rebirths from animal to human, from low to high caste, and from female to male. These stories reproduce the belief that those lower in the hierarchy are responsible for their own suffering, and present them as having lower inherent worth. Christopher S. Queen points out that Ambedkar rejected the doctrine of transmigration because it “intensified self-blame by alleging the sufferers' misconduct in former lives” (“Dr. Ambedkar” 59). From a gender perspective, the Jataka tales “present an almost uniformly negative picture of women” (*Gross Buddhism after Patriarchy* 33), especially since they indicate that the Buddha stopped being reborn as female even before he stopped being reborn in animal form. Ambedkar's rejection of caste inequality also serves as a rejection of gender inequality.

He includes other legends which challenge gender and caste inequality. The story “Prakrati the Chandalika” (109-11; 2.7.2), adapted from “The Woman at the Well” in Paul Carus’s compilation of Buddhist texts, demonstrates that Buddhists do not practice untouchability. Renaming the story to include the name and caste of the central character revalues her as a person and highlights her caste as a central feature of the legend. This legend in particular shows the intersection between gender and caste in women’s work of drawing water. Dalit writers and activists repeatedly highlight the connections between water and untouchability. Clean water is a human rights issue worldwide, but in India, untouchables are credited with the ability to pollute water. Furthermore, women predominantly take on the domestic task of collecting water for the home, and fictional, autobiographical, and sociological accounts repeatedly give evidence that Dalit women are forced to beg for water, and to exchange unpaid labour for water (Pawar 201; Malik 324). Ambedkar’s Mahad satyagraha, where he led a group of Dalits in exercising their rights to drink from a tank reserved for upper castes, holds a central place among the contemporary legends of the Dalit movement. At this satyagraha, he also made an important speech to women, and burned the *Manusmriti* as a symbol of caste and gender oppression.⁵⁰

Most useful for this project is a close analysis of Ambedkar’s treatment of the admission of Mahaprajapati Gotami into the monastic sangha, in comparison with “The

50 Ambedkar’s “Mahad satyagraha speech” is translated from Marathi into English in Pawar and Moon, *We Also Made History*.

Admission of Women to the Order” from the *Culla-Vagga*.⁵¹ Feminist theologians also examine this legend closely because of its sexist implication for the core Buddhist doctrines on women. Ambedkar includes the legend, but makes specific revisions to emphasize the Buddha’s challenge to caste and gender inequality, and to reinforce his own radical approach to caste and gender in neo-Buddhist doctrine. In the legend, Gotami, the Buddha’s aunt and foster mother, represents a group of women and asks the Buddha to allow her to leave the life of a householder and join the monastic sangha. The Buddha refuses her three times, yet she shaves her head, dons monk’s robes, and follows him. The Buddha’s disciple Ananda submits her request; he is refused three times as well. Ananda then changes his tactic, and asks if women are competent to leave the life of householder to pursue enlightenment. The Buddha agrees that they are, and admits women to the monastic sangha under the condition that they accept eight special rules which subordinate nuns to monks in every circumstance. Then he announces that the lifetime of Buddhism will be diminished by half because of women’s inclusion in the sangha.

Feminist analyses, including those of Paul and Gross, argues that the legend demonstrates patriarchy and misogyny, though many feminist theologians and Buddhist women agree that the final misogynist assertion is a later addition, representing the views of later monks who were misogynist (Friedman 225-6; Falk “Case of the Vanishing Nuns” 203; N. S. Barnes 107). The Buddha’s initial rejection of women’s admission to

51 The *Culla-Vagga* documents the First and Second Buddhist Councils, and is part of the larger Tripitaka, or Buddhist canon.

the monastic sangha, and the eight special rules, however, are accepted as a representation of the Buddha's words, and evidence of patriarchal values. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, the revised legend demonstrates how even the words of the Buddha can be challenged by using reason.⁵² Here Ananda provides the voice of reason when he says: "Has not the Blessed One allowed the Shudras to take Parivraja [monastic vows] and join the Sangh in the same way he has done to the Brahmins? What is the ground, Lord, for treating women differently? . . . Would not such an act bring the Dhamma into discredit and make it open to the charge of upholding sex inequality?" (108; 2.7.1.18, 21). Ambedkar's arguments about caste and gender—and the connections between them—emerge through Ananda's voice. Ananda raises the same points found in Ambedkar's oppositions to Hinduism throughout his writing, including his analysis of what the Buddha taught in Section III of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*: "All women, no matter whether they belonged to the Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya, and all Shudras, both males and females were prohibited from acquiring knowledge, even from acquiring literacy" (153-4; 3.5.2.1.3-5). Ambedkar makes the same statement in his analysis of the Buddha's predecessors in Section I (56; 1.5.3.14).

In her article "Truth over Convention: Feminist Interpretations of Buddhism," Suwanna Satha-Anand argues that the Buddha capitulated to social pressures which devalued women so that the religion might achieve legitimacy:

52 As discussed, Ambedkar ensures that women have access to the processes of reason, though this negotiation for Dalit and women's reason is complicated by hierarchies which devalue emotion and the body.

[T]he institutional subordination of the nun order under the monk order should be understood primarily as a precautionary measure taken by the Buddha to secure the acceptance and the respect of the lay society for the nun order, and to maintain the lay world's respect for the male order which was crucial for the survival of the religion at that time. (286)

In Ambedkar's revision in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, the Buddha's refusal of women's entry to the monastic sangha likewise acknowledges cultural expectations. The Buddha says that his rejection of women's application to the sangha "is based on practical grounds" (108; 2.7.1.20). The text highlights practical rather than spiritual reasons for refusing entry. However, it does not expand on the details of those practical reasons. The revised legend also omits the specifics of the eight special rules. Furthermore, it includes these rules in Gotami's initiation, mirroring the 22 vows which Ambedkar took when he fulfilled his promise that he would not die a Hindu and converted to Buddhism on October 14, 1956.

Ambedkar took 22 vows in addition to the core Buddhist initiation, which includes taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, and vowing to abide by the five precepts to abstain from: taking life, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicating substances.⁵³ His action created the specific neo-Buddhist initiation which has been performed subsequently by converts to the neo-Buddhist path. The 22 additional vows are represented as adding to neo-Buddhists' experience of their faith,

53 The 22 vows are reproduced in the introduction to this dissertation.

rather than detracting from it; neo-Buddhists define their identity through reference to these vows, which explicitly reject Hinduism. Some contemporary Buddhist women approach the eight special rules in the same way; an individual might “accept them as a form of beneficial personal discipline that she puts in service of her own spiritual discipline” (N. J. Barnes 283). The revised legend also reinterprets the impact of Gotami’s vow in the *Culla-Vagga*. The nineteenth century translation states that she will “take up these eight weighty regulations, not to be transgressed as long as life shall last” (“Admission” 446). In the revision, Gotami states: “I, Ananda, take upon me these Eight Chief Rules, never to be transgressed during my lifelong” (108; 2.7.1.24). The slight change in language places the duty on Gotami during her life as an individual rather than on all women as long as human life lasts.

Most importantly, the legend in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* omits entirely the claim that since “women have now retired from household life to the houseless one, . . . but five hundred years . . . will the Good Doctrine abide” (“Admission” 447). Ambedkar insists that Buddhism must meet the qualification of the Buddha’s own teachings:

He was nothing if not rational, if not logical. Anything therefore which is rational and logical, other things being equal, may be taken to be the word of the Buddha. / The second thing is that the Buddha never cared to enter into a discussion which was not profitable for man’s welfare. Therefore anything attributed to the Buddha which did not relate to man’s welfare cannot be accepted to be the word of the Buddha. (185; 4.2.5.13-14)

Since the eight special rules and the claims about women's impact on the lifespan of Buddhism contradict the Buddha's intentions regarding equality, Ambedkar judges that they do not represent authentic teachings, and omits them from the text. Since these aspects of the Pali texts contradict Ambedkar's own intention that Buddhism liberate Dalits from gender as well as caste inequality, he rejects them outright. While writers such as Anand K. Coomaraswamy believe that "true" Buddhism did die out after 500 years as the Buddha foretold, Ambedkar saw Buddhism revive in India through his work.⁵⁴ Ambedkar's adaptation of Buddhism to contemporary circumstances, including the incorporation of feminist theory, has encouraged the development of Buddhism as a living religion.⁵⁵ Ambedkar's goal to recover an original Buddhism rejects the most misogynist and androcentric aspects of these Pali texts. At the same time, through the project of neo-Buddhism, Ambedkar claims the process of rationality for South Asians, Dalits, and women, allowing for new forms of rationality.⁵⁶

Many of the changes to the traditional legends of the Buddha allow for positive interpretation, and the possibility of greater social freedom for women. The exclusion of the eight special rules for monastic women, in context of reading *The Buddha and His Dhamma* as a scripture, allows for a complete rejection of the eight special rules as

54 Coomaraswamy's assessment, based on shifts in Buddhist iconography, is considered in more depth in chapter five.

55 As discussed further in chapter three.

56 See also Walter D. Mignolo, "(Post)Occidentalism, (Post)Coloniality, and (Post)Subaltern Rationality," *The Pre-Occupation of Postcolonial Studies*, eds. Fawzia Afzal-Khan and Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

useable in neo-Buddhism. Buddhist women cross-culturally have addressed the eight special rules in similar ways:

Many modern women and men reject the eight rules outright, either because they seem inconsistent with the rest of the Buddha's teachings, or because they are inappropriate for modern Buddhists, or both. . . . Many *bhikshuni* [nuns] make personal decisions not to observe the eight rules.

(N. J. Barnes 283)

In dealing with all aspects of sexism in the legend, feminist theologians seek a thorough modern revision: "The values reflected in the story . . . are not worth fostering any more. This judgement extends not only to the misogynist coda or to the Buddha's initial reluctance to ordain women, but also to the eight special rules themselves" (Gross *Buddhism after Patriarchy* 38). In many important ways, Ambedkar's text preempts feminist theologians' attempts to address this specific text in the Buddhist canon. While Ambedkar's omission of the eight special rules may ignore historical barriers to the equality of women in Buddhism, it also allows for a more equal sangha in contemporary neo-Buddhism. Ambedkar rewrites the legend to address *both* caste and gender, and incorporates a significant message of caste and gender equality on which Buddhist women might draw.

Feminist-Buddhism and neo-Buddhism: Mutual Transformation

So far in this chapter I have examined the analysis and revisions regarding caste and gender in historical Buddhism, specifically in Ambedkar's text *The Buddha and His*

Dhamma, as a means of drawing out connections between caste and gender which impact Dalit women in the neo-Buddhist movement. Now I consider further possibilities for neo-Buddhism's impact on feminist Buddhists, as well as for feminist Buddhism's impact on neo-Buddhism. I draw on Gross's texts as broadly representative of Buddhist feminist theology. Ambedkar incorporated the concerns of his women contemporaries, and he acknowledged and promoted women's rights alongside Dalit rights, based on his understanding of the connection between caste and gender oppression (Chakravarti *Gendering Caste*). Likewise, Gross expresses a concern for social justice throughout her writing which applies to caste as well as gender oppression. The absence of any discussion of caste in her writing stems from a lack of information and a lack of analysis of caste inequality within the specific Vajrayana tradition and resource materials. Her research is also based in the USA, where caste has less relevance, although South Asian communities in diaspora practice the caste system. Gross's writing occurs within the context of colonialism.⁵⁷ Gaps remain in both the anti-caste and the feminist perspective, but a combination of the two perspectives will benefit both.

Gross's discussion of ego-style is her most relevant contribution to a synthesis of both gender and caste. As discussed earlier in this chapter, she presents ego in terms of gender; all gender roles pose a barrier to enlightenment as well as to social justice. Where a submissive ego-style is as much of a barrier to liberation as an assertive one, these concepts apply to caste identity, and challenge neo-Buddhists' own attitudes that

⁵⁷ I discuss the legacy of Orientalism in Buddhist studies further in chapter three, part two.

conversion to Buddhism will lift them out of their oppressed state. Here it is important to consider privileges which all women do not share. Gross speaks from a position of privilege—which she acknowledges to some extent—as a white woman living in the West; she has different opportunities than do Dalit women living in India.⁵⁸ As such, her understanding of Buddhism, while engaged with gender, incorporates colonial bias in the sense that South Asian women’s experience of sexism intersects specifically with colonialism.⁵⁹

Furthermore, while South Asian women face both sexism and racism, Dalit women also face caste oppression within India, and often from other women. While a positive Dalit identity may not provide liberation in a specifically religious sense, neither will an attachment to oppression, such as pride in begging rights expressed by the Mahar—a Dalit sub-caste. In her autobiography, Baby Kamble describes the right of begging, represented by the *yeskar* stick rotated yearly among Mahar families: “The higher castes had created an illusion among the Mahars that the *yeskar*’s stick was like a royal staff. Each *yeskar* considered this stick as a mark of honour for his family” (77). Ambedkar and other activists recognize that an *internalized* untouchable identity contributes to a low self-worth of individuals and communities, whereby they reinforce and maintain their own oppressed status.⁶⁰ Ambedkar uses Buddhism to create a political identity for Dalits, and thus space for them to participate in the modern Indian state as a

58 A useful counter to Gross’s perspective arises in bell hooks’s comments on Buddhism from an African-American perspective. See “Contemplation and Transformation,” *Buddhist Women on the Edge: Contemporary Perspectives from the Western Frontier*, ed. Marianne Dresser (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1996).

59 See also Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000).

response to both British colonialism and the Indian caste system. However, in this sense, Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism may be seen as an incomplete process, where Dalits are shifting from a self-effacing identity to a self-respecting identity; on the path to enlightenment, identity itself is a barrier.

In contemporary context, the central challenge of ego-style is a negative Dalit identity which must be overcome. Ambedkar's central issue was improving material conditions for individuals and communities in this life. Both he and Gross support the struggles of oppressed groups through the practice of Buddhism. In the sense of identity, or ego-style, a combination of Ambedkar and Gross's analyses provides a complex and nuanced understanding of spiritual liberation which is applicable for both caste and gender in the context of social justice. In terms of social justice, Ambedkar's revaluing of Dalit identity offers a liberation from social injustice which may hold the potential of finding a suitably Buddhist middle way between pride and oppression, both of which represent attachment.

Furthermore, Ambedkar recognized that enlightenment is the final step in a long process, and individuals on the bodhisattva path seek to alleviate the suffering of others while they travel the path to enlightenment. In Buddhism, the central focus has been placed on monastics, and the initiation has generally focused on an individual born

60 Chakravarti defines this internalized oppression with regard to Hindu women and the cult of pativrata—the wife devoted to her husband as a god—whereby a woman's worth paradoxically relies on her low self-worth: "It was one of the most successful ideologies constructed by any patriarchal system, one in which women *themselves* controlled their own sexuality and believed that they gained power and respect through the codes they adopted," *Gendering Caste* 74.

Buddhist who takes initiation as a monastic.⁶¹ While Buddhism began as a missionary tradition, exemplified in the Ashokan period, it has adopted the cultural codes of neighbouring traditions such as Hinduism and Confucianism, whereby doctrines of rebirth focus on followers who are born—rather than convert—into the tradition. Theravada doctrine in particular has focused on the necessity of monasticism for achieving enlightenment, while lay practitioners must take up the monastic life or wait for another rebirth. In this case, because Ambedkar rejected the concept of transmigration inherent in this doctrine, he draws on the Mahayana doctrine whereby every living being has “Buddha nature” and the potential for enlightenment in a single lifetime, as well as its concept of the bodhisattva:

He was more attracted by the Mahayana concept of the Bodhisattva, who delays his own liberation out of compassion for less fortunate or advanced beings. Furthermore, the Bodhisattva ideal lends itself more easily to modern concepts of democracy, human rights, and social justice, for it can easily be seen as a compassionate activity in favor of the oppressed and the fight against social and political injustice. (Fitzgerald 63-4)

Even so, most Buddhist sects privilege monastic life over lay life. Ambedkar attempted to develop a code for lay practitioners when he instituted the lay initiation, which followed the same code for monastics, but without the requirement of celibacy.

⁶¹ When Buddhism arrived in the West, the initiation shifted to incorporate different modes of conversion, but this type of initiation-conversion is not relevant to the neo-Buddhist movement.

Through his incorporation of the lay conversion, he defines the precept against sexual misconduct in a way which refuses to demonize human sexuality. Ambedkar challenged both the understanding of true Buddhism as a celibate path and the essential separation between the lay and monastic communities when he underwent diksha, or initiation, traditionally a celibate path, along with his wife Savita Ambedkar: “Ambedkar broke that tradition and sanctified marriage in Buddhism. Unlike Gautama Buddha, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism along with his second wife—Savita Ambedkar . . . The classical Buddhist *sangha* did not allow wife and husband to be a part of the *sangha*” (Ilaiah *Post-Hindu India* xxi).⁶² In contrast with his acceptance of the Buddha’s abandonment of Yasodhara in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar resolved the conflict between family and duty, and rejected the traditional path whereby men have the option, even the cultural endorsement to leave their families. Furthermore, Savita Ambedkar’s agency in converting to Buddhism potentially resolves Yasodhara’s lack of choice in the Buddha’s renunciation.⁶³

Both Ambedkar and Gross acknowledge the relevance of the body in experiences of both caste and gender.⁶⁴ Gross approaches the precept against sexual misconduct in a similar way, which combines feminist and Buddhist concerns:

People whose basic mental and spiritual discipline is the development of mindfulness and awareness should not slide into reproduction mindlessly.

62 Here Ilaiah does not distinguish between *sangha* as *bhikkhu sangha*—the monastic community—and *sangha* as the community including lay and monastic Buddhists. As discussed, the distinction between lay and monastic are important for both Dalits and women.

63 I discuss the representation of Savita Ambedkar in more depth in chapter four.

64 In chapter five, I consider Dalit women’s inclusion of their own bodies in self-representation.

Doing so could easily be construed as a violating of the major precept to avoid sexual misconduct. Rather, being aware of one's likely behaviors ahead of time and being prepared with birth control should be routine practice for lay Buddhist meditators, a refreshing change from practices advocated in some religious traditions. (*Buddhism after Patriarchy* 236)

Women have been represented as bodily, as seen in Blackstone's analysis of the *Therīgatha* and *Theragatha* texts, and women have been denied control over their own bodies and their own sexuality, as Chakravarti argues. Likewise, South Asians have been associated with the body in the colonial context. Finally, Dalits have been associated with bodily impurity in comparison with upper caste spirituality. Through a feminist or a neo-Buddhist recognition of the legitimate place of the body in sacred spaces, Ambedkar provides an empowering space for women and Dalits to revalue the body and to reject religious sexism or casteism.

The body is also associated with the community in both feminist and Dalit experiences. In her comparison between the writings of the *therīs* and the *theras*, Kathryn R. Blackstone demonstrates that renunciation of social relationships is unavailable to women: "The *therīs*, therefore, cannot escape the obstacles to liberation, but must confront them. The *theras* can, and apparently did, avoid such obstacles" (105). Ambedkar's own experiences of suffering based on the hierarchical caste system reinforced his belief in the strength of the community, rather than the individual, as activist; his famous slogan appealing to Dalits to Educate! Organize! Agitate! relies on

the community. He reproduces the attitudes of the *theris* rather than the *theras* in his refusal to renounce or reject social relationships: “Where the *theras* often praise solitude and explicitly condemn social interactions, the *therīs* never praise solitude, nor do they have anything negative to say about relationships” (Blackstone 57). Just as the experience of being female requires a more social and relational approach to enlightenment in the *theris*’ songs, Ambedkar’s approach to Buddhism suggests that the experience of being low caste or Dalit does as well. Because he did not renounce his social relationships upon initiation, Ambedkar arguably follows a path culturally coded as more feminine, and also rejects a cultural aspect of Buddhism adopted specifically from Hinduism.

The opportunities offered to elites in which they can pursue enlightenment in solitude are not available to the majority, including Dalits and most women regardless of caste: “Early Indian Buddhism, like much Indian spirituality of that time, sees little hope that anyone could attain detachment and insight while pursuing sense pleasure, bodily enhancement, or family stability and wealth; these things are too distracting” (Gross *Buddhism after Patriarchy* 31). In this sense, Ambedkar’s practice of Buddhism breaks from Indian Buddhism—which developed a close syncretic relationship with Hindu traditions, specifically with regard to the renunciate stage of life—and other patriarchal Buddhist traditions which drew from existing cultural codes. His neo-Buddhist path appropriately revalues experiences which are associated negatively with female experiences in the Buddhist canon. Furthermore, he argued that the lack of a separate lay

initiation had damaged Buddhism's ability to challenge caste and gender hierarchies in the neighbouring religious traditions:

[T]here was no separate Dhamma-Diksha for those who wanted to be initiated into the Dhamma but did not wish to become members of the Sangh, one of the consequences of which was to go from home into homelessness. / This was a grave omission. It was one of the causes which ultimately led to the downfall of Buddhism in India. / For, this absence of the initiation ceremony left the laity free to wander from one religion to another and, worse still, follow at one and the same time. (*Buddha and His Dhamma* 238; 5.4.1.11-13)

His initiation blurs the boundaries between lay and monastic, in that a lay initiation ritual did not exist prior to his conversion.

Ambedkar's goals in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* are twofold: to write a useable scripture for the contemporary Dalit Buddhist movement, and to recover what he sees as an original Buddhism. More important for him is the goal of usability. For Ambedkar, the priority is imagining or inventing a Buddha who promotes social equality.⁶⁵ He judges Buddhist texts using the Buddha's central doctrines of rational

65 I do not use the term "invent" with the contemporary negative connotations of fiction, but with the implication of a creative intellectual act, typically denied to women and Dalits. Feminist theologians use the word in such a sense: "You say there are not words to describe this time, you say it did not exist. But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent" Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, trans. David Le Vay (London: Peter Owen, 1971) 89. As well, Christian feminist theologians have claimed the right to name the world—responding to the myth in which God bestows upon Adam the right to name the animals in Genesis; see Mary Daly, "Theology after the Demise of God the Father: A Call for the Castration of Sexist Religion," *Women and Religion: Papers of the Working Group on Women and Religion 1972-73*, eds. Judith Plaskow and Joan Arnold Romero, Revised ed. (Missoula, Montana: American Academy of Religion and The Scholars' Press, 1974).

thought. Through this model, I argue that Ambedkar claims a historical Indian rationality, in the specific context of arguing for the inclusion of women. Interrogating the early Buddhist texts using rational thought provides a more accurate history and mirrors both feminist theological and postcolonial studies analysis of historical religious texts to address androcentric, Eurocentric, and caste bias.

Feminist theologians attempt to retrieve the positive aspects of women's participation in historical religious traditions while refusing to ignore instances of androcentrism and patriarchy. While they typically focus on the academic method of recovering an accurate history, they also intentionally incorporate an experiential approach to religion, where the accurate analysis supports a useable social vision: "The articulation of a new perception of the ultimate which will arise out of the discovery and recovery of women's experience will require clarification of women's experience" (Christ "Spiritual Quest" 230). At the same time, feminists may fall into the trap that more recent religious paths provide increasingly female-positive models. This understanding contrasts with Ambedkar's analysis of the core message of Buddhism found predominantly in the earliest forms of Buddhism, and may fit too easily into an assumption of progress:

Many feminists begin with a cultural bias against past ages, thinking that present cultures, despite all their signs of sexism, represent a more enlightened view of sex than past cultures. But when one allows the presuppositions of the past culture in question to have their own say, one can find them presenting current cultures a strong challenge. (Carmody 6)

This analysis also destabilizes the Orientalist understanding that modern Europe represents the developmental high point in politics, as well as in theology, in comparison to an underdeveloped Indian politics and religion.⁶⁶ Buddhist feminist theologians acknowledge the possibility that misogynist comments may be later editorial comments, as discussed earlier in the chapter. Through omission, Ambedkar insists that any comments that do not fit his agenda *must be* editorial comments. In the core issues, Ambedkar's activist agenda puts into practice the feminist analysis Gross presents. Overall, neo-Buddhist and feminist approaches to social justice complement each other; they each address gaps and blind spots in the other's analysis.

Conclusion

In one sense Ambedkar undermines a Buddhist challenge to casteism and sexism through androcentric and patriarchal language and gender representation; in another, he wrote in a specific context in which he had a specific purpose of writing a religious scripture. He completed his manuscript for *The Buddha and His Dhamma* shortly before his death, and he did not have the luxury of reconsidering, revising, and rewriting in order to produce a work which perfectly represented his attitudes. Even so, the textual incorporation of women and women's rights achieves greater gender equality than other activists of his time. While his androcentrism should not be ignored as merely a product of his time and culture, he wrote prior to contemporary language and feminist theory. Feminist analysis continues to develop, and he had no access to certain theories and

⁶⁶ I return to this point in chapter three, part two.

movements. If Ambedkar had the exposure to reconstructionist feminist theology, he might have changed the language to read human instead of man, or even woman instead of man as a means of disrupting the androcentric universal masculine gender implied in the term human.⁶⁷ While Ambedkar rejected the most misogynist and androcentric aspects of the early Buddhist texts, he should not be exempt from interrogation, just as he did not exempt the Buddha. Unfortunately, sexism in the neo-Buddhist scripture affects contemporary Dalit women, manifested in the persistence of patriarchy in their religious spaces. Ambedkar's insistence that neo-Buddhists must subject knowledge and practice to rigorous critical analysis places the responsibility for revision and rewriting of *The Buddha and His Dhamma* onto contemporary Dalit women and men.

Both Ambedkar and Gross, in their use of the prophetic voice to propose an inclusive future, regardless of their approaches to the historical texts, focus on meaning and possibility: the meaning of a text which explains the place of humans in the world, and the possibility that a text participates in creating that world. Where scripture both describes an existing culture and defines it for the future, the prophetic voice aims to bring about revolution in understanding the world and recreating it through a religious lens. Just as women must analyze scripture in other religious traditions, neo-Buddhist women must turn a critical gaze on Ambedkar's scripture as well, and reject the aspects which do not offer full liberation from gender roles as they do from caste roles. Likewise,

67 Johanna H. Stuckey defines four approaches to feminist theology, all of which Ambedkar uses in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* to a certain extent. I outline these approaches in chapter one. See *Women's Spirituality: Contemporary Feminist Approaches to Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Goddess Worship* (Toronto: Inanna Publications and Education, 2010).

feminist Buddhists must go beyond gender and acknowledge the multiple oppressions which intersect with gender oppression, including race and caste. Ambedkar himself demonstrates the process of revision through his rejection of teachings of inequality attributed to the Buddha. An analysis of Ambedkar's writing for positive representations of women offers a counterpart to his androcentrism to provide a balanced reading of his attitudes toward women in Buddhism and in the neo-Buddhist movement. Women must also use the positive representations of women in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* to reinforce the equal status which Ambedkar preached, and which contemporary neo-Buddhists claim.

Feminist theologians have noted that all religions claim that their own path gives greater rights to women than do other traditions, or that the original practice provided women with greater rights than the surrounding culture: "All religions agree that women should be treated properly, not abused or mistreated. Some religions, in fact, argue that their norms represent an improvement in the treatment of women over what their predecessors did. Mistreatment of women is found only in other traditions" (Gross *Buddhism after Patriarchy* 105). Buddhism also makes such claims. In the fifty years since Ambedkar's death, male Dalit leaders appear to exclude women from participating in the central institutional aspects of their faith, in ways which I examine throughout the dissertation, and which Dalit women contest. Ambedkar is held up as the model for a neo-Buddhist community committed to social justice. His actions included efforts to institutionalize gender equality, for example, in the Hindu Code Bill. He ensured that

every Dalit meeting had a corresponding women's meeting: "women's conferences were held simultaneously with those for men" (Moon and Pawar 50); in speeches to the Dalit community, he asked Dalit women to stop using specific dress codes which identified their caste, and urged them to educate their daughters and sons alike.⁶⁸ He also stated that inter-caste marriage would help break down the caste system; marriage is an important site for the reproduction of caste, since caste purity is often presented as upper caste women's purity, which is maintained through arranged marriage (Chakravarti *Gendering Caste*). Today inequalities persist in organization, archiving, and reporting of women in the movement, and male successors do not match Ambedkar's acknowledgement and empowerment of women in the tradition.

The Buddha and His Dhamma, as the scripture for the neo-Buddhist movement, includes revisions to the central Buddhist canon texts regarding women and caste. As such, it constructs a Buddhist doctrine which offers positive representations of women, and a greater institutional gender equality for Dalit women converts. However, it also includes contradictions to gender equality. The intersection of caste, gender, and Buddhism provides a common interest in which both Dalit Buddhists and Buddhist feminists can draw from the others' knowledge.

⁶⁸ I return to these principles in chapters five, six and seven.

Chapter 3

Wheels Within Wheels: Neo-Buddhism in Context

This chapter presents the history and context of the interactions between caste, gender, and religious conversion in India. In Part I, “Off the Wheel: Christian and Muslim Caste Conversions,” I consider the history of caste conversions in India, with a particular focus on women’s caste conversions in the modern period. Here I highlight the trend of caste observances in non-Hindu religions, which B. R. Ambedkar noted during his quest to choose a religion in which Dalits might escape the caste system, but which would not reproduce colonial systems of oppression. I use specific examples from Christian and Muslim caste conversions in the literary texts of Bama, Ismat Chughtai, and Krupabai Sathianadhan, in the context of historical and social analysis. These examples illuminate the intersections between gender, caste, and colonialism. I also develop these examples in the context of Gauri Viswanathan’s analysis of conversions in India in her book *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, Belief*, to preempt the question of how conversion is imagined, whether neo-Buddhism truly approaches caste conversion in a different manner than previous caste conversion movements, and whether it can expect to achieve greater success than previous movements.

Part II, “Reinventing the Wheel: Ambedkar and Western Thought,” considers Ambedkar’s writing, including his use of Marxist and feminist thought in developing the Dalit movement. In particular I explore connections between religious conversion and political activism, as Viswanathan discusses in her book, but also the compatibility of

feminism, Marxism, and Buddhism. I examine the charges that Buddhism is not properly a religion concerned with social justice, expressed predominantly through use of the term “Engaged Buddhism.” This chapter follows from the definition of religion as presented in chapter one of this dissertation, in which I define religion as a theory of understanding the nature of the world and the place of a person or their community in the world. This theory of the world is complemented by a set of practices which respond to that understanding of the world, and serve to demonstrate a person’s or community’s place in the world. The two parts of this chapter together give the theory, history, and context of the subsequent gender and caste analysis of Dalit women’s roles in the contemporary neo-Buddhist movement.

Part I

Off the Wheel: Christian and Muslim Caste Conversions

Ambedkar's movement to convert to Buddhism was not the first approach to countering caste in Hinduism. Although caste conversions to Islam and Christianity were disparate in terms of time, geography, and incentive, they should be considered political statements which challenged Hindu orthodoxy. However, the caste system persists among converts. In choosing a religion into which to convert, Ambedkar rejected Islam and Christianity, as well as Sikhism and heterodox Hindu sects, because of the persistence of casteism or the poor treatment of women within these religions in India, despite doctrines of equality. At the same time, Ambedkar overlooked the more complicated relationship between Hindu nationalism and denigration of Islam and Christianity as "colonial" religions. I focus on caste practices in Islam and Christianity, which were imported into the region. Situating neo-Buddhism within the context of other South Asian religions which practice caste highlights the challenges it faces in resisting caste discrimination. Since caste and gender impact Dalit women's experiences of their religion, I examine women's experiences within Islam and Christianity.

Caste structures rely predominantly on the behaviour of members of those castes who hold the balance of power in a community. Where critical texts examine the historical precedents and development of caste practices in non-Hindu religions, Bama, Ismat Chughtai, and Krupabai Sathianadhan present caste practices in their own cultural experiences through literature, despite different times, religious traditions, and

geographies. These women writers particularly draw attention to the role women play in enforcing these practices. Krupabai Sathianadhan's *Saguna: The First Autobiographical Novel in English by an Indian Woman*, originally published serially in 1887-8, and Bama's autobiography *Karukku*, published in Tamil in 1992 and in English translation in 2000, depict the persistence of caste practices within Christian communities. Chughtai's fictional short stories "Kallu" and "Lingering Fragrance," published in Urdu in the early 1940s, draw upon the author's experiences as an Indian Muslim and show how class, caste and gender roles are enforced within Muslim communities.

Sociological research identifies caste practices in non-Hindu South Asian communities, and I draw on this research to place women's experiences of caste and religion in context. However, as in Buddhism, caste and gender are rarely examined as intersecting areas of oppression within religious communities. Literature by women provides a window into these intersections. Sathianadhan's autobiographical fiction presents the nineteenth-century upper caste Christian Indian gentlewoman's experiences of intersecting gender, racial, and especially religious marginalization overlaid with a veneer of fiction. This approach allows her an increased degree of distance from which critiques of her own community emerge. Bama's autobiography never names the narrator, and serves as an example of Dalit autobiography which makes a political statement about the intersections of caste and gender oppression in the Tamil Christian community. Though not from the Dalit community, Chughtai often uses fictional settings to highlight taboo subjects in Indian communities, including Muslim caste practices. The two short

stories which I have chosen for the purpose of this dissertation feature a fictional representation of the intersections between caste, gender, and class in Indian Muslim communities.

All of the selected narratives, regardless of genre, address the intersections of caste and gender in non-Hindu Indian communities, where the sociological analyses do not. They provide an alternative to dominant narratives of subjecthood which present the Indian experience as Hindu, upper caste, upper class, and often male. In this context, I use autobiographical texts as a political statement, and as an explicit challenge to dominant narratives. The literary texts I have chosen offer a useful cross-section of Indian literature which addresses the same issues found in neo-Buddhist women's writing.

Elites and Doctrines of Equality

Several factors influence the development of the caste system within Indian practices of Christianity and Islam, including existing hierarchies, approaches to conversion, and syncretic influence—whereby two different belief systems are fused or reconciled—from surrounding Hindu communities. The history of the spread of religion through India and conversion demographics play a role in the growth of Islam and Christianity and the adoption of caste practices in these religions. Of the earliest Christian settlements, dating from the first century CE, Duncan B. Forrester notes that caste has always played a role in these communities:

Syrian Christians have been for centuries encapsulated within caste society, regarded by Hindus as a caste, occupying a recognized (and high)

place within the caste hierarchy . . . The Syrian community itself is internally divided into sects closely analogous to subcastes, and seems to have been quite content to accept and operate the caste system without any egalitarian protest. (14)

Early in Islam's history, Arab merchants introduced the religion along the trade routes to India and East Asia. When Muslim Arab and Persian kingdoms expanded into South Asia, the initial response to the Hindu faith was negative. However, the importance of co-existence of these religions contributed to the exchange of caste structures: "[d]himmi status was, however, soon added to those extreme alternatives, as Muslim scholars learned of Hindu religious books and Muslim monarchs wisely recognized that there were too many Hindus to exterminate" (Wolpert 107).⁶⁹ In both Christianity and Islam, the new religious communities focused on integration rather than maintaining separate status.

Islam particularly attracted low caste converts because of its alleged egalitarianism. It offered them "an escape from the degraded status they had in the Hindu society to at least theoretical equality with the ruling community" (A. Ahmad 82). While the Qur'an advocates equality, elite scholars interpreted the religious texts to support the caste system among Muslims in India: "[i]n order to provide suitable legitimacy to their claims of social superiority, medieval Indian ashraf scholars wrote numerous texts that sought to interpret the Qur'an to suit their purposes, thus effectively denying the Qur'an's

⁶⁹ Dhimmi refers to "people of the book," Prophet Mohammad's advocacy for respect toward the other Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Christianity.

message of radical social equality” (Sikand).⁷⁰ In Ismat Chughtai’s short stories, the high caste characters also manipulate interpretations of the Qur’an to reproduce class and caste privilege.

Importantly, doctrines of equality in Islam and Christianity ensure neither caste nor gender equality for low caste women. In Chughtai’s “Lingering Fragrance,” women play a central role in enforcing caste divisions upon other women. The matriarch Nayaab Bubu, a servant-wife herself, uses an understanding of marriage as a contract found in the Qur’an and the hadiths—statements or actions attributed to the prophet Mohammed which are used as tools for interpretation, context, and construction of Islamic legal codes.⁷¹ She uses this understanding to justify the sexual service of low caste girls to upper caste men. To ensure the family’s lineage, she coerces the maids into sexual service to the family sons until they become pregnant and prove the sons’ fertility, then discards them and their illegitimate children. The maids are encouraged to maintain the illusion of accordance with Muslim law. Though they are unmarried, they are encouraged to use language which a married woman would use to refer to her husband: “[p]rivately, they always referred to their masters as grooms” (“Lingering Fragrance” 207). However, after a maid becomes pregnant, the family enforces her low status: “[t]he mahal tradition was that when cattle became heavy with child they were despatched to the village. As soon as they were relieved of the calf and the milk started flowing, they were summoned back.

70 Ashraf: Indian Muslims of Persian descent, who took on the role of upper caste Muslims in India.

71 Much Muslim feminist theology, such as that pursued by Fatima Mernissi, examines the source and interpretation of hadiths defining women’s role, with the intention of refuting false hadiths constructed to justify oppression of women. See *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (Reading, MA: Perseus, 1991).

Maids received identical treatment. Pregnant ones were packed off to the village. There they delivered the brat and there it was left to grow or die” (“Lingering Fragrance” 197-8).

The designation of low caste women as animals and property diminishes their humanity and enables the upper caste family to treat them as property, leading directly to the acceptance of intercaste violence. The expected sexual availability of low caste women recurs as an issue for Dalit women regardless of religion.⁷² After a maid serves this purpose, the family shifts to upholding the cultural and scriptural Islamic laws, but against low caste women, rather than equally: “[w]ithout a nikah a woman . . . should be stoned in the market-place” (“Lingering Fragrance” 220).⁷³ The shift in language and the violence that accompanies it expose the hypocrisy with which the upper caste Muslim family reinforces caste divisions in order to serve their own interests. This lack of equality centres on the woman’s caste and gender.

Likewise, despite claims that Christianity is a religion of equality, Indian Christian elites have interpreted scripture to support the caste system: “Christian egalitarianism has frequently been all but totally obscured by no less Christian affirmations of hierarchy” (Forrester 8). Historically, Christian missionaries seem to have focused less on doctrines of equality than Muslim missionaries did. In the early seventeenth century, Roman Catholic missionaries “appear to have regarded the caste system as the given and religiously neutral structure of Indian society within which evangelization, understood as

72 See Sharmila Rege, “Caste and Gender: The Violence against Women in India,” ed. P. Jogand, *Dalit Women* (New Delhi: Gyan, 1994). See also chapter six.

73 A nikah is a matrimonial contract in Islam.

the conversion of individuals without detaching them from their social context, and also the conversion of whole caste-groups, might proceed” (Forrester 14). The Inquisition at Goa, beginning in the sixteenth century and continuing until the early nineteenth century, targeted Christian converts who maintained their Hindu traditions, who then fled Goa and maintained caste traditions. One significant Christian populations in India, in Kanara, Karnataka, is “governed by a caste system which is akin to that of the Hindus which came from Goa with the early immigrants” (Chopra 243). These approaches allowed the caste system to prevail even before British colonizers noted its usefulness to their own imposed hierarchy of social class. However, these systems arise in the specific context of colonialism, whereby Indian Christians faced racism despite their conversion to the “modern,” or “rational” monotheism of the colonizers. Their affirmations of hierarchy resisted on one hand the colonial hierarchies which situated them in an inferior position, and on the other hand reproduced these hierarchies as they applied to women and to the caste system, as a means of claiming power. Both Christians and Muslims in India faced particular pressures as a result of British colonialism and Hindu nationalism.⁷⁴

At the same time, Christian missionaries reinforced both high- and low-caste affiliations. They allowed converts to maintain their caste, and because of mass caste-conversions from low caste communities for whom Christianity’s egalitarian doctrine offered some freedom from caste oppression, the two identities became associated: “Christianity therefore became identified as the ‘Parangi’ religion, limited to foreigners

74 I consider the pressures of sexism and casteism which provoke Dalits to seek power through the reinforcement of those hierarchies, in chapter six.

and polluting castes, and conversion for the high castes was regarded as tantamount to becoming a Parangi and adopting a whole series of foreign and impure ways” (Forrester 15).⁷⁵ Seeing this attitude and the rejection of Christianity by the higher castes, in Tamil Nadu in the first half of the seventeenth century, the Jesuit missionary Robert de Nobili focused his missionary strategies on upper caste Hindus in order to shift the association between Christianity and low castes. He assured them that they need not break caste through contact with untouchable Christians: “By becoming a Christian . . . one does not renounce his caste, nobility or usages” (Forrester 15).⁷⁶ High caste converts to Islam maintain their status as well: “many Pathans are publicly known as high-caste Hindu converts” (Ali 603-4). Conversion demographics were integral to the development of caste among Muslims and Christians for two reasons: conversions occurred gradually, and they occurred within caste groups.

Bama’s unnamed narrator argues that caste practices are more prevalent among Christian elites. When she is accused of stealing, the village priest uses her caste as proof of her guilt: “you are from the Cheri [caste]. You might have done it. You must have done it” (17). Neither are Christian rituals accessible to all, in the spirit of Christian egalitarianism; the school Principal refuses to allow her to leave school to attend her brother and sister’s First Communion: “what celebration can there be in your caste, for a

75 Parangi, or feringhi, is used in Hindi; it translates to “foreigner,” and carries connotations of outcaste status.

76 Forrester takes this citation from Cyril Bruce Firth, who takes it from J.S. Chandler’s book *The History of the Jesuit Mission in Madura, S. India, in the 17th and 18th Centuries* (1909), which is out of print. See Firth, *An Introduction to Indian Church History*, The Christian Students’ Library (Mysore: Wesley Press, 1961).

First Communion?” (17). Antony Raj’s unpublished sociological study on caste in Christianity shows that rather than espousing Christian doctrines of equality, priests and nuns carry their elite caste membership into their religious life: “speaking about the caste mentality, and . . . calling by the caste appellation, the priests and nuns are more discriminating than the caste Hindus and Christians” (quoted in Stanislaus 78). Through positions of authority, elite Christians reinforce oppressive caste hierarchies.

Bama’s narrator also concludes that authority figures in the Indian Christian church benefit from caste discrimination, and so perpetuate the caste system:

Far worse is the attitude within our own church. . . . In the churches, Dalits are the most, in numbers alone. In everything else, they are the least. It is only the upper-caste Christians who enjoy the benefits and comforts of the Church. Even amongst the priests and nuns, it is the upper-castes who hold all the high positions, show off their authority and throw their weight about. And if Dalits become priests or nuns, they are pushed aside and marginalised first of all, before the rest go about their business. (69)

She experiences these divisions among Christian women, where monastic orders observe untouchability through segregation: “a Sister told us that in certain orders they would not accept Harijan [untouchable] women as prospective nuns and that there was even a separate order for them somewhere” (22). Christian and Muslim communities are already marginalized in the British colonial context and the dominant Hindu culture, and treated as outcastes in Hinduism. As a means of participating in the larger hierarchies in which

they have less power and privilege, elites within a marginalized group exercise their power even more forcefully through the caste system.

Both Sathianadhan and Bama's texts depict the inequality which women face in their Christian communities. Despite her aptitude, Saguna is discouraged from pursuing education overseas: "The fact is you would not stand the climate and the hard strain. You can stay in India and still learn" (Sathianadhan 150).⁷⁷ Her poor health and the weakness of her body in the text becomes a metaphor for religious and gender oppression imposed on women's bodies.⁷⁸ Bama addresses the threat of violence against women should they resist the more implicit forms of discouragement: "If a woman so much as stands alone and by herself somewhere, all sorts of men gather towards her showing their teeth" (102). This threat mirrors that against low caste women in Chughtai's short stories in an implicit threat of sexual violence, specifically against low caste women. Doctrines of equality in Christianity and Islam do not undermine existing and syncretic practices of oppressive hierarchies of race, caste and gender. Caste and gender intersect at the site of Dalit women's bodies, regardless of religious affiliation.

Colonialism, Syncretism and Existing Hierarchies

In response to the perceived religious and cultural syncretism between Islam and Hinduism, revivalist practices were well entrenched by the time the British took political control. Hindu culture reacted to contact with other religions during both the Mughal and British empires by attempting to preserve (or invent) traditions, and developed or

⁷⁷ Discouragement from education on the basis of caste and gender is also discussed in chapter seven.

⁷⁸ Women and bodies are discussed further in chapter five.

reinforced strict gender roles. South Asians further emphasized cultural purity due to the unique pressures of European colonialism, which attempted to demonstrate European racial, religious, and cultural superiority (Sarkar *Hindu Wife*; Said *Culture and Imperialism*). Hindu and Muslim revivalism and nationalism developed in response to foreign rule.

During the colonial period, the British policy of non-interference in matters of religion contributed to reinforcing patriarchal religious and cultural practices: “In many instances, the British tolerated indigenous religious and cultural practices that were deeply patriarchal, such as dowry, polygamy, and male inheritance, to avoid social unrest and the stirring up of anticolonial sentiment” (Kwok “Unbinding Our Feet” 65).

Orientalist academic practices defined “Eastern” religions as static and unchanging:

Through an Orientalist study of scriptures, a Hindu past was reconstituted as a lost ideal, which contrasted sharply with the present degeneration of India. At the same time, the British were shown to have a knowledge of scripture superior to that of the Indians and could better interpret the Indian past. (Kwok “Unbinding Our Feet” 65)⁷⁹

In combination, non-interference political policies combined with Orientalist academic practices resulted in the petrification of religious practices as they existed in the nineteenth century.

⁷⁹ See also Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

Missionaries and colonial practices do not carry the entire blame for the inclusion of the caste system in non-Hindu religions; the strength of the caste system in India outweighed doctrines of equality which the texts or missionaries presented. Syncretic practices continually impact religious development in South Asia. During the Mughal period, despite the shift to an Islamic government, society was still predominantly Hindu, and Muslim and Hindu communities influenced and overlapped each other:

[i]t was thus not the influence of Hinduism among a previously 'pure', 'uncontaminated' Muslim community . . . but the continued impact of Hindu beliefs and customs on the converts, that explains the continued hold of caste-related practices and assumptions among large sections of the Indian Muslim community. (Sikand)

Likewise, continued relationships between Christian converts and their Hindu neighbours resulted in the exchange of caste practices (Dirks).

The most basic caste organization among Indian Muslims distinguishes between ashraf and ajlaf (or non-ashraf); these designations correspond with high caste and low caste respectively, in the Hindu caste system. This distinction supports both an historical ethnic and class interpretation of Muslim caste. On one hand, ashraf "claim foreign origin from Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, or Central Asia," while ajlaf are alleged to be low caste Hindu converts (Ali 603). Since Muslim immigrants to India acted as rulers to the native peasants: "the ashraf belonged to the dominant political elites, while the bulk of the ajlaf remained associated with ancestral professions as artisans and peasants which

were looked down upon as inferior and demeaning” (Sikand). On the other hand, while caste attitudes distinguished between Muslims of Middle Eastern origin and Indian birth and allowed for the maintenance of caste among Indian converts to Islam, communities which follow Islam incorporate existing social structures: “[i]t is quite possible . . . [to] argue that the similarities between South Asian Muslims and Hindus are not a result of assimilation, but rather of structural correspondence” between the Hindu caste system and Arabic and Persian social organization (Z. Ahmad 39). Just as British class hierarchies mutually supported an Indian Christian caste system, so too did Arab or Persian social hierarchies support an Indian Muslim caste system.

However, an analysis which considers the intersecting influence of both British colonialism and Hindu nationalism complicates explanations of caste among Indian Muslims which rely on foreigner/convert or ruler/peasant divisions. In many ways European Orientalist scholars fascinated by the caste system reinforced it, particularly among converts: “the emphasis on class differences between so-called hereditary Muslims and Muslim converts is part of a well documented tendency in British commentaries to explain Indian society in terms of the caste system” (Viswanathan *Outside the Fold* 169). During the colonial period, the British policy of neutrality in religious matters affected politics and consequently the independence efforts, since a main nationalist focus was the brotherhood (male) of Hindus. The Christian community as a whole distanced itself from the independence movement. Thus Christians were depicted as anti-national, and were associated with foreigners; Hindus perceived “any

migration, large or small, from the Hindu to the Christian community as a loss to the nation [and] a direct blow to [their] political strength” (Forrester 185). Likewise, the anxieties of Muslims, faced with Hindu nationalist attempts to create a Hindu state or Hindu secularist dismissal of existing inequalities, were perceived as attacks on the independence movement itself (Kamra). Explanations of caste in Islam particularly resonate with a Hindu nationalist ideology; an explicit distinction is made between Muslim “foreigners” in India, and Hindu “converts” to Islam, where “foreigners” are deemed oppressive to Hindus and converts, while “converts” may be reconverted back into the Hindu fold.⁸⁰

The intersections between caste, class, and gender persistently appear in the selected literary texts. Though caste and class overlap to a great extent, Saguna defines their distinct characters in her response to condescension from British women in the Christian community: “We are the real aristocrats of this place ... you are middle-class people. She is a Brahmin, and only takes money from the Mission because she is poor. She is no servant. In your country you are no Brahmins. You are *Sudras*” (original emphasis, Sathianadhan 115). Her Christian faith has not overcome the hierarchies of race, class, and caste; she responds to an expression of class and race hierarchies by appealing to caste hierarchy. Bama’s narrator discusses how, among Christian Tamil women, class often exposes caste affiliation:

⁸⁰ On their website, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a right-wing Hindu nationalist political party, explicitly defines Indian Muslims in these ways. See *BJP History: Its Birth and Early Growth*, 2011, Bharatiya Janata Party, <<http://www.bjp.org/>>, 16 Oct 2012.

All the final year students were invited to a party, which they attended dressed in silk saris and decked out in their best things. As for me I didn't have a single decent sari to my name . . . I realized how deeply shamed one can be for the lack of a few rupees in one's hand . . . I hid in the bathroom until the party was over. (65)

Modes of dress regularly mark caste and religious status—especially for women in the colonial context.⁸¹ Finally, gender, caste and class intersect in Chughtai's short story "Kallu," where matriarch Mumani enforces caste and class endogamy as a means of maintaining status after Partition: "the loss of land had resulted in a lowering of status and income" ("Kallu" 58). She manages her family's status by regulating her daughter: purity is regulated through the management of Salima's body. In all of these examples, existing class structures in Christian and Muslim communities mutually regulate caste distinctions between women. Notably, women access power through observing caste discrimination against other women, just as caste elites in marginalized Christian or Muslim communities access power through caste or gender hierarchies.

Caste practices, whereby status is assigned at birth, then enforced through endogamy and violence, are the result of internal and external forces in Christianity and Islam. Other than the distinction between Muslims of Arabic origin and Muslim converts

81 Several writers have discussed women's role as bearers of tradition in the face of colonialism, which facilitates men's ability to participate in modernity. See Nivedita Menon, "Between the Burqa and the Beauty Parlor? Globalization, Cultural Nationalism, and Feminist Politics" in Ania Loomba, *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 206-29. See also Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993). Ambedkar particularly considered the ways religion and caste marked women's bodies; I discuss this further in chapter five.

from Hinduism, which are irrelevant today due to intermarriages between historical immigrant and convert Muslims, the Muslim caste system resembles the Hindu caste system.⁸² Family name indicates caste: “Muslim converts of Indian origin are generally called by their caste names” (Ansari 35). In “Kallu,” the narrator’s mother refers to the name Qureshi as “a good caste” (59). A major reason Ambedkar rejected Christianity as a potential religion to which to convert was his recognition of the persistence of caste names and occupations in the community: “There are Brahmin Christians and Non-Brahmin Christians. Among Non-Brahmin Christians there are Maratha Christians, Mahar Christians, Mang Christians and Bhangi Christians. Similarly in the South there are Pariah Christians, Malla Christians and Madiga Christians” (*Essays*). Despite his conversion in *Saguna*, Harishchandra still identifies as Brahmin against the low caste Mahars: “The proud Brahmin was to preach to *Mahars*, and to live with the lowest of the low” (Sathianadhan 64). While the forces which contribute to the persistence of caste in non-Hindu religions differ in terms of missionary focus, existing hierarchical structures, and source community, the end result is the same. Importantly, many of these forces operate on bodies, especially women’s bodies.

Pollution and Purity in Non-Hindu Traditions

Since caste carries into non-Hindu religions, the corresponding attitudes toward religious purity and pollution apply as well. The Hindu understanding of pollution

82 The fiction of immigrant or “invader” Muslims in India today is largely reproduced by right-wing Hindu nationalist political parties in order to develop the concept of a pure Hindu state in which Muslims should either emigrate or convert back to Hinduism (Bharatiya Janata Party). Likewise, contemporary Muslim immigrants appear to integrate with upper caste Hindu elites, rather than with Indian Muslims, although this community requires more research.

constructs caste both inside and outside of caste affiliation. Belonging to a community confers impurity upon a member, and impure castes are prohibited from entering temples. The four varnas include Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra Hindus. Outcastes—or those without caste, also known as avarna—include Dalits, and all members of non-Hindu religions. Hindu doctrine holds that non-Indians are born without caste, and therefore are avarna, “outcaste,” or untouchable. While in most cases outcastes are born into this polluted state, conversion—while consensual or forced—conveys an irrevocable polluted state upon the individual; conversion from Hinduism is a means of “breaking caste.”⁸³ Dalits are consistently excluded within Hinduism, even in the case of the communalism which infamously led to a mosque’s destruction in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, when right-wing Hindus claimed it was built on the birthplace of the god Rama: “even in the aftermath of the demolition of the Babri masjid [mosque], which was ostensibly the act of a united Hindu community, all temples were not open to dalits” (Malik 323-4). In Sathianadhan’s novel *Saguna*, when Harichandra converts to Christianity, he leaves his Hindu caste as well, or becomes outcaste: “a Brahmin renounced his ancestral faith . . . and allowed himself to be polluted and degraded thus in the sight of the world” (55). The text explicitly connects conversion and pollution. Furthermore, Harichandra’s act of conversion imposes the same polluted status on his wife, because she is considered his property.

83 Forced conversion, raised as a spectre by religious nationalists or orthodox, involves the imposition of an irrevocable polluted state on an individual. This imposition is effected through the breach of bodily integrity, whether by circumcision (conversion to Islam), forced or subversive breach of dietary laws (conversion to Islam or Christianity through the consumption of beef or pork), or through rape. This understanding of forced conversion requires further analysis.

At the level of religious prejudice, purity observance acts to regulate worship within Islam and Christianity as well as in Hindu purity observances against Muslims and Christians. Ghaus Ansari states that low caste Muslims are barred from mosques, just as Dalits are barred from temples:

A Bhangi, either Muslim or non-Muslim, is not permitted to enter a mosque no matter how clean he may be at the time. Although in theory a Muslim Bhangi or Chamar is allowed to offer his prayer in a mosque, but in usual practice their entrance into such pious places as mosques and shrines of Muslim saints is socially disapproved and thus it is resisted.

(50)⁸⁴

Furthermore, Zarina Bhatti's studies expose Muslim purity practices whereby upper caste individuals avoid polluting activities or contact, and observe purification rituals:

physical contact with individuals of [polluted] castes is avoided not only by Ashrafs but also by non-Ashrafs. Among the Muslims, if a person accidentally touches an individual of an unclean caste, the former must purify himself by a simple bath, particularly prior to performing a religious function like saying 'namaz', reading the Koran or entering a mosque.

84 Bhangi and Chamar are low caste names referring to polluting occupations.

These practices among Indian Muslims mirror practices in Hinduism whereby lower castes are prohibited from temples, and upper castes practice untouchability and purify themselves after polluting activities or contact with lower castes.

The danger posed to caste purity through the bodies of low caste women is presented in Chughtai's short story "Lingering Fragrance" through the metaphor of murder: the low caste girl Haleema is the dark "shadow," the caste "assassin" who eventually pollutes the son Chhamman so that he is dead in the eyes of his family (190).⁸⁵ Importantly, no purification ritual exists for an individual of an outcaste.⁸⁶ Within Islam, lower castes are restricted from worship as well as restricted from contact with upper caste worshippers. Likewise, in Christianity, Bama's narrator tells that "Naickers were upper caste, and therefore must not touch Parayas" (13). Brahmin Hindu pollution rituals apply in Christian and Muslim communities. While Hindus perceive that all Muslims and Christians are impure because of their religion, Muslims and Christians apply caste purity and pollution restrictions to those who share their faith.

Institutional Violence Against Converts

Legal rulings and constitutional amendments maintain the precarious economic status of Dalits, Muslims, and Christians affected by caste discrimination. Although India's government provides recognition, assistance and autonomy, various levels of government administration repeatedly deny these benefits to low and outcaste Indians.

85 Interestingly, in Syria in the twelfth century, Muslims used the term "hashishi," the word from which "assassin" derives, pejoratively against members of an Ismaili sect; see Farhad Daftar, *A Short History of the Ismailis: Traditions of a Muslim Community* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998) 13.

86 Likewise, female reproductive processes convey inherent pollution upon women's bodies, discussed further in chapter six.

These forms of insitutional violence arise under British rule, and continue as a direct legacy of colonialism: “the Government of India (Scheduled Caste) Order, 1936, gave a list of the ‘Scheduled Castes.’ Here the term ‘Scheduled Caste’ included a new specification that ‘no Indian Christian shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste’” (Stanislaus 55). The government excluded converts by claiming that Christianity freed Dalits from their caste status and the accompanying discrimination. However, the decision to refuse Scheduled Caste status results in negative economic and social outcomes: “the protective discrimination for Scheduled Castes and Tribes reversed at a blow the possible economic and educational advantages of conversion to Christianity, and indeed provided new and compelling disincentives to conversions from the underprivileged groups” (Forrester 179). Legal refusal to recognize the economically oppressed status of low caste converts both reinforces the double disadvantage of caste and religion and reproduces antagonistic attitudes toward conversion.

Muslims experience levels of discrimination similar to Dalits, including decreased access to basic needs. The report of Human Rights Watch to the 2001 United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance states that, “[w]hile the government has allocated equal amounts of monetary compensation and food supplies to members of all communities, Dalit and Muslim populations [do] not have the same access to adequate shelter, electricity, running water, and other supplies available to others” (“Caste Discrimination”). Because of the official policy that caste does not exist in Islam, governing bodies withhold support. The

ideology that conversions from Hinduism are always coerced influences laws against conversion. Perceptions of conversion and laws against conversion combine to increase the threat of economic or physical repercussions against converts or non-Hindus. This multifaceted context further discourages conversion.

In 2010, the Andhra Pradesh High Court used this context of conversion to strike down a law providing reservations in education and employment for Muslims because it “was religion-specific and potentially encouraged conversions and was thus unsustainable” (“Andhra HC”). When government officials must acknowledge that outcaste communities, whether Hindu or not, experience economic oppression, their approach obscures caste and religious discrimination. Furthermore, governments deny assistance to existing oppressed groups by suggesting that these economic incentives provide enough reason to convert. Likewise, the language of scientific research is used to support anti-Muslim and casteist attitudes; in the Andhra HC decision, the court ruled that the Commission identifying “backward classes” relied on “data collated by the Anthropological Survey of India . . . [which] was meant for determining the profile of the Indian population and not for deciding on affirmative action for Muslims” (“Andhra HC”). The dominant Hindu government uses apparently secular reasoning to reproduce discrimination on the basis of caste and religious identity.⁸⁷ This discrimination reinforces low caste status through ensuring maintenance of low class markers of poverty.

⁸⁷ The connections between a secular state and a dominant Hindu faith are explored further in chapter seven.

The Challenge of Caste after Conversion

Conversion to Christianity or Islam has not offered an escape from caste discrimination. Despite explicit doctrines of equality in both traditions, economic disadvantage and religious purity observances remain in both traditions. Christians and Muslims observe caste within their communities, while Hindus observe caste against Christians and Muslims as outcastes. Neo-Buddhists must anticipate similar challenges to those present in the Christian and Muslim communities. While Ambedkar chose the Buddhist tradition because it is indigenous to India, anti-conversion attitudes still apply. In a statement to the press, Mohandas K. Gandhi demonstrated the upper caste Hindu attitude toward conversion when he responded to Ambedkar's call for conversion: "religion is not like a house or a cloak, which can be changed at will. It is a more integral part of one's self than one's own body" ("Untouchability on Last Legs"). In context, Gandhi merely reaffirms the Hindu belief that one must be born into the religion, and conversion results in breaking caste and becoming polluted. The Hindu doctrines of karma and dharma hold that even if an individual is born a non-Hindu, she must follow that duty. Conversion means attempting to choose one's dharma, and thus failing to perform it. Through his religiously justified enforcement of social hierarchy through the doctrine of karma, Gandhi confirms the expectation that low castes will continue to serve upper castes. Furthermore, his response attempts to construct an Indian modernity which is particularly Hindu. Likewise, practices of gender discrimination in Buddhism undermine the doctrines of equality.

As Ambedkar noted, elite Buddhism incorporates casteist attitudes.

Sangharakshita played an important role in Indian Buddhism; a Buddhist of British origin, he founded the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) based in Britain and now known as the Triranta Buddhist Community), and worked closely with Ambedkar in the neo-Buddhist movement. He relates a meeting in which Ambedkar asked: “Why does your Maha Bodhi Society have a Bengali Brahmin for its President?” (Sangharakshita 18). Sangharakshita goes on to note: “Not only was the President of the Maha Bodhi Society a Bengali Brahmin, but that Brahmin was also a former President of the Hindu Mahasabha, a right-wing Caste Hindu organization” (18). Casteist attitudes, intersecting with other modes of oppression such as gender, risk emerging as the movement grows. For instance, Buddhism is already known as a “Dalit” religion in twenty-first century popular discourse, paralleling the perception of Christianity and Islam as “polluting castes” or “foreigner” religions, while elite Buddhism as it existed prior to the movement may offer an upper caste Buddhist alternative to conversion.

Class poses another challenge; writers such as Baby Kamble and Anand Teltumbde accuse upper class Dalits of abandoning their responsibilities to their community once they integrate into the upper caste and upper class Westernized Hindu elite (Pandit and Kamble; Teltumbde “Dalit Capitalism”).⁸⁸ The neo-Buddhist community must understand anti-conversion and pro-caste influences in order to incorporate countermeasures into the conversion movement. The close connection between class,

⁸⁸ I revisit this accusation in chapter six with regard to the appeals of elite models of success.

caste, gender, and other forms of discrimination, as Bama, Chughtai, and Sathianadan demonstrate in their writing, situate caste conversion within a matrix of hierarchies which support one another. The connection between these modes of oppression poses a challenge to the neo-Buddhist community in terms of women's rights as much as the abolition of caste. Where a doctrine of equality fails at the level of caste, it also fails at the level of gender.

Part II

Reinventing the Wheel: Ambedkar and Western Thought

Where sociological studies rarely address the intersections of caste, gender and religion, studies of Ambedkar infrequently examine the intersections of religion, politics, and social activism in neo-Buddhism. However, the influence of feminism, Marxism and engaged Buddhism in neo-Buddhism stand to challenge the caste system more effectively than in previous conversion movements. While colonialism and industrialization brought significant challenges to class, gender, and caste roles, Ambedkar had a temporal advantage over the Buddha, as well as the advantage of cross-cultural exchange with the West. Reflecting processes of the postcolonial third space, or the Buddhist middle-way, he placed Buddhist philosophy in a dialogue with Marxist and feminist theory to challenge both British colonialism and Brahmin patriarchy, and to develop his vision of a socially just religion. European women imported Western feminism and women's movements to South Asia, and these ideas, in combination with existing women's movements, achieved common currency during the independence movement despite the relegation of women's issues to a low priority; Kumari Jayawardena discusses the variety of these movements in her book *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Rule* (1995). More central to Ambedkar's social vision was Marxist theory.

Ambedkar also had extensive exposure to political theory and social justice movements in New York in the 1920s during his studies at Columbia University. Writers

such as Christophe Jaffrelot (2005) accuse Ambedkar of applying inappropriate Western philosophies to Buddhism which run contrary to Buddhism's "true" nature. However, Viswanathan argues that conversion allows for new interpretation and thus renewal of a tradition: "Coming to an established religion from the outside allows . . . converts to interpret the new religion with a freedom not necessarily available to those already within the fold" (*Outside the Fold* 125). As a convert, Ambedkar interpreted Buddhism through a lens of both Western theories and Dalit identity in order to create a useable Buddhism for contemporary liberation.

Briefly, specific Western philosophies affected Indian culture negatively. British colonialism imported modes of capitalist production which exacerbated divisions in class and gendered labour, just as they had done in an increasingly industrialized Britain (Hartmann; McClintock). Women's role in child-rearing became emphasized, as did their conceptual positioning as the repositories and transmitters of authentic culture to the next generation in the face of rapid change: "Particularly when a community feels its identity or existence under threat, its proud assertion of identity always appears marked on the bodies of 'its' women first" (Menon "Between the Burqa" 209). Women often internalized their role as the traditional bearers of culture, and continue to play a role in regulating both women and men in contemporary India. Finally, Indian women hold traditional responsibility for the maintenance of the household shrine and ritual observance within the home, as opposed to men's responsibility for worship in the public space of the temple. The stratification of women's roles as domestic, traditional, and

religious stems from a South Asian religious life increasingly focused on the home because of apparent Westernization and secularization in the public sphere: “No matter what the changes in the external conditions of life for women, they must not lose their essentially spiritual (that is, feminine) virtues; they must not, in other words, become essentially Westernized” (Chatterjee *Nation* 126). These factors led to a glorification of women’s place in the domestic sphere, and increased cultural and religious sex-segregation.

Ambedkar, Feminism and Marxism

Ambedkar noted the negative aspects of Western philosophy which produced and endorsed doctrines of capitalism and sexism (Telumbde “Dalit Capitalism”). However, he also drew on Western philosophies which contributed to social justice movements, as a complement to Buddhist philosophies. Buddhism, Marxism and feminism all serve as political bases from which to organize for social justice; in her summary of interviews with Dalit women in the book *Pan on Fire*, Sumitra Bhave states that in neo-Buddhism, “Mahars began to come together to pray in the *Buddha-Vihars* of their neighbourhoods. These gatherings were the beginning of their political base” (xxxv).⁸⁹ Likewise, women mobilize because of neo-Buddhist changes to cultural traditions. In an interview, the neo-Buddhist Dalit woman Rukmini notes: “Generally it’s the men who lead the prayer, except on Wednesdays when only women pray. We are about 25 and anyone can lead us” (Bhave 97). In this way, Buddhism brings Dalits together and Dalit women together,

⁸⁹ Mahar: a Dalit caste name. Vihar: neo-Buddhist temple or community centre; this term derives from the vihara—the Buddhist monastery—but in neo-Buddhism shifts the focus to lay worshippers.

which enables community identity and strength, further crumbling the barrier between the political and domestic spheres, spheres constructed and reinforced by colonialism and Hinduism.

In neo-Buddhism, Ambedkar attempted to excise the syncretic Hindu traditions which led to caste discrimination. This agenda in combination with Marxist and feminist theory also served to condemn gender roles. Dalit women began to identify the limitations which Hinduism had placed on them, and to challenge their cultural gender roles. In the book *Pan on Fire*, Ashoka, a neo-Buddhist, states that “Hinduism treats women as inferior to men. It confines them to the home. . . . But I never felt that I was a woman as far as our religion was concerned. In our religion and our home men and women are treated as equals” (Bhave 141). Ambedkar’s action against Hinduism persists at a practical level, in women’s daily experiences, rather than just a theoretical or superficial level.

Although Ambedkar eventually rejected Marxism as a means of abolishing caste discrimination, Marxist theory contributes significantly to his religious agenda: “To him, Buddhism and Marxism were similar in valuing material prosperity as good, but differed regarding the path to equality and social justice; with Buddhism, this happened by changing the minds of men through the Dhamma” (Omvedt *Buddhism* 257). In his article “Buddha or Karl Marx,” Ambedkar argues that communism, as a social structure based on shared production and property, is achieved through Buddhist philosophy: “the Buddha established Communism so far as the Sangh was concerned without dictatorship. It may

be that it was a communism on a very small scale but it was communism without dictatorship a miracle which Lenin failed to do [sic]" ("Buddha or Karl Marx"). Historian Romila Thapar describes the early Buddhist world-view as a response to shifts in ownership and the development of private property. After a remote past in which desire did not exist, "a process of decay began, when needs, wants and desires became manifest. These led to the notion of ownership that resulted in the concept of the family, then led to private property, and these in turn to disputes and struggles that necessitated law and a controlling authority" (*Early India* 149). Buddhist traditions thus seek an absence of desires, and thus enlightenment, through abolishing private property. To paraphrase Rita M. Gross's assessment of the relationship between Buddhism and feminism in her book *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, *Buddhism is Marxism*.⁹⁰

However, as Chair of the Indian Constitution Drafting Committee, and the author of the Hindu Code Bill, Ambedkar saw that secular political approaches alone would not enable the destruction of caste or gender hierarchies, despite his commitment to the creation of a secular democratic government. Because of its connection to Hinduism, the problem of caste was not merely a social problem, but a religious problem. In response to Marx's critiques of religion, Ambedkar understood that spirituality was a valuable part of life: "[h]umanity does not only want economic values, it also wants spiritual values to be retained" ("Buddha or Karl Marx"). Ambedkar believed that not only was caste

90 "Buddhism is feminism!" Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy* 130.

embedded in both religion and culture, but that the rejection of religion as a whole undermined its potential for social change.

Marx critiqued religion as a means by which the elites control the people, but Ambedkar did not necessarily reject Marx's attitude toward religion. In fact, Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism largely parallels Marxist theory; he chose Buddhism for its focus on rational thought, personal responsibility, and absence of divine inspiration: "the purpose of philosophy is to reconstruct the world and not to explain the origin of the universe" ("Buddha or Karl Marx"). Furthermore, he argued that Buddhism surpasses Marxism in its goals of shared production and property. Gail Omvedt summarizes the arguments of his article "The Illusion of the Communists and the Duty of the Untouchable Class" in *Janata* (1938): "Buddhism, in the Sangha, abolished private property more thoroughly and without bloodshed and was therefore superior to Marxism" (*Dalits and the Democratic Revolution* 230). At the same time, Ambedkar's incorporation of Marxism allowed for a critique of colonial rule and the capitalist state, and provides continued access to critiques of neo-colonialism and globalization in modern India. Where the modern Indian state is both Hindu and capitalist, and incorporates caste structures into its systems of production, Marxism contributes to a continued critique of Hindu capitalism. Ambedkar also used Marxism to challenge elite class and caste culture within Buddhism; he "was alienated by much in the existing Buddhist communities in Asia, feeling that the Bhikkhu Sangha in particular had become in most cases too unworldly and parasitical. In fact, for him Buddhism was to be a total world-view, an

alternative not simply to Brahmanism but to Marxism also” (Omvedt “Ambedkar’s New Buddhism”). Marxism and Buddhism offer each other opportunities for mutual transformation.

Compatibility between Buddhism and Western Theory

Social justice movements in the West, including the US civil rights and feminist movements, also influenced Ambedkar’s development of neo-Buddhism. Major criticism of Ambedkar’s choice of religion revolves around his interpretation of Buddhism.

Christophe Jaffrelot argues that Ambedkar’s revision of Buddhism results in a political movement which is not a religion:

Ambedkar selected, within Buddhism, the values which he found in western republican doctrine. He legitimately highlights the egalitarian meaning of Buddhism, but he undoubtedly goes too far when deducing from it a message of social justice. The egalitarianism of the Buddha comes more from a religious and spiritual logic. (133)

However, Ambedkar drew on the political models of northern republican kingdoms at the time of the Buddha as much as from Western republican doctrine; his interpretation of Buddhism must be seen as a challenge to Western appropriation of democracy in the colonialist project, as much as to caste and gender oppression in Hinduism. Thapar describes the democratic principles of debate and voting during the time of the Buddha: “The assembly was presided over by the head of the clan. This office was not hereditary and was regarded as that of a chief, rather than a king . . . The matter for discussion was

placed before the assembly and debated, and if a unanimous decision could not be reached it was put to vote” (Thapar *Early India* 148). Buddhism encapsulates ideals mirrored in Marxism and feminism. While it may not explicitly contain a message of social justice in its core doctrines, Buddhism may serve as a tool to effect social justice, and Ambedkar intended to use it as such.

Other writers argue that Ambedkar’s vision of social justice is compatible with Buddhist teachings: “the Four Noble Truths are focused upon want and the insolubility of personal desire, while Navayana Buddhism is focused upon social need, for which there exists the possibility of a material solution” (Tartakov 210). One step on the path to enlightenment requires a Buddhist to take a vow as a bodhisattva, an incarnation of the Buddha or an enlightened individual who dedicates herself to rebirth, in order to help others attain enlightenment. Ambedkar particularly noted the concept of the bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism. Gross likewise connects liberation and the bodhisattva path to social action:

When one realizes how unliberating, how oppressive, economically, politically, psychologically, and spiritually, are some of the dominant forms of social organization and authority, it is hard to imagine being serious about liberation or the bodhisattva path without being involved in social action at some level. (*Buddhism after Patriarchy* 183)

Social need represents a significant barrier to enlightenment, which the Buddha recognizes in a legend associated with the *Dhammapada*, part of the Buddhist canon.

When a man arrives hungry to a sermon, the Buddha ensures that the man eats, then gives his sermon. The Buddha replies to his disciples' surprise by pointing out that hunger may prevent someone from fully understanding his teachings ("A Certain Layman"). Since the Buddha demonstrated the connection between enlightenment and social or personal need, Ambedkar's understanding of Buddhism as a means to social justice does not necessarily circumvent the focus on desire as the barrier to enlightenment.

Likewise, Buddhism is compatible with feminism as a social vision. The Buddhist doctrine of egolessness also serves Ambedkar's goal of developing a positive Dalit identity.⁹¹ In Hinduism, Dalits remain committed to the dharma or duty of self-sacrificing service to upper castes, just as women in patriarchal societies learn and often internalize a self-sacrificing role. With regard to women's style of ego in patriarchal societies, Gross writes: "Self-effacement is just a style of ego different from self-aggrandizement, but both equally cause suffering to self and others" (*Buddhism after Patriarchy* 162). Dalits in a Brahmin-dominated society learn and internalize the self-effacing role of untouchability which likewise causes suffering to self and others. This commitment restricts both Dalits and non-Dalit women to samsara—the cycle of desire—as stated in the second Noble Truth. In the positive neo-Buddhist identity, Dalits gain the possibility of neither clinging to untouchability as a submissive identity nor rejecting it as an oppressive identity, but accepting its essencelessness. The essencelessness of ego, or identity, is a step on the path to liberation, which frees Dalits to work for the liberation of

91 For more discussion on the concept of egolessness as it applies to Buddhism, gender, and caste, see chapter two.

others, for social action in the Buddhist context of the bodhisattva. I argue that the contemporary combination of Marxism and feminism in neo-Buddhism has provided the language to identify and direct the mobilization and politicization of the Dalit community which developed in historical Dalit movements.

Conflicts and Opportunities between Buddhist, Marxist, and Feminist Theories

Though I have argued that Buddhism, Marxism and feminism are compatible, Ambedkar does not incorporate Marxist and feminist theories wholesale. In fact, all three theories have posed conflicts for each other. Just as colonialist theories often conflate race and class with the feminine, in the Indian context, critics have noted that Marxist groups often reproduce existing class and gender hierarchies: Marxism “systematically downplayed non-economic factors such as gender and caste, arguing that these would be nearly automatically taken care of with socialist revolution” (Omvedt *Buddhism* 254). Ambedkar rejected Marxism as a means to accomplish caste equality; he preferred non-violent means, as opposed to dictatorship or violence.⁹² Ambedkar also had access to the feminist movement. His choice of Buddhism allows women to participate more fully in religion and in politics. However, the Marxist ideal, whereby the rejection of class overturns casteism and sexism, has not succeeded. Just as upward class mobility has not

92 Satyagraha—non-violent civil disobedience—has been depicted as a “feminine” approach, much as British colonizers depicted colonized peoples as racially feminine: “the rhetoric of *gender* was used to make increasingly refined distinctions among the different *races*. The white race was figured as the male of the species and the black race as the female” Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 55. The “feminine” also connects women and South Asians to religion and irrationality, as discussed in chapter two. Ambedkar’s 1926 Mahad water tank satyagraha where he also burned the *Manusmriti*, connects women’s rights to Dalit rights most closely. He marched for the right for Dalits to draw from the main water tank of the town, typically women’s work. He recognized the connection between caste and gender, giving his most important speech to women here.

provided a means for Dalits to escape caste discrimination, likewise, socialist ideology has not been able to eradicate patriarchy. Furthermore, where Marxist theory incorporates colonialist constructions of development and progress, Marxist theory alone is inadequate for a Dalit challenge of either British colonialism or Hindu capitalism.

Although Ambedkar benefited from feminist theory, his central role in the conversion movement has also influenced gender roles in neo-Buddhism since his death in 1956. The Buddha taught that knowledge was the path to enlightenment, and rejected any suggestion that he was divine, or inspired by the divine; so did Ambedkar. In an interview, the Dalit woman Rukmini affirms: "In the vihar they tell stories about Babasaheb, about the Buddha. They say that these two were men, not gods" (Bhave 99). However, Ambedkar is variously seen as a guru due to his addition of 22 vows to the Buddhist conversion ritual, a bodhisattva, or a divinity in the Hindu-Buddhist pantheon. John C. B. Webster argues that neo-Buddhists reproduce their Hindu past, and connects pantheon-creation to the practice of placing portraits of the Buddha and Ambedkar in the neo-Buddhist vihar: "The Buddha was being worshipped as God and Ambedkar was being deified along with him" (86). Ambedkar's central role, alongside the Buddha, as the *male* model in Buddhism, reproduces gender hierarchies which reinforce men's leadership role both spiritually and intellectually, and thus privilege men over women. Sexism in South Asian culture gives political opportunities to Dalit men before women, and subsequently focuses on men's stories rather than women's. Likewise, Buddhist traditions focus on men because of the emphasis placed on them as teachers, and on the

limitations which expect women to remain in the domestic sphere.⁹³ These limitations in representation and available roles contain women in their gendered bodies, both in religion and in culture. As both a political and a religious project to achieve class, caste and gender equality, neo-Buddhist doctrine still contains elements of patriarchal traditions ingrained in South Asian culture.

Finally, the combination of Buddhism and feminism overcomes the difficulties which an application of Western feminism to South Asian women's issues poses. Western feminism has a persistent history of Eurocentrism, whereby white and middle-class women's issues come to represent and supersede all women's issues; these attitudes developed in the intersection of feminism and colonialism. Chandra Talpade Mohanty writes: "By contrasting the representation of women in the third world with what I referred to earlier as western feminism's self-presentation in the same context, we see how western feminists alone become the true 'subjects' of this counter-history" (213). Thus, Western feminism sometimes reproduces colonial attitudes in which South Asian culture is less valuable or legitimate than Western culture. These patterns emerge in the identification of Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism as "Western."

Gross argues that Buddhism offers significant philosophical contributions to Western feminism. Ambedkar argued that Buddhism posed an alternative to Western philosophies. Following these same arguments, tempering Western feminism with Buddhism has the potential to dismantle persistent Eurocentrism in feminist movements.

93 Women and education in the neo-Buddhist movement is discussed in chapter seven.

Neo-Buddhism, with its incorporation of Marxist and feminist thought under a religious philosophy, draws out the social conscience of Buddhism, essential for a recognition of and a solution to gender inequality. This model of social justice aids in women's ability to escape gender roles and thus gives them a greater chance for liberation from oppressive social systems as well as the concept of suffering as an abstract.

Engaged Buddhism

The term "engaged Buddhism" is used to define Buddhist movements of all sects which apply Buddhism's central doctrines to challenge social injustice: "these movements are characterized by a fundamental commitment to the amelioration of conditions that produce suffering for all living beings; and, finally, to reform, in light of the demands of modernity, Buddhist doctrines and institutions" (Père Delehay x). It is sometimes disparaged as an inappropriate "this-worldly" interpretation and application of "true" Buddhist doctrines (Tambiah). Much of the criticism against neo-Buddhism focuses on how Ambedkar incorporated contemporary and Western philosophy into his creation of a new path in Buddhism (Jaffrelot). This criticism nearly always concludes that neo-Buddhism is not Buddhism. However, Ambedkar's integration of Buddhism and Western philosophy provoke an analysis of the Orientalist attitudes toward Buddhism inherent in this critique, as well as the appropriation of Buddhist philosophies into the Western canon. Ambedkar himself noted that Western theology had excluded Buddhism as a religion: "some European Theologians refuse to recognize the Buddha's Dhamma as Religion"; however, he suggests that "it shows what is wanting in Religion" (*Buddha and*

His Dhamma 168; 4.1.2.4-5). As an Other to Orientalist theories and theologies which present Christianity as contemporary, changing and rational, Buddhism has been typically presented as traditional, unchanging, and mystical or other-worldly in focus.

The question of whether Buddhism is a religion or philosophy is misleading; William Herbrechtsmeier argues: “the distinction is certainly not a cultural universal, and we should not insist that it is necessary to distinguish between ‘philosophies’ and ‘religions’ in cross-cultural studies” (7). Both terms arise from a specific Western context of the European Enlightenment whereby reason became differentiated from the experiential focus of religion (W. C. Smith). Buddhism is both religion and philosophy, just as Western monotheism heavily influences European philosophy, even projecting monotheism backwards onto the classical Greek philosophers. Buddhism as a living religion incorporates all aspects of spirituality, and balances tradition and modernity, as other world religions do. As such, I argue that Buddhism is an appropriate tool with which to engage with modernity, and Ambedkar used it in this very context.

In the Buddhist canon, the “Heart Sutra” of the Mahayana tradition acknowledges change, immateriality, and emptiness:

[F]orm is emptiness, and the very emptiness is form . . . there is no ignorance, no extinction of ignorance, . . . there is no decay and death, no extinction of decay and death; there is no suffering, no origination, no stopping, no path; there is no cognition, no attainment, and no non-attainment. (“Heart Sutra”)

Christopher S. Queen's analysis of neo-Buddhist hermeneutics argues that Ambedkar's interpretation challenges core doctrines to a lesser extent than the Heart Sutra: "[b]y comparison, Ambedkar's assertion that man's suffering is caused by class struggle, which is caused in turn by human passions, can be considered a new reading of, but hardly a radical break from the canonical Buddha-word" ("Dr. Ambedkar" 61). Buddhism's core philosophy allows for—even insists on—an incorporation of contemporary values and struggles as a religious duty.

The characterization of engaged Buddhism as a divergent form of Buddhism represents on one hand an Orientalist perspective insistent on romanticizing an ancient or "dead" Eastern tradition which is inferior to a "living" European tradition. At the core of claims regarding what Buddhism is—an introspective withdrawal from the world—and what Buddhism is not—a social and political tool for change—lie perceptions regarding the nature of religion, the nature of Eastern cultures and philosophies, and the nature of political evolution and resistance. These perceptions contrast an Eastern "other" with a Western "self," and attempt to fit Buddhism into definitions constructed by Western monotheistic theologians. Kwok Pui-Lan places these oppositions in a postcolonial context: "From a postcolonial perspective . . . either a narrative of affinity: 'they,' versus 'we,' or a narrative of temporality: 'ancient' culture versus 'modern' culture . . . mutually reinforce one another to marginalize the Other through a subtle valorization of the 'modernized we'" ("Unbinding Our Feet" 74). Elizabeth J. Harris analyzes nineteenth century translations of Theravada texts, and argues that the translator Daniel John

Gogerly incorporated Christian biases into the translation: “Traditional interpretations were overridden when it suited Gogerly’s desire to highlight difference and the ‘superiority’ of Christianity” (184). The negotiations of colonial translation occur at a conceptual as well as a linguistic level, where Buddhism is always “translated” as inferior to Christianity in a hierarchy of religions.

On the other hand, this characterization represents a contemporary elitist perspective—including that of elitist Buddhists—insistent on denying the relevance and immediacy of liberation movements. Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah describes an elitist conception of Buddhism which develops

from a pure, pristine, philosophical, salvation-search-oriented beginning, unstained and unsullied by the character and concerns of the social milieu in which it arose, to the later states of ever-widening popularization and vulgarization and deviation from the initial purity, in which are at play all the human passions and this-worldly concerns of the masses. (7)

However, acceptance of the status quo is a luxury afforded to those elites for whom the status quo does not pose a barrier to enlightenment, and for whom the status quo accords privileges.

Queen points out the inadequacy of elite definitions of Buddhism in his discussion of Ambedkar’s interpretation of Buddhism. Importantly, he notes that Ambedkar shifts the presentation and interpretation of the Four Noble Truths. In *The Buddha and His*

Dhamma, Ambedkar reinterprets and decentralizes the Four Noble Truths as a component of Buddhism; he writes of the Buddha:

The recognition of the existence of suffering, and to show the way to remove suffering, is the foundation and basis of his Dhamma. . . . according to his Dhamma if every person followed (1) the Path of Purity; (2) the Path of Righteousness; and (3) the Path of Virtue, it would bring about the end of all suffering. (68-9, 2.2.2.17, 22)

However, Queen argues that Ambedkar does not *change* them:

Ambedkar knew that the traditional presentation of the Four Truths—which blame the victims for their own suffering—would be offensive and unacceptable to people whose sufferings were caused by others’ cruelty and a heartless social system. He recognized that the metaphysics of karma and rebirth intensified self-blame by alleging the sufferers’ misconduct in former lives. Furthermore, he knew that the voluntary poverty and contemplative pursuits of the traditional bhikkhu could not offer a viable ideal for people locked in structural poverty. (“Dr. Ambedkar” 59)⁹⁴

I suggest that the concept of the *traditional* arises from an *elite* perspective, because a philosophy which blames victims for their own suffering comes from a position of

⁹⁴ bell hooks also notes this conflict of black communities viewing Buddhism as practiced by white Westerners; in this case, the privilege arises from race, rather than caste, but the critiques are the same. See “Contemplation and Transformation.”

privilege, and reproduces oppressive relationships. Patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist cultures all use these approaches to maintain systems of domination.

In terms of developing a radically just tradition, even the core beliefs of Buddhism must be examined for their connections with a specific historical and social context. Ambedkar judged that even the Four Noble Truths presented an elite point of view which inadequately represented the experiences of low-caste and -class peoples. Understanding the context within which neo-Buddhism is refused legitimacy allows for a broader definition of Buddhism which incorporates paths such as those integrating social justice theories like feminism and Marxism. These theories and their accompanying movements are not antithetical to Buddhism; rather Buddhist philosophy requires their incorporation into the teachings of the Buddha for contemporary relevance. Perhaps a more appropriate term for “engaged Buddhism” is “contemporary Buddhism,” reflecting the realities of change in the multiple traditions of a modern living religion. Furthermore, acknowledging engaged Buddhism as a legitimate religious tradition also allows for an acknowledgement of South Asian models of modernity as authentic, where they act as a third space between indigenous and Western theories.

Turning the Wheel: Some Concluding Thoughts

This chapter begins with an examination of the persistence of caste discrimination in Indian Christian and Muslim communities. As a challenge to casteism, neo-Buddhism emerges as the latest conversion movement. As such, it faces similar risks in reproducing the caste system within the neo-Buddhist community. At the intersection of caste and

gender, sexism also mutually reinforces casteism among other modes of oppression. Both Christians and Muslims in India faced particular pressures as a result of British colonialism and Hindu nationalism. These pressures reinforce the caste system and sexism where they reproduce hierarchies as a means of gaining power within their own communities. Through the construction of neo-Buddhism, Ambedkar attempts to avoid the pressures of British colonialism and Hindu nationalism. The chapter continues with a consideration of how Ambedkar incorporated—or re-appropriated—Western theories, including Marxism, feminism, democracy and social justice movements, into his revision of Buddhism. These theories, combined with Buddhist theories as a means for social justice, offer the potential for neo-Buddhism to avoid the pitfalls of earlier conversion movements.

The subsequent two sections of the dissertation, comprised of four chapters, focus on this tension between maintenance of and challenges to oppressive hierarchies, particularly caste and gender as they respond to both British colonialism and Hindu nationalism, in the neo-Buddhist movement, as expressed through writing about neo-Buddhist women and by neo-Buddhist Dalit women, with regard to their religious lives.

Chapter 4

Writing Women: Men Writing, Media Writing

The second and third sections of the dissertation build on the conceptual framework of the previous section, which outlines the context of gender and caste in Buddhism and previous conversion movements. These sections consider the specific interactions of gender and caste in the neo-Buddhist movement, and in combination examine recurring tensions between representation and self-representation. The two chapters of the second section consider the representation of Dalit women. Representations of Dalit women, through the writing and visual imagery of Dalit men, demonstrate a divergence from Ambedkar's challenge to Brahmin patriarchy as these representations manifest in gender inequality. The third section of the dissertation examines Dalit women's self-representation.

Politicians such as Mohandas K. Gandhi in labelling untouchables Harijans—"God's Children"—represent Dalits in paternalistic, condescending, and ultimately damaging ways when they insist on speaking for Dalits. Likewise, authors such as Munshi Premchand in his short story "The Shroud" (1936) present Dalits stereotypically, despite positive intentions to depict poverty and discrimination. Drawing from the anti-colonial models developed during British rule, and social justice models in the West, Dalits demand their right to name and to speak for themselves, against Hindu hegemony in this case. Governmental surveys routinely diminish or ignore the effects of caste in a modern state which prohibits discrimination based on caste, and in the context

of intersecting identities.⁹⁵ Critics of caste politics point to reservation in government jobs and token upwardly-mobile Dalits as evidence that caste discrimination has been eradicated. These assertions act as forms of institutional violence, reproducing an understanding that uneducated and unworthy Dalits receive benefits based on caste rather than merit, at the expense of meritorious upper caste Hindus. Disenfranchised groups are also encouraged to compete against each other for the limited reserved seats. For example, in 2009 Sharad Yadav, a low caste Member of Parliament and the chief of the Janata Dal (United) political party, opposed a bill to introduce quotas for women in Parliament on the grounds that it was advanced by upper caste women to the detriment of lower castes: “The anti-women quota rhetoric hit the roof on Friday, with JD(U) chief Sharad Yadav threatening to drink poison in the House to oppose the measure” (“Sharad Yadav”).⁹⁶ Analysis of government complicity in caste discrimination is widely available.⁹⁷ The understanding of caste politics which sees the reservation system as a barrier to worthy upper caste Hindu Indians exists in the context of a cultural mythology which simultaneously glorifies Ambedkar and vilifies other Dalits, and through both approaches reproduces systems of oppression. The concept of mythology arises in a

95 For example, the judiciary regularly rejects reservation for non-Hindu castes; both the judicial model and early rulings date from British rule. For a 1939 ruling, see L. Stanislaus, *The Liberative Mission of the Church among Dalit Christians* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1999) 55. For a 1977 ruling see Seema Kazi, *Muslim Women in India*, Minority Rights Group International Report (London: Minority Rights Group International, 1999) 23. More recently, in a 2010 ruling, “Andhra HC Strikes Down Quota for Muslims,” *The Times of India* 9 Feb 2010.

96 The Janata Dal party can be translated as the Broken People’s party, referencing the root of the word Dalit.

97 See also Vani K. Borooah and Sriya Iyer, “Vidya, Veda and Varna: The Influence of Religion and Caste on Education in Rural India,” *International Centre for Economic Research (ICER)* (2002).

specifically religious context which pits Hindu elite mythology against Dalit Buddhist mythology.⁹⁸

Premchand intended to present untouchable characters sympathetically, in the context of economic and social oppression. As a critically lauded author, his early twentieth century texts form the foundation for upper caste writing about Dalits. However, his short stories depict low caste men in patronizing ways, as uneducated and ignorant victims. In addition, Premchand uncritically reproduces the concept of karma, where untouchables are responsible for their own suffering. For example, in “The Shroud,” two low caste men beg for, then get drunk with money intended for funeral rites. As part of the Indian literary canon, these attitudes are reproduced through the Indian education system as well as in literary studies globally.⁹⁹ This approach continues into the contemporary period, with representations of Dalits as comic pathetic figures, such as in Rohinton Mistry’s novel *A Fine Balance* (1995) where two untouchable men face discrimination and violence, but ultimately maintain a positive outlook and a resigned acceptance of their place in life, reproducing concepts of dharma.

This chapter outlines the representations of Dalits by non-Dalits, and the representation of women Dalits by male Dalit writers, as a means of highlighting recurring characteristics of these representations. In the scope of the dissertation, I focus specifically on those representations within the religious neo-Buddhist movement which

98 See also the rewriting of the myth of Eklavya in the *Mahabharata*, in Veena Deo and Eleanor Zelliot, “Dalit Literature: Twenty-Five Years of Protest? Of Progress?,” *Journal of South Asian Literature* 29.2 (1994).

99 I examine Dalit women and education in chapter seven.

encompasses religious spaces, hagiography, and the development of the neo-Buddhist pantheon. As developed in the previous two chapters of the dissertation, the intersections of caste and gender are rarely addressed in the context of religion. This chapter draws on the previous analysis of the pressures of caste and gender, in order to contrast representations of women in the neo-Buddhist movement with Dalit women's resistance to Brahmin patriarchy in their own writing in the sixth and seventh chapters. I consider contemporary depictions of Ambedkar at government sites such as the Dr. Ambedkar National Memorial and the Parliament Museum, both in Delhi, as official elite representations which depoliticize Ambedkar. I focus on *Babasaheb Ambedkar: He Dared to Fight* (1979) a mainstream comic book presentation of Ambedkar's biography.¹⁰⁰ Importantly, the government sites and the comic book biography target an Indian audience; the government sites, and particularly the Dr. Ambedkar National Memorial, are outside of the tourist circuit, and the comic book biography publisher Amar Chitra Katha specifically uses historical and mythological narratives to construct a positive Indian image. I then turn to biographies of Ramabai as representative of equivalent Dalit male narratives about Dalit women, drawing specifically from the biography *Reverend Mother Ramabai Ambedkar* by Shanti Swaroop Baudh (2002), in English translation and targeting young or basic-level readers. Finally, I examine the corresponding mythology which has developed around Ambedkar's second wife, Savita Ambedkar. This mythology contrasts with the Ramabai hagiography, in that Dalit men in

¹⁰⁰ Amar Chitra Katha is a well-known publishing company for picture books targeting English-speaking Indian children. *Babasaheb Ambedkar* is published in the Visionaries series. English fluency in India also indicates class and caste privilege in many cases.

the neo-Buddhist movement construct a demonography regarding the representation of a central female figure. At the government sites and in Dalit literature, the apolitical and (de)sacralized caricatures of B. R. Ambedkar, Ramabai Ambedkar, and Savita Ambedkar serve to support and reproduce a popular cultural mythology in which a shameful past becomes disassociated from contemporary atrocities and discrimination, as well as the corresponding political and religious movement.

Institutional Memorial and Religious Memorial

Government and popular representations of B. R. Ambedkar typically construct him positively as a nationalist hero who fought on behalf of untouchables and who achieved their liberation, but their praise is devoid of recognition of contemporary caste discrimination. These representations exist within a sanitized mythology which presents elite narratives as objective and apolitical. However, these representations are inherently political in their promotion of the myth of objectivity, their aim to defuse the power of Dalit political agendas, and in the construction of a mythology of Hindu nationalism. These depictions allow upper castes to congratulate themselves for an imagined modern India free of caste in which they take no responsibility for their participation in or benefit from existing caste discrimination.

Contemporary representations of Ambedkar reverse previous depictions from the 1960s and 1970s which vilify him as anti-nationalist and anti-Indian: “Public expression of oppressive structures and practices of caste in opposition to dominant nationalism as in the case of Jotiba Phule and B. R. Ambedkar came to be branded as betrayals of the

nation” (Rege *Writing* 30). Elite Hindus criticized Ambedkar’s activism as fragmenting the independence movement—and thus supporting the British—and continue to do so today. As recently as 1997, Arun Shourie’s book *Worshipping False Gods: Ambedkar and the Facts Which Have Been Erased* claimed:

There is not one instance, not one single, solitary instance in which Ambedkar participated in any activity connected with that struggle to free the country. Quite the contrary—at every possible turn he opposed the campaigns of the National Movement, at every setback to the Movement he was among those cheering the failure. (3)

This example in particular targets the neo-Buddhist movement, by juxtaposing Ambedkar and “False Gods” in the title. The nationalist movement is a specifically Hindu movement.¹⁰¹

As in many nationalist movements, marginalized groups such as women, Dalits, and religious minorities are accused of undermining nationalist solidarity when they point out the existing fragmentary nature of a community. Tanika Sarkar discusses the conflict between Hindu nationalism and the communities which it imagines out of existence:

Internal divisions of class and caste are seen as forms of divisiveness that desecrate the wholeness of the *desh* [motherland]. These divisions, therefore, are not to be interrogated but submerged under a political piety

¹⁰¹ See also chapter seven, where Hindu nationalists protest against textbooks which replace the Hindu gods Rama and Krishna with the “false gods” Ambedkar and Phule.

that suspends all manner of criticism which might expose social hierarchies. (*Hindu Wife* 279).

In contemporary representations, Ambedkar's activism against patriarchal and casteist nationalism becomes a historical footnote under the assertion that the Constitution of India abolished caste discrimination; his activism becomes part of a successful Hindu independence movement and the creation of a modern Indian state, which does not correspond with present Dalit activism.

The text posted at the Dr. Ambedkar National Memorial (DANM) and the comic book *Babasaheb Ambedkar* closely resemble one another. Both use religious markers in specific ways which undermine Ambedkar's political statement in his conversion to Buddhism. Both promote Ambedkar as a nationalist in the fight for India's independence, while obscuring his criticism of prominent upper caste nationalists. These texts sanitize Ambedkar's activist work and downplay his conversion to Buddhism, in the interests of maintaining a unified Hindu whole. They also fall into a tradition of deity-production which seeks to adopt Ambedkar into a pantheon of Hindu deities and saints:

Brahminism sought to retain its superstructural hegemony through deifying and mystifying counter-cultural ideological schools. Thus, Buddha, Vardhamana, Basaveswara and even a modern social reformer like Veera Brahmam who fought against casteism were deified and mystified. (*Ilaiah God as Political Philosopher* 13)

While the production of religious mythology is legitimate and valuable, deifying Ambedkar in a Hindu mode, while removing political context from a hagiography, is problematic.

The government-run museums and memorials in Delhi systematically omit portions of Ambedkar's life which are important to Dalit religious and political movements.¹⁰² They also omit contemporary and historical Dalit movements such as Phule's in the nineteenth century, and the Dalit Panthers political and literary movement since the 1970s. To some extent, these locations omit Dalit identity itself by separating Ambedkar from his Dalit community, and omitting Dalit festivals. The Parliament Museum in Delhi features Ambedkar as the Chair of the Constitution Drafting Committee, but neither posted information nor videos on the independence movement mention his Dalit caste.¹⁰³ The DANM in Delhi, built at the location where Ambedkar died on December 6, 1956, is nearly invisible in the governmental public image. At the time of research and writing, a web-based keyword search resulted in poorly archived news articles reporting Dalit political leaders' demands for a memorial on the site, but a complete absence of information on the DANM ("Dalit Leaders"). This media blackout reflects a persistent practice of media outlets ignoring Dalit issues (Teltumbde *Khairlanji*; Prasad). Indian governmental websites exclude information about the DANM, including

102 The Dalit woman Mayawati, former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, provides some exceptions, building massive monuments to Ambedkar during her term. See Pheroze L. Vincent, "Maya Statues of Dalit Pride," *The Telegraph* 15 Dec 2010.

103 The Parliament Museum is difficult to find, and heightened security discourages individual visitors. When I visited in 2010, a school group was also visiting. The museum seemed to cater more to organized groups.

location, hours, or special events.¹⁰⁴ As such, the government portrait of Ambedkar isolates him in an apolitical and ahistorical context where he is an exceptional Dalit *and* where caste discrimination has been overcome.

Dalit festivals, including Ambedkar's conversion and his death, are expressions of Dalit identity. Ambedkar was cremated in Dadar, and hundreds of thousands of Dalits congregate annually in memorial of his death. The DANM in Delhi, in contrast, holds a small puja—devotional worship—service on December 6. The Delhi puja is nevertheless reproduced in photos and text on the DANM site, while the Dadar memorial is omitted from documentation inside the museum and in the literature. While the “Dr. Ambedkar National Museum” pamphlet available at the site notes the date and location of Ambedkar's death in Delhi, it omits his funeral procession and cremation in Dadar from the list of major events. Rather than memorializing Ambedkar, the lackadaisical approach to the DANM serves the purpose of using an official government site to draw attention to sanctioned and controlled appearances of upper caste and elite politicians, and away from the massively popular memorial of Ambedkar's death at the Chaitya Bhoomi in Dadar, Mumbai.

The disinterest in promoting the DANM, combined with a lack of acknowledgement of the Dalit-focused Chaitya Bhoomi memorial celebration, suggest that the site's central purpose is for political elites to appropriate Ambedkar as a national

¹⁰⁴ At the DANM, both entrances are gated, with no posted information at the back gate to indicate access at the front gate. No posted information on hours is available at either gate. When I visited the site in 2010, it was difficult to find the site, then to find the front gate, and catch the attention of an attendant to gain entry. The attendant offered pamphlets on the site as we left, but this literature was not set out for visitors.

hero, and to court the Dalit vote, rather than to celebrate Dalit achievements. On Ambedkar Jayanti, the national holiday commemorating Ambedkar's birthday, political parties erect signs with his image. All political parties participate in this appropriation of Dalit identity, including those historically antagonistic to marginalized groups, such as the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra.¹⁰⁵ This approach serves the purpose of promoting the political party with a veneer of progressive politics.

Importantly, the DANM prominently features a bust of Ambedkar. The pamphlet and photos depict Ambedkar pujas at the site, and the pamphlet shows the bust garlanded and adorned with flowers. Buddhist markers, including a portrait of the Buddha, are small and peripheral. The Delhi memorial does not use the stupa as an architectural model, as do prominent memorials in Dadar and Nagpur, the two key locations in neo-Buddhist spiritual geography (Appendix A, Image 1). In the context of a government attitude toward conversion which is ambivalent at best, the presentation of Ambedkar in the Hindu sacred mode suggests that the marginalization of Buddhist markers is intentional. At the major Buddhist pilgrimage sites in India, including Sarnath and Kushinagar, prominent signage requests that pilgrims not perform puja.¹⁰⁶ Where Indian secularism is simply a model of Hindu nationalism, the Hindu norm remains. Ambedkar is

¹⁰⁵ The Shiv Sena built its reputation on the claim that Maharashtrians should be privileged over other Indian ethnic groups who migrate to the state. The Shiv Sena also infamously participated in the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh in 1992, and the communal violence which followed. See also Bela Malik, "Untouchability and Dalit Women's Oppression," *Economic and Political Weekly* 34.6 (1999): 323-4. Anand Teltumbde describes the freedom from prosecution this group enjoys; while the police target Dalit protests, "the police play[ed] the role of mere spectators when irate mobs of the Hindu fundamentalist party, Shiv Sena, ran amok and burnt vehicles in Mumbai's central Dadar area over the issue of the alleged disrespect to the bust of Meenatai, the late wife of Bal Thackeray (Shiv Sena's founder-leader)" Teltumbde, *Khairlanji* 72.

appropriated into the Hindu norm rather than where he situated himself in the Buddhist challenge to Hindu dominance.

(Hindu) Nationalist Depictions of Ambedkar

The narrative of the comic book *Babasaheb Ambedkar* emphasizes Hindu religious markers at the expense of Buddhist markers. It begins with a prophecy from a Hindu ascetic: “I bless you. You shall have a son, who will achieve world-wide fame” (Rege and Kadam 1). This addition to Ambedkar’s biography places it squarely in the realm of hagiography; a saint’s biography often begins with an omen or miracles surrounding the birth: “the narrative of the acts of the saint himself is, as it were, impregnated with the miraculous. Even before his birth his greatness is foreshadowed, and his cradle is enveloped in visible signs of divine protection” (Père Delehaye 50). That the ascetic is specifically a Hindu sannyasi, depicted with caste markings, situates the hagiography of Ambedkar in a Hindu mode rather than a Buddhist mode. In the context of Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism, and his explicit rejection of Hinduism in the 22 vows, use of the Hindu mode acts to appropriate Ambedkar into the upper caste Hindu nationalist pantheon.¹⁰⁷

Likewise, Ambedkar’s parents recognize his divine nature early in his life, singling him out among his siblings: “little Bhim shall have my special attention” (Rege

106 Nevertheless, the remains of votive candles, incense, and gold leaf are evident. These locations mark the site of the Buddha’s first sermon, and his Mahaparinirvana—death or final liberation—respectively. These are two sites of four on the Buddhist pilgrimage circuit. The Buddha’s birthplace is in Lumbini, Nepal, and the site of Buddha’s enlightenment at Bodhgaya does not explicitly discourage worship. Notably, Sarnath and Kushinagar are located in Uttar Pradesh, where the former Chief Minister Mayawati promoted the sites as a Dalit woman who intends to convert to Buddhism.

107 I have reproduced the 22 vows in the introduction to this dissertation.

and Kadam 2). Shanti Swaroop Baudh's biography *Reverend Mother Ramabai Ambedkar* also marks Ambedkar as an exceptional youth: "As Bhiva was the fairest, strongest, best built up and most handsome as well as the youngest of all the brothers, [S]ubedar loved him most" (7).¹⁰⁸ Although Ramji, Ambedkar's father, was employed in the military, and the family escaped poverty in that sense, Ambedkar was one of fourteen children. In the context of women's work and the multiple pressures of Dalit women's work, the statement that Ambedkar received special attention at best stretches the truth. Ambedkar himself noted the pressures which excessive reproduction placed on women:

In a speech to students in 1938, Babasaheb . . . spoke about his 14 brothers and sisters and the poverty of his childhood. "We can properly bring up only one child. If there are less children, women are freed from the terrible burden of childbearing and can use their strength for other tasks." (Pawar and Moon 160)

Ambedkar's own representation of his childhood contrasts sharply with the idealized presentation of the comic book, which resonates more with Gandhi's romanticization of rural life than with Ambedkar's reality.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, this narrative presents Ambedkar

108 During his early schooling, Ambedkar was registered under the name Bhiva Ramji Ambavadekar. This last name represents a Maharashtrian construction of his relationship with his village, Ambavade. Ambedkar later adopted the surname of one of his patrons. His name Bhimrao further includes the Marathi male honorific "rao." The corresponding female honorific is "bai."

109 As a highly educated, upper caste lawyer, Gandhi's attempt to highlight native values and construct an independent and modern Indian state resulted in his romanticization of rural Hindu life through his political persona of a dhoti-wearing, khadi-spinning religious man. He constructed this persona and performed poverty from a position of privilege; a popular saying claims that Sarojini Naidu joked that it cost the nation a fortune to keep Gandhi living in poverty. In contrast, Ambedkar advised Dalits to leave the villages for their uplift, since his experience of poverty was incompatible with the romanticization of poverty.

as a unique individual, despite past and present figures in the Dalit movement, including Phule and contemporary Dalit writers and politicians. The comic book slightly improves on the government exclusion of Buddhist markers. It includes a depiction of the Chaitya Bhoomi stupa on the cover. The text also depicts Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism. However, after the Hindu hagiographical beginning, the impact and sincerity of the Buddhist religious markers are diminished.

In the government sites in Delhi, the presentation of Ambedkar's life appropriates him into the nationalist movement, extols him for liberating the Untouchables, and downplays his conversion and other challenges to Hindu hegemony. A pamphlet available at the DANM states that Ambedkar "contributed greatly in the nation building" ("Dr. Ambedkar National Memorial"). The central video at the Parliament Museum notes that India's tribal peoples and Dalits joined the struggle for independence. It likewise omits the activism of Ambedkar and his clashes with Gandhi. Rather, the only connection between Gandhi and the Dalit movement is a positive one: "Gandhi fought for Harijan temple entry". This statement in a stroke erases the Dalit-led temple entry satyagrahas, Dalit rejection of Gandhi's name for them as "Harijan," and Gandhi's successful protest against separate electorates for Dalits.

Among several temple entry satyagrahas, the most famous was led by Ambedkar at the Kalaram temple in Nasik, Maharashtra in 1930 and is reproduced in the comic book biography (Rege and Kadam). Gandhi did not participate. Likewise, Gail Omvedt

summarizes the conflict between Ambedkar and Gandhi, with particular reference to the term “Harijan”:

There was a direct confrontation between Ambedkar and Gandhi on this issue at the second Round Table Conference in London in 1932, when it was clear that in resisting separate electorates for Untouchables (while accepting them for Muslims and other minorities), Gandhi was speaking not as a national leader but as a Hindu leader concerned with keeping Untouchables as part of the ‘Hindu fold.’ His choice of the term ‘Harijan,’ which had no basis in any symbolism or terminology of actual Untouchable communities in India, indicated this effort at incorporation, and was resisted not only by Ambedkar but by almost all militant Untouchables. (“Hinduism, Social Inequality” 28)

Frances Pritchett reports that in 1938,

[o]ver Dr. Ambedkar’s vigorous protests, in January Congress adopted Gandhi’s own term ‘Harijans’ (‘Children of God’) as the official name for the ‘scheduled castes.’ In protest against a term that he considered condescending and meaningless, Dr. Ambedkar and his party staged a walkout from the Bombay Legislative Assembly.

Ambedkar’s rejection of the term Harijan is also a resistance to Gandhi’s attempts to promote a unified Hindu voting base. Gandhi’s hunger strike against separate electorates

led to the 1932 Poona Pact, considered Ambedkar's major concession to Gandhi in his struggle for Dalit self-representation at the political level.

In contrast to the government representation of Ambedkar as cooperative or absent in the independence movement, Dalit writers highlight or privilege Ambedkar's criticism of upper caste Hindu elites in relation to his criticism of British rule: "Ambedkar's opponents were not the British: it was the Hindus who were unwilling to change or compromise" (Diwanji). The official representation of Ambedkar in the 1960s and 1970s attacked him and excluded him; the current twenty-first century reversal of this approach appropriates Ambedkar into Hindu nationalist narratives or excludes him, and is hardly an improvement.

The "Dr. Ambedkar National Memorial" pamphlet also praises Ambedkar for his activist work: "He led a number of movements to emancipate the downtrodden masses and to secure human rights to millions of depressed classes." This statement obscures the reality that the equal rights enshrined in the Constitution are, in practice, widely disregarded in favour of caste hierarchies.¹¹⁰ It also exists in a context where Ambedkar's work for the state is privileged at the expense of his criticism of the state. Likewise, the comic book *Babasaheb Ambedkar* represents him demanding self-rule in the independence movement on behalf of lower castes: "The depressed classes of India also join in the demand for replacing the British Government" (Rege and Kadam 24). Gandhi praises him as "a patriot of sterling worth" (Rege and Kadam 24). In this depiction,

¹¹⁰ For further analysis, see Teltumbde, *Khairlanji*.

Ambedkar sets aside his caste politics for the good of the nation. The mythology thus suggests that the nationalist project takes priority over social justice internally. The summary on the back of the comic book states that “he became the icon of the underprivileged. History, however, will remember him as the architect of India’s Constitution” (Rege and Kadam). This statement acts to create history, and anticipates a future narrative which excludes Dalit activism, and erases Dalit narratives of their own history and present.

The government sites all but erases the historical realities of caste discrimination. Despite more of a focus on caste discrimination, the comic book uses a rhetoric in which the child Ambedkar learns of his untouchability through specific events.¹¹¹ This approach sanitizes the practice of untouchability in several ways. First, the incidents are specific and unique departures from the norm, rather than a constant reminder in a matrix of connected events. Second, the incidents surprise Ambedkar, who appears innocent in the narrative. He asks: “‘Why can’t I go to a barber like the other boys in my school?’ Tears filled his sister’s eyes. ‘We are Mahars, untouchables.’ ‘But why? What makes us different?’” (Rege and Kadam 6-7). In contrast, Dalit autobiographies suggest that Dalits become aware of their status at an early age, as a result of the constant small humiliations of the cultural context within which they learn their place.

The Dalit woman writer Kumud Pawade writes about her childhood

understanding of caste discrimination: “This disgust is extremely familiar to me. In fact,

111 These events are predominantly drawn from Ambedkar’s own writing. See B. R. Ambedkar, “Waiting for a Visa,” *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, ed. Vasant Moon, vol. 12 (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1993).

that is what I have grown accustomed to, ever since I was old enough to understand” (Pawde “Story of My ‘Sanskrit’” 27). Likewise, Urmila Pawar states in her autobiography: “We were aware, without anybody telling us, that we were born in a particular caste and in poverty, and that we had to live accordingly” (93-4). Ambedkar was the only Dalit in his class, and was forced to sit on a piece of cloth in the corner to avoid polluting the other students or the space; undoubtedly he was aware of his caste status. Ambedkar himself adds, when writing about these incidents: “Before this incident occurred, I knew that I was an untouchable, and that untouchables were subjected to certain indignities and discriminations” (Ambedkar “Waiting for a Visa”). Atrocities such as rape and murder may stand out, but the practice of untouchability is continuous, the norm rather than the exception.¹¹²

Third, the events of the comic book biography omit violence, and any sense of the vast numbers of people affected by caste discrimination. They involve one or two individuals who are denied access to public water or refused transportation on an upper caste cart, or clients boycotting the adult Ambedkar. Upper caste Hindus seek to maintain their elite status in contemporary India through appeals to merit which construct Dalits as undeserving of reservations. With reference to these anti-reservation arguments, caste discrimination against Ambedkar is presented as wrong because of his exceptional merit,

¹¹² Teltumbde argues in *Khairlanji* that even atrocities are subsumed under acceptable behaviour toward Dalits in contemporary India; since atrocities against Dalits are relatively common, they are not newsworthy: “The media sexualizes violence by rendering it pleasurable and by highlighting the erotic payoffs for the protagonists who perpetrate sexual violence. . . . However despite this penchant for violence and crime, the media avoids covering crimes and atrocities related to caste” (96). Since caste discrimination removes Dalit humanity, by this logic rape, assault and murder are not atrocities.

not because of its dehumanizing impact on an entire community. Even the mild violence in the artist's rendering—an upper caste man throws a stone—results in tears, rather than blood (Rege and Kadam 6). The representation of the various satyagrahas, where upper caste Hindus violently attacked Dalits, places the violence in the background, and the text notes that because he had promised not to retaliate, Ambedkar “prevented a blood bath” (Rege and Kadam 22). This presentation implies that upper caste violence against Dalits does not constitute a blood bath, and that Dalits—reversing the positions of aggressor and victim—are responsible for violence and its prevention.¹¹³ The omission of violence suggests that the practice of untouchability is embarrassing but not *harmful*, and obscures forms of violence other than physical violence.

Fourth, the narrative of the comic book biography suggests that Ambedkar eventually challenged caste because of his original naivety. It suggests that if someone is aware of caste, they must not truly be oppressed. It also suggests that an individual deserving of recognition must have an innate sense of self-worth which untouchability offends. Insidiously, this attitude undermines education and political activism, since an individual's “true merit” would overcome oppression naturally, without external intervention. The comic book erases the history of challenges to caste, including those from the thirteenth century saint Kabir, or the nineteenth century Shudra activist Jyotirao Phule, both of whom were known to Ambedkar's family. Rather than mentioning that they were devotees of Kabir, the comic book references the family reading the Hindu

113 A reluctance to illustrate violence does not represent an effort to avoid depicting violence in children's comic books, since other comic books in the series, such as *Ananda Math* depict more graphic violence in the cover artwork.

epics the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, and omits Ambedkar's challenge of this practice: "I asked my father why he insisted upon our reading the Mahabharata and Ramayana, which recounted the greatness of the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas and repeated the stories of the degradation of the Shudras and the Untouchables" (Ambedkar *Buddha and His Dhamma: Critical Edition* xxvi). As examples of the practice of untouchability, specific events served a purpose to the adult educated Ambedkar. As exceptional incidents in an individual's biography they mystify a violent and perpetual reality of poverty, institutional barriers, and physical assault.

These presentations undermine Ambedkar's role as a revolutionary who challenged Indian elites as well as the British during the nationalist movement. The texts serve to present casteism as a past shame, rather than a present reality. Official representations of Ambedkar depict him in an apolitical light; however, this apparently apolitical agenda masks an explicitly political agenda of controlling information on Dalits and reproducing the image of India as a Hindu monolith. It also contributes to the reconstruction of the independence movement as a Hindu movement. This approach serves to erase governmental complicity in caste and religious oppression.

Upper Caste and Dalit Male Autobiography

Similarities emerge in comparing upper caste (usually male) writers' representations of Dalits (usually men) as suffering victims with Dalit male writers' representations of Dalit women as suffering victims. Dalit male autobiographers typically omit patriarchy and Dalit women's movements to develop an apolitical female figure

within a political statement regarding Dalit caste oppression and Dalit movements. Where upper caste writers depict Dalits as suffering victims, Dalit men tend to reproduce patriarchal, racist, and religious nationalist attitudes about men controlling women, who then need protection from other men.¹¹⁴ The women in these texts are not agents; they do not act in their own interests. Male writers often appeal to assumptions and other men's statements about women's religious lives under Buddhism whereby Buddhism frees women from gender oppression. However, when they depict real women's lives, they rarely discuss religion, and often depict women as self-sacrificing and suffering victims; as Pradnya Lokhande states: "In dalit men's *testimonios* dalit women were only selectively remembered as sacrificing wives and mothers, or victims of caste-based practices" (cited in Rege *Writing* 74-5).

K. A. Gunasekaran's Tamil Dalit autobiography *The Scar* reflects this attitude aptly. The narrator relates: "As she cut the thorn trees she would sing quietly the songs of lamentation ruing her fate. I would pay attention to her songs, but I would never fully understand my mother's soulful keenings" (80).¹¹⁵ In the construction of Ramabai through hagiographical biographies, this tendency becomes even more explicit. In the biography *Reverend Mother Ramabai Ambedkar*, Baudh describes Ramabai as "a goddess who sacrificed hersel[f] to make life bright for her husband" (29). Representations of Ramabai

114 When I began this dissertation project, several analyses, including those by Gopal Guru (2009) and Sharmila Rege (2006) examined the representation of Dalit women in Dalit men's writing. However, the existing work does not provide a comprehensive analysis. This area requires further research which is outside the scope of this dissertation.

115 See also autobiographies by Sharankumar Limbale, Daya Pawar, and S. E. Sonkamble, excerpted in Arjun Dangle, ed., *A Corpse in the Well: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Autobiographies* (Hyderabad: Disha, 1992).

mirror the depiction of the self-sacrificing wife and mother, who is strong at the expense of independence and agency.¹¹⁶ At the same time, Dalit male writing arises out of a context in which not only men, but Western and Indian women in South Asian women's movements have glorified women's self-sacrifice: "[Annie] Besant glorified the self-sacrificing Hindu woman; [Sarojini] Naidu the self-sacrificing Indian mother; . . . Kamaladevi [Chattopadhyay], on the other hand, here glorified the self-sacrificing peasant woman" (Radha Kumar 79). In an attempt to revalue Indian cultural models, this approach accepts a patriarchal and colonial model of South Asian women's self-sacrifice. Furthermore, in the introduction to *The Scar*, Ravikumar dismisses several autobiographies, including the Dalit woman writer Bama's, which "cannot be categorised as autobiographies" (xiii). This assessment regarding who meets the definition of literary terms, which the same androcentric and Eurocentric systems establish, has the effect of further marginalizing women's self-representation, and promoting men's depictions of women instead.¹¹⁷

In neo-Buddhism nearly all of the religious representations of women focus on Ramabai Ambedkar, B. R. Ambedkar's first wife. She appears in the neo-Buddhist pantheon alongside Ambedkar and the Buddha. Biographies of Ramabai share similarities with those of Ambedkar; both follow hagiographical models. Savita Ambedkar, B. R. Ambedkar's second wife, provides a binary opposite to the representation of Ramabai as the ideal woman in the neo-Buddhist pantheon. Savita is often demonized as the evil

¹¹⁶ I find the same construction of the strong but self-sacrificing woman in the character of Yasodhara in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, as discussed in chapter two.

¹¹⁷ For further analysis of how definitions are used to marginalize the Other, see chapter three.

female presence. The glorification of Ramabai as a depoliticized Dalit woman allows Dalit men to congratulate themselves for challenging the caste system without acknowledging responsibility for the perpetuation of patriarchal attitudes. Likewise, the demonization of a political neo-Buddhist woman inappropriately positions expressions of female strength. The hagiography of Ambedkar serves to diminish current caste politics and disguise upper caste writers' participation in caste discrimination. In these examples of hagiography and demonography, political messages are erased in the service of maintaining hierarchies of caste and gender.

Ramabai Hagiography

Dalit male writers focus almost exclusively on Ramabai as the female presence in the neo-Buddhist pantheon, enshrining her as a model for women.¹¹⁸ They represent her in ways which echo sympathetic but paternalistic upper caste depictions of Dalits. In both cases, the subject is a tragic victim and martyr; in both cases, the subject is separated from contemporary political context. The hagiographical agenda undermines a revolutionary religious agenda in terms of caste and gender for B. R. Ambedkar and Ramabai Ambedkar. Since this dissertation approaches religious movements with the understanding that they are valuable and meaningful in the production of identity, the

118 During my research in India, I found fictional autobiographies of women written by Yashwant Manohar in Marathi; alongside Ramabai he includes Yasodhara, the Buddha's wife, and Savitri Phule, Jyotirao Phule's wife. These texts have not been translated into English and so fall outside the scope of this project. *Ramai, Mi Savitri! Savitri Jotirao Phule!, Mi Yashodhara!* (Nagpur: Yugasakshi Prakashan, 2004). Notably, the *wives* Yasodhara and Savitri take priority over women such as Gotami, the first woman admitted to the Buddhist monastic sangha, or women leaders in the Dalit political movement. As I argue in this chapter, this representation further reproduces the male depiction of the ideal woman as Hindu wife in the neo-Buddhist movement. In visual representations, the neo-Buddhist pantheon sometimes includes Savitri Phule.

process of deification in itself is not understood as problematic. Likewise, a religious mode of writing is not inherently apolitical.

At festivals and in bookstores, a wide range of material on Ambedkar and the Buddha is available, followed by Dalit political theory and biographies of other men in the civil rights movement; these materials are available in English, Marathi, and Hindi. Sparse materials about Ramabai are available, and even fewer texts about her in English. They follow the same patterns as the texts on Ambedkar. However, the texts on Ramabai are written by Dalits for Dalits. They are available in English and Marathi at specifically neo-Buddhist festivals, while the materials on Ambedkar are available in English, Hindi, and local languages, at government sites and public bookstores, as well as at festivals. While this disparity reflects a broader cultural androcentrism, in which biographies about men are more widely researched, published, promoted and read, the texts on Ramabai specifically target Maharashtrian Dalit women and men's beliefs about ideal behaviour for women and about husband-wife relationships. They use specific religious markers to identify Ramabai as an ideal Hindu wife, promoting traditional Hindu womanhood over neo-Buddhist concepts of gender equality. This depiction of Ramabai undermines both Ambedkar's radical message of gender equality and Ramabai's potential as a strong Dalit role model.

I focus on the English-language biography *Reverend Mother Ramabai Ambedkar* by Shanti Swaroop Baudh, the only English-language material on Ramabai available at

the festivals I attended.¹¹⁹ Where necessary, I provide the counterparts in Dalit women's writing, though this discussion predominantly remains in the next chapter. Very little factual information is available about Ramabai's life; she typically appears only as she relates to Ambedkar's biography. Baudh focuses on Ramabai's devotion as a wife, and her spiritual and physical beauty. While praising her for these attributes is not a negative act in itself, in the cultural context of patriarchal societies, women are typically represented in bodily terms as a means of excluding and demeaning their intelligence or ability. A 2007 study in the USA, only one among many, found a relationship between endorsement of Western beauty ideals and hostility toward women and sexism; a similar relationship would be expected cross-culturally (Forbes et al.). Naomi Wolf argues for direct connections between women's empowerment and appeals to beauty: "The qualities that a given period calls beautiful in women are merely symbols of the female behavior that that period considers desirable: *The beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior and not appearance*" (original emphasis, 13-14). Ramabai's physical appearance and submissive devotion are praised at the expense of her other attributes.

Ramabai was not educated, and traditional understanding of literacy does not value forms of education such as oral or financial literacy. Baudh notes her ability "to keep the accounts" (Baudh 14). However, within the same text, he undermines this praise

119 I found similar representations of Ramabai in Marathi-language devotional songs to Ramabai in the pamphlet *Ramaai Gita*, (रमाई गीते: Mother Ramabai Songs). However, these songs have not been published in English translation and so fall outside the scope of this project. "Ramaai" is the correct spelling in the pamphlet title; as a Marathi familiar term, it combines Ramabai's name with the Marathi word for mother, "aai" (आई). Translations from Marathi are my own, with assistance from my teacher, Sunila Gondhalekar, a native Marathi speaker.

in a scene where Ambedkar teases her for being unable to add large numbers: “‘Oh, it is good that you are not educated,’ joked Baba Saheb. ‘Otherwise you would have outwitted me’” (Baudh 21). Ramabai’s depiction as beautiful but illiterate is even more complex within the neo-Buddhist context since Ambedkar privileged rationality and education. Meenakshi Moon and Urmila Pawar (2008), and Sharmila Rege (2006) have demonstrated that numerous women participated in the movement and converted to Buddhism, and have made available their biographies and autobiographies. That Ramabai remains the focus of male writers’ hagiographical goals demonstrates a dedication to Brahmin patriarchal ideals. Male writers glorify aspects of Hindu womanhood in biographical texts which they then reproduce in the iconography of Ramabai.¹²⁰

Ramabai married Ambedkar in an arranged marriage in 1906 when she was nine and he was fourteen. She gave birth to five children, including four who died in childhood and one surviving son Yashwant. She died in 1935 after an illness. She appears only briefly in letters to Ambedkar, and in Ambedkar’s description of her in his own publications. Among the repeated events in the biographies and devotional verse, it is difficult to separate Ramabai from stereotypes of Dalit women. Male authors use stereotypical situations to contrast her worldly and practical concerns with Ambedkar’s spiritual and intellectual concerns. According to male writers, Ramabai was illiterate. In Baudh’s biography, Ramabai manages the family’s finances and prepares food, while

¹²⁰ For further analysis of the female iconography of the neo-Buddhist movement, see chapter five.

Ambedkar overspends on books and skips meals to study. Baudh represents Ramabai as domestic and Ambedkar as intellectual:

When he handed her his first salary, she purchased new clothes for the kids, her husband's sister and sister-in-law as well as other relatives. She also bought utility items for the household. Baba Saheb was shocked to see such **misuse** of his first salary. He wanted to utilise this money to complete his studies. . . . Domestic duties were secondary to him. (original emphasis, Baudh 10)

While this representation may lightly poke fun at Ambedkar's obsession with education, it still occurs in the context where intellectual and spiritual pursuits are privileged over domestic and practical concerns in a particularly gendered binary.¹²¹ This depiction reproduces a gendered model of Buddhism, in which men are free to pursue spiritual development while women are encouraged to find fulfilment in practical domestic wife- and motherhood.

Furthermore, the contrast between Ambedkar's intellectual and Ramabai's domestic concerns reproduces a Hindu model of enlightenment, whereby men worship the god and women worship their husband as a god, specifically through domestic duties.¹²² Rita M. Gross notes that in the development of social codes "Buddhism relied

121 An interpretation in which Baudh mocks Ambedkar for his dedication to his studies would be equally inappropriate in the context where Ambedkar encouraged both female and male Dalits to pursue education as a means of their uplift. I consider related gendered binaries in more detail in chapter six. I discuss Dalit women and education in chapter seven.

122 I also discuss the Hindu and Buddhist endorsement for men to leave their families to pursue spiritual development in chapter two.

upon prevailing Hindu and Confucian social codes, with their strongly defined gender roles” (*Buddhism after Patriarchy* 213). Ambedkar specifically denounced Hindu gender roles, yet Dalit male writers insist on mythologizing oppressive social roles for women in which women are obedient servants to their husbands. As I discuss in chapter two, Ambedkar’s own text *The Buddha and His Dhamma* reinforces this relational dynamic through its reproduction of a sermon in which the Buddha advises girls to be dutiful and submissive wives to their husbands.

Motherhood is the central role for a Hindu woman. In her analysis of motherhood in ancient India, Sukumari Bhattacharji writes:

The social reality . . . had relegated the woman to the socially significant role of the procreatrix; she had lost her identity as woman, as a social being, as an individual with free scope for intellection [sic], volition and emotion. She was primarily, if not solely, a mother, preferably of male children. (54)

Baudh focuses on Ramabai’s supposed natural inclinations to motherhood: “She was very fond of children and looked forward to having a few of her own. Her maternal instincts flared up” (9). This approach decontextualizes her struggle with maternal health which arises in the deaths of four children and the degradation of her body through successive pregnancies. Her desire for another child even comes at the expense of her own health; when her fifth child dies, Baudh relates: “Ramabai grew weaker. A mental and physical pain weakened her. She wished for another child. But, the doctor advised her against

motherhood, as it might invite TB” (24). This glorification of childbearing mirrors the representation of Ambedkar as receiving special attention despite being one of fourteen children. Maternal health is an issue of women’s equality. However, male writers who idealize Ramabai glorify her poor health as a reflection of her dedication to wifehood. At best, they depict the death of four children, and her doctor’s advice to avoid having more children, as an individual tragedy unrelated to women’s health, just as popular biographies present Ambedkar’s experiences with caste discrimination as individual experiences. Since Ambedkar spoke about the burden of too many children and its connection to poverty, the glorification of motherhood undermines Ambedkar’s message of gender equality.

Other recurring aspects of Ramabai’s life in the developing mythology involve typical chores in a low caste woman’s life. Baudh’s biography describes Ramabai making fuel using cow dung, and her humiliation by other village women. This representation reflects a sacrificial hagiographical mode in which Ramabai takes on the oppression of Dalit men through her suffering. At the same time, the text avoids the labels of “untouchable” or Mahar, and omits tasks such as street sweeping or latrine cleaning, tasks assigned to Mahars in the Hindu caste hierarchy.

Ambedkar argued against religious superstition, and for the rights of women. In contrast, Baudh repeatedly praises Ramabai’s dedication to fasting: “Presuming that her master had not eaten, Ramabai forced herself into fasting. It happened a good many times in a month” (24). Even more alarming is the praise of fasting which coincides with the

textual implication that Ramabai fasted on Ambedkar's behalf even while she was in poor health. In a wider sense, a decreased access to adequate nutrition for women and girls is a worldwide problem. Decreased female health due to malnutrition reflects gender inequalities (Pal). More specifically, the malnourishment of girls and women is embedded in Hindu religious hierarchies. Men eat before women, and a wife eats last (Barker et al.; Ghosh). Baudh uncritically exposes gender inequality when he describes food distribution between three male children and three adult women: "They baked four breads of the chakki flour. The three of these were distributed among Yashwant, Mukund and Shanker one each, while the fourth bread was shared by Ramabai, Gorabai and Laxmibai" (16-17). Baudh notes poverty as a marker of caste when he notes that their bread is made of chakki flour—flour coarsely hand-ground by poor women in a village or household mill—but does not examine the connection between gender and poverty. Furthermore, women perform regular weekly or monthly fasts on behalf of their husbands or male relatives. The connection between religious dietary observance and women's health has rarely been assessed.¹²³ The hagiographical texts on Ramabai fail to connect the problem of female malnourishment with the Hindu religion. In fact, Baudh uses the theme of Ramabai fasting as proof of her dedication to her husband. This ideal of womanhood further reinforces women's lower status.

123 In an editorial in *The Kathmandu Post*, Bhawana Upadhyay relates that during Chaupadi, a custom practised in Western Nepal under which women are to stay in a makeshift hut, usually an animal shed, away from house, "they are prohibited from eating nutritious food and are merely left to eat bread (roti) with salt, that too when they are pregnant, nursing newborns or during their periods." She also describes the stigma attached to women's reproductive health problems, and connects women's health to ritual. See "Fallen Womb," *The Kathmandu Post* 16 Aug 2010. The Dalit woman Vimal Dadasaheb More notes birth pollution rituals in "Teen Dagdachi Chul," trans. Maya Pandit, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios*, ed. Sharmila Rege (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006) 355.

Male writers also avoid Dalit women's experiences in which Dalit men play a patriarchal oppressive role. In the film *I'm Dalit How are You?* (2002) one woman describes taking up latrine sweeping upon her marriage. Her husband specifically defines her as property conveyed from a woman's father to her husband: "When her father gave her to me he said, 'Make her do anything you want'" (K and Manon). Regardless of traditional caste duties, women are expected to clean the toilets. Ambedkar called on Dalit women to refuse to clean upper caste toilets, to force upper castes to perform this polluting task. However, Dalit women remain responsible for cleaning toilets in their own homes and neighbourhoods, in a patriarchal division and valuation of labour which crosses class and caste boundaries.

Ramabai's tasks, in which she is humiliated by other women, situate her in a public casteist space rather than a private patriarchal space: "She, a barrister's wife, carries dung. She is bringing dishonour to her husband's name, she does not at all consider her husband's prestige,' the women said" (Baudh 16). The use of dried dung cakes for fuel is a symbol of poverty. Furthermore, Ramabai's public display of her poverty is seen as a reflection of her duty to her husband. As well, the caste discrimination she faces is sanitized. She faces humiliation based on her *choice* to save money on fuel. In contrast, Dalit women's self-representations situate humiliation in the context of human rights violations *imposed* upon them. For example, Dalit women experience limited access to clean water and are forced into labour ("Caste Discrimination"; Malik). As in the comic book biography of Ambedkar, in Baudh's

biography of Ramabai, caste discrimination is embarrassing but not *harmful*. The biographical examples of Ramabai's imagined tasks serve to highlight the suffering of a Dalit woman victim without looking closely into caste and gender oppression.

Likewise, male authors rarely address the complexities of patriarchy within the Dalit movement when they glorify women's work. A glorification of a rural Dalit woman's life in Ramabai hagiography contrasts sharply with Ambedkar's exhortation that Dalits should leave the village for their uplift. Instead, it mirrors Gandhi's construction of modern India in a Hindu mode, where he romanticizes rural life and austerity from a privileged position. Ambedkar targeted the village as the central site of caste division and believed that Dalits would never advance without leaving (Pawar; Gokhale).

In his book *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, originally published in 1945, he includes The Working Committee of the All-India Scheduled Castes Federation Resolution 11 on Separate Settlements:

[S]o long as the Scheduled Castes continue to live on the outskirts of the Hindu village, as an alien people, with no source of livelihood and in small numbers as compared to Hindus, they will continue to remain Untouchables and subject to the tyranny and oppression of the Hindus and will not be able to enjoy free and full life . . . (348)

Ambedkar notably decried Gandhi's romanticization of rural village society: "Gandhism with its call of back to nature, means back to nakedness, back to squalor, back to poverty and back to ignorance for the vast mass of the people" (*What Congress and Gandhi Have*

Done 273).¹²⁴ Ambedkar spoke in favour of education and industrialization as a means whereby Dalits might lift themselves out of poverty: “Machinery and modern civilisation are . . . indispensable for emancipating man from leading the life of a brute, and for providing him with leisure and making a life of culture possible” (*What Congress and Gandhi Have Done 273*). Just as he combines both South Asian and Western philosophies in neo-Buddhism, he argues for the incorporation of European models of production as a means of challenging internal hierarchies of caste and class.

Conversely, contemporary male writers participate in a double standard when they glorify Dalit women’s poverty. This response falls into a subcontinental cultural strategy of modernization whereby men become educated and move beyond historically polluting or worldly tasks:

Traditional social ideology and practices were regarded by most shades of nationalist as the one domain unmediated by foreign rule, the one independent space. Women and peasants, the only people as yet unpolluted by Western education, could preserve the purity of that domain.

(*Sarkar Hindu Wife 265*)

Women—and importantly, lower castes—are left to take on the additional menial labour, meanwhile being glorified for upholding traditional cultural values. The Indian independence movement likewise emphasized its caste and gender hierarchies as a counter to British cultural imperialism; Ambedkar’s critiques of Hindu caste and gender

¹²⁴ See also *Constituent Assembly of India*. Parliament of India, 1948.

hierarchies disrupts this approach, while his use of Buddhism simultaneously supports the anti-colonial agenda.

While Ambedkar fought for women's rights, he still had the luxury of an unwaged wife to care for his home and family while he pursued higher education and politics at home and abroad. He encouraged Ramabai to educate herself and learn to read; nevertheless, his encouragement must be seen as adding another chore to Ramabai's household tasks. Bela Malik notes that "[g]iven the division of labour within the household, women have to suffer more from the lack of access to water, fuel sources, and sanitation facilities, exposing them to humiliation and violence" (323). Despite his good intentions, in an androcentric culture women must continue their domestic work alone even after gaining opportunities to pursue education and work outside the home. Ketu H. Katrak examines women's education in India and its inability to alleviate domestic burdens:

Education rather than challenging sexist codes in society, ironically, can strengthen them. A woman's education is often viewed as an additional commodity to be sold along with her body. Education seldom prevents her from being perceived as incomplete without marriage. (178)

Colonial critics depicted India and Hinduism as backwards, partly through attention to sexism. In response, privileged Indian men insisted on the education of their wives and daughters as a means of countering British constructions of India. However, this education did not undermine the commodity status of women.

In contrast to the context of women's education in India, Baudh alleges that Ramabai's illiteracy in the face of Ambedkar's efforts resulted from her devotion to wifehood: "To her, the real duty of a woman was to . . . serve her husband wholeheartedly and, thus, wear away her life for the good of her spouse. Such conventional thoughts kept her away from any idea of women's education" (9).¹²⁵ His assessment privileges Ramabai's wifely devotion and Hindu religious beliefs rather than acknowledging structural oppression. In contrast, Pawar points out "the social differences between Krantiba Phule and Ambedkar, and how it [sic] had affected the formation of their wives' personalities" (261). Interestingly, only Pawar and Moon's biography of Ramabai indicates that she learned to read and write in order to correspond with Ambedkar while he studied abroad (Pawar and Moon 201). Dalit women's writing casts suspicion on the agenda of Dalit men in their presentation of female illiteracy, domesticity, and Hinduism in a binary with male intellect, politics and secularism.

The absence of women's activism in the men's writing is striking. Baudh's book reaffirms traditional gender roles in religious movements. In the article "Hindu Women's Activism in India and the Questions It Raises," Amrita Basu describes women providing food for male participants in communal violence: "Indeed, a striking feature of women's participation in the activities of the BJP's women's organization is women's re-enactment

125 This concept of Ramabai wearing away her life is reproduced in Marathi devotional songs, which draw on a metaphor of sandalwood, ground into paste for Hindu puja, which conveys a sense of self-sacrifice.

of conventional sex-linked roles within the broader public arena” (179).¹²⁶ Baudh’s depiction of Ramabai reproduces this expectation of women’s duties and behaviour:

When Ramabai was told that women would also participate in the Mahad Satyagrah, she talked to Baba Saheb, who decided to poke fun at his wife. ‘Of course,’ said he quite seriously. ‘A lot of women from Mumbai are joining. You must lead them.’ Ramabai took it in a serious vein and said, ‘This behoves [sic] men only. We women will certainly be there but to arrange food for men.’ (21)

Furthermore, their exchange suggests that Ambedkar thought that Ramabai’s participation in any activism was a subject of derision. Women in fact participated and led actions in the Dalit movement (Pawar and Moon; Rege *Writing*). Since Ambedkar insisted that women participate at all levels of the Dalit movement, this presentation of Ambedkar and Ramabai’s exchange suggests that present day women’s activism is a pursuit to be mocked. This depiction undermines Ambedkar’s promotion of gender equality. Likewise, it erases the women who participated as leaders and speakers in the Dalit movement.

Savita Ambedkar

As a woman who visibly participated in the neo-Buddhist movement until her death in 2002, Savita Ambedkar is characterized as a binary opposite to the devoted

¹²⁶ The Bharatiya Janata Party is a right-wing religious nationalist party known for endorsing communal violence. They participated in the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992, and the communal violence which followed. See Dhananjay Mahapatra, “Advani Must Be Tried for Babri Masjid Conspiracy: CBI to SC,” *Times of India* 7 May 2012. See also “Timeline: Ayodhya Holy Site Crisis,” *BBC News* 30 Sept 2010. See also “Babri Masjid Demolition Neither Spontaneous nor Unplanned: Liberhan,” *Hindustan Times* 24 November 2009.

Hindu wife Ramabai. However, rather than challenging a sexist and casteist model of Hindu womanhood, representations of Savita reproduce negative sexist conceptions of women.¹²⁷ In the contemporary neo-Buddhist movement, the most misogynist myth surrounding the hagiography of Ambedkar is generally spoken of circumspectly, and avoided in analysis of his life. As a myth, defined in the religious sense as a traditional story which explains how and why the universe works, as opposed to frequent contemporary uses which interchange myth as a synonym for fiction, it plays an important role in constructing an understanding of women in the Dalit community. A widely circulating rumour suggests that Savita Ambedkar played a role in Ambedkar's death, and Dalits called for post-mortem tests for poisoning: "There was also tension at Rajgrih, Babasaheb's residence when some people demanded a post-mortem because they suspected slow poisoning" (Rege *Writing* 119). The official investigation and report concluded that Ambedkar died of natural causes, and his body was cremated.

A discussion of whether or not Ambedkar died under suspicious circumstances is outside the aims of this analysis. Rather, an analysis of the production and impact of this specific myth is important in the context of the larger dissertation. In the production of hagiography, I would argue that Ambedkar's illness is treated in two, sometimes simultaneous ways. In one, biographers largely ignore his illness as unfitting for a deity; in the comic book biography, his illness is mentioned only in the context of meeting Dr.

¹²⁷ Savita published an autobiography in Marathi; however, since it has not been published in English translation, it falls outside the scope of the dissertation.

Sharda Kabir, and the term diabetes is never used.¹²⁸ In the other, biographers represent Ambedkar as a martyr who sacrificed himself for the benefit of others in the pursuit of his work, and thus his health suffered.

The myth of a Brahmin woman's involvement in Ambedkar's death serves two central purposes, both of which are damaging to Dalit and women's liberation, and harm Dalit women specifically. First, the myth promotes a patriarchal and misogynist image of women as deceptive and dangerous. This image arises from historical Hindu and Buddhist attitudes toward women; texts such as the *Panchtantra* and the *Jatakamala* in each respective tradition repeat these misogynist attitudes (Chakravarti "Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy"; Gross *Buddhism after Patriarchy*). Savita continued to participate in the neo-Buddhist movement after Ambedkar's death, where Ramabai is represented as refusing to participate on the basis of appropriate roles for women. Thus Savita faces punishment in the form of character assassination.

Second, the myth displaces responsibility for casteism onto Brahmins alone. Analyses of the Dalit movement show that casteism is prevalent even among lower castes. Ambedkar noted that low castes pride themselves on their place in a hierarchy: "Each caste takes its pride and its consolation in the fact that in the scale of castes it is above some other caste" (*Annihilation of Caste* 65). The neo-Buddhist movement has faced accusations of supporting Mahar rights—Ambedkar's sub-caste—where other Dalit castes remain excluded from the movement via caste privilege exercised by Mahars

¹²⁸ Typically, Marathi women take a new name upon marriage. Pawar describes this practice in her autobiography. See *The Weave of My Life* 180. Thus Sharda Kabir becomes Savita Ambedkar upon marriage.

(Burra). Chandra Bhan Prasad points out that the anti-Brahmin movement has only served to reorganize the hierarchy: “The anti-brahman movements in the south resulted in the emergence [of the] shudras as the ruling elite” (68-9). Anand Teltumbde points out that lower caste solidarity, or Dalitbahujan solidarity, remains an unrealized ideal since members of the Shudra caste committed the rapes, tortures, and murders against the Bhotmange family in Khairlanji (*Khairlanji*).

Since Ambedkar’s publications include little about his personal life, Dalit writing generally expresses confusion about his decision to marry the Brahmin woman Savita Ambedkar.¹²⁹ Sharmila Rege notes a devotional song which attempts to answer this question:

The second composition ‘Baba Mhanto Samaj Mala – Lagna Konashi Karu’ (The community calls me ‘Father’—who can I marry) . . . places on record why Ambedkar might have married Savitabai, a brahman doctor, as also the secondary importance of conjugality as compared to the community. (*Writing* 62)

The post “Why Babasaheb Married a Brahmin” from the blog *Dalit Nation—The Only Authentic Voice of Dalits* and subsequent reader comments discuss the character of Savita Ambedkar, and speculate on the reasons for Ambedkar’s marriage to her. The comments section of the blog post presents an apparently uncensored cross-section of popular

¹²⁹ Ambedkar expressed his intention to write his autobiography, but his early death, poor health, and central priority of writing *The Buddha and His Dhamma* prevented him. His text “Waiting for a Visa,” published posthumously, includes incidents from his life in autobiographical form. See *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, ed. Vasant Moon, vol. 12 (Bombay: Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1993).

attitudes about gender and caste. The comments range from thoughtful responses to vicious slurs. The comments especially reveal deeply misogynist and casteist attitudes.

Positive commentary suggests that Ambedkar married Savita to help liberate even upper caste women from the Brahmin patriarchy, or that he married a doctor because of his poor health. Though offering a largely superficial analysis, the author of the blog post writes: “Babasaheb by Marrying the doctor brahmin Mai [Savita] Ambedkar has shown us that even women in Brahmin community is oppressed and the only way they can be saved is to get them out of their jati” (“Why Babasaheb Married a Brahmin”).¹³⁰ This interpretation follows Ambedkar’s own claim that intermarriage was the means to breaking the caste system, as well as Ambedkar’s efforts to improve women’s rights in India. However, this analysis ignores women’s agency in this process, and reproduces their status as passive victims who need male intervention and rescue.

Others argue that that Ambedkar married in order to procure domestic help with his illness:

[I]n the mahar caste and in the untouchables in general, there was no education at all in those times. And to find a nurse or a doctor to take care of him throughout the day was impossible. So he had to marry. . . . Dr. Ambedkar married a Brahmin doctor so that he could be healthy and contribute more of his energy for the social movement. (“Why Babasaheb Married a Brahmin”)

¹³⁰ Jati: birth or occupation, and a sub-category of varna, or caste.

The British-born Buddhist monk Sangharakshita reproduces this understanding in his book *Ambedkar and Buddhism* (9-10). This analysis follows the sexist and capitalist use of women as unpaid domestic labour by which men are freed to pursue public and political goals. It reproduces the narrative of Ramabai in which her duty is as a wife. Though positive, these comments reproduce the concept of woman as a powerless and passive victim, or the concept of wife as a tool or attribute in the pursuit of male political and spiritual goals.¹³¹

Less favourable speculation in the comments argues that Ambedkar was subject to his specifically male sexual desires: “Look guys all these politicians from ambedkar to this paswan all wants good sexy girls and they marry. When it comes to sex these people think from their dicks” (“Why Babasaheb Married a Brahmin”). Similar comments claim that he married Savita because of the beauty of Maharashtrian Brahmin women: “Admit it, brahmin women on the majority are quite hot. They are fair, pretty and elegant. Ambedkar is a man like anyone, obvious he liked her and got married into her” (“Why Babasaheb Married a Brahmin”). These comments follow the racist and casteist logic that upper caste status and fair skin are equivalent to beauty (Craig; Thiyyagirajah et al.).¹³² Furthermore, though apparently positive, these attitudes reproduce the mystification of men’s sexual desire, where evidence of masculinity hinges on virility. The depiction of Ambedkar as virile resists the representation of Dalits as genetically deficient or weak as

131 I return to the concept of wife as attribute in chapter five, when I analyze visual religious representations of Dalit women.

132 Additionally, upper castes are constructed as fair, and fairness is identified with upper caste status, echoing Fanon’s observation that “[t]he cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich”, *The Wretched of the Earth* 40.

well as the representation of intellectuals as impotent (Alter; Back; McClintock). However, this reversal occurs in the context of patriarchal concepts of heterosexual masculinity which reproduce oppressive roles for men and situate women as passive receptacles for men's desire. Furthermore, the comments reproduce casteist standards of beauty, where beauty is also used to devalue women in any other role than object.¹³³ This approach reproduces the representation of Ramabai.

The most negative comments, from both Dalit Buddhist and Brahmin nationalist extremes on the spectrum of caste politics, are misogynist, racist, and casteist. Some reproduce the myth within the Dalit Buddhist community, and suggest that Savita was planted in a Brahmin conspiracy to remove Ambedkar as a threat: "Babasaheb was trapped by the upper caste into marrying a Brahmin. It was a clear conspiracy. . . . Dalit politicians have to be careful. This has been happening quite frequently the dwijas [upper castes] identify the promising Dalit leaders and set them up with Brahmin whores" ("Why Babasaheb Married a Brahmin"). This comment reproduces misogynist concepts of women as either virgins or whores, in which women must meet a standard of unattainable sexual purity or be labelled as sexually impure; these concepts are prevalent across multiple cultures (MacKinnon). In this case, they arise in the context of Brahmin patriarchy in which upper caste women's sexuality is regulated in the interests of Hindu caste purity, whereby purity is maintained through the commodity exchange of upper caste women within marriage. In this same system, Shudra and Dalit women are seen as

¹³³ Again, I examine beauty standards and the visual representation of Dalit women in chapter five.

lacking purity and thus sexually available (Chakravarti *Gendering Caste*; Rege “Caste and Gender”). The comment labelling Brahmin women “whores” applies the same logic, while reversing the roles, and presumably positions them in opposition to “pure” low caste women. Despite the role reversal, this comment nevertheless maintains Brahmin patriarchal concepts of caste and gender purity.

Other comments repeat racist, casteist slurs likening Dalits to monkeys. These slurs represent the extension of Orientalism into internal colonialism. Where the British drew on Social Darwinism to construct Indians as ` inferior and to justify colonialism, Indian elites appropriate these racist attitudes to reinforce their power within India:

hey dalit, . . . you guys want everything for free. can't you guys score just 60% to avail govt. scholarships? you cry / crib / whine / whinge for anything and everything. next you will expect pass mark to be lowered from 40%. infact i wouldn't be surprised if you demand that its enough if you just sit for exams and you should be awarded degrees. and also be given job reservations on top of that. now you want to marry brahmin women.....c'mon DUDE, wake up. brahmin women don't flip for monkeys like you. (“Why Babasaheb Married a Brahmin”)

As postcolonial and Dalit feminists have noted, race and caste are regulated at the location of the exchange of women. This response also draws on the anti-reservation arguments, constructing the argument that Dalits are racially or genetically inferior, and

thus receive reservations without merit. These comments are not exceptional in their violence, but represent popularly held attitudes voiced regularly in Indian culture.

In discussing Savita Ambedkar, the blogger or commenters never acknowledge her as a person with agency. Both the Brahmin and Dalit communities punish women for independence and intelligence, as discussed throughout this dissertation. Meera Kosambi discusses Pandita Ramabai's character assassination upon marrying outside of her caste: "This was greatly resented by contemporary traditional women in Maharashtra who projected her as having destroyed her husband and her marriage, and contaminated the rest of society through her unorthodox behaviour" (48). The caste system is based on endogamy, and women's bodies are the site on which caste purity is regulated:

Women are regarded as upholding the traditions by conforming to them; *men* on the other hand *uphold* traditions *by enforcing* them—*not* upon themselves but *upon women*. The greatest impact of the upholding/enforcing of such codes is in the arena of marriage and reproduction. (original emphasis, Chakravarti *Gendering Caste* 144)

Urmila Pawar comments on another upper caste woman who married into the Dalit community and committed herself to working on behalf of Dalit liberation:

I felt a great respect for her when I came to know that Usha, a high-caste girl, had married Vilas Wagh, a low-caste man, and never made him sever his links with his community. On the contrary, she quit her job and

devoted her entire life to the project of reaching the works of Phule,
Ambedkar and Marx to dalit homes. (225)

Usha's commitment to working for Dalit liberation, without using her upper caste privilege to condescend to Dalits or to take over the agenda, and Pawar's respect, allow the possibility of inter-caste solidarity on the basis of Dalit feminist politics.¹³⁴ Pawar's inclusion of Usha opens the door to accepting Savita as a model for Dalit women as well; as an upper caste woman who marries Dalit man, she demonstrates the possibility for challenging sexism and casteism even from a relatively privileged position, and for cross-cultural support.

Furthermore, Savita's example responds to Ambedkar's assertion that intercaste marriage provided an important key to the breakdown of the caste system: "*The real remedy for breaking Caste is inter-marriage*" (original emphasis, *Annihilation of Caste* 60). Ambedkar did not imagine upward or downward caste mobility through intermarriage, as proposed in Hindu legal codes, but an abolition of caste. Dalits as well as upper caste Indians have resisted this call; if caste purity is the goal, doctrines of karma and dharma suggest that even low castes will gain some reward if they maintain caste purity. Dalit women acknowledge Ambedkar's life and writing as encouragement to pursue intercaste marriage: "The views of Babasaheb Ambedkar regarding mixed marriages are, of course, expressed in his writings. He also set an example by making a mixed marriage himself, and it was his desire that his son too should marry outside his

134 Sharmila Rege also strongly advocates for a Dalit feminist standpoint (2003, 2006).

caste” (Pawar and Moon 113). In the context of a Brahmin patriarchal system, Savita Ambedkar must be acknowledged as an individual with agency.

Conclusion

In comparison with the omission of or diminished attention to Ambedkar’s conversion, men’s writing on Ramabai highlights her devotion to the Hindu deities, even in the face of Ambedkar’s discouragement. Women writers simply define her as “a woman of religious persuasion [who] practiced penances and fasts to bring success to Babasaheb’s work” (Pawar and Moon 203). Writers cannot stretch their narratives to depict Ambedkar as a devoted Hindu, in the face of his condemnation of Hinduism and his conversion to Buddhism. However, Ramabai’s devotion to Hinduism remains highlighted in biographies and devotional songs. This commitment exposes a double standard for Dalit women, in which they remain associated with traditional roles for women, including Hindu religious identity. Where Dalit women are relegated to domestic spaces as the bearers of tradition, Dalit men are free to participate in modernity, including Buddhist religious identity, which provides an alternative to Hindu secular or Western capitalist modernity (Queen “Dr. Ambedkar”; Prasad). The persistence of the model of Dalit woman as Hindu wife demonstrates that, in their imagining of Dalit identity, Dalit men fall short of the nationalist critiques found in Ambedkar’s radical message of gender equality. As Tanita Sarkar argues in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*, the model of a Hindu wife is specifically connected with Hindu nationalism. Rather than drawing on Ambedkar’s construction of a Buddhist

model of the independent Indian state which promotes gender equality, Dalit men draw on existing Hindu models of women which emphasize women's subordinate status. As such, they undermine their own Dalit activist project by excluding a major aspect of it and excluding women from the literary landscape of the neo-Buddhist movement.

In both government depictions of Ambedkar and men's depictions of Ramabai, the revolutionary possibilities are erased, and the figure is absorbed into elite conceptions of society. The devotional songs re-inscribe these unequal relationships by focusing on Ramabai's devotion and self-sacrifice—a tactic more damaging than writers who represent women's suffering alone. Likewise, since the texts focus on Ambedkar's first wife Ramabai, they reinforce the image of woman as an illiterate, devoted Hindu wife, while they exclude Ambedkar's second educated, political neo-Buddhist wife, Savita. While Dalit men's autobiographies often represent Dalit women in patronizing ways, the representations of Ramabai and Savita within the religious pantheon become dangerous to neo-Buddhist women's self-actualization rather than simply demeaning or limiting.

Chapter 5

Picturing Women: Iconography and Artistic Production

Iconography as Text

Visual representations are highly important in the context of theology and religious studies as fields of study. These disciplines developed within the Western traditions of Judaism and Christianity; both traditions include complex responses to scriptural prohibitions against visual representation of the divine. Visual representations of the divine often reproduce gender and racial hierarchies, as discussed in the essays in *Men's Bodies, Men's Gods: Male Identities in a (Post-)Christian World* (1996), edited by Björn Krondorfer. The theology and philosophy implicit in the Hindu or Buddhist image is explored less often than it is in text; for example, books on iconography such as Benoytosh Bhattacharya's (1968), and S. P. Gupta and Shashi Prabha Asthana's (2007), generally fall into the category of encyclopedias which merely enumerate the aspects of iconography.

While contemporary religious studies as a discipline incorporates iconography as a legitimate text, often literary text takes a privileged position. In South Asia in particular, texts such as the Rig Veda continue to be privileged (Viswanathan "Colonialism and the Construction of Hinduism"). Jacob N. Kinnard discusses the challenges of "textual bias" in religious studies, and specifically in Buddhist studies in his book *Imagining Wisdom: Seeing and Knowing in the Art of Indian Buddhism* (1999). Using iconography as a legitimate text also acknowledges the inaccessibility of written texts for groups who have

traditionally been barred from education because of their caste, gender, or class position, and who work with different types of literacy, such as oral or iconographic. Iconography plays a central role in Hindu and Buddhist religious practice in South Asia. It challenges the concept of written literature as central text, and falls within the canon of religious texts.

In the second chapter I outline the context of Buddhism for this project as it relates to the intersections of caste and gender. I return to this broader historical and geographical Buddhist context for the specific purposes of placing visual representations in the neo-Buddhist movement in context. While I focus on Maharashtrian writing in the second and third sections of the dissertation, the history of Buddhist iconography specific to Maharashtra is of little weight in the neo-Buddhist movement. Ambedkar visited and researched Buddhist sites around India, including the cave temples in Maharashtra such as Ajanta, Ellora, Kanheri, Karla and Bhaja, which date from the second century BCE in the earliest case. However, these sites did not appear in the pre-conversion Hindu Dalit sacred geography. Only in the late twentieth century have these sites become neo-Buddhist pilgrimage destinations, though they are predominantly government-run tourist sites, like the sites on the Buddhist pilgrimage circuit, and receive visitors of all religions and all Buddhist sects.¹³⁵

Neo-Buddhism has developed and continues to develop a complex iconography alongside the other aspects of religious expression. I compare representations of and by

¹³⁵ See also chapters four and seven for discussions on Hindu secularism and Buddhist religious markers.

Dalit women in the context of non-anthropomorphic and anthropomorphic iconography, including representations of women and the feminine in two- and three-dimensional art, architecture, and ritual in festivals and temples. I consider posters, calendar art, and folk art among other popular textual forms. In the context of Hindu and Buddhist representations, women's role as artists is restricted; however, Dalit women represent themselves in visual as well as in textual forms.

In the iconography of neo-Buddhism, androcentrism most immediately arises. In this chapter, I begin with a focus on the development of the male ideal in Buddhism as the milieu within which neo-Buddhist iconography develops. Traditional Hindu and Buddhist philosophy proposes that one can only achieve enlightenment in a male body.¹³⁶ Even though women can reach enlightenment, often they can only do so by being like men. Therefore, the iconography often reproduces the male ideal, reinforcing the male body as the universal human ideal. Secondly, I consider female representation in Buddhism. This representation includes abstract, symbolic, and anthropomorphic representation, both positive and negative. Finally, I analyze iconographic representations of women in neo-Buddhism. Women appear both in the political and religious aspects of the Dalit Buddhist movement. While elements of Hinduism still exist in neo-Buddhism, so too do elements of gender and caste discrimination which Ambedkar rejected along with Hinduism.¹³⁷ Androcentric iconography affects the participation of Dalit women in

¹³⁶ As discussed in chapter two.

¹³⁷ Examples of *women's* iconographic and artistic production are difficult to find and study in the multiple androcentrism detailed earlier in the dissertation. Women's artistic production has traditionally been both highly developed in the culture and widely under-represented in scholarly texts on Indian art. As a matter of practicality, it must fall outside the scope of this project.

the Buddhist conversion movement and their understanding of liberation, just as androcentric literature does.

Allies and Antagonists in Iconography

Buddhist iconography emerged in a specific context of Hindu iconography. It shares symbolism and follows a similar genealogy in terms of form. An understanding of iconography in both Hinduism and Buddhism helps to develop the circumstances within which neo-Buddhism emerged. Early in Buddhist iconography, the pantheons of Hinduism and Buddhism overlapped. In Buddhism, iconography of the goddess takes much the same form as in Hinduism, and incorporates the same complex systems of ornamentation, stance, colour, and to a lesser extent, consort. Vajrayogini and Tara allow for comparison with the goddess in Hindu iconography, although they belong properly to the Vajrayana and Tibetan traditions which developed as Buddhism moved outside the borders of India. Vajrayogini, like Kali, dances naked on a body, and wears a garland of severed heads (Appendix A, Images 2 and 3).

However, the difference in Buddhist iconography arises in the purpose of the image. Heather Elgood, articulating a point of view which Rita M. Gross (*Feminism and Religion*) and Albert Grünwedel share, argues:

The figures of Buddhism . . . are concerned with experience and the relationship and nature of man, while the Hindu images concern themselves with the evoking of the gods among men . . . The Buddhist icon represents the enlightened human state which was intended to inspire

and evoke in the disciple a corresponding detachment and enlightenment.

(230)¹³⁸

The representation of the Buddhist icon, as a representation of the human and an inspiration for enlightenment, is opposed to the Hindu icon which represents the goddess, and is a focus for worship and prayer.

In iconography the deity becomes embodied in the image. In Hinduism in particular, worshippers create the icon to give the deity a body. However, embodiment for living people more often holds negative connotations. Women have been depicted as bodily, and European colonialists also categorized colonized peoples as being bodily:

As far as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were concerned, women, all races not deemed white . . . and the working classes were all suspected of being too close to the body. The separation of mind and body that marked the acquisition of reason was deemed foreign to these people.

(Cranny-Francis et al. 181)

Colonized peoples were further associated with the feminine: “the rhetoric of *gender* was used to make increasingly refined distinctions among the different *races*. The white race was figured as the male of the species and the black race as the female” (McClintock 55). However, within South Asia, Brahminical Hinduism tends to erase or appropriate other religious experiences, such as Dalit religious traditions or Buddhist and Jain traditions. In the *Rig Veda*, Brahmins depicted themselves as intellectual and spiritual, as the gods

¹³⁸ This citation itself demonstrates evidence of androcentrism in the Western academy, in which a woman writing in the late twentieth century uses the terms “man” and “men” interchangeably with “human.”

created their varna from the head of Purusha (*The Rig Veda* 10.90.11-12). The bodies of outcastes can pollute this purity with a shadow, or a footprint: “Any contact with members of this group, even their sight, sometimes even their shadow, was held to be ritually polluting and abhorrent; elaborate purifications would be undertaken if such occurred” (Teltumbde *Persistence of Caste* 14). Within Dalit communities, class and gender hierarchies of the body remain; often “Dalit” really means “Dalit men,” and Dalit women’s experiences are erased.

Often iconography acts as a site where religions compete for followers, particularly when deities of one religion dominate deities of another religion in art; this concept also plays a role in imagining two distinct traditions. Benoytosh Bhattacharyya and Bhagwant Sahai describe the iconography of Buddhism as incorporating physical dominance over the Hindu gods:

The Buddhists as a proof of their aversion to the followers of the Brahmanical faith, made their gods trample upon Ganeśa. . . . The four Hindu gods, Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva and Indra have been designated uniformly as the four Māras or Wicked Beings, and several Buddhist gods have been described as trampling them under their feet. (Bhattacharyya 389)

Early Buddhists seem to use this competitive strategy more often. Ambedkar rejects this embodiment of the god since Buddhism considers the concept of deity irrelevant, as discussed in chapter one.

Another approach to ensuring a religion's dominance involves appropriating the deities of another religion: "Buddha, the great prophet and teacher, became absorbed into the pantheon of Hinduism as an avatar of Vishnu . . . Both the Buddha and Vishnu are seen as divine saviour figures" (Elgood 63). Bhattacharyya likewise interprets Hindu appropriation positively: "[i]t is a matter of satisfaction . . . that the Hindus never disgraced any gods belonging to the alien faith in this manners. On the contrary, they placed Buddha among the ten Avatāras of Viṣṇu" (389). In the Hindu scripture the *Garuda Purana* or the smṛiti canonical texts compiled around the fifth century CE, and in iconography, the ten avatars of Vishnu include the Buddha as the ninth avatar: "My holy name should be remembered and meditated upon repeatedly. / The Fish, the Tortoise, the Boar, the Man-lion, the Dwarf, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Krisna, Buddha, and also Kalkī / These ten names should always be meditated upon by the wise" (*Garuda Purāṇa* 62; 8.9-11).¹³⁹ Out of context, this inclusion of the Buddha seems to represent positive syncretism. At the same time, Buddhist iconography includes the Buddha protected by a crown of serpents, from his mythological encounter with Muchalinda. This representation directly mirrors popular images of Vishnu protected by a crown of serpents, and draws on a wider association of the Hindu gods with the naga—serpent deities.

However, just as British cultural imperialism acted to construct South Asia through appropriating its knowledge and rewriting it, so too did Brahminism appropriate Buddhist knowledge in order to promote its own superiority within South Asia.

139 Smṛiti: the category of historical or "remembered" religious texts. Shṛuti is the category of divine word, or "revealed" religious texts.

Ambedkar details the Brahmin cultural struggle for superiority over Buddhists in his book *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?*:

Buddhism had made so deep an impression on the minds of the masses and had taken such a hold of them that it was absolutely impossible for the Brahmins to fight the Buddhists except by accepting their ways and means and practising the Buddhist creed in its extreme form. (117)

In this analysis, Ambedkar recognizes the negative effects of appropriation, where Hindus attempted to denigrate Buddhists by adopting the Buddha into their pantheon. As an avatar of Vishnu, the Buddha is said to have incarnated in order to draw the wicked away from Hinduism: “preceding the Kali Yug shall Vishnu be born in Kikata, as Buddha, the son of Ajita, for the purpose of deluding the enemies of the gods” (Kennedy 112). In this way, Hindus appropriate Buddhist culture in order to demonstrate their cultural superiority.

Finally, syncretism plays an important role in the overlap of pantheons. While the previous two competitive approaches help to develop one religion as distinct from other religions in the community, syncretism undermines this idea: “It is not a fact that Hindu gods were unknown in the Buddhist pantheon or that the Buddhist pantheon wholly consisted of Buddhist gods” (Bhattacharyya 344). Bhattacharyya argues further:

The Hindus, on the other hand, have borrowed goddesses like Mahācīnātārā, Jāngulī, Vajrayogini from the Buddhist pantheon . . . Thus there is evidence that a free interchange of deities actually took place at

the very outset of Buddhism . . . the Buddhists alike borrowed Hindu gods in their earlier stages. (1)

Upon the decline of Buddhism in India in the eight to tenth centuries CE, a Brahmin-dominant society dictated the terms of iconography. In India, the remaining Theravada and Mahayana practices predominantly used non-anthropomorphic iconography, or limited anthropomorphic iconography to represent the Buddha. The mutual exchange between early Buddhism and Hinduism contrasts sharply with Ambedkar's rejection of Hinduism and his conversion to Buddhism. In the neo-Buddhist movement, rather than re-imagine or reclaim Hindu iconography, upon conversion many Dalits "threw all the gods, goddesses, the altar, the gods' special clothes, and so on, into the river" (Bhave 186). Ambedkar rejected syncretism and appropriation as necessarily retaining elements of the Hindu caste system in Buddhism, or devaluing Buddhist ideals in Hinduism. An examination of the valuable and the damaging aspects of Hinduism and Buddhism which Dalit Buddhists retain or might consider in their development of the new path is useful.

Ambedkar explicitly rejected Hinduism's appropriation of the Buddha within his conversion ceremony. In the fifth of his twenty-two vows, he states: "I do not and shall not believe that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this to be sheer madness and false propaganda."¹⁴⁰ Ambedkar's preferred Buddha iconography excluded the Muchalinda mythology. All of the representations of Buddha in neo-Buddhist vihars or pilgrimage sites use the Buddha alone. At the same time, within India the process of

140 I have reproduced the 22 vows in the introduction to this dissertation.

appropriation continues with regard to Ambedkar and the Buddha. Just as upper caste Hindus in the past appropriated the Buddha into their pantheon, and successfully resisted the British Christian missionary movement by absorbing Jesus into the pantheon, evidence suggests that Ambedkar is also being included in the Hindu pantheon. Billboard images which place Krishna, Ambedkar, Mahavira, Hanuman, and Jesus side by side visually parallel the literary situation of Ambedkar in the Hindu hagiographical mode as discussed in the previous chapter (Appendix A, Image 4). In the case of religion, Hindu elite narratives pose more of a threat to neo-Buddhism than colonial narratives.

Buddhist Representations

Buddhist iconography roughly divides into three groups in South Asia, corresponding with the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana schools of Buddhism. In the Theravada school, from 250 BCE onward, iconography focused on non-anthropomorphic imagery, which avoids representation of humans in architectural forms such as the stupa, and symbols such as the lotus, the footprint, and the bodhi tree representing the Buddha. The Buddha did not claim to be a divine messenger, and discouraged metaphysical speculation as discussed in chapter one; Buddhism is a non-theistic religion. Thus iconography which followed the anthropomorphic character of the surrounding Hindu religion which represents deities using human forms, and explicitly expressed the god's form was avoided. In the Mahayana school, roughly dating from the beginning of the current era, anthropomorphic iconography developed, and representations of the Buddha and his disciples became popular alongside Theravadan

non-anthropomorphic symbolism. A distinct iconography developed, with features of the Buddha enumerated. Although the Buddha's features are stylized according to time and region, the Buddha is depicted as having a body, alongside symbolic icons of him. In the Vajrayana school, which emerged around the sixth or seventh centuries CE, Buddhism saw an explosion of iconography, with a highly developed pantheon expressed in anthropomorphic icons. Here more similarities with Hindu iconography emerge: Buddhist deities are associated with specific colours, and hold implements in their multiple arms (Appendix A, Image 5).

An inadequacy of categories and terms in the Western tradition arises in the insistence of Western writers who categorize Buddhism as a philosophy rather than a religion, as discussed in chapters one and three. These distinctions between philosophy and religion, or elite and lay Buddhism, are reproduced in attitudes toward images.¹⁴¹ In particular, colonial attitudes toward icons posed a double standard, where missionaries accepted the reproduction of images of Christ, and of Christian saints, but condemned iconography in Hinduism. This strategy served to devalue Hinduism and Indian culture, in the interests of constructing European superiority at the level of religion. Studies of early Buddhist iconography reproduce colonial hierarchies when they propose a hierarchy of images whereby abstract symbols took priority over anthropomorphic ones: "When in the course of time the religion fell back into a worship of gods, the cult picture appeared.

¹⁴¹ I discuss these definitions with regard to texts in chapter three. See also Ninian Smart, "Theravāda Buddhism and the Definition of Religion," *Sophia* 34.1 (1995), and Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets: A Study in Charisma, Hagiography, Sectarianism, and Millennial Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

The countless legends which are related of the oldest Buddha pictures describe plainly the embarrassment occasioned when such a representation had to be made” (Grünwedel 67). In this case, depicting the Buddha is characterized negatively; however, in the context of denigration of the body, the Buddha’s bodily-ness, is the distasteful aspect of representing him. The construction of categories of race and religion connects directly with negative valuations of the deity’s image.

The same hierarchies of race, religion and image, which emerged in colonial expressions of dominance, incorporate concepts of gender as well. Carol Christ argues that representations of the deity in the Western monotheistic traditions are particularly concerned with gender: “The prohibition of images is a prohibition of the Goddess. If images are permitted, there is no way to stop the human mind and the human hand from creating images of female power” (*Rebirth of the Goddess* 112).¹⁴² Where representations of the deity are common, as in most Christian sects, a male gender is required. Where female saints emerge in the Christian pantheon, these images are explained as representations of people, rather than representations of the divine. Just as in language, where worshippers *may not* use feminine pronouns for an allegedly gender-free deity, depictions of Christ as female provoke outrage.¹⁴³ Where women have been associated with the bodily, women are also distasteful.

142 Importantly, images of female power in Hinduism do not necessarily correspond with improved status for women, though Gross argues that they still provide psychological comfort for women. See “Is the (Hindu) Goddess a Feminist?,” *A Garland of Feminist Reflections: Forty Years of Religious Exploration* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009) 192.

143 For example, see “Sculpture of Female Christ Prompts Praise, Outrage,” *The Palm Beach Post* 25 Apr 1984. At the same time, Kwok Pui-Lan argues that some Asian feminist theologians avoid this linguistic sexism where their language provides a neuter noun or pronoun; see *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*.

In his analysis of Buddhist symbols Ananda K. Coomaraswamy demonstrates misogyny when he connects a negative view of anthropomorphism with the proclamation that women's admission into the sangha, the community of monastic Buddhists, would shorten the life of Buddhism from 1000 to 500 years:

[A]nthropomorphic elements have now been combined with the earlier and more abstract symbolism; that was an inevitable result of the emergence of Buddhism as a *popular* religion, its extension as an *emotional* (*bhakti-vāda*) persuasion. That may have been just what the Buddha is said to have prophesied with regret on the occasion of the admission of *women* to the monastic order . . . (my emphasis, 39)¹⁴⁴

Coomaraswamy's weights his analysis with hierarchical terms which reference binary oppositions. He explicitly values symbolic images over anthropomorphic images, and associates abstract symbolism with the masculine, rational, elite, and intellectual, and anthropomorphic iconography with the feminine, emotional, popular, and bodily. Both women and anthropomorphic imagery represent the devalued bodily. Coomaraswamy blames women for the decline of Buddhism, which he associates with the introduction of anthropomorphic imagery. At the same time, he overlooks inherent connections between the symbolic and the anthropomorphic. For example, the symbol of the footprint does not exist without the foot—and the body to create it. Despite appeals to the value of symbolic representation, and despite attempts to deny the bodily and so exclude women-as-bodily,

144 I address Ambedkar's response to the legend including Buddha's proclamation of the shortened life of Buddhism in chapter two.

Buddhists are still individual women and men with bodies. It is impossible to remove the body from Buddhism.

In early Buddhism, symbols played a more important role because of the Buddha's rejection of theism. Gupta and Asthana state: "[t]he reason for the comparative absence of anthropomorphic gods in stone during this period appears to be Buddha's own instructions to his disciples against imagery" (83-4). Both anthropomorphic and symbolic imagery were developed for the purpose of memorial, including respectful remembrance, rather than worship of a deity. However, use of symbols does not remove gender associations; particularly in an androcentric context, non-anthropomorphic symbols come to represent the universal male. Most important for the purpose of this analysis is the wheel as a symbol of samsara, and a non-gendered focus of meditation. The wheel as a symbol resembles the stupa as a central feature in Buddhist architecture: "*Stūpa* (स्तूप) as an object of veneration in its own right, and as a replacement of Buddha himself, became very popular with Buddhists . . . *Stūpa* is, in fact, a sepulchral monument, in which the ashes of the cremated bodies of the saints were buried" (Gupta and Asthana 28). In particular, the stupa connects the abstract to the body where its circular form is abstract and wheel-like from an aerial point of view, but is also a memorial to an individual Buddhist saint or reliquary for a physical and bodily token of the Buddha (Appendix A, Images 6 and 7). Furthermore, the personal memorial connects to the abstract in that practitioners use their bodies to combine memorial, meditation, and devotional worship in a ritual circumambulation of a stupa.

Negative conceptions of women and the feminine emerge even within abstract symbolism, and not only in the devaluation or outright rejection of the body. The wheel provides an excellent example of these negative conceptions as it appears in both Hinduism and Buddhism as a representation of samsara, or the cycle of rebirth. While the concept of samsara is a central feature of religions originating in India, the wheel, through samsara, is inextricably connected to birth, and often male religious leaders connect birth and rebirth with women as childbearers. Women take much of the blame for samsara because of their role in bringing life into the world of illusion. Falk connects samsara and symbolism in Buddhism: “a woman was a veritable image of becoming and of all the forces of blind growth and productivity which Buddhism knew as *samsāra*. As such she too was the enemy—not only on a personal level, as an individual source of temptation, but also on a cosmic level” (Falk “Image of Woman” 110). Furthermore, women are seen as sexually tempting and entice male monastics into participating in bringing life into the world.¹⁴⁵ As such, the literature represents women as participating at an individual bodily level in reproducing the conditions for samsara. This becomes reinforced in an androcentric worldview where the ideal monastic—who is male—can withdraw from this process of reproduction, *even if* he has already procreated, due to the ideal woman—who is a mother—taking sole responsibility for domestic duties, as

145 The depiction of women as temptresses is similar to depictions in the Western monotheistic religions. See also Kathryn R. Blackstone, *Women in the Footsteps of the Buddha: Struggle for Liberation in the Therīgāthā* (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 1998).

discussed in chapter two with reference to the Buddha's abandonment of his wife and child.¹⁴⁶

Anthropomorphic Buddhist iconography in India most often represents the Buddha, rather than the pantheons of deities and saints found outside of India. In contrast with many icons in the Hindu pantheon, including the avatars of Vishnu, and although the iconography enumerates a multitude of auspicious marks on the Buddha's body, he does not take multiple arms or heads to denote his attributes (Appendix A, Image 8). Two of these attributes defining the Buddha are important for this analysis, in which "17, the skin has a tinge of gold colour; . . . [and] 23, nature has concealed the marks of sex" (Grünwedel 161). As with Hindu iconography, skin colour denotes caste, and insistence on androgyny more often excludes the body, particularly women's bodies. Trinh T. Minh-ha describes this exclusion with reference to writing; her assertions apply equally to religious experience:

The notion of "bisexual, hence neuter" writing together with the fantasy of a "total" being are concepts that many men have actively promoted to do away with differentiation. Androgyny is another name for such a co-optation. Saying that a great mind is androgynous . . . is equivalent to

146 John S. Strong reproduces this androcentrism in his sexist analysis of the Buddha's abandonment of his wife and child: "Indeed, in achieving the goal of renunciation—enlightenment—the Buddha also achieves the goal of lay life—fatherhood. But conversely, and just as importantly, in achieving the goal of motherhood, Yaśodharā makes possible the goal of renunciation," in "A Family Quest: The Buddha, Yaśodharā, and Rāhula in the Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya," *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Juliane Schober (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997) 123. Strong conflates "laypeople" and "men" by assuming that the goal of lay life is fatherhood, and thus marks difference from the male standard on the bodies of women. He also glorifies Yasodhara's contributions to the Buddha's enlightenment in the domestic duties imposed on her in a patriarchal culture.

saying that “the mind has no sex” (also read “no gender”). In the salvation theme of androgyny, the male is still seen as the active power of generation and the female as the passive one (a defective male, due to the absence of androgen). (39)

Since the Buddha is always described as upper caste (Kshatriya) and male, the iconography sets Dalit women farther away from Buddha-nature, and reinforces the goal of rebirth as an upper caste male as the means to enlightenment.¹⁴⁷

Abstract concepts such as femininity, masculinity, the body, and the intellect may promote positive representations for women in reconceptualization. Trinh asserts that “we do not *have* bodies, we *are* our bodies” (original emphasis, 36). A gender analysis of abstract symbolism must expose as misogynist the rejection of the body as it appears in several world religions, including in Buddhism as a connection to maya—or illusion—and the world.¹⁴⁸ An insistence on the abstract as the highest form of worship, or even on Buddhism as a philosophy, connects to gender. To call something “abstract” often implies the process of Cartesian rationality, and always implies intellectualization; thus invoking

147 Gross also acknowledges the insistence on an androgynous model of Buddhism that very often obscures the reality that usually only men fit into this androgynous model: “the statement about the irrelevance of gender is made in an androcentric context. Given that context, those statements are only superficially gender neutral. In fact, they always mean, ‘You can make it, even if you are female.’ They never mean, ‘You can make it even if you are male.’ Often the sex-neutral language hides the fact that women become acceptable only by transcending their femaleness and becoming ‘manly.’ They are supposedly given the opportunity to match the human norm, but that human norm is collapsed into the male ideal. Men are rarely, if ever, expected to become ‘unmanly’ to the extent that women are expected to become ‘unfeminine’.” *Buddhism after Patriarchy* 178.

148 At the same time, Western theology often influences scholarly analysis of the body in Buddhist thought, as well as the development of Buddhist doctrine from within the tradition; see Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India, and the Mystic East* (London: Routledge, 1999).

the abstract often excludes women ideologically and therefore frequently in practice.

While “woman” as a concept has been defined in relation to the emotional and the bodily, and their rational and intellectual capacities undervalued and institutionally underdeveloped, the value placed on rationality and the intellect poses a binary and hierarchical opposition which devalues emotion and the body.

Neo-Buddhist Representations

In neo-Buddhism, Ambedkar insisted on non-theism, and rejected worship of any deity; in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar repeats statements reinforcing Buddhism’s non-theism: “The world has no protector or preserver” (91; 2.3.8.56). These statements are taken up by practicing neo-Buddhists; the Dalit woman Rukmini tells: “In the *vihar* they tell stories about Babasaheb, about the Buddha. They say that these two were men, not gods” (Bhave 99).¹⁴⁹ However, following practices in both Hinduism and Buddhism, Ambedkar has been deified; Dalit Buddhist homes display “images of the conventional Navayana pair: Ambedkar, in his blue suit, and the Buddha, in his golden monk’s robe” (Tartakov 209; Appendix A, Image 9). Ambedkar is variously seen as a guru (due to his addition of 22 vows to the Buddhist conversion ritual), a bodhisattva, or a divinity in the Hindu-Buddhist pantheon: “The Buddha was being worshipped as God and Ambedkar was being deified along with him” (Webster 86).¹⁵⁰ Many memorial buildings dedicated to Ambedkar take the architectural form of a stupa, particularly those with more explicit religious connotations, including the Chaitya Bhoomi in Dadar and the

¹⁴⁹ Vihar: the Buddhist place for worship.

¹⁵⁰ Additionally, in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, the distinction between guru, bodhisattva, and deity become blurred.

Diksha Bhoomi in Nagpur (Appendix A, Image 10). These forms connect non-anthropomorphic symbols with anthropomorphic memorial—inside are portraits and statues of Ambedkar and the Buddha—and devotion in their purpose. Ambedkar’s goal of recovering an original Buddhism, and the subsequent development of neo-Buddhist iconography from non-anthropomorphic to anthropomorphic, pose an interesting comparison with the development of Buddhist iconography.

Ambedkar’s counter to both British colonialism and Hindu nationalism also emerges in his image. Ambedkar often wore a Western-style suit as a means of resisting the hypocrisy of dressing to evoke poverty and spirituality in a life of wealth and politics.¹⁵¹ As a political figure, he was often photographed. He is often depicted in unpainted metal sculpture modelled on the European commemorative style, popularized during the colonial period (Appendix A, Image 11). Most often these statues fall in the “political” category; mainstream politicians build them as campaign promises, and garland them upon election and relevant festivals, then forget them for the rest of their term, unless politically expedient.¹⁵² Ambedkar is also depicted in folk art statues—usually constructed from concrete and painted (Appendix A, Image 12).

Like iconography of the Buddha, paintings and statues of Ambedkar have taken on specific features. This iconography mirrors that of the existing religious traditions: his raised arm with finger pointing upward mirrors the gesture of teaching or blessing in

¹⁵¹ He sometimes wore a Nehru jacket as well, also known as an Indian-style suit. Only in the context of religious ritual—and specifically his conversion—did Ambedkar wear the modest robes of the Buddhist monastic which cover the body from shoulder to ankle, in contrast with the sannyasi dhoti which he and Muslims found immodest.

¹⁵² As discussed in the analysis of government memorial in chapter four.

Buddha iconography, and the Constitution becomes an attribute like the trident, bowl or conch in Hindu and Buddhist iconography (Appendix A, Images 11, 12 and 13). Icons also follow regional variations including facial features, body type, and skin colour; a statue of Ambedkar in Pondicherry in south India gives him a stockier frame and rounder features than statues in north India (Appendix A, Image 13).¹⁵³ Currently, ritual in the neo-Buddhist movement evokes the practice of puja to the deity in the Hindu tradition. Rituals commemorating important events in Ambedkar's life include statues, photos, or paintings in a shrine-like setting, including a statue of the Buddha. Ambedkar is decorated with garlands of flowers, and food and incense are offered to him. One image shows Dalits in the community centre praying before the picture of Ambedkar; the caption specifically refers to their action as puja: "*the center officially opened last sunday, with an inauguration led by its director, dhammachari maitriveer nagarjuna (shown leading the puja, left)*" (original italics, "Welcome to Dhammachakra") (Appendix A, Image 14). Viswanathan notes: "The laws that regulate the daily activities of individuals from birth to death aren't easily shed with a change of religion" (*Outside the Fold* 88). Increasingly, the images displayed in Dalit Buddhist homes and centres become aligned with the shrine to the deity in Hindu homes in both appearance and purpose. However, Ambedkar did not reject ritual wholesale. He accepted the use of

¹⁵³ Depictions of deities across religious traditions also change regionally. Where Ambedkar's features change, his posture and attributes identify him, aligning the representation with other South Asian iconographic representations.

ritual where it avoided superstition and did not impose financial burdens on neo-Buddhists.¹⁵⁴

Despite explicit rejections of theism, prominent men in a tradition often become deified. This process connects to men's power in a culture; often barriers prevent women from becoming great teachers, and androcentrism further prevents them from becoming deified. Images of powerful women in the right wing Hindu nationalist movement do not provide an exception. Usually they become glorified through their adherence to and promotion of traditional gender roles, rather than challenging women's oppression.¹⁵⁵ Additionally, they often participate in the reproduction of class, caste, and racial oppression as a means to gain or maintain power in a Brahmin patriarchal culture.¹⁵⁶ Importantly, Ambedkar's Western-style suit emphasizes his masculinity; as an icon of neo-Buddhism, his gender becomes far more important than the Buddha's maleness, when both female and male monastics wear the orange robe.

At the same time, Ambedkar's blue suit represents a significant challenge to caste hierarchy as indicated in his contrast with Gandhi's adoption of the dhoti, a one-piece cloth tied around the lower body. Western observers often perceive Gandhi as religious and Ambedkar as secular due to their attire. However, this reading superficially interprets

154 Hinduism, in comparison, is widely known for offering more luxurious and private pujas to worshippers who pay higher sums.

155 See also Amrita Basu, "Hindu Women's Activism in India and the Questions It Raises," *Appropriating Gender: Women's Activism and Politicized Religion in South Asia*, eds. Patricia Jeffery and Amrita Basu (New York: Routledge, 1997).

156 For an analysis of imperialism as a means for women to gain power, see Antoinette M. Burton, "The White Woman's Burden: British Feminists and 'the Indian Woman,' 1865-1915," *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, eds. N. Chaudhuri and M. Strobel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

their self-representations. In his attempt to construct an modern Indian state with its foundations in Hinduism, Gandhi made the political decision to exchange his own Western-style suits for the dhoti to perform rural Hindu values. During the independence movement, his attire alienated many Muslims who value more modest head-to-toe dress; their reactions were further interpreted as anti-nationalist, where nationalism was identified with Hinduism. Ambedkar rejected what he saw as the hypocrisy and privilege of an elite upper caste Hindu male romanticizing Hinduism and rural life, and adopted the Western-style suit as a representation of rational values, which he identified in Buddhism. Importantly, the colour blue also marks a visual distinction from Hinduism, which uses red, pink and orange.¹⁵⁷ Despite misreadings of their modes of dress, Ambedkar was as religious as Gandhi was political.

Furthermore, an association between traditional, religious and Indian or modern, secular and Western reproduces Orientalist analyses of religion and culture.¹⁵⁸ I argue that Ambedkar proposed Buddhism as an indigenous alternative to both British colonialism and Hindu nationalism; he did not find a suitable indigenous mode of dress, and adopted the Western-style suit rather than reproduce Hinduism. Where Ambedkar resists Hindu nationalism, exemplified in Gandhi's performance of Hinduism through the adoption of the dhoti, Ambedkar's affirmations of Buddhist modernity are often interpreted by those in the West as an absence of religiosity, where religious conviction is mistakenly marked

157 Another reading of Ambedkar's blue suit may acknowledge colour symbolism in Buddhism, where blue represents compassion.

158 The impact of Orientalist academic work on current perceptions of Buddhism is discussed in chapter three, part two.

only by Hinduism in the Indian context. While Gandhi attempted to disrupt the conflation of Indian religious values with anti-modern sentiments, he conflated religious and nationalist values—which lead directly to Hindu nationalism—to the detriment of marginalized groups.

Images of Contemporary Dalit Women

Iconography of existing female bodhisattvas or goddesses, so prevalent in other Buddhist paths, particularly Vajrayana, does not appear in neo-Buddhism. However, this rejection owes much to the dominance of upper caste Hindu gender roles. Ramabai, Ambedkar's first wife, Savita, Ambedkar's second wife, and Mayawati, the Chief Minister of the state of Uttar Pradesh, all represent different aspects of the movement, and all play some role in relation to the religious aspect of neo-Buddhism. Alongside the male pantheon, Ramabai's image holds the central female religious place in the movement. However, it receives a distinctly subsidiary position to Ambedkar and the Buddha, either in a corner of the vihar, or on a wall or pillar of the stupa. Evidence suggests that devotees offer flowers to her image. Sometimes Savitribai Phule's image as the wife of Jyotirao Phule accompanies Ramabai's.

The significance of Ramabai's image lies in its positioning and reproduction. The photo of her reproduced most often was taken as part of a family portrait, where she holds the position of wife and mother, but also sits closer to her sister-in-law Laxmibai in a community of women (Appendix A, Image 15).¹⁵⁹ Artists reproduce the photo of

¹⁵⁹ A photo of her during her funeral also exists. I am also aware of a second rare family photo, reproduced in a Hindi-language coffee-table book on Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* (Mumbai: Pratham Samskaran, 2007) 134.

Ramabai in paint medium. Her portrait is sometimes available for purchase among popular calendar art-style posters alongside portraits of Ambedkar and the Buddha (Appendix A, Image 16). These portraits bring the pantheon into individual homes and local vihars. All reproductions are cropped, and she either holds a lesser position as Ambedkar's consort in the religious pantheon, or as the ideal woman represented on the covers of the highly problematic texts discussed in the previous chapter. This ideal woman is a self-sacrificing wife and mother.

In the popular portrait Ramabai's chin is lowered, and her head turned slightly to one side (Appendix A, Image 16). In the family portrait, this body language connects her to her sister-in-law (Appendix A, Image 15). Alone, her body language conveys a sense of feminine ideals of modesty and submission. Often the photo shows only her face, cropping out the bodily-ness so troublesome in the production of a saint. Her sari covers her head; in fact, Ramabai's manner, pose, and dress in the portrait represent a distinctly Maharashtrian style, further making the reproductions of Ramabai indistinguishable from other women. In one poster reproduction of the Ambedkar couple, the woman is simply a generic Indian woman in a red sari.¹⁶⁰ Since Ramabai is not identified using iconographic attributes, her individuality is completely erased, and she is simply Ambedkar's wife.¹⁶¹ In fact, she becomes one of *Ambedkar's attributes*, mirroring the Hindu concept of wife as a tool required for a man to properly perform puja (Young *Hinduism*).

160 Unfortunately, the image I have is unsuitable for reproduction.

161 If this portrait is indeed meant to represent Ramabai, as all other portraits of "Ambedkar's wife" do, it is important to note that this portrait also includes an image of the Buddha, an astonishing anachronism, since by all accounts Ramabai died a devout Hindu.

As booklet cover representations, features of the original photograph and the painted reproductions receive emphasis in the accompanying text.¹⁶² Because of the mythological construction of the figure of Ramabai, the artists' reproductions lighten Ramabai's skin tone and shift her facial features beyond the point of recognition, into typical Indian standards of beauty which include fair skin and a straight nose. Her gold jewelry is enlarged and enriched, and her wrinkles are erased, reflecting standards of beauty which privilege wealth and youth. Hindu iconography persistently reproduces the fair, beautiful, wealthy goddess, who is a wife, as the ideal which Indian women are expected to emulate (Young *Hinduism*). The ideals of beauty which privilege these attributes are explicitly expressions of *casteism*. In India, racist beauty standards are explicitly connected to caste, and affect women regardless of religion. Neo-Buddhism breaks away from Hindu beauty standards in the recommendation of short hair (Ilaiyah *Post-Hindu India*). The divergence between Ramabai's photo and portraits—which are reproduced far more often—suggests that the artists *construct* her beauty rather than present it. It also suggests that rather than revaluing alternative forms of beauty, the artists reinforce an ideal of upper-caste and -class Hindu wife- and motherhood also found in the Ramabai mythology.¹⁶³

The current inclusion of Ramabai in the neo-Buddhist pantheon and women's participation in the neo-Buddhist movement have no connection. The Diksha Bhoomi is spatially the "initiation grounds" in Nagpur, where Ambedkar converted to Buddhism

162 I analyse these texts in chapter four.

163 See also chapter four.

with hundreds of thousands of his followers on 14 October 1956. Dalit neo-Buddhists travel from locations across India to participate in pujas, listen to speeches on Ambedkar's ideals and political empowerment, and visit the site of Ambedkar's conversion as well as the Dragon Palace Temple, a memorial building for indoor worship services. The architectural form of the stupa is evident at the site of Ambedkar's conversion, as well as adjacent to the Dragon Palace Temple, in construction when I visited in 2009. Stalls selling books, and religious statuary and tokens are an important aspect of the festival.

At a Diksha Bhoomi event I attended at the Dragon Palace Temple in Nagpur, women took on central roles in the worship, and an equal number of girls and boys accompanied the ceremony with small drums. Images of the Buddha and Ambedkar were present, yet Ramabai's portrait was absent. The absence of Ramabai in the visual pantheon appeared to have no impact on women and girls' ability to access full participation. Rather than modelling Dalit women's strength and independence, Ramabai's image reflects an unattainable and apolitical ideal which shares more with upper-caste and -class representations of the ideal Hindu woman. Beauty, fairness, modesty, and submission to the husband represent aspects of ideal Hindu womanhood. Here Ambedkar's aspirations for Dalit women have not overcome traditional patriarchal and Hindu values emerging in the neo-Buddhist movement. In Ambedkar's construction of a modern religion in which women participate fully in the independent state, the visual reproduction of Ramabai falls short.

Savita's role in Ambedkar's life is controversial, as discussed in chapter four, and the use of her image reflects that. On one hand, the elite of the Indian state stand to gain from promoting Savita's role as a Brahmin woman in the Dalit Buddhist movement. Her appearance may be used to demonstrate that the caste system has been abolished, or the benign nature of Brahmin identity. On the other hand, her role as Ambedkar's partner, appearing with him at public events, rather than as his dutiful, submissive, absent wife, plays a role in the attempted erasure of her from the movement by Dalit Buddhist men. Photos of Savita are more common than those of Ramabai. She is reproduced alongside Ambedkar at his conversion ceremony, in monuments such as the one in Nagpur (Appendix A, Image 17). Savita appears in many different poses, many of them in candid and informal photographs, which decreases the potential for iconic production as repetition of one image (Appendix A, Image 18). However, the numerous photos of Ambedkar have not prevented the same process. She is always identified as Ambedkar's wife, both before and after his death. She wears Indian dress—the sari—but does not always cover her head. In one portrait of her, representing her years after Ambedkar's death, she looks directly at the viewer with her chin raised, and her age is not erased in the service of reproducing standards of beauty (Appendix A, Image 19). However, Savita is completely absent from the religious neo-Buddhist iconography, though she often appears in government displays. Her own participation and a level of control over her own image occurs in the political realm.

While she was born a Brahmin, she married a Dalit man and converted to Buddhism in the context of prevailing negative beliefs about intercaste marriage and conversion. This act grants her the potential of becoming an important political figure which undermines upper caste Hindu ideals.¹⁶⁴ The exclusion of a fully-formed Savita from the pantheon reinforces her status as a real woman, whereas the little known about Ramabai has contributed to the creation of a dangerous ideal. This ideal runs contrary to the insistence of Ambedkar that he was just a man, where it would follow that Ramabai was just a woman. Images of Savita are impossible to crop out of major events in Ambedkar's life, but the development of Ambedkar iconography simply replaces reproductions of events with increasingly stylized representations of Ambedkar. However, Savita's image poses a threat to gender and caste hierarchies more because of her appearance in the public realm as a speaking woman than as a caste Brahmin. Paradoxically, she is dangerous because as a Brahmin woman, and specifically a wife, she steps outside of the Brahmin patriarchal ideal into which Ramabai has been so neatly slotted. While political spaces are more open to upper caste women, the use of Ramabai to form the ideal (Hindu) woman in the neo-Buddhist movement erases the image of the strong, politically active Dalit woman as it erases the image of Savita. Through the reproduction of images, Dalit women are discouraged from identifying with Savita, who converted to Buddhism with Ambedkar, but was born a Brahmin Hindu. They are

¹⁶⁴ See also the discussion of Savita Ambedkar mythology in chapter four.

encouraged to identify with Ramabai, who is represented as committed to self-sacrificing Hindu womanhood, despite being born Dalit.

Mayawati is the first Dalit woman to hold the office of Chief Minister in India. She is the former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh (1995, 1997, 2002-2003, and 2007-2012), the leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party, and is now a member of Parliament.¹⁶⁵ Her political party has a presence in Maharashtra, and sets up booths at neo-Buddhist festivals. She has expressed her intention of converting to Buddhism. She is also not held up as a role model for Buddhist women, just as strong female deities in Hinduism are not meant as role models for Hindu women to emulate. Her promotional photo shows her wearing the salwar kameez suit (Appendix A, Image 20).¹⁶⁶ Women politicians in India have typically calmed fears of powerful women by emphasizing their femininity and Indianness through wearing the sari; these political figures include Sonia Gandhi, the President of the ruling Indian National Congress and the widow of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi; and Pratibha Patel, the former President of India (2007-2012) (Appendix A, Images 21 and 22).¹⁶⁷ Most importantly, Mayawati is known for her short haircut, in a

165 The Bahujan Samaj Party can be translated as the Majority People's Party, referencing the majority of low castes including Dalit and Shudra. Kancha Ilaiah uses the term Dalitbahujan to refer to the oppressed majority in his book *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (Calcutta: Samya, 1996).

166 Salwar kameez: a two-piece form of dress consisting of loose pants and a long shirt.

167 As a woman of Italian descent who married into the Nehru-Gandhi political lineage after meeting Rajiv Gandhi during his education in Europe, Sonia Gandhi wears the sari as a means of emphasizing her Indianness as well as her femininity. Her life represents a fascinating negotiation between colonial and South Asian modernity, in the context of gender and authenticity, the analysis of which unfortunately falls outside the scope of this project. This Gandhi family is not related to Mohandas K. Gandhi, but to Indira Gandhi, the third Prime Minister of India and the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India.

culture which glorifies long hair for women.¹⁶⁸ Long hair plays a specific role in the construction of Indian femininity across religions. However, in the neo-Buddhist movement, it is popular for young girls to wear a short cut, and Buddhist nuns shave their heads as a means of casting off vanity. In the neo-Buddhist movement, short hair is a political statement which rejects the standards of beauty and purity associated with Hindu femininity specifically.

In another popular image, Mayawati mirrors Ambedkar's posture as reproduced in the statuary, pointing upward with her right hand. She regularly incorporates Dalit and Buddhist imagery such as the wheel and the Buddha into her promotional material. Mayawati has also constructed statues of herself in the European commemorative style, in unpainted bronze, often alongside important figures in Dalit history, including Ambedkar and Jyotirao Phule. Finally, her statues often show her holding a handbag. Within the pantheon, as her attribute, the handbag represents modernity and wealth, the aspirations of Dalits seeking to participate in the modern Indian state. Within a specifically Buddhist pantheon, wealth is not necessarily a contradiction to Buddhist principles. Legends of the Buddha describe him rejecting extreme austerity as a path to enlightenment; likewise, Ambedkar rejected the doctrines of poverty which he saw as elite interpretations of Buddhism (Queen "Dr. Ambedkar"). Through her hairstyle and

168 Notably, the Bihari Dalit politician Sharad Yadav used the term "short-haired women" as an insulting way to describe Indian feminists, reported in "Sharad Yadav Picks Poison over Women's Quota," *Times of India* 6 June 2009. This term is also associated with elitism. See also Ilaiah's review of religious theories of purity and cleanliness in *Post-Hindu India: A Discourse in Dalit-Bahujan, Socio-Spiritual and Scientific Revolution* (New Delhi: SAGE, 2009). Shampoo marketing in contemporary India explicitly targets women who aspire to the ideal of "long and strong" hair.

mode of dress, Mayawati cultivates a certain image: Dalit and Buddhist. She is also notably unmarried.¹⁶⁹ Like Ramabai and Savita, popular discourse and texts inform her images.

Because of Mayawati's position as a mainstream political figure, her portrait appears in a specific political context. As well, as a living politician, she maintains the most control over her own image, in comparison with Ramabai and Savita. While she never appears in the religious context, she has inserted herself to some extent into the overlapping area between political and religious. She recognizes the publicity gained from sponsoring booths at the popular Dalit festivals commemorating Ambedkar's conversion and death. On Buddha Jayanti 2010—the celebration of the Buddha's birth—she printed a full-page advertisement in the *Times of India*. By connecting her image and political campaign with Buddhism and the central Buddhist pilgrimage sites in South Asia, two of which are in Uttar Pradesh, she uses religion as a political tool to gain votes, but also to celebrate the importance of Buddhism in India.

Despite living in a time when cameras—and therefore those images—are widely accessible to the public, the repetition of specific images on political posters contributes to a representation more iconographic than Savita's. Like Savita, she is regularly dismissed by neo-Buddhists. During the early days of my fieldwork in India, when I

¹⁶⁹ She uses kinship terms, including behnji, or respected sister, to legitimize her power. At the same time, the choice of behn—sister—implies a more familiar kin relationship than the term didi—elder sister—which is used popularly to convey a position of superiority; low caste maids use “didi” to address younger female upper caste employers respectfully. The available public roles for Indian women require an asexual or safely married identity; in this case she remains within expectations of femininity. See chapter six for further analysis.

asked at a festival who the woman in the photo was, she was dismissed as just a politician. This attitude reflects a reaction against women's subjectivity and public participation rather than a rejection of political elites, since, in this context, I had already stated my interest in women in the neo-Buddhist movement.¹⁷⁰ Although Mayawati's main incentive is political promotion, she remains the best contemporary example of a Dalit woman taking control of her own image. Her self-representation, and her production of Dalit iconography, often faces criticism on the basis of misdirection of funds; however, these attacks must also be seen in the context of sexism and casteism. In fact, many Dalits see her as an Dalit icon, who has recovered and revalued historical Dalit icons in counterpart to mainstream Hindu politicians' glorification of upper caste Hindu icons. Neither Savita or Mayawati, who produce and control their own images to some extent, are seen as role models for women in the movement. Rather Ramabai, whose image is produced and reproduced by others, and whose image retains hardly any vestige of the original so that it is impossible to tell if any of her subject self remains, is presented as an ideal. Therefore, the woman as object is idealized in Dalit Buddhist iconography rather than the woman as subject.¹⁷¹

170 Though Mayawati has only expressed an intention to convert to Buddhism, she explicitly associates her image with Buddhist iconography and history. To define the movement as excluding political figures would be a strange approach, considering that I was advised from another angle to avoid the "fundamentalist" religious aspects of the neo-Buddhist movement as well; not coincidentally, the Buddhist Society of India, which Ambedkar founded, is headed by Ambedkar's daughter-in-law Meeratai Ambedkar. Nevertheless, Dalit women include Meeratai; her oral history is included in Pawar and Moon, *We Also Made History*.

171 As discussed in chapter six, women have often been denied subjectivity through the medium of autobiography as well as through visual forms of self-representation.

In a religious context, Hinduism offers the potential for female subjectivity in the practice of darshana. The goddess, “who is embodied in her icon, gazes at the worshipers standing at her throne room doorway while the worshipers gaze back at her. In that mutual seeing (darshana), Devi’s consciousness passes through her sculpted eyes into the worshipers’ physical eyes” (Hudson 83). The icon of the female deity is not only an object that worshippers look at, but an embodied subject who looks back at the worshipper. In Buddhism, the icon of the deity as an embodied subject, such as the goddess Tara in the Vajrayana pantheon, also looks back at the worshipper. Although the Buddha is not necessarily embodied in the icon, his masculinity, as well as his attained enlightenment, make him a subject. Male Hindus maintain control over the mutual gaze; generally men practice darshana in public temple worship, whereas women are situated within the private religious space of the home. Likewise, where women are discouraged from identifying with powerful, arguably misogynist, images of the female deity, men hold the prime place of worshipper in the goddess tradition.¹⁷²

In the neo-Buddhist movement, Ambedkar’s explicitly non-theistic approach, combined with androcentrism in a developing pantheon, have influenced the construction of women such as Ramabai, Savita, and Mayawati as people, not deities. Neither do enlightened women appear in the developing pantheon, while as a bodhisattva or Buddha,

¹⁷² Numerous writers have analyzed the tension between the prominence of powerful goddesses and women’s actual status in a society. See Ena Campbell, “The Virgin of Guadalupe and the Female-Self-Image,” *Mother Worship: Themes and Variations*, ed. James J. Preston (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), or Paul Halsall, “Early Western Civilization under the Sign of Gender: Europe and the Mediterranean (4000BCE-1400CE),” *Blackwell Companion to Gender History*, eds. Teresa A. Meade and Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2005).

neo-Buddhists refer to Ambedkar as attaining full enlightenment upon death (parinirvana, or final liberation, and more rarely, mahaparinirvana, usually reserved for the Buddha). The Buddha, Ambedkar, and both Vajrayana Buddhist and Hindu goddesses maintain subjectivity. In neo-Buddhism, women become objects in multiple ways, intended for looking at, rather than looking back.

The depiction of Ambedkar and the depictions of religious women in India play a part in influencing neo-Buddhists' self-presentation and self-conception. The website for Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) provides photos of women in the developing sangha tradition (Appendix A, Image 23).¹⁷³ While lay women in all traditions generally follow a cultural rather than a religious model of dress, the women depicted fall squarely into the category of novice or lay nun. Gross points out the necessity of restoring women's monastic lineages in traditions where "women are confined to perpetual novice status, in the Tibetan case, or to the status of 'lay nuns,' who receive no formal ordination ceremony at all, and wear white or other non-monastic colors" (*Buddhism after Patriarchy* 243). The FWBO women follow the model of the traditional (Hindu) woman: sari or salwar kameez, long hair, bindis, shifting out of the Hindu norm only in the blue and white colour choice. This style of dress distinguishes them visually from male monastics, who wear orange robes, and reinforces the differences between men and women's paths to liberation. Conventional colours for Hindu women include red, pink,

173 For further analysis of the role of FWBO in Indian Buddhist mission work, see Alan Sponberg, "TBMSG: A Dhamma Revolution in Contemporary India," *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, eds. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

yellow, and orange. Dalit laywomen who wear white or blue mark their Buddhist status visibly on their bodies, just as Ambedkar's blue suit resisted the visual markers of Hinduism.

Outside of FWBO, nuns follow the traditional Buddhist mode of attire, wearing the orange robe and shaving their heads. This approach achieves a high level of androgyny: in my photos of the Diksha Bhoomi festival commemorating Ambedkar's conversion in Nagpur, the traditional dress of a bhikkhu and a bhikkhuni whom I had met erases gender differences. At the same time, the person "without gender" is still coded as male; the bhikkhuni achieves a level of maleness in her appearance, where difference is marked on the female body. However, and most importantly, Ambedkar sought to break down distinctions between lay and monastic. He introduced a lay initiation while married to Savita—celibacy being the norm in religious monastic life—and wore religious, Western, and Indian dress depending on circumstance. Whether women in neo-Buddhist monastic traditions wear lay dress or monastic dress, it is important to consider the impact of these representations, and for neo-Buddhist women to reclaim a female-positive or androgynous interpretation of human bodies within the iconography.

Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon report an alternative to the contemporary practice and representation of neo-Buddhist women. At the mass conversion to Buddhism in 1956, women took up white dress, even if white saris were unavailable:

The shops were so crowded with people wanting to buy new white clothes that they ran out of stock. Many women could not get white saris, but this

did not deter them. If saris were not available, white dhotis would do just as well. And several women arrived at the deekshabhoomi wearing white dhotis. (185)¹⁷⁴

In this case, neo-Buddhist women demonstrate their religious convictions through a challenge to gender dress codes. Rather than the androgyny of the monastic orange robes or the feminine dress codes of FWBO salwar kameez, the dhoti is identified exclusively as male dress.¹⁷⁵

Positive Approaches to Feminine Representation

Despite the androcentrism and misogyny that often conceptualizes abstract and anthropomorphic imagery negatively with regard to women, and defines women in terms of their female bodies rather than their capacity for enlightenment, woman-positive interpretation of iconography in Buddhism is possible. Androcentric description and analysis of religious symbolism more often sees the rim, spokes, and hub of the chakra than the space enclosed by the circle of the wheel. In the broader context of Buddhist iconography, the most often overlooked is the inner space of the temple as womb: “For example, *garbha* or womb of mother to the *garbhagrha* of temple” (Gupta and Asthana 50). Just as the wheel as an abstract symbol connects to the stupa as an architectural memorial, so does the wheel as womb connect with the stupa as womb. In this case, the depiction of gestation, birth, and the mother is a positive one: “the Buddhist tradition has

174 Deekshabhoomi: initiation grounds; also, Diksha Bhoomi.

175 At the same time, a woman’s adoption of the dhoti may have a specific caste connotation; historically, a low caste woman was expected to tie her sari in a particular way. See the chapter “Babasaheb’s Views on Women” in Pawar and Moon, *We Also Made History*.

explicitly compared the process of developing enlightened qualities with the processes of pregnancy and gestation, which are especially drawn from women's experience" (Gross *Buddhism after Patriarchy* 187). Here the goddess also appears as mother in her nurturing and protective qualities.¹⁷⁶ At the same time, this construction must be equally cautious to avoid coding the female as a "blank space" which seeks the male presence to fulfil it.

Re-imagining and reclaiming iconography applies equally to anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic imagery. Abstract forms of the wheel as a positive feminine image of the womb connect to Tara in the Buddhist pantheon (Appendix A, 24). One aspect of the goddess/bodhisattva Tara is her compassionate form: "Tara's plump belly and full breasts distinguish her from the gaunt Kali . . . and point to the gentle and nurturing aspects that coexist with her fiercer qualities" (Dehejia 240). Buddhist doctrine encourages women and men alike to practice compassion. In *Buddhism After Patriarchy*, Gross argues that compassion is most difficult to assign as a role to one gender, or to separate from the bodily, and in particular, childcare can offer an experience of meditative quality: "In post-patriarchal Buddhism, it is as important that women not be the sole childcare givers as it is that childcare be revalorized and included in the realm of spiritual discipline" (276). She analyzes the meditative, compassionate, and *bodily* characteristics

¹⁷⁶ These qualities should not be understood as passive. In iconography, the Buddhist goddess Tara takes up weapons to defend practitioners from the seven fears: lions, wild elephants, fire, snakes, thieves, bondage, floods, and demons. See Martin Willson, *In Praise of Tārā: Songs to the Saviouress: Source Texts from India and Tibet on Buddhism's Great Goddess* (London: Wisdom Publications, 1986). See also Miranda Shaw, "Tara: Savior, Buddha, Holy Mother," *Goddesses in World Culture*, ed. Patricia Monaghan, vol. 1: Asia and Africa (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2011).

of caring for a child. At the same time, compassion in Buddhism is personified as masculine, in a pair with wisdom personified as feminine.

Personification of the Dhamma—the teachings—and Sangha—the community—as two of the Three Jewels of Buddhism alongside the Buddha, provides for further positive representations of the feminine:

Besides the Stūpas, the Three Jewels of Buddhism, known by the names of the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha were conceived in the form of deities and worship was freely offered to them by the Buddhists in both symbolic and human forms. . . . [O]ut of the three, one Dharma is a goddess.

(Bhattacharyya 32)

Ambedkar took refuge in the Three Jewels as part of his conversion ritual, and names his religious scripture *The Buddha and His Dhamma* after the first two. That the Dhamma, the *teachings* of the Buddha, is a goddess in anthropomorphic form, also undermines a model which associates women with the bodily; here an intellectual, spiritual production becomes personified as female.¹⁷⁷ In practice, neo-Buddhists follow other religious traditions in assigning human attributes such as sex and gender to abstract and symbolic as well as anthropomorphic aspects of devotion. Where *anthropocentrism* persists, so too will androcentrism. Diverse approaches to revaluation within neo-Buddhist iconography offer an alternative to the prevalent images of the male, or the high caste Hindu woman.

¹⁷⁷ In comparison, Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of knowledge, exists in a context where all Hindu women are prohibited from studying. Unlike Saraswati, the Buddhist personification of Dharma corresponds with a rich tradition of education which includes women. I return to the subject of Dalit women's education in chapter seven.

Conclusion

The iconography of Buddhism, and specifically neo-Buddhism, has an influence on practitioners' understanding of women, the feminine, and gender roles. Gross states that "though some Jewish or Christian feminists might initially expect that the maleness of the Buddha should give me just as big a problem, the Buddha, no matter how interpreted, just isn't as important to Buddhism as God is to the monotheistic faiths" (*Buddhism after Patriarchy* 139). The distinction between symbolic and anthropomorphic iconography is constructed, just as the distinction between intellectual and bodily. Most importantly, Buddhism as a religion argues most often for the illusion—or construction—of the distinction between male and female, or the distinction between intellectual and bodily, as discussed through this dissertation, and particularly in chapters two and six.

The iconography in the neo-Buddhist movement thus far uses the stupa as a major architectural symbol, and places Ambedkar and the Buddha centrally, with Ramabai, and sometimes Savitri Phule situated peripherally. Savita and Mayawati are excluded from the neo-Buddhist religious iconography, but their images influence women in the neo-Buddhist movement. Anthropomorphic iconography in Buddhism is more difficult to use to produce positive images of the feminine, particularly in light of the contemporary practice of deification of Ambedkar. The Dalit woman Chhaya highlights the problems with Ambedkar and the Buddha's centrality as well as the loss of Hindu goddesses when she asks: "And who is the ideal woman to look up to in our society?" (Bhave 40). The existing androcentric iconography promotes representations of women who reinforce

gender and caste ideals, and excludes representations of women who challenge an existing sexist and casteist hierarchy within the neo-Buddhist movement. However, the same strategies in interpreting symbolic iconography are useful to necessarily impose a positive feminine image onto the anthropomorphic model. While depictions of the goddess may not offer positive feminine images, as Carol Christ argues, a prohibition on those images, and as I have argued, a privileging of abstract images too easily rejects the bodily—and by association the female—as posing a barrier to enlightenment in conjunction with attitudes toward women discussed in chapter two. The male image reinforces the concept that women must be reborn as men before they can gain enlightenment.

So far in neo-Buddhism, no iconographic examples of women achieving enlightenment exist. While Ramabai is being deified alongside Ambedkar, her death is never named parinirvana—or ultimate enlightenment—as is Ambedkar's; if analysis considers that her enlightenment is represented at all, it is through the Hindu wife's salvation through devotion to her husband. Although women have opportunities to present their own images, images in religious spaces have been limited to those which promote traditional high caste Hindu womanhood. Many positive images of women exist outside of religious spaces, and the opportunity exists to use non-anthropomorphic iconography to evoke positive female imagery. However, women can find role models in the development of the sangha tradition, and in women leaders in the community; practitioners must actively seek out images of the female Buddha or bodhisattva to place alongside, or *to exchange with* images of the Buddha and Ambedkar. For example, in

nuns' residences along the Buddhist pilgrimage circuit, images of the Buddha's mother Maya, his aunt and the first woman admitted to the monastic life Gotami, and female leaders of the lineage are placed alongside images of the Buddha (Appendix A, 25). The representation of women who are mother or renunciate, contrasts with the *wives* who are represented in the neo-Buddhist movement.¹⁷⁸

Despite the complex positions which Mayawati and Savita occupy in the neo-Buddhist movement, and their participation with or co-optation by upper caste elites, the use of their images broadens the representation of women in the movement beyond the use of Ramabai's iconography in the religious setting. The development of Ramabai as a saint or goddess in the neo-Buddhist tradition risks undermining women's self-image more than if women had only the male ideals of Ambedkar and the Buddha with whom to identify. The specific use of Ramabai as a model for women stems from persistent underlying attitudes which are inherently Hindu, sexist, and casteist. The images of women which Mayawati and Savita present offer a model which could undermine this persistent hegemony. While they are restricted to being looked at rather than participating in the mutual gaze of *darshana*, they maintain some control over the circumstances in which they appear, and present themselves, and in specific cases, construct their visual identity in opposition to the mainstream upper caste Hindu ideal of womanhood.

Reclaiming Savita, with a fully critical Dalit feminist view, as a convert to Dalit caste and Buddhist religion offers a positive model which allows the possibility of sustaining rather

178 For example, in the fictional autobiographies of Ramabai, Savitri Phule, and Yasodhara in Yashwant Manohar's writing. See also chapter five.

than undermining Dalit women's strength. In addition, critical attention to representation offers the potential to reverse an appropriation of Ambedkar and Ramabai into a Hindu pantheon.

Likewise, the lack of positive representations of women in the movement might be filled by female figures in the Buddhist pantheons of all schools. The creation of a religious pantheon as a mode of religious expression is not the problem. The problem is the idealization of a specific type of woman within this religious pantheon. In this specific situation, Ambedkar's lack of consideration of gender issues with regard to iconographic representation in the neo-Buddhist movement have allowed the reemergence of caste and gender attitudes which he rejected even more forcefully. Neo-Buddhism appears to follow a more conservative approach in its iconography than the Theravada, Mahayana, or Vajrayana schools, but also holds the potential for radical change. While he rejected the deification of the Buddha and himself, Ambedkar did not place limits on anthropomorphic representations, and thus the feminine may be represented alongside the masculine. In iconography, neo-Buddhism shows most similarities with Mahayana Buddhism, where Ambedkar's philosophies as expressed in written text show more similarities with Theravada Buddhism. However, he did insist that the Buddha (and he himself) were human, which limits representations of the divine as feminine.

The existing neo-Buddhist representations of women do not provide Dalit women with models to follow in their own pursuit of enlightenment. Thus, they must follow the

male models of the Buddha and of Ambedkar, which limit both their full participation in their faith and their own self-perception as fully human beings, but still offer more potential for liberation than the images of women in religious practice. However, no one individual can provide a complete model for all practitioners in a faith, and in fact the concept of an individual model may represent an androcentric model of religious devotion: "It seems to have been part of the patriarchal mind-set to imitate slavishly a master or father-figure with an almost blind devotion and then to reject this figure in order to be oneself" (Daly 74-5). Rather than choosing or discarding iconographic models, it is more useful to include many models, and apply the same critical analysis to each one, just as it is important to include multiple experiences in religious studies.

Chapter 6

Polluting the God: Women Writing Religion

When they discuss religion, male Dalit authors such as B. R. Ambedkar claim that Buddhism frees women from gender oppression. Outside of specifically religious terms, male Dalit autobiographers such as K. A. Gunesekaran tend to depict women as self-sacrificing, suffering martyrs. The male authors glorify women's suffering, holding it up as a model for the realities of life, while avoiding any responsibility for that suffering. Ambedkar does not specifically connect suffering and gender roles, as Rita M. Gross has in her book *Buddhism After Patriarchy*. However, he recognizes that not only individual desire, but oppressive cultural systems cause suffering: "the conflict between classes is constant and perpetual. It is this which is the root of all sorrow and suffering in the world" (*Buddha and His Dhamma* 41; 1.2.6.8). When Dalit women discuss their religious status, as in Baby Kamble's autobiography *The Prisons We Broke*, Urmila Pawar's autobiography *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs*, an excerpt from Kumud Pawade's autobiography "The Story of My 'Sanskrit'," and Sumitra Bhavé's collection of Dalit women's narratives in *Pan on Fire: Eight Dalit Women Tell Their Story*, they recognize a tension between the opportunities which Buddhism offers, and the challenges of life as a woman in a particular culture. Dalit women are fully aware of the additional freedoms which neo-Buddhism offers them in terms of both gender and caste, and the restrictions which remain in a predominantly patriarchal and caste-ridden society.

The construction of distinct gender roles in a society lead to different life experiences for women and men. Therefore, as feminist theorists assert, the understanding of what it means to be human must include women's experiences as well. The same assertion applies in a religious context: "The uniqueness of feminist theology lies not in its use of the criterion of experience but rather in its use of *women's* experience, which has been almost entirely shut out of theological reflection in the past" (original emphasis, Ruether *Sexism and God-talk* 13). Kamble, Pawar, Pawade, and Bhave's texts demonstrate this assertion. Each autobiography presents aspects of Dalit life found in both women's and men's autobiographies; however, the women's writing presents aspects of Dalit women's life specifically. Furthermore, many of their experiences have religious connotations; these women express the changes which conversion to Buddhism has made in their experience of being a woman in the community.

Women writers do not represent themselves in one-dimensional extremes of heroism or victimhood, but as complex thinking, acting humans. In this chapter I examine women's representations of themselves and the complexities of intersectional identities, which are part of their experiences, in comparison with the representation of women in men's writing in chapter four. I begin with an examination of goddesses as role models for women in the Hindu tradition in order to present the broader cultural context of female icons in which neo-Buddhist women construct their faith. I then examine the role models which Dalit women choose for themselves. I examine Dalit women's neo-

Buddhist ritual practices and religious language in their writing in the context of the pressures to assimilate into the dominant Hindu culture. Importantly, most women insert their female bodies into the texts, challenging the understanding of female bodies as polluted within a community that challenges the understanding of Dalit bodies as polluted.

The Female in a Pantheon

Representations of Hindu goddesses and their meanings influence Hindu women. They also affect women who convert from Hinduism to Buddhism. Some feminist theologians aim to recreate a religious tradition by importing goddesses and practices from other traditions; Johanna H. Stuckey identifies these approaches as revolutionary or rejectionist feminist theologies.¹⁷⁹ Revolutionary feminist theologians import goddesses, sometimes from non-Western traditions, into Christianity to supplement existing images. Rejectionist feminist theologians, who have left their religious traditions, often develop an eclectic pantheon by drawing on a variety of polytheistic traditions. Such Western feminist theologians see goddesses as empowering images of the female which can act as counterparts to the dominant images of masculinity found in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, particularly in the last.¹⁸⁰ These approaches of feminist theology arise in a tradition of colonial strategies of appropriation, in which white feminist theologians consume the culture and knowledge of colonized peoples without reference to the participation of colonized women.

¹⁷⁹ See Stuckey, *Women's Spirituality*.

¹⁸⁰ Stuckey gives examples of feminist theological approaches in all these traditions in her book.

Feminist women of colour place these appropriations in the context of colonialism when they critique white Western feminist theologians, including revolutionary and rejectionist, who draw from non-Western traditions without acknowledging cultural context. Tracy Pintchman summarizes these critiques:

[F]eminist interpretations of these goddesses tend neither to represent the dominant perspectives of the religions from which these goddess traditions spring nor to be concerned with the lives and experiences of adherents of those religions. . . . Whether or not one finds strong Hindu goddesses to be empowering feminist symbols, it is important not to overlook the women for whom these goddesses are a living reality. And in seeking to empower oneself, one should not fail to recognize and acknowledge interpretations of goddesses that serve to perpetuate patriarchal hegemony in their original cultural settings. (199-200)

Importantly, this feminist theological approach both reproduces colonial appropriation of cultural traditions, and ignores how non-Western traditions and goddesses often *do not* offer positive role models for women, nor do they ensure the higher status of women.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty analyzes the feminist scholarship which reproduces colonial appropriation:

The definition of colonization I invoke is a predominantly *discursive* one, focusing on a certain mode of appropriation and codification of 'scholarship' and 'knowledge' about women in the third world by

particular analytic categories employed in writings on the subject which take as their primary point of reference feminist interests as they have been articulated in the US and western Europe. (196)

Lucinda Joy Peach, in a criticism that many academics in the field of religious studies share, notes that “often there is a lack of direct correlation, or even a direct contradiction between the status and value accorded by a religion to female images and symbols, and the actual status of women within that religious tradition” (8). With regard to Hindu goddesses, Sarah Caldwell argues that “[t]he construction of gender in the śākta worldview, when dominated by and serving men, ironically denies to women the very sense of embodied power that the male ideology asserts they possess” (31). If Hindu goddesses are to become useful to feminist theologians such as Gross and Christ who often draw on them, they must negotiate complex cultural and neo-colonial attitudes. Acknowledging Dalit women’s responses to these representations will allow a more balanced approach.

Among Hindu goddesses, appropriate role models for Hindu women prescribe behaviour which limits women to motherhood roles, predominantly those which encourage self-sacrifice for her sons. For example, Hindu women may traditionally express strength or anger: “in India such ferocity brings an unusual kind of respect and saves a woman from many potentially exploitative situations” (Kishwar *Off the Beaten Track* 171). However, this anger is limited to expressions of motherhood, which are oriented toward protection of or provision for another. The mother-child relationship is

reinforced in depictions of the relationship between river goddesses and their devotees: “the reason for calling her people’s mother is not that she gave birth to them, but that she protects them, and most especially that she provides them with food” (Feldhaus 82). Women who emulate the goddess are likewise limited to roles of service, to male children in particular.¹⁸¹

In terms of religious power and identity, the female power of the goddess is more available to men: in the *mutiyettu* performance of Kerala, where men are possessed by the goddess, “[t]he phallic imagery of Kālī reflects male sexuality imagined into a female body. It is a transsexual fantasy, not spiritually transcendent androgyny, which Kālī expresses in this context” (Caldwell 179). Female identity as a mother denies to a great extent any expressions of female sexuality. Notably, the *bhakti* tradition, or the devotional path to enlightenment, includes personal identification with and devotion to the deity as a friend, master, parent, child, or lover; in goddess worship the last is never available because the goddess is always a mother: “the erotic *mādhurya bhava* [erotic emotion] is conspicuously absent from *Devī bhakti*; to see oneself as the lover or consort of the Goddess would violate the incest taboo” (Erndl 159). Evelyne Accad argues that “sex is one of the basic needs—like food and sleep—in any culture” (38). However, sexual expression is often denied to women, or severely restricted, even by other women, though men are encouraged to express their sexuality as a demonstration of their masculinity.

¹⁸¹ For further discussion of self-sacrifice expected of a Hindu mother, see chapter four.

In specifically religious terms, women's sexuality is depicted negatively through representation of the goddess: "[m]ale power and male sexuality are legitimate, for instance in the worship of the Shiva *lingam*; female sexuality, mystified as female power must be controlled and bounded through social custom, primarily within marriage" (Katrak 172). Expectations for Hindu women drawn predominantly from religious mythology consist of submissive wives contained and controlled through marriage, such as Sita and Parvati. While Kali is worshipped in the pantheon as a goddess with sexual agency who is not controlled, she is also not a model for Hindu women to emulate: "the wild, fierce, and independent goddess . . . is not a role model for these women; they take Pārvatī as their model, the goddess whose story describes their own reality" (Young *Anthology* 214). Rita M. Gross takes an apologist stance to such symbols of submissive women because "the first function of Goddesses is not to provide equal rights or high status, but to provide psychological comfort" ("Is the (Hindu) Goddess a Feminist?" 192). Her response is arguably colonialist, in the sense of constructing Hindu women's passive acceptance of these goddesses. Importantly, the contemporary mythology surrounding Sita and Parvati selectively excludes episodes where they act in their own interests.

For example, in behavioural prescription drawing from the *Ramayana*, Sita is held up as an ideal wife who maintains her sexual purity and devotion to her husband Rama despite her kidnapping by his foe Ravana and Rama's subsequent disavowal and exile of her. However, in her final interactions with Rama, she loses patience with his suspicion

and accusations, and she curses him and returns to her mother; this part of the myth is usually omitted in appeals to Hindu womanhood (Kishwar "Yes to Sita"). Caldwell argues that these myths are malleable, and offer women a means of redefining their roles:

[S]ymbols are not static archetypes. They are the creation of human beings, and as such are infinitely adaptable to human needs. The fierce goddess provides a rich store of indigenous symbols to Indian women, with which they can work out some of their real anger and imagine themselves in new way. (244)

However, cultural mythmakers, such as the BJP or the Shiv Sena, show both a willingness to subvert models of strength into demonstrations of control and submission, and a persistence in maintaining control of women through these mythologies (McLain; Omvedt "Hinduism and Politics"). The act of reclaiming ancient mythology as an act of creating a contemporary mythology operates on both progressive and fundamentalist terms.

However, Ambedkar was concerned with countering Hindu fundamentalism, just as Hindu nationalists reinforced fundamentalist traditions as a means of countering British colonialism. Existing studies predominantly examine the role of dominant goddesses in orthodox Hindu traditions; here white feminist theologians and Hindu nationalists similarly devalue Dalit religion in the interests of revaluing Hindu goddesses. The studies which assess women's inverse relationship with the high status of goddesses largely ignore local goddesses who have been appropriated or identified as an aspect of a

central goddess in the Hindu pantheon of the orthodox traditions.¹⁸² Kancha Ilaiah argues that certain local or Dalitbahujan goddesses were adapted from the models of real women, and provide democratic and feminist models for the wider Indian society: “upper caste society has not recognized the great tribal heroines like Sammakka and Sarakka who became goddesses among the tribal societies” (*Post-Hindu India* 18). However, Dalit women writing about their own relationships with these figures has not yet been published; therefore we must treat these claims with some scepticism. Perhaps these figures provide useful models for women, but they may also reproduce gender roles. M. Swathy Margaret (2005) critiques Ilaiah for patriarchal apologism; his praise of tribal goddesses may discourage a more critical analysis of them.

Even so, Dalit women in Maharashtra enjoy an agency which adds complexity to these studies. According to Anand Teltumbde, the typical Ambedkarite woman is “socially conscious, intolerant of injustice, courageous and outspoken” (*Persistence of Caste* 93). Class and caste studies show that complex intersections of identity manifest in different opportunities for different women. For example, low caste or working class women work outside the home, and by these means gain economic independence or greater freedom of movement. In south India, including Maharashtra, women often have more autonomy than in the north regardless of religious affiliation: “they have greater decisionmaking authority, are less secluded and more likely to work outside the home and control resources, and are less likely to perceive sons as their only source of prestige”

¹⁸² A study of how women identify with local goddesses and find empowering role models in them requires expansion. This study falls outside the scope of this dissertation.

(Jejeebhoy and Sathar 690). At the same time, this work can decrease the amount of time they are able to spend with their families, and can actually serve as an excuse for family suspicion and domestic violence.

Buddhist authors argue that women in Buddhism enjoy more rights than women in other religious traditions; however, this approach is not unique to Buddhism:

All religions agree that women should be treated properly, not abused or mistreated. Some religions, in fact, argue that their norms represent an improvement in the treatment of women over what their predecessors did.

Mistreatment of women is found only in other traditions. (*Gross Feminism and Religion* 105)

Shifts in women's status over the history of Buddhism follow the same pattern.¹⁸³ The neo-Buddhist movement follows this pattern, especially if understood as a new religious tradition, or a new sect within the greater Buddhist tradition.

In the Buddhist pantheon, models for women span a wider range of possibilities than models in the Hindu tradition. However, critical studies suggest that women are presented with predominantly lay women models, and are discouraged from using bhikkhunis or yoginis as models:

The stories that relate to laywomen are far more lavishly and enthusiastically developed than those that relate to nuns. . . . Thus one cannot escape the impression that the community was more comfortable

¹⁸³ Discussed in chapter two.

with its laywomen than with its nuns and that it probably found the latter's presence to be an embarrassment. (Falk "Image of Woman" 204)

However, the monastic path was still available to women according to doctrine if their communities did not support them socially or economically.¹⁸⁴ Once on that path, women were free to draw more widely on female models which challenged cultural constructions of femininity. Women were *always* discouraged from taking up a monastic lifestyle in Buddhism, but the option was nevertheless available.

Ambedkar rejected the Hindu pantheon in his conversion to Buddhism, and specifically included this attitude in his creation of the neo-Buddhist path. Neo-Buddhists take an additional 22 vows upon conversion after Ambedkar added them to his diksha, or Buddhist initiation ceremony; the third vow states: "I shall have no faith in Gauri, Ganapati and other gods and goddesses of Hindus nor shall I worship them."¹⁸⁵ In his reconstruction of an original Buddhism, Ambedkar generally omits the Buddhist pantheon—associated in particular with Mahayana and Vajrayana paths—and with it positive and non-restrictive female models of strength such as Tara and Vajrayogini. Tara undermines the belief that a male body is a requirement for the bodhisattva path; she vows to take only female rebirths until all beings have achieved enlightenment.

Vajrayana, as an energetic and sexual goddess, represents the trap of societal norms on

184 Suwanna Satha-Anand argues against contemporary Thai refusals to institute a nun's ordination lineage. She argues that Buddhism must privilege truth over convention if it is to remain true to its central doctrines, and uses the example of the first ordination of women, "Truth over Convention: Feminist Interpretations of Buddhism," *Religious Fundamentalisms and the Human Rights of Women*, ed. Courtney W. Howland (New York: Palgrave, 1999).

185 I have reproduced the 22 vows in the introduction to this dissertation.

the path to enlightenment.¹⁸⁶ The exclusion of these goddesses create opportunities for the submissive female models in mainstream Hinduism to regain supremacy in popular discourse, despite Ambedkar's third vow. Male writers use the orthodox, devoted, and submissive Hindu wife as a model.¹⁸⁷

Models for Dalit Women

Women's autobiographies present women as agents of change. In the preface to *The Weave of My Life*, Urmila Pawar states: "When I look back upon my life, I see the period of conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism as its most significant" (x). The most important incident in her life involves change in which she participates and directs. Dalit women's writing does not seem explicitly religious. However, where Hindu women's writing marks the norm, religion appears explicitly in invocation of goddesses, and in references to both scripture and religious legal code. In fact, Dalit women writers express their Buddhist faith through their writing as much as do Hindu women writers. In their non-theistic tradition Buddha as well as Ambedkar replace deities. Even so, Buddha is less important. Instead, the *act of writing* itself represents women's religious devotion, within a religious context which prohibits women and low castes from hearing, speaking, or reading religious texts. Manu and his successors define and insist on the separation between the polluted body and the sacred text, formally requiring illiteracy among low castes and women. In "The Story of My 'Sanskrit'," Kumud Pawade describes her defiance of ancient religious codes based on her encounter with modern casteist attitudes:

186 As presented in Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy*.

187 As discussed in chapters four and five.

“This disgust is extremely familiar to me. In fact, that is what I have grown accustomed to, ever since I was old enough to understand. . . . it was this disgust that inclined me towards Sanskrit” (Pawde 27). Buddhist women’s writing must be examined for its *inclusion* of Buddhist religious markers, rather than for its *exclusion* of Hindu markers.

Male writers focus almost exclusively on Ramabai Ambedkar as the female presence in the neo-Buddhist hagiography. In a clear departure from this model, Dalit women writers mention Ambedkar’s first wife only rarely. Pawar only mentions her once in her autobiography, and then not even by name. Women do not erase her from the history as male writers do with Savita Ambedkar, though. Instead the women appeal to B. R. Ambedkar for their religious inspiration, among a multitude of other female figures. In particular, Pawar centres her own mother. In the brief biography of Ramabai authored by the Dalit women writers Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon, available in their book *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*, Ramabai is dedicated, but not self-sacrificing. They refer to her as “Babasaheb’s partner” (201). This language responsibly reflects Ambedkar’s own attitudes to the relationship between wife and husband; in a 1942 speech to the Mahila Parishad, he said: “After marriage the wife must be her husband’s friend and a housewife having equal rights. She must not become the slave of her husband” (Pawar and Moon 159). As well, in his inscription to *Pakistan, or The Partition of India*, Ambedkar wrote of a Ramabai who “suffer[ed] along *with*” him, rather than sacrificing herself *for* him (my emphasis).¹⁸⁸ Likewise, Pawar and Moon note

¹⁸⁸ Baudh cites this inscription in his biography of Ramabai, contradicting Baudh’s own presentation of her.

that “Ramabai was fiercely independent and proud” (203). Dalit women’s depictions of her more closely resemble their own lives, distinctions which correspond closely to the differences between Dalit women’s representations of themselves as compared to Dalit men’s depictions of Dalit women.

Furthermore, Dalit women writers such as Moon and Pawar place Ramabai in a specific social and political context, while Dalit male writers such as Shanti Swaroop Baudh place her in an apolitical mythic context. The women’s approach is not only a female approach in which they represent their own lives through a mythic figure. Their language lacks hagiographical markers, such as the honorific “mother.” This approach more accurately represents a *feminist* approach, in which Ambedkar’s inclusion and empowerment of women aims at legitimate personhood for women. The men’s depiction makes specific departures from Ramabai’s life as depicted in Dalit women’s writing.

In chapter two I discuss the importance of gendered language with regard to Ambedkar’s rewriting of Buddhist legends important in feminist theology. In her autobiography the Dalit woman Baby Kamble invents a new honorific for Ambedkar “Bhimaai” by combining Ambedkar’s first name “Bhim” with “aai” the Marathi word for mother, instead of the usual “rao” the Marathi male honorific (134).¹⁸⁹ Although the honorific is a common suffix in Marathi culture, Kamble’s usage is both unique and important in the Dalit literary movement and in the neo-Buddhist context. It also presents a marked divergence and important challenge to the Dalit male use of Ramaai, or Great

¹⁸⁹ Ambedkar’s first name is also used in the Dalit greeting “Jai Bhim” or “Hail Bhim.”

Mother Ramabai, and sometimes Matoshri, which carries connotations of Hindu goddesshood.¹⁹⁰ Ambedkar is widely given the honorific “Babasaheb” or uncle. In feminist theology, a revisionist approach replaces masculine pronouns for God with feminine pronouns; uses female names such as goddess, queen, or mother when naming the deity; and exchanges names of male deities or historical figures with their female counterparts.¹⁹¹ Kamble creates her own feminine attributes for Ambedkar. She reaffirms practices in feminist theology transnationally and centres Ambedkar as a female-gendered deity in the movement. She also positively reinscribes, in a neo-Buddhist context, the androgynous deity in Hinduism, most commonly associated with images of Shiv-Parvati.

This mode of deification references and impacts women in the neo-Buddhist movement in several ways. First, Kamble reaffirms the importance of maternal kinship for women. Importantly, Marathi language speakers always use the familiar singular form, rather than the respectful or plural form, when speaking of or to their mother. Language plays an important role in defining gender and familiar roles. Matrilineal cultures, which privilege maternal kinship, ascribe an important religious nature to fertility or motherhood. Importantly, in these traditions women have greater control over their own fertility, as opposed to patriarchal forms of Hinduism in which men must control women’s fertility through control of their sexuality: “in women’s religions what

190 As discussed in chapter four.

191 For example, Jewish revisionist feminists may use the feminine name Shekinah for god, or exchange the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with the matriarchs Sarah, Leah, Rachel, and Rebekah. See Paula Reimers, “Feminism, Judaism, and God the Mother,” *Conservative Judaism* 46 (1993). See also Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).

we often find is that women's control of their own fertility is somehow sacralized or institutionalized. Apparently, religions that sacralize or institutionalize women's control of their own fertility are anathema to patrilineal societies" (Sered 62).¹⁹² Second, the combination of a man's name and the female parent undermines cultural glorification of masculinity, particularly in terms of hero production. In Hindu mythology, strength is characterized as a desirable male trait, and passivity as a desirable female trait, Kamble's addition of the matronymic to Ambedkar's name reaffirms him as a model without glorifying the emotional absence of a distant father.¹⁹³

Third, the use of "Bhimaai" reconceptualizes the role of both mother and father by claiming Ambedkar's authority using the female parent. In religious writing, women often appeal to a male deity in order to claim the authority to speak against religious and cultural prohibitions.¹⁹⁴ Finally, it demonstrates that women are capable of identifying with male role models in a feminine mode. This identification follows caste identity and the politics of social justice and transcends gender identity and politics. Kamble expresses the tension between women's movements and Dalit movements just as the other Dalit women do, and claims in her renaming that Ambedkar stood up for women and low castes alike.

192 Later in this chapter, I return to Dalit women's control of their own fertility.

193 In comparison, the story of the Hindu god Ganesh's birth hinges on the absence of his father, Shiva. Ganesh is also an important figure in the Hindu pantheon as it developed during the nationalist movement in India.

194 For example, the upper caste Bengali Hindu Rashundari Devi claims inspiration from an aspect of the male god Krishna in her autobiography, "Amar Jiban (My Life)," *Words to Win: The Making of Amar Jiban a Modern Autobiography*, ed. Tanika Sarkar (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999).

Kamble speaks of Ambedkar in explicitly religious terms. Buddhists refer to the Buddha as Lord: “The Buddha our Lord has found the root of all evil; he has shown us the way of salvation” (“The Disciple Speaks”). Kamble uses the same language used to refer to the Buddha when she refers to Ambedkar as “my king Bhim, the son of Morality, saviour of the world” (102). She also refers to him as a deity: “since he made all this possible, he is our god. Nay, he is even better; he is the god of gods for it is because of him that the age-old suffering of millions of people could be wiped out within fifty years. He is certainly superior to god. He achieved what even god has not been able to do” (118). Kamble references Ambedkar’s political mobilization of Dalits and his success in awakening them to their oppressed status, the inhumanity of the caste system, and their potential as participants in modern India. At the same time, and in contrast with the religious terms associated with Ramabai, Kamble distinguishes between her realized understanding of god, and the concept of Hindu deity: “I have never worshipped Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar with sandalwood paste, flowers and dhoop [incense] sticks. I have never made a public display of my reverence for him. I worshipped, instead, the principles he stood for” (117).¹⁹⁵ Kamble makes a clear distinction between ritual worship of the deity in Hinduism, and the doctrines of Buddhism. Buddhist doctrine privileges wisdom, community, and the human capacity for enlightenment in the Three Jewels of the Dhamma, the Sangha, and the Buddha, rather than through worship of a deity.

Kamble defines her puja as a celebration of principles through her conscious actions. This

¹⁹⁵ Flowers and dhoop, or incense sticks commonly play a role in puja, or devotional worship, also called “Jai Bhim” in the neo-Buddhist tradition, while sandalwood paste falls more in the context of Hindu deity pujas.

attitude reproduces the Noble Eightfold Path which advocates right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. She both celebrates Ambedkar's achievements and reaffirms her non-theistic faith.

Ritual and Worship

Ambedkar defined a religion based on reason, in opposition to the superstition he identified in Hinduism.¹⁹⁶ He equated many Hindu rituals, as well as Vajrayana Buddhist rituals, with superstition. However, his participation in the conversion ritual demonstrates his distinction between ritual and superstition. Likewise, he advised neo-Buddhists to visit vihar, the community prayer hall, regularly and to ritually venerate the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.¹⁹⁷ The ritual act of conversion recurs in Dalit women's writing: "For Ambedkar, the single most important Buddhist act for an ex-Untouchable was conversion (*diksha*), the act of formally renouncing one's outcast status within Hinduism by going for refuge to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha" (Sponberg 92). Dalit women's writing examines both opportunities and oppression both within and outside of the Dalit community.

Pawar and Bhave mention the act of conversion, but focus on the rejection of Hinduism rather than accepting Buddhist vows. In *Pan on Fire*, Leela tells: "Babasaheb took the vows of Buddhism and my father threw all the gods, goddesses, the alter, the gods' special clothes, and so on, into the river. . . . All the family were converted" (Bhave

¹⁹⁶ I discuss the complications with privileging reason or rational thought in chapter two.

¹⁹⁷ As a visual symbol, the stupa, or memorial dome, is discussed in chapter five.

187). Likewise, Pawar details this ritual in her autobiography (110). The actual conversion ritual is less vivid, and less important than the ritual of rejection. However, the physical act whereby they reject the material aspects of Hinduism mirrors Ambedkar's doctrinal rejection of Hinduism in the 22 Vows. Dalit neo-Buddhist oppression is imposed by external sources, as opposed to the demeaning religious identity assigned in Hindu texts which led to internalized inferiority in the pre-conversion period. At the same time, the physical act of throwing the gods away in some cases allows the new Buddhist to believe that she has renounced attitudes as well as material aspects of the former religion. The Dalit women writers present the continual mediation between the old and new expressions of religion.

Dalit women writers express the struggle to replace the rituals of Hinduism. Throwing away the material aspects of a religion seems easier to accomplish than casting off ritual aspects. New rituals, such as marriage, are repeated events, and become more important than the one-time conversion ritual. Catherine Bell theorizes ritual as follows: "The social or cultural context of ritual does not exist separately from the act; the context is created in the act. In other words, ritualization is historical practice—historically structured, historically effective, and history-producing" (310). The Dalit women writers discuss rituals which specifically affect their lives, and which change upon conversion. As Bhave points out, new Buddhists are "even more confused regarding their religious beliefs" (xxxvi). However, this statement simplifies a complex negotiation between women's roles in Hinduism and Buddhism. Pawar discusses women's role in marriage

ceremonies: “many women were openly critical and were dying to sing the usual marriage songs but were strictly forbidden as the songs contained the names of gods!” (Pawar 118). The women express frustration not only because they cannot enact the most familiar rituals but because their *ritual role as women* is prohibited.

In the Buddhist ceremony which Pawar describes, the monk replaces the Brahmin priest, but the women are prohibited from enacting their ritual role, which is defined as Hindu. They have no place in the Buddhist ritual. Later in her memoirs, Pawar tells how they reclaim that role by substituting Ambedkar and the Buddha’s names for the names of Hindu gods: “Women learnt to sing songs without taking the names of gods and goddesses” (147). She gives examples of such songs in her autobiography: “My first namaskara [greeting] is to the Bharati Buddha / I am leaving my Baba [father] behind” (288). The women adapt to their new religion in a way which allows them to maintain their ritual roles, a positive example of syncretism. Once they reclaim their ritual role, they participate without criticizing the ritual.

Dalit women writers also use Ambedkar’s teachings to argue for their rights in the community, and follow his teachings in terms of their religious lives. Ambedkar writes that the Buddha “preached that the road to knowledge must be open to all—to males as well as females” (*Buddha and His Dhamma* 154; 3.2.1.3-5). Dalit women remember what Ambedkar said about women’s rights and women’s lives. Pawar and her sisters use a ritual associated with the Hindu festival Diwali to remind their brother of his responsibilities and their own rights as modern Buddhist women:

Now we three sisters decided to celebrate Diwali and Bhau Beej so that we could force Bhau [brother] into giving us gifts. . . . He went on, 'Don't you know, Babasaheb had asked us not to celebrate anything of this kind?' 'Aha!' I said, 'Don't you know that Babasaheb had asked in the Hindu Code Bill to give the daughters their share of property? So come on, get up now!' (285)¹⁹⁸

She reminds her brother that Ambedkar insisted that women receive equal inheritance. In fact, Dalit women writers refer to Ambedkar's teachings even more than they refer to the Buddha's teachings. Even the Buddha's teachings they express are mediated through Ambedkar, and his specific interpretation of Buddhism. Through repetition of their understanding of their new religion they create the religion. This creation of a religion is mediated by interactions with their Buddhist neighbours.

The Appeal of Power

Dalits who achieve social mobility and live among upper caste Hindus tend to follow the same practices of mediating their religious lives through the perception of their neighbours. Pawar criticizes upwardly-mobile Dalits:

Some had hung the image of Padma Pani rather than that of the Buddha on the wall as a decorative piece and some kept tiny images with their plants, so that they would not show clearly. Some had hidden them in embroidery and knitting and hung them as showpieces with decorative frames. In

198 Bhau Beej celebrates the relationship between sisters and brothers during Diwali.

short, they took great care to keep these symbols of their caste hidden from the public eye, in a less prominent place. (271)¹⁹⁹

At the same time, their behaviour also represents a negotiation with their surrounding society. Rashmi Venkatesan relates in the *Times of India* article, “A gene called caste,” that casteism is expressed through informal refusals of housing in urban modern India: “the landlord discovered that I was a dalit. He immediately returned the advance and said I couldn’t have the house” (Sethi and A). Though upper class women disguise their Dalit caste to ensure favourable housing, they also express their Buddhist faith, and resist Hindu homogeneity in small ways by discreetly including Buddhist images. In this situation, their religious beliefs remain intact.

However, the political aspects of neo-Buddhism fail in the context of social mobility. The women also show the appeal of “brahminization” to Dalits who experience upward social mobility. Higher economic status includes associated restrictions on women, where high caste is conflated with wealth, and status is marked on the bodies of women. Ambedkar advised women to give up their dress codes which marked them as low caste (Pawar and Moon). Kamble notes in her interview that “educated Dalits are behaving exactly as the upper caste villagers used to behave then. Educated dalits occupy top positions in the government. Their children enjoy the good life. They are not bothered about what’s happening to poor people” (150). Likewise, Pawar relates how Dalit women

199 Padma Pani is a bodhisattva in the Mahayana and Vajrayana paths of Buddhism, which reproduces Hindu iconography in the Buddhist pantheon. This icon may appear to be Hindu upon a superficial viewing.

uphold Ambedkar's concept of the community in Meenakshi Moon's response to a Dalit woman living as a Brahmin:

That's when she said, 'You know, every individual must work for his own development and progress, mustn't he? Ultimately, it is individuals who make a community and communities in turn make the country, right? So each one should look after himself!' . . . 'But Madam, suppose Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar also had said the same thing! Then where would we be today?' Meenakshi [Moon] asked her. (270-1)

Orientalist perceptions of Buddhism, drawing on the construction of Buddhism as inferior to Christianity, often misinterpret the path to enlightenment as individualist. However, the Three Jewels of Buddhism include the sangha—the Buddhist community in which both monastics and laypeople provide mutual support to one another on the path to enlightenment.

Pawar's critique of individualism arises in the context of anti-colonial theory as well. Frantz Fanon writes:

Individualism is the first to disappear. The native intellectual had learnt from his masters that the individual ought to express himself fully. The colonialist bourgeoisie had hammered into the native's mind the idea of a society of individuals where each person shuts himself up in his own subjectivity, and whose only wealth is individual thought. (47)

After Indian independence, elite Hindus continued the colonial relationship with Dalits internally. Just as proximity to Hindu communities influenced the Christian and Muslim communities to adopt or continue caste ritual, so too does the proximity to Hindus affect the practice of Buddhism. At the same time, women mediate between Hinduism and Buddhism in their homes, traditionally women's space, to include Buddhist iconography in their artwork and among their household plants.

However, neo-Buddhist syncretism represents neither an inevitable slide into Hindu ritual, nor an advocacy of separatism. Community ties, mutual support, and identity allow continued rejection of casteism. Religious identity is maintained and reproduced through practice or performance in relationships with family and the wider community. Education also creates this religious identity.²⁰⁰ Both Kamble and Pawar critique a lack of political activism among upper class Dalits and their neglect of identity. However, if religion is a political statement, Buddhism still overcomes Hindu social appeal. Conversion for neo-Buddhists is not a moment in the past, but an identity which is continually constructed in the present. Practice is more important than conversion, while conversion allows for practice. The Dalit women practice the Buddha's Noble Eightfold Path in that they are conscious of their daily actions while negotiating with the potential for violence in their surrounding community.

The Dalit women writers also critique their own and other women's participation in the patriarchal and casteist systems. Pawar mentions a prominent woman who "had

200 Education as a means of building identity and community is discussed further in chapter seven.

gagged her daughter-in-law and burnt her alive. She had managed to suppress the whole affair because of her position in society” (280). Both Pawar and Kamble include references to the abuse of daughters-in-law:

These sasus [mothers-in-law] ruined the lives of innocent women forever. Everyday the maharwada [Dalit neighbourhood] would resound with the cries of hapless women in some house or the other. . . . The entire day, the poor daughter-in-law would serve the entire household like a slave.

(Kamble 98)

They note the hierarchies of value which require them to abuse weaker community members in order to have any power. Kamble refers to the structures of violence in the Dalit community which parallel those in the wider Indian community:

The other world had bound us with chains of slavery. But we too were human beings. And we too desired to dominate, to wield power. But who would let us do that? So we made our own arrangements to find slaves—our very own daughters-in-law! If nobody else, then we could at least enslave them. (B. Kamble 87)

Through their recognition of the suffering created by oppressive hierarchical structures, the women show compassion for the abusers who reflect the violence they experience against their own bodies. The Buddhist concept of compassion allows for acknowledgement of institutional violence as well as physical violence.

Humour, Oppression, and Liberation

Dalit women represent their daily experience of the violence of the caste system in humorous anecdotes. The women use humour and vulgar language to cope with tragic events rather than becoming victims of these events. Majken Jul Sorensen (2008) argues that humour can facilitate outreach and mobilization, facilitate a culture of resistance, and turn oppression upside down. He draws on James C. Scott's (1990) theory of hidden transcripts which argues that these forms of resistance develop dignity within a community, but also prepare the group for public forms of resistance. These strategies of humour exist in the context of gender and caste hierarchies, as well as in colonial hierarchies. The Dalit women's humour is both caste- and religion-oriented. Kamble begins her narrative by creating an analogy for children's clothes so full of holes that they barely cover the body: "These strings were our holy threads, the markers of our birth, our caste—like the *janeu* [sacred threads] of the brahmins. These strings had to be there because on these strings we would hang the intestines of dead animals in order to dry them!" (8). She references the caste-based and polluting occupation of disposing of dead animals and using them as a food source, and the caste-imposed poverty which results in bodily exposure. At the same time she mocks Brahmin ideology by proposing the inverse of Brahmin purity; Dalits hang the markers of their pollution—entrails of dead animals—on the sacred thread, while their polluted bodies preclude the possibility of wearing the sacred thread.

Pawar begins her narrative on a similar note; the women creatively retell the stories of marketplace negotiation in which they verbally abuse the upper caste women who condescend to them:

“I straightaway said to her face, go stuff your stove with this money and see if it burns well.” This raised a collective burst of laughter from all! The women, of course, had not said anything like this to their customers.

Nonetheless, it would give vent to their pent-up anger. (10)

The stories are filled with coarse language, and the women intend to make the other women laugh as a means of relief from the oppression they have just faced. As per Scott, they also practice for a future when their status will allow them to speak openly.

Women balance suffering and liberation in their writing. Dalit women fully embrace the middle way of Buddhism in this sense. The Buddha taught that life is suffering in the Four Noble Truths. However, he taught the path of liberation from suffering as well. Dalit women writers use humour as a way of acknowledging without accepting the oppressions of gender and caste. They neither ignore nor submerge themselves in their community's suffering. The women follow Ambedkar's teachings in the sense of political identity as well. The Dalit identity for them acknowledges suffering and oppression, but does not take on the identity of suffering victimhood. The women write their lives in positive ways, without ignoring the negative aspects.

Women's Religious Experience and Women's Bodies

Many aspects of their lives which women present in the writing are absent from men's autobiographies, such as the experiences of menstruation, marriage, childbirth, sexual desire, and domestic violence, harassment and assault. They are absent, on one hand, because these are female experiences. On the other hand, this omission occurs because these subjects fall under a wider mystification of women's sexuality (Friedan). Because of the controls placed on women's bodies, women face restrictions on their mobility and their associations. Among these limitations are the rules of untouchability which are still enforced upon women during menstruation or childbirth. Menstruation is one of the most prevalent taboos: "In menstruation a woman is subjected to segregation" (Ambedkar *The Untouchables* 22). At the same time, women perpetuate the silences around such topics. Women exist within, and reproduce, the culture of patriarchy. Pawar and the narrators in *Pan on Fire* represent practices of bodily untouchability in Hindu culture, and their resistance to or subversion of practices of untouchability as they reemerge in neo-Buddhist culture. Dalit women reject untouchability as women and not only as Dalits. They frame their bodies in religious terms, and their resistance defines their own religious space in opposition to oppressive patriarchal religious terms.

Hindu religious texts assign the status of pollution to low caste and to women's bodies. According to the *Manusmriti*, the religious legal code compiled between 200 BCE and 200 CE, men and upper caste women may ritually purify themselves after contact with a polluted person or object, or after sexual activity, menstruation or childbirth:

“When he has touched a Kandala, a menstruating woman, an outcast, a woman in childbed, a corpse, or one who has touched a (corpse), he becomes pure by bathing” (Manu 5.85). However, lower caste women and men have no such possibility, nor do women experiencing a bodily process. The connection between female sex, caste and pollution is persistent. Women often name the untouchability inherent in women’s bodies using caste designations: “In India, common statements during menstruation are: ‘*I’ve become an untouchable*’ and ‘*I am a mahar*’” (original emphasis, Garg, Sharma and Sahay 19). These polluted states are inherent to the body, even if they are temporary for upper caste women. Women’s central religious role in India—influenced primarily by Hinduism—is the maintenance of household purity. As such, women self-regulate, informing others of their polluted status through their withdrawal from specific contact and activities. Since men can be polluted by women—both through physical contact and through knowledge, women regulate themselves and each other for the ritual purity of men. At the same time, women perpetuate the silences around such topics. Women exist within, and reproduce, the culture of patriarchy. While the Dalit movement challenges the practice of untouchability against Dalit bodies, Dalit women still face untouchability practices against women’s bodies within their own communities.

In Hinduism, a man becomes impure through contact with a menstruating woman: “the wisdom, the energy, the strength, the sight, and the vitality of a man who approaches a woman covered with menstrual excretions, utterly perish” (Manu 9.41). The texts are androcentric, positioning the male body as representative of the human body; the male is

of central concern with regard to ritual purity. They are also misogynist, conveying a sense of disgust with the aberrant female body in its capacity to pollute the male body; women do not “menstruate,” they are “covered with menstrual excretions.”

Responsibility falls on women to avoid polluting others through touching them, touching household items, or touching the god or other sacred items.

Ambedkar believed that Buddhism offered a tradition which effectively challenged the caste system and sexism in Hinduism. However, in the early Buddhist religious texts, women are also constructed as living in polluted bodies. The *Therigathas* and *Theragathas*, some of which date from the earliest years of Buddhism, represent the earliest texts from female and male monastics. Katherine R. Blackstone notes that although the monastics, and particularly men, describe bodies as impure in general, they target women’s bodies more often:

[D]epictions of all bodies and bodily processes are not uniform: women’s bodies are more frequently described as impure and defiling than are men’s bodies; women are often presented as inherently more physical, that is, as tied more closely to bodily processes than are men; and, concomitantly, women are commonly defined by their sexuality . . . (60)

The behavioural codes of Buddhism canonized in the Vinaya texts do not define women’s bodies as polluted. Instead, women observe rituals which recognize their bodies as polluted based on other cultural codes: “Buddhism relied upon prevailing Hindu and Confucian social codes, with their strongly defined gender roles”, particularly with regard

to lay Buddhists (Gross *Buddhism after Patriarchy* 213). As such, Hindu social codes became embedded in Buddhist culture, and Dalit women face not only a Hindu condemnation of their bodies, but also a Buddhist one.

Though the pollution assigned to bodies comes from ancient texts, untouchability against women is practised today. Both women and men commonly express the understanding that women's bodily processes are polluting: "The process of menstruation was described as the expulsion from the body of *ganda khoon* (dirty blood), which is why it leads to segregation and untouchability" (Garg, Sharma and Sahay 18); "menstrual blood, sexual fluids, and the lochia of childbirth have been regarded as pollutants which threaten the well-being of the community, and men in particular" (Garg, Sharma and Sahay 22). These attitudes are expressed in the religious texts and affect women's religious practices: "[r]eligious practices, such as visiting holy places or touching religious texts, were avoided during menstruation by both Hindu and Muslim women" (Garg, Sharma and Sahay 21). Girls are expected to segregate themselves in the village; while these restrictions are lessened in the city, women are still expected to avoid certain activities.²⁰¹

While upper caste men can become polluted through activities such as a family death, sexual activity, or contact with an untouchable person, only untouchables and women are polluted due to the nature of their bodies. However, untouchables' and women's pollution are inherent to their bodies.²⁰² Kamble and another girl decide to

201 I use the term "untouchable" here to express a religious state identified externally, in contrast with the outdated "Untouchable" identity which has been replaced by the Dalit identity.

202 See also B. R. Ambedkar, *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?*

pollute the god as part of their daily play: “You don’t know how that spirit hates things that pollute. Even women are polluting for this spirit god” (130). In this case, their Dalit bodies are the source of the pollution rather than their female bodies, but the purpose of defining pollution is the same: to exclude and demean. Likewise, Pawar expresses her concerns about untouchability in the caste system and for women in the specific context of menstruation. Upon her first menstruation she complains: “As it was, people in the class kept me at a distance because of my caste. Now because of this even my own people in the house would keep me away!” (124). Kamble and Pawar connect Dalit bodies and women’s bodies in a religious context; Dalit women are doubly untouchable.

Though the pollution assigned to bodies comes from ancient texts, menstrual taboos are still practised today. Girls are often expected to “sit aside” when they visit their family members in the village, while this is usually not required at the family’s home in the city; this observation also implies capitalist demands on women in urban nuclear families: “Abstaining from kitchen chores in the villages depended on extended family members filling in for each other, a necessary social support mechanism. In the slums, the women were living in nuclear families and had to manage on their own” (Garg, Sharma and Sahay 20). Ambedkar advised Dalits to leave the villages, but he did not consider the additional demands of urban life which specifically affect women.

Bhave summarizes in her introduction to Dalit women’s narratives that “[t]hey have progressed to the extent of not making their daughters ‘sit aside’ during

(Aurangabad: Kaushalya Prakashan, 2003).

menstruation” (xxxvii), but the text of the women’s narratives tells a more complex story. Despite the rejection of Hindu religious norms in the neo-Buddhist community, Edward Luce notes that “[w]hen the women are menstruating, they remove Ambedkar’s likeness so as not to pollute him” (111). The interviewees of *Pan on Fire* present both practice and critique of menstrual untouchability in the neo-Buddhist culture. Sangeeta recalls: “I ate [the sweets] until I was fit to burst and then began to give to others but the others wouldn’t take them, saying, ‘Oh, no! The crow has touched you’” (Bhave 10). Chhaya relates:

[M]y grandmother has her rituals. . . . she really isn’t a Buddhist at all. She says: ‘All this pollution nowadays! Girls touch everything during their menses and throw the soiled things near the house—that’s where all these troubles come from. . . . It’s all due to the impurity and pollution!’ (Bhave 17)

Here Chhaya demonstrates how women participate in reinforcing women’s oppression, but specifically connects religious identity with menstrual taboos in Hindu traditions rather than Buddhist.

Different families variably enforce pollution rituals on women. Pawar discusses the shift in practice between generations, between families, and between rural and urban areas. When she first menstruates her mother directs her to segregate herself: “‘Change your clothes, take a pad and go sit at the back door’” (124). Her sister, however, offers a point of view from the post-conversion generation: “There is no need for you to sit

secluded. Behave naturally, as usual in the house. There is nothing like sin or merit in starting your periods. It is just a natural thing to happen to a woman!" (124). The combination of modern neo-Buddhist ideals and improved education influence Pawar's sister. Pawar also must adapt when she marries; her mother-in-law says: "'Here we have to observe the custom of sitting isolated.' Then she turn[s] to [Pawar], 'I too was a girl from Mumbai. But here I have to behave like a village woman'" (186). The observation of menstrual taboos change between families, and between rural and urban areas as well. Within the neo-Buddhist community, these taboos are practised less often, or discarded as rituals specific to Hinduism which maintain caste through restrictions on women.

In her writing, Pawar also subverts menstrual taboos. Though Dalit women writers depict women enforcing an oppressive culture upon other women, Pawar shows the possibility of women collaborating to shift oppressive values. At her first intercourse with her husband, she experiences bleeding and segregates herself because she believes she is menstruating. When her true menstrual cycle comes later, her sister-in-law helps her to hide it and so avoid the embarrassment of discussing her sexual activity: "In the meantime I freely roamed about everywhere . . . When our eyes met, Mai and I would break into peals of laughter" (187). Again, Pawar experiences humour among women as a response to oppression, as with the women who tell vulgar stories about their interactions with upper caste women. In this instance, the humour specifically references women's bodies, where earlier it references caste; the humour offers relief in both cases. Her resistance occurs in a context that might be seen as unintentional, but also relates to

sexuality, desire, and sexual relations between Pawar and her husband, another taboo which Pawar breaks in discussing her sexuality. Within the wider frame of religious conversion, which Pawar explicitly states in her preface, this act takes on a religious connotation.

Pawar expresses the fluidity of collusion and secrecy in different contexts. She knows from her first menstruation that her mother feels comfortable maintaining rituals which treat women as polluted. Pawar recalls intentionally hiding her period from her mother. When she first meets her husband, her mother asks her to serve him: “‘Since Vasanti has her periods she asked me to make tea for him. Take it. Go, give it to him.’ I could not help smiling at this. I was in the same state as Vasanti” (128). Pawar demonstrates in her writing that pollution is applied to an individual externally, and that any ill effects from failure to observe menstruation taboos represent mere superstition. Just as throwing the gods in the river symbolizes casting off the external Hindu oppression of pollution which marks Dalit identity, Pawar practices casting off the external patriarchal and Hindu oppression of pollution as it defines women’s bodies.

Dalit women writers’ openness about taboo topics risks drawing condemnation for obscenity. In comparison, sex education books have been banned in several states, and specifically in Maharashtra in 2007; although the complainants claimed to support sex education as modern Indians, they used arguments against Westernization, and other vague accusations against the images and age group: “These books will create ‘Sex Gurus’ instead of educating students” (“Maharashtra”). Since the book ban was

effectively a ban on sex education, which was never reinstated, girls no longer receive education about their bodies in school, resulting in shame and anxiety as discussed in Suneela Garg, Nandini Sharma and Ragini Sahay's article (2001). However, pornographic materials, "yellow books," demeaning to women still circulate among men and boys, defining their attitude toward women's bodies.

I argue that in neo-Buddhism, Ambedkar constructed a third space, or middle way between British colonialism and Hindu nationalism. Where Hindu nationalists reject sex-education books as too "Western," so did the colonial perspective often reject depictions of sexuality in Hinduism, and contemporary Hindu moral codes regarding sexuality emerged under British rule, in part through the imposition of Western legal codes (R. Menon).²⁰³ Neo-Buddhism gives Dalit women the ability to resist Hindu nationalist narratives which position themselves as anti-Western in the interests of maintaining internal colonialism through gender and caste hierarchies. Pawar breaks the silence surrounding women's sexuality and female bodies. She indicates the opportunities in the feminist movements which educate women about their bodies:

I was made aware of the biological aspects of male and female bodies.

This was quite different from the titillating yellow books one got in the streets. Here I found books containing information on male and female reproductive organs with illustrations, presented in an objective, clean, and scientific manner. Just as the disciples of Lord Shiva never see the

203 Where Orientalists engaged with representations of sexuality in Hinduism or Indian culture, they often exoticized India and sexualized Indian women in particular, or ignored the ways these representations of sexuality reinforced gender and caste hierarchies. See Puri, "Concerning Kamasutras".

Shivalinga as a representation of Shiva's penis in Goddess Parvati's vagina, these pictures did not create any different feelings in our minds.
(245)

Here she references religion, at once demystifying female sexuality and the Hindu gods, both with regard to bodies.

Furthermore, because of this education, Dalit women also reflect on how childcare affects their ability to participate in the neo-Buddhist movement. In their book *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*, Pawar and Moon summarize women's approaches to their reproductive agency: "In order to take part in the movement, some women underwent contraceptive surgery, some took on a co-wife, while others looked after the children of their co-wives and mothers-in-law" (353). This attitude opposes that of Dalit men, who glorify motherhood in their representations of women in the neo-Buddhist movement.²⁰⁴ That the women writers specifically connect their experiences to religious identity helps to construct neo-Buddhism as a religion which offers more opportunities for women.

Dalit women also counter Hindu religious values in the neo-Buddhist community with blasphemy centred on their bodies and writing. Gauri Viswanathan describes how these challenges create new communities and ways of knowing:

When not resolved by expulsion and excommunication of the offending heretic, doctrinal conflict produces nothing short of the paradigm shifts

204 As discussed in chapter four.

that create new structures of knowledge. A simple, yet unacknowledged, notion is that blasphemers may blaspheme without undermining the content or truth of any proposition because blasphemy's enemy is not a text or a creed but a community, along with the codes and rules it employs to sanction membership within it. (*Outside the Fold* 242)

Dalit women's blasphemy, in their breach of multiple purity rituals, breaks down the hierarchical binaries of body and mind, and physicality and rationality. Their writing goes beyond mere assertion that women are valued more in Buddhism than in Hinduism, as found in male writing, and *demonstrates* their improved status and improved opportunities for challenging existing oppressions. This approach serves to insist that women continue to demand their rights in their secular and sacred lives, despite the intersecting pressures of patriarchal and caste-biased culture.

Conclusion

Scholars of religion, beginning with Louis Dumont in his book *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*, often define untouchability in terms of interdining and endogamy. However, Dalit writers relate that untouchability goes beyond these ritual observances: "Any contact with members of this group, even their sight, sometimes even their shadow, was held to be ritually polluting and abhorrent; elaborate purifications would be undertaken if such occurred" (Teltumbde *Persistence of Caste* 14). The existing scholarly definition of untouchability arises from an upper caste male understanding of religious ritual which was adopted in elite Western scholarship

rather than the rituals of daily life influenced by religious politics. In *The Persistence of Caste: India's Hidden Apartheid and the Khairlanji Murders*, Teltumbde discusses the rape, torture, and murder of a Dalit family in the village Khairlanji in 2006.²⁰⁵ He argues that religious caste observance has declined, as in prohibitions against interdining. He further argues that caste violence has intensified in response to the social advances made by Dalit individuals and communities. This violence is specifically religious in nature:

The Hindus would argue that this violence is against evil and is hence reassuring to those who are virtuous. The definition of virtue and vice however rests on caste ideology, as we saw in Khairlanji. Those who abide by this ideology are supposed to be virtuous and those who defy it evil. Those who challenge this framework are reminded by the weapon-wielding gods of the violent end they would face. In Khairlanji, the caste Hindus wielded these weapons. All this is embedded in and communicated through what could be summarily put as 'Hindu culture.' (42)

An androcentric reading understands the expression of caste through violence as abuse, torture and murder; however, the understanding of women's bodies as polluted remains embedded in his argument, in the expression of pollution through violent sexual assault.

Rapists target Dalit women and girls more frequently than upper caste women. Statistics on rapes committed against Dalit women are unreliable, based on the Brahmin patriarchal culture in which Dalit women are expected to be sexually available, the myth

²⁰⁵ This book was originally published in 2008 by Navayana as *Khairlanji: A Strange and Bitter Crop*, though the author has made some significant revisions in the 2010 Zed Books publication.

that an upper caste man would not risk pollution through contact with a Dalit woman, and the concept that purity is marked on the bodies of upper caste women, while Dalit women have no honour (Rege "Caste and Gender"; Chakravarti *Gendering Caste*). Language combines with caste and gendered oppression when upper castes use caste slurs during rapes: "during the attack, the men seem[] to have more pleasure in humiliating their origins and background" (Sengupta). In fact, rape appears in language used to low caste girls, as a means of implied threat: "[a]llusions to rape by upper castes begin to appear in subtle conversations and . . . begin to mark (rape) as inevitable in the mind of young Dalit girls" (Sengupta). Studies show that rape is used as a tool of control targeting the Dalit community through Dalit women: "rape is, for the members of India's rural upper classes, a means to show power" (Niazi). Moreover, the imposition of pollution on women's bodies remains, despite Teltumbde's arguments, since women *within and outside* the Dalit community remain untouchable, where pollution has been assigned specifically to women's bodies regardless of caste. An understanding of women's bodies as polluted leads directly to violence against women's bodies through rape. In a context where upper caste men may regain ritual purity easily, contact with doubly "polluted" Dalit women via sexual violence is not the paradox it seems.

Women's bodies, including their experiences of menstruating, childbirth, sexual desire, or violence, are constructed in the religious texts and in men's writing as apolitical, and excluded as taboo as a means of reproducing oppressive cultural systems. Reintroducing women's bodies in a specifically religious context undermines the

oppressive aspects of neo-Buddhism which persist, whether patriarchal or Hindu. Dalit women writers both expose oppressive aspects of culture and reconstruct their own experiences in the context of religion and politics, breaking down the distinctions between bodily and intellectual, secular and sacred, religious and political. Dalit women challenge Hindu practices creeping into neo-Buddhism with their own bodies, and with their specific experiences of being women with polluted or untouchable bodies, even within their own untouchable communities. The resistance to ritual becomes ritual itself, whereby they combine the ritually "pure" religious space with the ritually "impure" religious space. In this act, they redefine women's bodies as worthy of participation in the sacred spaces previously refused to them in patriarchal and Hindu restrictions.

Chapter 7

Women's Mission: Education and the neo-Buddhist Movement

Historically, Hindu doctrine has prohibited education to low castes and all women. Dalit women are thus doubly marginalized in the production of knowledge; doctrine prohibits them from learning as women and as Dalits. Although literal adherence to these doctrines is not popular in the contemporary period, at least in formal education institutions, multiple barriers prevent Dalit women from accessing education.²⁰⁶ These barriers include financial, physical, social and cultural factors, and arise from both the Dalit community and the upper caste community. Challenges to Hindu doctrine come from several avenues. On one hand, Dalit women are accessing educational institutions. Despite the barriers to their education, they persevere, and become students, scholars, teachers, and administrators. On the other hand, Dalits are challenging the definition of knowledge. Hindu doctrine prohibited Dalits and women from accessing knowledge, where upper caste men defined knowledge as sacred written literature, and by authority of the sacred texts refused to acknowledge the production of knowledge in terms of labour. Dalits are now reclaiming their historical traditions of oral literature and labour knowledge.

Neo-Buddhism empowers Dalits to work collectively to achieve their educational goals. While I am not aware of academic texts addressing the role of the male educator in

206 I use "formal education" to refer to the institutionalized state-accredited education, as a contrast to institutionalized religious education focusing on theology and led by priests. I avoid the term "secular education," which suggests that religion has been removed from primary, secondary, and post-secondary state-accredited education. Talal Asad discusses the context in which religion came to be seen, in Western philosophy, as a personal or private matter, inessential to public life. See Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

India, male teachers and priests are prevalent in both women's and men's literatures of the Dalit movement. Literature examining how women play a role as educators is largely absent, particularly in the context of the lay focus of neo-Buddhism.²⁰⁷ This chapter begins by examining the historical perspectives on the education of Hindu and Buddhist women. These attitudes, combined with Hindu dominance in contemporary India, impact contemporary education systems. Second, I examine the barriers to Dalit women's education. Regardless of these barriers, Dalit women answer Ambedkar's call for Dalits to pursue education as a means of escaping caste oppression, and integrate his challenge to "Educate! Organize! Agitate!" in their lives.

Building on the strong tradition of women's movements in India and in the Dalit community, and considering the context of the lower status and participation of women teachers in historical Buddhism, I examine the instances in which women play an integral role in educating other women, men and children. Overall, I consider both women's traditional role as educators of children in the home and women's participation as educators in schools, women's organizations, temples, and wider communities. As well, I consider the interactions between education and proselytization; I analyze how women reject, assume, and appropriate pedagogical strategies used by colonizers, by Brahmin Hindus, and by male educators. Finally, I examine the contemporary challenges to the education of Dalit women, both from external resistance and from within the neo-

²⁰⁷ For an examination of the Pali canon which focuses on women's role in educating other nuns, see Ellison Banks Findly, "Women Teachers of Women: Early Nuns 'Worthy of My Confidence'," *Women's Buddhism Buddhism's Women: Tradition, Revision, Renewal*, ed. Ellison Banks Findly (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000).

Buddhist community. Building on written and visual representations of women which men produce, as well as women's self-representations, women educators are in a position to play an integral role in developing other women's self-conception as Dalits, as Buddhists, and as women. Despite resistance from men in their community, and from upper caste Indians, neo-Buddhist Dalit women are pursuing Ambedkar's appeal that Dalits educate themselves.

Historical Scripture and Religion in Education

It is essential to connect historical religious texts and legal codes, contemporary attitudes regarding caste, and the importance of religion in the modern education system. The most vicious arguments against low caste and women's education come from *The Laws of Manu*; the text states: "For women no (sacramental) rite (is performed) with sacred texts, thus the law is settled; women (who are) destitute of strength and destitute of (the knowledge of) Vedic texts, (are as impure as) falsehood (itself), that is a fixed rule" (Manu 9.18). This verse was historically interpreted as justification to prohibit women from studying the Vedas. Furthermore, contact with low castes and/or menstruating women causes upper caste men to become temporarily polluted, and thus they may not read the Vedas: "Let a twice-born man always carefully interrupt the Veda-study on two (occasions, viz.) when the place where he recites is impure, and when he himself is unpurified" (4.127); a Brahmin man becomes polluted "[w]hen he has touched a Kandala, a menstruating woman, an outcast, a woman in childbed, a corpse, or one who has touched a (corpse)" (5.85). According to Hindu doctrine, low castes and menstruating

women—nearly all women of childbearing age, at one time or another, regardless of caste—convey pollution upon people, locations, and sacred items; as such they are the site of impurity, and can never access sacred knowledge.

Gargi is well-known to Indian feminists as a highly educated and intelligent philosopher who is the only person capable of challenging the best philosopher, Yagnavalkya, in the *Upanishads*. Some scholars of Hindu doctrine and feminist researchers present the woman philosopher Gargi as proof that women had a higher status in Hinduism in ancient times:

Nineteenth-century Hindu nationalists—mostly from the newly educated middle classes, always male and upper caste, romanticized this [Vedic] period. This was partly in order to establish the superiority of their traditions over those of their European conquerors but particularly because they needed to establish the high status of their women for some time in the past, as their condition was so evidently ‘low’ at the time they were writing. (Chakravarti *Gendering Caste*)

However, these arguments stem partly from a response to British colonizers who argued that British culture and the Christian tradition treated women better than did South Asian cultures, including Hinduism and Islam.²⁰⁸ Furthermore, the argument reproduces the

²⁰⁸ Subsequent historians challenge this claim; most European women who travelled to India were extremely privileged, and did not represent the working woman exploited by the Industrial Revolution in Europe. Likewise, upper class European women gained some freedom from rigid gender codes in Europe, and much power because of racist ideology. Like upper caste Hindu women who gain power from caste in a Brahmin patriarchy, white women gain power from race in European patriarchy. See also Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Rule* (New York: Routledge, 1995). These colonialist attitudes continue up to the present day; see Sayantani DasGupta, “‘Your Women Are Oppressed, but Ours Are Awesome’: How Nicholas

concept of a degenerate Indian culture used in colonial ideology to support arguments for European superiority and dominance. These arguments propose that true Hinduism holds women in high regard and that contemporary Hinduism represents a degraded version of Hinduism.²⁰⁹

Uma Chakravarti's interrogation of the Gargi legend suggests that analyses which use Gargi as proof of the high status of women in ancient Hinduism are superficial.²¹⁰ Instead, she argues that the legend reinforces the role of women through promoting male philosophers as the ideal type, and threatening women with violence should they persist in pursuing knowledge:

Yagnavalkya . . . abruptly ended the debate with a typical assertion of brahmanical male power: 'Do not, O Gargi, push your inquiry too far lest your head should fall off.' Thereupon Gargi fell silent. It is significant that all the other male contestants fell silent on their own—not so Gargi whose questions had come thick and fast and had to be threatened with violence. It is also significant that while a recourse to violence is actually necessary to tame or break the resistance of men who need to be subordinated the

Kristof and *Half the Sky* Use Women against Each Other," *Racialicious* (2012).

209 See also chapter three for similar arguments regarding an ancient "pure" and a contemporary "degraded" Buddhism.

210 Ursula King's article on female education in Indian religions is an example of these arguments which propose a higher status for women in ancient Hinduism. Likewise, though she acknowledges that only upper caste women had access to education, she goes on to erase low caste women by noting that "even higher castes came to be classed with the lowest caste of the Shudras", "World Religions, Women and Education," *Comparative Education* 23.1 (1987): 38. I challenge the equivalence of (upper caste) women with low caste or Shudra (men) throughout the dissertation.

mere threat of violence is enough to silence women. (original italics,
Gendering Caste 20)

Importantly, Gargi was also an upper caste woman, and uncritical appropriation of the story thus reproduces the caste restrictions on knowledge.²¹¹ Manu's successors prescribed violence against low castes of any gender who came into contact with the Vedas: "Now if he listens intentionally to (a recitation of) the Veda, his ears shall be filled with (molten) tin or lac. / If he recites (Vedic texts), his tongue shall be cut out. / If he remembers them, his body shall be split in twain" (*Sacred Laws* XII 4-6). Chakravarti argues that upper caste women who benefit from the caste system need only be threatened with violence. However, low caste women regularly experience violence.²¹²

While Buddhist texts do not contain prohibitions against women's education, they still include negative representations of women which contribute to the barriers against women's education. In Buddhism, the texts suggest that the unenlightened aggressor is the source of physical violence against women. However, the texts make the *threat* of violence *implicit* for women who do not follow the rules. For example, Buddhist women are prohibited from individual forest retreats because of the risk of rape, a case of punishing the victim for a rapist's crime. The Buddha stipulated in *The Bhikkhunis' Code of Discipline*, which contains the additional rules for nuns, that

211 Contemporary news articles about women priests likewise ignore women's access to religious education which is nevertheless limited to upper caste women, and generally available through their husbands. G. V. Subba Rao, "Women Priests Establish Themselves," *The Times of India* 30 June 2002.
 212 I discuss this violence in chapter six.

[s]hould any bhikkhunī go among villages alone or go to the other shore of a river alone or stay away for a night alone or fall behind her companion(s) alone: this bhikkhunī, also, as soon as she has fallen into the first act of offence, is to be (temporarily) driven out, and it entails initial and subsequent meetings of the Community. (“Bhikkhunī Pāṭimokkha”)

In addition, Kathryn R. Blackstone points out the institutional violence embedded in the *Therīgatha* and *Theragatha*, in which male monastics externalize sexual desire and temptation. They blame women, and practice the corpse meditation—imagining the decay of a corpse as a means of understanding bodily impermanence—with a woman’s body in mind. Blackstone argues that for the theras “[t]he disgusting nature of the body is revealed not in images of self, but in images of others, particularly women” (69). These images construct women as lesser humans, which then justifies physical violence and contributes to women’s internalized low self-image.

Since historical Buddhist lay communities often adopted the cultural regulations of the surrounding community, those regulations combined with patriarchy in Buddhism contributed to a low value placed on women. While women monastics gained access to education—albeit at a more limited level than male monastics—laywomen’s education was limited to the elite, as in the neighbouring religions. When women overcome the barriers against monastic life, they seem to have a greater access to education than laywomen. Androcentrism has likewise resulted in a lack of writing on female teachers. Historical barriers prevented women from pursuing education, from pursuing the

monastic life, from becoming teachers, and from becoming prominent teachers. Patriarchy and sexism within Buddhist institutions ensured that the existing women teachers were not documented adequately, and subsequent androcentrism has ignored those teachers where their lives and teachings are recorded. At the same time, the Dhamma—teachings or wisdom—is personified as female, and in contrast with the Hindu Saraswati, Buddhism never incorporated women’s illiteracy into doctrine.²¹³

Reform movements across religions in contact with European criticism and European women’s movements often advocated women’s education for the reason that women in the domestic sphere educated the next generation of men. This education, however, maintained gender roles, and valued intellectual labour over emotional or physical labour, as men’s education centred on philosophical pursuits, while women’s education emphasized the practical aspects of domestic and religious life. It is important to note, however, that education was and remains a privilege of the upper and middle classes, for women as well as for men. Furthermore, upper caste women’s education emphasized caste privilege:

Women’s education . . . was a way of both detaching upper-caste women from any contact with ‘the vulgar masses’, and of curing them of their latent vulgarity. One of the effects of the women’s education movement, therefore, was also to marginalize popular forms of women’s entertainment, pushing their performers into seeking new avenues of

²¹³ For a discussion of regulations and practices for female monastic educators in the Pali canon, see Findly, “Women Teachers of Women.”

employment. Traditional spaces for the expression of ‘woman’s voice’ were thus further curtailed. (Radha Kumar 16)

Education for women does not necessarily improve women’s status, and serves to reinforce gender and caste hierarchies.

Ambedkar recognized the role of education—or enforced illiteracy—in maintaining oppressive hierarchies, and called on Dalits to educate their children, girls as well as boys. He made connections between caste and gender oppression, as did Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule, who advocated for low caste rights and women’s rights, and founded the first school for low caste girls. Ambedkar emphasized the value of education as a means to escape oppression, and founded the Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha for the purpose of educating both female and male Dalits. At the same time, he used language similar to that of early educational reformers in suggesting that education for women improved their reproductive capacity as mothers nurturing and educating their children: “if you want to improve the next generation, you must not neglect to educate their daughters” (“Mahad Satyagraha Speech” 123). However, in his activism, and through the medium of his religious text, he acknowledges the ways which Hinduism oppresses low caste men and all women, in the prohibition on education: “All women, no matter whether they belonged to the Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya, and all Shudras, both males and females were prohibited from acquiring knowledge, even from acquiring literacy” (*Buddha and His Dhamma* 204; 3.2.1.3). Furthermore, since the caste system is

perpetuated even among low castes, through exchange of and limitations on women, education of girls challenges not only patriarchy, but the caste system.

Religion in the Contemporary Educational Institution

Religious doctrine is embedded in the formal Indian education system itself. The knowledge canon is based on the history of Brahmin knowledge production and literacy, in addition to British educational standards and English language medium, which were historically prohibited to women and low castes, and which are still limited to the elites.²¹⁴ In his book *Post-Hindu India: A Discourse in Dalit-Bahujan, Socio-Spiritual and Scientific Revolution*, Kancha Ilaiah points out how Brahmin ideology has created a system where sacred scripture is considered knowledge, but theories of labour and production are not considered knowledge. Just as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) revalues indigenous knowledge which was appropriated or excluded in the process of cultural imperialism, Ilaiah values Dalit knowledge in terms of its contributions to India's development:

All knowledge systems—literary, cultural, or of the social and physical sciences—are being restructured. The social layer that had been marked as 'polluted' is being highlighted as scientific and socially useful, while the so-called 'pure' is being reconstructed as unskilled, parasitic, anti-social and anti-national. (*Post-Hindu India* 27)

214 As discussed in the introduction, education in English provides a means for Dalits to access upward social mobility through language. For a comparison of the history of British colonialist and Hindu nationalist agendas in the Indian education system, see Krishna Kumar, *Political Agenda of Education: A Study of Colonialist and Nationalist Ideas*, Second ed. (New Delhi: Sage, 2005).

The Indian education system focuses on Western arts and sciences, and includes Brahmin religious philosophy as South Asia's contribution to world knowledge. Thomas Babbington Macaulay's 1835 minute on education, a major influence on the Indian education system, values Western arts and sciences over Indian Hindu and Muslim, and discourages Sanskrit or Arabic studies in favour of English. Even within the Indian education system and intellectual community, sacred knowledge is sometimes privileged over scientific knowledge, in direct opposition to scientific evidence.²¹⁵ Both Western and Brahmin religious knowledge exclude Dalit knowledge as meaningful. At the same time, the British provided the possibilities for anti-colonialist movements as well as for the Dalit movement by employing Dalits in the military, and thus ensuring greater access to education; in fact, Ambedkar was the product of this process.

Ilaiah points out that the prohibition against literacy for lower castes ensured that their productive knowledge would be isolated from the body of elite knowledge:

Hindu spirituality treated reading and writing—textualizing human practices and experience—as the divinely ordained work only of the *dwija* (twice-born) castes. Hence, the productive castes were not allowed to learn reading and writing. The ghettoization of education, of reading and writing of texts, of the synthesization and hybridization of knowledge became a defining feature of the Hindu society. (*Post-Hindu India* xxiv)

215 For example, there are numerous studies “proving” the physical purity of the Ganges River, despite its status as one of the most polluted rivers in the world.

I argue that Ilaiah uses language which recognizes how Hindu elites engage with hybridity with its connotations of power and appropriation, an act which precedes the colonial encounter; conversely, Dalits and all women are constructed as authentic only when they remain illiterate, and cannot represent themselves or reproduce their knowledge in literary forms.

In her autobiography, the Dalit woman writer Urmila Pawar reacts against an elitist definition of culture: “the word ‘cultured’ pricked me like a thorn. What exactly did he mean? Which culture were they talking about? Whose dominance were they praising? Patriarchy? Caste system? Class? What was it? And why was *our* writing termed uncivilized, uncultured?” (232). She points out that elitist definitions are used to justify oppressive social conditions, continuing the process of cultural imperialism within India, whereby upper class and upper caste men impose the values by which they benefit. The written word is upheld as the only true conveyor of knowledge, reinforced by British colonialist attitudes (Chakravarti *Gendering Caste; Ilaiah Post-Hindu India*). This perspective ensures that oral literacy and other Dalit forms of knowledge is debased, and that only Brahmin scripture represents Indian reality.

The Brahmin religious philosophy included in the canon of the contemporary Indian education system further establishes institutional violence. While the concept of secular education is popular in the West, related to the belief in a separation between church and state, contemporary educational institutions arise from historical religious institutions. If a neo-Buddhist educational model draws on the history of the Buddhist

educational institutions, contemporary Indian education attempts to disguise its Brahmin Hindu and European Christian roots.²¹⁶ It is popular knowledge in India that the best schools are Roman Catholic and English-medium institutions. The so-called secular norm in both Indian and British education fails to disguise embedded Hindu and Christian ideology.²¹⁷ In the 1990s, the political party in power, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), controversially revised textbooks to emphasize Hinduism under their religious nationalist agenda (*2005 Report on International Religious Freedom - India*). Indian textbooks include Brahmin deities, who—as Ilaiah argues—glorify war, theft, and sexual assault: “Even in grammar books sentences like ‘Rama killed Ravana’ and ‘Krishna had stolen the butter’ have shown the lack of respect for a productive profession” (Ilaiah *Post-Hindu India* 145). As a woman and Dalit seeking to maintain legitimacy in a Brahmin patriarchal political system, in 2003 Mayawati, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, restored these examples to state textbooks. Controversy arose because “new chapters on B R Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule were added even as the names of Ram, Krishna and Shivaji were deleted. . . . [Mayawati] has reiterated that she respected all great men regardless of their caste, creed and religion” (Sahay). Notably, including historical Dalit political heroes and knowledge in the canon is still prohibited, especially if it comes at the expense

216 A Hindu-secular education is often presented as a religious nationalist counter to the Muslim madrasa, or religious school. See Imtiaz Ahmad, “Urdu and Madrasa Education,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 37.24 (2002). See also Rajeew Bhargava, “Liberal, Secular Democracy and Explanations of Hindu Nationalism,” *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics* 40.3 (2002).

217 Because of these embedded ideologies, the standard of education is Hindu and Christian, and other religious groups must meet this standard in order to have their education accepted. Likewise, critics of the reservation system argue that every individual should be held to the same standard. Where this standard is based on the Hindu elite experience, marginalized groups such as women, Muslims, or Dalits can never gain “equal access” to the standard. The standard itself reproduces a colonialist model which ensures racial inequality.

of diminishing the institutional power of predominantly mythical Brahmin religious figures who have been adopted into the Hindu nationalist canon.²¹⁸

The same attitudes toward knowledge apply to women in textbooks, where they address women's bodies and sexuality. In 2007, the Maharashtra government followed the Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat state governments in banning sex education books, which effectively banned sex education. Justification included the risk that the books would "destroy Indian culture" ("Maharashtra"). Just as Pawar asks in her memoirs, the key questions are: whose culture is being destroyed? Who claims "Indian culture" as their own? The lack of formal sex education in schools is replaced on the streets in pornographic magazines, targeted to men and boys, which depict women as sex objects. Feminist women's movements attempt to combat these attitudes through sex education. Urmila Pawar writes that through her participation in feminist organizing, she received sex education as an adult:

I was made aware of the biological aspects of male and female bodies.

This was quite different from the titillating yellow books one got in the streets. Here I found books containing information on male and female reproductive organs with illustrations, presented in an objective, clean, and scientific manner. (Pawar 245)

218 Just as Ambedkar was accused of being anti-nationalist, any challenge to Brahmin patriarchal hegemony is framed as anti-Indian. For example, in 2009, the BJP expelled Jaswant Singh from the party because he expressed sympathetic views toward Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan and a central leader of the Indian independence movement. See "BJP Expels Jaswant Singh over Jinnah Remarks," *Times of India* 2009. See also Jaswant Singh, *Jinnah: India, Partition, Independence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). See also chapter four, where Ambedkar is framed as a "false god" in Arun Shourie's 1997 book *Worshipping False Gods*.

Rather than protecting girls from harm, bans on sex education impose psychological harm on girls. In the context of the religious texts' comments on the pollution inherent in women's bodies and in sexual contact, the ban on sex education reaffirms the objectification of women and develops a silence around women living in their bodies.²¹⁹ It thus reproduces Brahmin patriarchal ideology which glorifies women as passive sexual reproducers only, and encourages girls and women to be ashamed of their polluted and polluting bodies, as defined by upper caste male writers in historical religious texts. Sexual violence against girls and women is also based on their sexual objectification.

Dalit Women in Education

Indian law mandates reservation for Dalits at post-secondary education levels (Weisskopf). However, it does not ensure adequate education at the primary and secondary levels, a prerequisite for post-secondary admission. The absence of a free and compulsory primary or secondary education in India is common knowledge. Yet this barrier is only one among many systemic and integrated barriers against women and girls, and Dalit women and men in education. These barriers are common knowledge cross-culturally within India. Most Indians acknowledge it as a fact of life, and elite Indians have no incentive to change a system which benefits them. While women's and Dalit organizations attempt to make changes to these systems, the short-term practical response is to work within these systems. Although free and public government schools exist, in fact they are popularly denounced (Kremer et al.). Teacher absenteeism and corruption

²¹⁹ For further discussion on shame and silence around women's bodies, see chapter six.

are rampant since public teachers often supplement their income by giving private instruction during school hours.

First among the barriers to education for Dalits and girls, poverty prevents Dalits from accessing education. The private school system is the norm in India. Students face further inequalities in terms of differing language medium; English medium schools are more expensive, but provide more educational opportunities in the long term since nearly all universities are English medium. Even if these inadequacies in the education system were addressed, for both girls and boys expected to take up the unskilled labour of their parents, education is seen as unnecessary beyond the most basic levels. Poor children are an immediate financial asset to their families. As the Tamil Dalit woman writer Bama points out in her autobiography, “At an age when they should be going to school, studying like everyone else and playing about in the evening, they are shut up inside the factories . . . How can they afford to study, when it is such a struggle even to fill their bellies?” (48). A family must choose between educating or feeding a child, even when free education is available. Furthermore, children provide essential labour and income for their families. Working children bring in income, and children, especially girls, take on the burden of domestic labour, such as cooking and childcare, while their parents work.

Second, access to educational spaces poses a barrier to education since the infrastructure is limited, particularly in rural areas. There are not enough spaces for students in schools, and often there is no school in the area. In particular, access to higher levels of education grows increasingly difficult since even fewer upper-level schools are

available. The combined pressures of high population and poor infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, ensure that travel to and residence in urban areas is prohibitively expensive for low caste poor Dalits. Persistent casteism and sexism ensure that limited spaces in schools are reserved for the elites.

Third, Dalit girls face social barriers, both inside and outside the Dalit community, including class and gender barriers. Dalit women writers describe incidents where they are segregated from their peers on the basis of both caste and class. Pawar writes about language and food markers of caste and class:

The upper caste girls always used words like “ladu”, “modak”, “karanjya”, “puranpolya”. They brought such novel items in their tiffin boxes . . . We were aware, without anybody telling us, that we were born in a particular caste and in poverty, and that we had to live accordingly. (93-4)

The mothers of upper caste girls have time—or domestic help—which allows them to make sweets for their daughters, above the poor food which low caste and poor girls eat.²²⁰ Likewise, Janabai Kachru Girhe describes herself from the point of view of other students and teachers on her first day of school. She is marked as low caste and poor on the basis of her dress and hygiene: “I was wearing rags which had once been a frock. My hands wouldn’t come away from my head; they were busy scratching it like mad, the fingers and nails black, filthy with dirt. No comb had ever touched my hair” (327). Upper caste girls have access to luxuries such as running water, new clothing, hairbrushes, and

²²⁰ Poor food and gender also intersect in chapter four in the glorification of Ramabai’s malnutrition.

hair oil. Because of their economic situation, Dalit girls are marked as different from the other students, and marginalized socially during their education.

Patriarchal social barriers within the Dalit community also discourage the education of girls. A girl who will eventually marry outside the family is expected to take her labour and earning potential with her, in all castes. Girhe writes of her family's appeals to her father after she reaches the eighth standard:

Bapu, take the girl out of school. She is old enough to work now. Let her go begging. She will earn enough for all of you. She is just a daughter, not a boy! Had it been a boy, he would elevate your family; but a mere girl, that's what she is! She is of the woman caste; she'll go away to some idiot's place with him. (333)

Girls face more barriers to education, due to a wider cultural attitude that a girl's purpose in life is to marry and join her husband's family. A girl's earning potential—more limited than a son's due to discriminatory pay scales in the workplace, but great in terms of unpaid domestic labour—is withdrawn if she pursues education, and eventually benefits her husband's family. In this case, the status of woman is again identified as a caste, marginalizing girls and women within their own Dalit communities.

Chakravarti comments that upper caste women students protesting reservations in the anti-Mandal agitations in Delhi in the 1990s excluded Dalit men from the possibility of government jobs and potential as spouses (*Gendering Caste* 1).²²¹ These upper caste

²²¹ These specific protests focused on the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, which reserved positions in government employment for Dalits and other socially, economically, and educationally marginalized groups.

women also reinforced a gender and caste hierarchy in which men should benefit from employment before women, and in which Dalit women are erased entirely, as workers or as spouses.²²² Divisions of labour also play a role in girls being kept at home while their male relatives are sent to school. The association between girls and domestic labour ensures that young girls take up domestic roles of cooking, cleaning, and childcare while their mothers work outside the home, and their brothers pursue education or paid work outside the home. Furthermore, the social restrictions on girls associating with men who are not their relatives limits their mobility outside the home as a means of protecting their reputation.²²³

Finally, caste discrimination exists at all levels of education, though upper caste teachers and students either frame it in terms of merit, or use social pressure to undermine educational opportunities. Dalit girls are singled out by their teachers and school administrators on the basis of caste. Bama describes being exposed as low caste by school authorities:

Suddenly one day a lecturer announced “Will Harijan students please stand; the government has arranged that Scheduled Caste students should get special tuition in the evenings.” Just two students stood up: myself and another girl. Among the other students, a sudden rustling; a titter of contempt. (19)

222 The Brahmin patriarchy based on the exchange of and regulations on women, is also based on heterosexist concepts of marriage, though Chakravarti does not acknowledge this influence, representing a common blind spot in analyses of caste and gender.

223 Chakravarti discusses the caste implications of regulating women’s purity. A girl allowed to interact with men from other castes is at risk of choosing one as a husband. See *Gendering Caste*.

Nisary Mahesh and Asha Menon interview university students who experience discrimination based on their caste: “Girija talks about the threats she received and the harassment she had to face from teachers at her law college for organising Dalit students to avail government grants.” Even allegedly sympathetic teachers discourage Dalit women from pursuing education, and frame their opposition indirectly, in terms of practicality. Both Shantabai Kamble and Kumud Pawade represent these experiences in their autobiographies. Shantabai Kamble’s headmaster tells her:

Naja, this is an agricultural school. You’ll have to do carpentry, iron-work, rope-work. And you’ll have to go out to the fields to observe the crops. I don’t think you can cope. You’d best go with an application to the girls’ school in Pandharpur. You’re the only girl in the class. (21)

These responses reproduce those against women’s education in earlier nineteenth century movements, as discussed in chapter three with reference to the Christian Indian woman writer Krupabai Sathianadhan.

If Dalit students continue their education despite this discouragement, they can expect to face physical violence. In the “Afterword” to Pawar’s memoirs, Sharmila Rege notes that Dalit students and workers meet with more “accidents” or are harassed into suicide: “Memories of deaths under suspicious circumstances—suicides committed by young men due to false implication in frauds or ‘accidents’ of students in anti-reservationist medical colleges—document the ‘routine violence’ of caste in modern institutions” (340). Contemporary Indians claim that the caste system is outdated and

argue that upper castes do not resort to violence in the modern period. However, atrocities against low castes continue, and include retaliation against Dalit women for pursuing education. In Khairlanji in 2006, villagers raped, tortured and murdered the Bhotmange family, in part because of “their cultural advancement. . . . Their economic, educational and cultural progress was grudged by the villagers” (Teltumbde *Khairlanji* 186). Importantly, as her brother had before her, Priyanka Bhotmange was pursuing higher education in junior college, as a woman and as a Dalit (Teltumbde *Khairlanji* 31). As Chakravarti has pointed out with regard to the story of Gargi, the threat of violence is often enough to ensure compliance, because violence is regularly demonstrated as a possible consequence. Atrocities such as the one in Khairlanji act as cautionary measures for the surrounding community, both upper and lower caste. Since these types of physical and psychological retaliation are so well documented among Dalit writers, the pursuit of an education takes on a heroic aspect for Dalits.

It is unsurprising that Dalits, and especially Dalit girls, drop out of school at such high rates (Corrie; Rao, Cheng and Narain). Even when they can physically and financially access education, institutional violence embedded in casteist and sexist cultures makes the educational space unbearably hostile. In the film *I'm Dalit How Are You?* (2002) a young woman describes her decision to leave school: “I used to sit in the front row of my class, but the students complained that they were getting polluted. So, the teacher started making me sit at the back. . . . when I was in grade 6, unable to bear anymore, I dropped out” (K and Manon). The lower value placed on girls in Indian

culture, manifested in and reproduced by inequalities in their earning power as adults, erects multiples barriers against the education of girls. Dalit girls, often from poor families, face more barriers than upper caste girls and all boys, encompassing institutional, financial and social barriers. In the context of all these barriers, reservation at the post-secondary level benefits very few Dalits, and even more rarely helps Dalit girls, since educational reservation most often benefits Dalit boys from socially mobile families. Embedded Brahmin patriarchal ideology ensures the reproduction of elite access to education, and barriers to low caste and/or women's education.

Lay and Monastic Educators in neo-Buddhism

Despite the barriers to formal education, Dalit women pursue education for themselves, and return to their communities to participate in educating others. In the Dalit movement, most examples of women educators are laywomen, rather than monastic. Nancy Auer Falk has critiqued the privileging of lay over monastic women: "one cannot escape the impression that the community was more comfortable with its laywomen than with its nuns and that it probably found the latter's presence to be an embarrassment" ("Case of the Vanishing Nuns" 204). Despite this bias, Dalit women have pursued the monastic path, as evidenced through Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon's biographies of women identified as Bhikshuni—the honorific used for a nun—in their book *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement* (215, 344, 345).²²⁴ Laywomen involved in neo-Buddhism follow Ambedkar's example in shifting the focus in neo-

²²⁴ Bhikshuni is the Pali term for the Sanskrit bhikkhuni.

Buddhism to the lay community rather than the monastic community. Suggesting that lay women are somehow inferior to monastic women reproduces hierarchies which I have noted as problematic throughout this dissertation.

Women work within a culture, both lay and monastic, which discourages women from pursuing the monastic life through physical and social coercion. That women pursue their goals of practising their religion and promoting education while negotiating these rights in a specific cultural context shows a dedication that would not necessarily be improved by taking up the monastic life as defined by male Buddhists: “Recently two women were ordained as Dhammucharinis (lay-ordained women) in the Western Buddhist Order (TBMSG). To be ordained in the order is not to enter a monastic life or to leave one’s family, but to be fully involved in the work of the *dhamma*” (Zelliot 101). Women both work with their families, and go against their family’s wishes to follow Ambedkar’s teachings and spread the Dhamma.

While women become nuns in the neo-Buddhist movement, their participation as educators in specifically neo-Buddhist educational institutions is a gap in the current academic writing. Ambedkar insisted that the monastic community of Buddhism serve laypeople in return for their financial support, rather than the traditional Theravadan exchange of merit or blessings for financial support. Ambedkar notably condemned the apathy of his contemporary Indian monks (Queen “Introduction” 12). In order to serve their community, laywomen are taking on the precepts for nuns without the full monastic initiation in the Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana (TBMSG), and thus

blurring the distinction between lay and monastic Buddhists, just as Ambedkar did when he created a lay initiation for neo-Buddhists. The TBMSG is a sect of the neo-Buddhist movement, and the Indian wing of the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO). In describing one of the central male organizers in the TBMSG, Sponberg explains the freedom of mobility granted to laypeople:

Although Lokamitra began his work as a saffron-robed *anagarika*, after his first several years as a TBMSG organizer he found the monastic persona increasingly limiting, both socially and administratively. This led him to give up his monastic vows and eventually to marry into the ex-Untouchable community, a change of status he found personally as well as culturally more appropriate since most of the new Indian order members were also married householders. (89)

In some ways, married women also have more freedom of mobility than unmarried women, especially if their in-laws support their work.

However, both married and unmarried women face intense scrutiny for their behaviour. Pawar describes a woman's criticism of her association with a man:

She said, "You know, his wife does not live with him. And yet you go to his house every day! What must people be saying!" I was simply aghast! How we women nurture and protect patriarchy, like a baby in the cradle! A woman's character is always on display! Always suspect! (240)

Even so, neo-Buddhist laywomen are enrolling their daughters and sons in school, as well as pursuing educational opportunities themselves. Taking up the monastic life might improve access to a woman's educational opportunity, but as Ambedkar suggested in his writing and in his actions, laywomen have a greater opportunity to ensure a better life for their families and communities.

Women educate by example, encouraging both their female and male children, and participating in institutional education systems. For example, women in the Dalit movement ensure that female teachers have a place in the institutions of education: “[i]n co-ordination with the Education Department of the state, Muktabai [Sarvagod] organized training courses for school teachers and young girls” (Rege *Writing* 154). Likewise, Dalit women raise funds and found schools for both girls and boys: “Shantabai [Dhanaji Dani] and other board members who were convinced about the school started the Takshashila Secondary school for girls and Gautam School for boys. They managed the finances with innovative fund raising schemes” (Rege *Writing* 122). In naming the schools they reference the Buddha—Gautama Siddharta—for boys, and the ancient centre of learning important to Buddhists, Takshashila, for girls. Takshashila, now known as Taxila and located in Pakistan, was the most important centre for higher education in South Asia from as early as the fifth century BCE up to the fifth century CE, and is associated with the development of the Mahayana path of Buddhism. Importantly, when the name Takshashila is used for a girls' school, it disrupts the idea of historical education which was restricted to men.

Importantly, Ambedkar's insistence that Dalits leave the villages supports the education of Dalit girls; even in urban slums, girls have closer proximity to educational opportunities, where urban infrastructure provides schools and transportation. Social encouragement also supports the education of girls through higher Dalit populations and well-organized political movements offering mutual support. Despite, or perhaps because of the barriers against the education of their daughters, Dalit women advocate for them strongly. They accept and integrate Ambedkar's challenge to educate, organize, and agitate. In an excerpt from her autobiography, Shantabai Dhanaji Dani describes her illiterate mother's insistence on her daughter's education:

She would visit Dani Master every eight days and tell him, "Master, my daughter must learn. She can stand on her own feet only if she is educated . . ." She never thought, "I'm illiterate; how can I go and see the teacher? How can I speak to him? How can I tell him my problems?" She wanted just one thing, that I should be educated. (103)

Dalit women educated in terms of politics, but not in written literacy, are in a position to see the possibility for their daughters to gain a better life through education.

Women play a major role in providing each other support in pursuing education. Baby Kamble claims: "It was only because of women that education became possible for us" (Pandit and Kamble 138). Pawar describes negative pressure from her mother with regard to her education. She relates how "beatings came from Aaye, for bunking school"

(64). More effective is the positive impact of her mother's response when Pawar faces caste discrimination from a male teacher:

Aaye sprang up like a female cobra . . . "What did she do today that you beat her up so much? . . . Guruji, you are so educated and yet you speak so foolishly? Look, I am a widow, my life is ruined. Yet I sit here, under this tree and work. Why? Because I want education for my children so that their future will be better. . . . Let me see you laying even a finger on my girl again and I'll show you!" . . . I started considering my mother a great support. (68-9)

Furthermore, after her husband's death, Pawar's mother raises money for her children's education by weaving baskets and renting rooms. Pawar recognizes her mother's labour as equivalent to the intellectual labour of writing and literacy, which is more highly valued than physical labour. She likens her mother's weaving and her own writing in the title of her memoirs, *The Weave of My Life*: "My mother used to weave *aaydans*. I find that her act of weaving and my act of writing are organically linked. The weave is similar. It is the weave of pain, suffering and agony that links us" (x). While Dalit women writers participate in the Hindu nationalist and British colonialist institutions in which the written word is the only accepted representation of knowledge, within their texts they acknowledge the importance of labour and bodies to education.

Neo-Buddhist Religious Education

In parallel to the pursuit of formal education in Indian institutions, Dalit women participate in Buddhist religious education. Religious education in the neo-Buddhist movement both follows and challenges Hindu religious education. While religious education primarily starts in the home, with Buddha and Ambedkar pujas, the Buddha vihar provides a place for religious activism in its community orientation. Unlike the formal religious initiations of the upper caste, which exclude all Dalits and usually upper caste women, the Buddha vihar challenges these codes of hierarchy through the neo-Buddhist challenge to the caste system itself.²²⁵ In the vihar, all castes are welcome, and both women and men are welcome. The vihar also provides an opportunity for activism, as children and adults have an opportunity to gather: “Though *Dalits* as whole are not united even now, Mahars began to come together to pray in the *Buddha-Vihars* of their neighbourhoods. These gatherings were the beginning of their political base” (Bhave xxxv).

Ambedkar’s vision of Buddhism focuses on rationality, but allows for scriptural doctrine in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*.²²⁶ Religious education emphasizes literacy as well, since female and male neo-Buddhists are encouraged to read Ambedkar’s scriptural work. Importantly, he wrote in English as a means of combating the linguistic colonialism of Hindi, one of several means through which internal colonialism manifests.

²²⁵ For an analysis of the exclusion of women and low castes from religious initiation, see “The Degradation of the Shudras,” Chapter 10 of B. R. Ambedkar, *Who Were the Shudras?* (Aurangabad: Kaushalya Prakashan, 2003).

²²⁶ See chapter two for an analysis of rationality and its privileging.

However, he also acknowledged English as the language of the elites—both Indian and non-Indian—as another site in which upper caste Indians attempt to limit education as a means of reproducing their elite status.²²⁷ Wider readership has been achieved through the translation of his book from English into multiple languages. Dalit women play a role in the work of translation into vernaculars, including Ambedkar's book *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, and Ambedkar's source texts. The Dalit woman Keertibai Patil tells Pawar and Moon:

I have translated the English book *The Gospel of the Buddha*, by Paul Carras [sic], into Marathi and it has been published as *Tathagathachi Satyagatha*. I have also written two more books, *Bouddhanchi Jeevancharya* (The Way of Life of Buddhists) and *Bouddhajidnyaasa*. They have been published. (253)

Dalit women participate in the production and reproduction of religious knowledge targeted to their communities.

As a religious icon, Ambedkar's attribute is a book, representing the Constitution of India, which contrasts with the weapons wielded by the Hindu gods in their manifestations.²²⁸ Ambedkar's role as a deity of activism and education is matched by his own writing and education, as opposed to the Hindu goddess of knowledge and the arts, Saraswati, where the same religious doctrines which celebrate her enforce women's illiteracy. Likewise, Ambedkar's icon reflects the Buddha in his teaching mudra—

²²⁷ See also the discussion of English language, vernacular languages, translation and colonialism in the introduction.

²²⁸ See also chapter five, and Appendix A, Images 11, 12 and 13.

symbolic hand position—with one hand raised. At the same time, the neo-Buddhist movement is a secularizing one. For example, in “The Story of My ‘Sanskrit’” Pawade challenges the sacred status of Sanskrit through her claim to the right to study it: “Seeing this knowledge hidden in the esoteric inner sanctum come within the embrace, not just of any person, but one whom religion has considered to be vermin—that is their [Dalits’] victory” (Pawde 24). Religious education in the Hindu priesthood is still prohibited to low castes, and generally limited to even upper caste women; however, access to an institution of Brahmin patriarchy is not a goal for politicized Dalits. In *Pan on Fire: Eight Dalit Women Tell Their Story*, the Dalit woman Chhaya connects Buddhism, education, and freedom from Hindu superstition: “Only the educated young men and girls like me refuse to worship god” (Bhave 39). For Dalit women, neo-Buddhism provides an opportunity to be both religious and rational, both to practice their faith and to analyze those practices.

Challenges in Education for neo-Buddhist Women

As with women’s movements and Dalit movements cross-culturally, Dalit women face both external and internal backlash against their education, and specifically their religious education. Dalit women negotiate an ambivalence to their education even within the neo-Buddhist movement; these internal barriers pose a more insidious threat to their status in their communities. Ambedkar’s stated goals in liberating Dalit women from caste and gender oppression through education and empowerment clash with prevailing casteism and sexism, where socially mobile Dalits often model their behaviour on upper

class Brahmins, whereby women carry the burden of tradition and orthodoxy. Despite criticism, women participate in educational opportunities. For example, Alan Sponberg describes the women-only retreats which the TBMSG organizes under the recognition that Indian women face criticism and violence for associating with men who are not family members:

It is especially significant that women in large numbers take part in these retreats, a circumstance only possible because of special provisions, including the exclusion of men, that are made to reassure anxious relatives and to minimize the breach of conventional social expectations a married woman commits in leaving her family even for as little as a single day. . . . some women attend TBMSG retreats knowing that on their return home they will be berated and even beaten by their husbands or in-laws. (96)

These retreats train women in basic literacy skills, as well as educating women about Buddhism, political participation, and the importance of educating their daughters.

In her interview with Pawar and Moon, the neo-Buddhist woman Chandrika Ramteke describes her own resistance to domestic violence in her commitment to education and activism: “After he had gone my husband bolted the door and beat me badly. ‘You go there to find husbands,’ he accused me. This became an everyday affair, but I took no notice. I kept on with my work” (308). Resistance to Dalit education, and specifically Dalit women’s education, comes from a desire to maintain caste and gender

hierarchies. Even Dalit men, benefiting from gender hierarchies, enforce the purity of women through endogamy.

Dalit women also suggest that an area of Hindu syncretism lies in the education of girls. In this sense, the model of Brahmin patriarchy remains even where explicit caste hierarchy has been rejected. In *Pan on Fire*, the Dalit woman Ashoka says,

It was told in King Ashoka's story that both his son and daughter had gone to the Andamans to propagate Buddhism. I was happy to hear that even children were given such important work and also girls. But here I see that women are not sent to schools; they are shut up at home. This is due to the old Hindu influence. Hinduism treats women as inferior to men. It confines them to the home. (Bhave 141)

In response to ambivalence regarding women's roles, Dalit women draw on the Buddhist textual history regarding women in order to legitimize their right to education in the neo-Buddhist movement. Religious and political education gives them the tools to argue for women's secular education.

Women also play a role in enforcing Brahmin patriarchal standards on Dalit girls. Where men initiated reform movements targeting women's education in the nineteenth century, the movements resulted in upper caste men encouraging their wives and daughters to pursue education, and women resisting, since they had internalized their religious duty to avoid literacy and knowledge. This internalized religious proscription against knowledge—at the level of both gender and caste—results in women policing

each other. Rege describes Mukta Sarvagod's experiences of harassment by both upper caste and lower caste women: "She recalls the pain of both kinds of abuse, hurled by the women of her community who ridiculed her for going to school and the upper castes who felt that her caste was 'polluting' despite her success in school competitions" (*Writing* 127-8). Upper caste women gain power in the Brahmin patriarchy through caste discrimination, while lower caste women internalize their place in the hierarchy. In terms of internalization of oppressed status, Baby Kamble describes Dalits proudly clinging to their right to beg in the yeskar tradition (77). Likewise, Rege describes Dalit women harassing Janabai Kachru Girhe because she pursues education: "The gopal women often taunted her and sang dirty songs when they saw her going to school" (*Writing* 332). These women have internalized Brahmin patriarchal ideology, in terms of restrictions on women's bodies and sexuality exercised through limitations on education and mobility. They gain perceived power when they police other women and girls using the same system which oppresses them, and the implied threat of violence through sexual assault, a central coercive force against women.

Upwardly mobile Dalits come under criticism from many of the Dalit women writers. Since acceptance into a community relies on performance of that community's culture, upper class Dalits adopt Brahmin patriarchal codes, whereby they reinforce caste and gender inequalities.²²⁹ In this sense, formal education, as a process of integration into Brahmin patriarchal ideology, becomes a negative education. Baby Kamble argues that

229 Discussed previously in chapter six.

educated—or upper class—Dalits become depoliticized through this indoctrination: “Now the educated Dalits are behaving exactly as the upper caste villagers used to behave then. Educated dalits occupy top positions in the government. Their children enjoy the good life. They are not bothered about what’s happening to poor people” (Pandit and Kamble 150). In India, where “uneducated” is popularly used as a derogatory euphemism to avoid the politically incorrect term “low caste,” Dalits must redefine education to recognize that their traditional knowledges are as valuable as the Brahmanical forms of knowledge prohibited to them historically. Ilaiah argues for a reevaluation of subaltern knowledge which rejects the primacy of textual literacy and philosophy, and places a high value on oral literacy which teaches labour and production.

Conclusion

In *Pan on Fire*, the Dalit woman Ashoka redefines education in a political sense: “By educated I don’t mean just the ones who went to school—I mean every thinking person” (Bhave 138). Women play an important role in educating other women, which is important on religious and political levels. Women take up this work as Ambedkar’s specific mission for them. The work of conversion is linked specifically to the work of education; in her interview with Pawar and Moon, Vimal Rokade describes women’s work in the neo-Buddhist movement: “Whatever Babasaheb said on the subject of religious conversion [we] would carry to the women in the *bastis* [neighbourhoods] around us. . . . When Babasaheb undertook initiation in the Dhamma in Nagpur we women had also gone there in large numbers” (269). Dalit women are redefining the

meaning of education and revaluing education in the fields of labour and production, but particularly in religion and politics. Education may do more than simply challenge casteist doctrines and Brahmin hierarchies through the dissemination of anti-oppressive philosophies. As a practice, education can also act to bring members of different communities together. While Indian education is still typically hierarchical, and Dalit women are still marginalized on the basis of their bodies as well as their ideas, the Dalit women's religious and political challenges to oppressive systems continually work to break them down.

While there does not seem to be an institutional stance against women's ordination into the monastic sangha in the Indian neo-Buddhist movement, Dalit women face barriers to monastic life. The patriarchal attitudes of Buddhist monks internationally also influence the neo-Buddhist movement where it seeks avenues for international support. In Sri Lanka for example, Buddhist monks argue against women's ordination, and only superficially disguise their misogyny with appeals to history and tradition:

[S]ome of the best-known, most influential monks in Sri Lanka vehemently oppose the reestablishment of the *bhikshuni sangha*, which died a natural death so long ago. They assert that since there are no *bhikshuni* of the Theravada ordination lineage anywhere in the world, who could join with a quorum of Theravada *bhikshu* to ordain new *bhikshuni*, it is impossible to resuscitate the women's *sangha*. It will have to wait until Maitreya, the next Buddha, is born in this world. (N. J. Barnes 266-7)

This resistance to women's ordination mirrors and supports the resistance to women's education in all its manifestations, particularly against educated women using their education to challenge dominant ideologies in the religious or education systems.

Dalit women's education challenges historical and contemporary "traditions" which devalue them as women and as Dalits. The most exciting arenas in education lie in the intersection of Dalit and women's movements. Where Dalits are revaluing their knowledge and insisting recognition for their contributions to the Indian community, the women's movements are likewise participating in traditional upper caste education, and reevaluating their role as women labourers, in the home and outside it. Dalit women's education provides the strongest means of resistance against women being confined to the home in the socially mobile Dalit family, where Dalit men have insisted on a place in the "public sphere" of the labour market.

Ambedkar called for Dalits to educate, organize and agitate, and asserted that it is a Buddhist's responsibility to spread the teachings of Buddha, or the Dhamma. Dalit women insist that their daughters and sons pursue education, they pursue education themselves, and they pursue teaching professions. They challenge Hindu doctrine as it persists in the Indian education system, through the continuing barriers to Dalit education, as well as the Hindu doctrine embedded in the education system itself. Through their examples, they demonstrate the possibility and the value of Dalit women's education. As laywomen, they enjoy greater opportunities to educate their families and their communities than as nuns. In her interview in Moon and Pawar's book, Seetabai

Thakur summarizes the view of Dalit women in the neo-Buddhist movement: "Educated women should impress the religion of Gautama Buddha on their children's minds" (302). Understood as a response to Ambedkar, women's role in education must be seen as a means of spreading the Dhamma, and thus as a religious practice of proselytizing. In this way they pursue a mission to the neo-Buddhist community endorsing women's education, and to the upper caste and non-Buddhist Dalit communities, endorsing both Dalit and women's education within the context of a Buddhist concept of modern India.

Conclusion

Nirvana and Samsara: Successes and Challenges in the neo-Buddhist Movement

Within the neo-Buddhist movement, representations of women emerge across a broad spectrum of genres, including textual and iconographical sources. The central images and biographies in the neo-Buddhist movement represent Ramabai, B. R. Ambedkar's first wife. These representations, as defined in the aim and scope of the dissertation as English-language and Maharashtrian in locale, are produced by Dalit men in the movement. They typically define Ramabai as a wife and mother, and reproduce upper caste Hindu concepts of female roles. Although Dalit women do not have the same access to participating in the production of representations of women in the neo-Buddhist movement, they nevertheless produce such representations. Their representations depict a wider range of women in the neo-Buddhist movement, and their relationship to the figure of Ramabai is complex and nuanced. Where Ambedkar worked to free Dalits from both caste and gender oppression, Dalit men's representations of women do not adequately recognize gender oppression as a major aspect of caste oppression. As such, they reproduce caste oppression through patriarchal, sexist, or androcentric depictions of women. Dalit women's representations, however, recognize the intersecting oppressions of caste and gender, and take up the challenge to these oppressions as a religious mandate.

Although women started to archive the work on women's involvement in the neo-Buddhist movement only recently, their publications show that women were involved in

the movement from its earliest days. Men's writing, men's contributions to the neo-Buddhist pantheon, and actions toward women in the movement usually seek to contain women, and limit women to an ideal which reproduces upper caste Hindu concepts of the female, as discussed in chapters four and five. As such, Dalit men imagine women in the movement as modest, pious, fragile, and beautiful. The imagined ideal woman is sexually pure. Unfortunately, a reputation of modesty relies on subservience and isolation; women are punished if they demonstrate sexual desire or act in ways which might ruin the reputation of modesty. This representation is significantly different from Dalit Buddhist women's representations of themselves and of other women.

In the early interactions between South Asians and British colonizers, Indian men realized that they would need to participate in British standards of community, politics, and work—cultural standards as set by the British—in order to maintain some control over their lives. Indian men countered their participation in British modernity in the public realm by imposing their definition of Indian traditions on women in the private realm. As Nivedita Menon points out, “[p]articularly when a community feels its identity or existence under threat, its proud assertion of identity always appears marked on the bodies of ‘its’ women first” (“Between the Burqa” 209). Resistance to hybridity is often expressed through regulating women's bodies. The contemporary Dalit movement mirrors this construction of separate public and private worlds, and opposed modern and traditional worlds, imposed onto segregated men's and women's worlds. Dalit men participate in politics and writing, and present themselves as modern Indians, through the

model of the Dalit neo-Buddhist challenge to the caste system and Hindu systems of oppression. At the same time, they construct images of Dalit women which reproduce those traditions which arise from Brahmin patriarchy. Standards of modesty, segregation from other men, limitations on movement outside the home, and imposed concepts of bodily pollution all seem to be reinforced as the Dalit family moves upward socially. As a norm, the Hindu model is a tempting goal for both women and men in the movement, where it represents a model of success, though that model of success is based on existing hierarchies. While Dalit men challenge the model for themselves, they accept it, or enforce it, for the women in their lives.

Dalit women are expected to maintain traditional standards of the upper-caste and -class Hindu wife, while Dalit men are free to participate in modern anti-caste politics as neo-Buddhists. This contradiction undermines the Dalit movement. As Ambedkar and other critics of caste understood, Brahmin patriarchy enforces caste through restrictions on women: "Caste cannot be reproduced without endogamy and it is for this reason that endogamy has been regarded as a tool for the manifestation and perpetuation of caste and gender subordination" (Chakravarti *Gendering Caste* 27). The persistence of patriarchy in the Dalit movement, which is not only accepted but enforced, undermines certain Dalit claims to follow Ambedkar's philosophies, in that they exclude Ambedkar's radical message of gender equality, as discussed in chapter two. A challenge to the caste system must necessarily also challenge patriarchal systems. In their challenge to Brahmin

patriarchy as it reemerges in their own communities, Dalit women more closely reflect Ambedkar's ideals in their lives and writing.

Ambedkar's revision of Buddhism may be seen as an example of claiming the postcolonial third space; he drew from contemporary and historical Indian movements, including the independence movement, the women's movement, and historical religious movements which challenged caste and gender hierarchies. He also drew from Western theory and philosophy, including Marxism, the feminist movement, and other social justice movements. Despite the independence movement and anti-colonial theory, knowledge about India in the West does not challenge Western hierarchies, including capitalism and patriarchy. Ambedkar's theories offer the possibility of challenging hierarchies on a global scale. His writing challenges both Hindu nationalism and Western neo-colonialism. It also challenges casteism, sexism, and classism as they appear in existing social justice movements, including Marxism and the feminist movement. Ambedkar's theories resist hierarchies of caste, gender, and class. Ambedkar's synthesis of Western and Buddhist philosophy, particularly his rationalist analysis of Buddhist theology, challenges both Western and Hindu hegemony in producing a new vision of modernity, as discussed in chapter three. However, I am not aware of a comprehensive survey of the influences of Western theory and philosophy on Ambedkar's work, although he lived and studied at the London School of Economics, and Columbia

University in New York in the early twentieth century.²³⁰ The analysis of Ambedkar's Western influences, particularly feminist, religious, and social justice movements, requires expansion.

Dalit women repeatedly highlight the oppressions of both caste and gender in their writing, in their histories, poetry, interviews, and autobiographies. The writings of Shantabai Dhanaji Dani, Janabai Kachru Girhe, Baby Kamble, Shantabai Kamble, Urmila Pawar, Kumud Pawade, Mukta Sarvagod, and the interviewees in *Pan on Fire: Eight Dalit Women Tell Their Story* and in *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*, among other neo-Buddhist Dalit women, share similar features. They refute upper caste women's claims that sexism is the most important challenge, and undermine Hindu women's caste privilege in feminist spaces. Likewise, they deny Dalit men's claims that caste is most important, and point out the patriarchy which persists in the Dalit community. When they face sexism justified by Ambedkar's philosophies, they point out Ambedkar's feminist attitudes, and his actions to ensure women's equality. They also critique women in their own communities who participate in oppressive power relationships.

They also appeal to Ambedkar's advocacy of rationality, and resist deifying him or allowing his words to become sacred and thus unarguable. As such, they take up Ambedkar's philosophies more effectively in their insistence that both Ambedkar and the

230 Sources include Arun P. Mukherjee, "B. R. Ambedkar, John Dewey, and the Meaning of Democracy," *New Literary History* 40.2 (Spring 2009). and Dinkar Khabde, *Dr. Ambedkar and Western Thinkers* (Pune: Sugava Prakashan, 1989). My knowledge of Ambedkar's Western influences also includes a presentation by Valerian Rodriguez, "Ambedkar as a Political Philosopher," *1st Dr. Ambedkar Oration* (University of Mumbai, Vidyanagari Campus, Kalina, Mumbai, India: Unpublished, 2011).

Buddha were men, not gods. Where men are actively involved in the production of pantheon, women do not seem to find the process of deification important. However, Dalit women express themselves in highly religious ways, and specifically identify themselves as Buddhists. Dalit women's specific self-identification as religious Buddhists parallels a significant understanding of and challenge to caste and gender. A neo-Buddhist identity strengthens a challenge of oppressive hierarchies.

Writing and Text

Men tend to represent Dalit women in terms of Hindu values where women are submissive, self-sacrificing victims, as discussed in chapter four. Dalit women writers offer a model to enable women to escape pressures that patriarchal Hinduism imposes on upper caste as well as lower caste women. Women's narratives demonstrate that they seek conversion, uphold new ways of being religious, and incorporate religion into their political lives. In their writing they take initiative rather than simply following their fathers' or husbands' examples, and express their religious identity more strongly than men. In fact, they often challenge the male authority figures in their lives. Dalit Buddhist women represent themselves as strong and intelligent. They talk about their bodies in contravention of taboos, and their writing normalizes women's bodies in opposition to the Hindu depiction of women's bodies as polluted, as discussed in chapter six. At the same time they recognize the barriers against women posed by the government, by authorities inside and outside their communities, and by their relatives. Through Dalit women's representations of themselves and other women in the movement, they challenge the

privileging of the written text—and specifically the privileging of Hindu sacred scripture—over the texts of iconography, lived experiences and labouring bodies, neo-Buddhist modes of education, and social justice.

Dalit male writing has often represented Dalit writing as a homogenous category. This depiction of Dalit writing erases Dalit women writers within the movement, as well as in representations to other groups. Furthermore, within their writing, Dalit men tend to depict Dalit women in the neo-Buddhist movement as suffering, self-sacrificing victims of the caste system, as discussed in chapter four. Dalit women's autobiographical writing challenges this perception. They represent themselves, their female family members, and other female activists as women leading the struggle for Dalit rights, despite barriers posed by both Dalit and feminist movements, as discussed in chapters six and seven. In addition, Dalit women seem to discuss their religious lives much more often. This difference suggests that Dalit women see neo-Buddhism not only as a challenge to the caste system, which is achieved through Dalit participation in mainstream politics, but as a challenge to sexism, as integrated in the Brahmin patriarchal system. As such, neo-Buddhism as a religion is necessarily part of the development of Dalit identity within their communities, in combination with the political institutions which defined Dalit identity within the Indian state, through reservations in employment and education, and through Ambedkar's failed bid for separate electorates.

Dalit women also include diverse and complex images of women, including intersectional identities, in their representations of women in the neo-Buddhist

movement, as seen in the collections of biographies and autobiographies of Dalit women in Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon's book *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement* (2006) and Sharmila Rege's book *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Reading Dalit Women's Testimonios* (2006). They expand on the existing limited roles for Indian women as mother or temptress. As a central female figure in the neo-Buddhist movement, Savita Ambedkar's life is an important site for critical analysis of the complex intersections of gender, caste, and agency, especially in context of the development of the neo-Buddhist pantheon—or demonic pantheon. As such, her autobiography and its translation into English is an avenue for future research, in the interests of resisting her appropriation into the Hindu pantheon.

Ambedkar explicitly stated that neither he nor the Buddha were divine. Among religious traditions cross-culturally, even in instances where images of the deity are discouraged or forbidden, religious practitioners create non-anthropomorphic or anthropomorphic images, as discussed in chapter five. Often where images of deity are forbidden, images are produced, but the prohibition manifests in an absence of images of the female. Where images of the divine female are allowed or produced, often these images reproduce stereotypes of proper female behaviour as imagined by men in the tradition. Ambedkar's rejection of sacred status has not prevented the reproduction of images, predominantly male, in a neo-Buddhist pantheon. Where women are included in the pantheon, they are usually stereotypes.

Since avoiding a pantheon of deities or avoiding iconographic development of those deities seems impossible, women must actively produce female deities and images of women in a tradition, and actively attempt to include a wide range of female experiences. In their writing, Dalit women are already including diverse women as their models, as discussed in chapters six and seven. It seems appropriate that they begin to translate those textual representations into visual representations; where they counter oppressive textual representations of women in the neo-Buddhist movement, their visual representations will also counter the images of Ramabai which reproduce a casteist and sexist model of the ideal woman, as discussed in chapter five. Dalit women have the potential and the opportunity to reproduce textual and iconographic representations of women which can serve as liberating models, and which challenge caste and gender oppression as they exist in their communities. Furthermore, women have the opportunity to challenge elite definitions of artwork and representation, which often include men's artistic production as legitimate art, and exclude women's artistic production.

Theology

In terms of approaches to feminist theology, Dalit women writers incorporate themselves into the neo-Buddhist textual canon through autobiographical writing, as discussed in chapter six. They take a wide range of ordinary women as their models rather than choosing a single exemplary woman; Mary Daly argues that “[i]t seems to have been part of the patriarchal mind-set to imitate slavishly a master or father-figure with an almost blind devotion and then to reject this figure in order to be oneself”

(*Beyond God the Father* 74-5). While Dalit women acknowledge Ramabai and Savita Ambedkar's work in the movement, they do not idealize them, and in fact focus on other women's stories (Moon and Pawar). Mothers, grandmothers, and sisters play a more important role in women's autobiographies. In a religious sense, this approach may in part arise from women's different attitude toward relationships; in the pursuit of detachment in Buddhism, women do not interpret detachment from emotional bonds with others as requiring solitude, as Buddhist men seem to understand. Katherine R. Blackstone's analysis of the *Therīgāthā* and *Theragāthā* texts leads her to conclude that women achieve enlightenment while continuing to see the benefit of relationships:

The therīs see themselves as continuing to interact positively with others, and interpret the unenlightened state as one in which relationships are fraught with deception, hatred, and contempt. . . . Instead of detachment from negative emotional states, the theras' social discourse reveals their psychological detachment from all emotional bonds with others in what amounts to a complete severing of relationships. (109)

However, the women writers do not hesitate to critique as well as praise their mothers, grandmothers, and sisters as ordinary, human women, as discussed in chapters six and seven.

At the same time, the production of deity provides images and concepts about faith and the divine. As divine figures, Ambedkar and the Buddha fill the role of the Hindu gods in all aspects of religion. I have written on their use to replace the Hindu gods

in ritual songs in chapter six. Dalit women mediate between the divine and the human, the rational and emotional, and participate in the creation of a liberating religion centred on the range of being human, and the possibilities for human enlightenment. Dalit women are furthering Ambedkar's work in creating a religion which aims for the goals of liberty, equality, and fraternity; however, they expand on the limitations of fraternity in which androcentrism imagines the male as the universal model and gendered language excludes the female. Dalit women include women as well as men.

Women in the neo-Buddhist tradition maintain a distinction between the Hindu deity as a supernatural and divine being, who cannot be questioned, and the Buddha and Ambedkar as deities who were human, and who should be examined through rational processes. In their writing, Dalit women insist on questioning the infallibility of the male deity and his status as a universal representation of the human when they insert their own bodies into their understanding of religion. In their treatment of the deification process of Ambedkar, Dalit women create a deity who is human, and who can—and should—be analyzed. While they use Ambedkar's and the Buddha's teachings to critique casteism and sexism in their own communities, they develop a practice of criticism which enables them to challenge casteism and sexism as it appears in texts on or by Ambedkar and the Buddha, and when members of their community use Ambedkar or the Buddha as justification for casteism or sexism. For example, Urmila Pawar refuses to perform a demeaning ritual for a widow upon her husband's death in which a woman's kumkum—red powder used as a marker of a married woman—is wiped off using her dead husband's

big toe—the most polluted part of the body in Indian religious beliefs. Her refusal is met with sexism excused by invoking Ambedkar's name; she writes: "This angered quite a few people but they had to hide it under the garb of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's philosophy" (318). Dalit women draw on both Ambedkar's and the Buddha's texts to justify their participation in education, the workplace, the Dalit movement, and their religion.

This approach sets the stage for both criticism and praise of Ambedkar and the Buddha as ordinary, human men. While the hagiographies of Ambedkar and Ramabai which I found are all male-authored, Dalit women writing biographies take a different tone, as discussed in chapter six. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon give the best example in their book *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*; in the brief biography of Ramabai they use balanced language to describe her as one among many hardworking women (201-3). In terms of critiquing Ambedkar and the Buddha, Dalit women focus their attentions on patriarchy occurring in the present, in their own homes and communities. The texts of Ambedkar and the Buddha provide them with sufficient ammunition to challenge patriarchy and sexism in their communities.

Feminist scholars, such as those included in Deborah Cameron's book *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader* (2005), have shown how gendered language both creates and maintains gender hierarchies. With regard to religion, Mary Pat Fisher notes that "[i]f a language uses gender-specific pronouns, a human being is 'he,' and even the Supreme Deity is usually referred to as 'He.' If women read such scriptures, they risk

becoming invisible to themselves or perceiving themselves as inferior, unworthy beings” (26). Feminist theologians, including the Jewish feminist theologian Judith Plaskow in *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (1990), and the Christian feminist theologian Rosemary Ruether in *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (1983), have shown how concepts of gendered deities, whether male, female, or androgynous, limit possibilities for women and exclude women as the site of gender or pollution, from dominant understandings of sacred spaces. I have addressed gendered language in chapter two, and commented on the production of female-oriented language in Baby Kamble’s invention of the honorific “Bhimaai” for Ambedkar in chapter six. However, a more comprehensive analysis of gendered language in neo-Buddhism is necessary.

An analysis of heterosexism or homophobia is a gap in this dissertation. As with marginalized communities cross-culturally, Dalit communities maintain internal structures of oppression, and not only with regard to gender hierarchies. While I have examined gender and caste hierarchies within neo-Buddhism and the Dalit community, I have not analyzed hierarchies of sexual and gender identity. Lesbian and gay communities as well as hijra communities are omitted from the Dalit texts I have accessed. Absence is an important statement on its own. More importantly, Brahmin patriarchy is based on compulsory heterosexuality as well as on intersecting caste and gender oppression (Rich; Menon “How Natural Is Normal?”; Puri). Reproduction of the labouring castes and classes relies on heterosexuality as well as on restrictions on women

and lower castes (Laslett and Brenner; D'Emilio). Heterosexism is an essential part of the reinforcement of a Brahmin patriarchy which is embedded in neo-Buddhist as well as upper caste Hindu communities, as argued throughout this dissertation. As such, heterosexism is an important—yet often omitted—area of research within caste and gender studies.

(Theology of the) Body

Dalit women also challenge the hierarchy, related to gender hierarchies, where rationality is privileged over emotion, as discussed in chapters six and seven. Ambedkar highlighted Buddhism's rationalist philosophies in his development of the neo-Buddhist tradition. He acted to reclaim Dalit rationality in the face of elite characterizations of low caste, Indian, and feminine irrationality, or connection with the bodily and emotional. His claiming of Dalit rationality and knowledge production was an important challenge to Brahmin patriarchy, and has been taken up by contemporary Dalits such as Kancha Ilaiah in revaluing Dalit modes of knowledge. At the same time, the hierarchy remains whereby intellect is privileged over emotional or bodily experiences, as discussed in chapter two. Dalit women include their emotional and bodily experiences in the writing in the process of revaluing these aspects of human experience. While they demonstrate their access to intellectual production as women and as Dalits, they do so without devaluing or erasing their bodily and emotional experiences. In this revaluing, they create a middle ground between intellectual and bodily, rational and emotional, which undermines these binary hierarchies; postcolonial studies defines these practices using theories of hybridity, but I

argue that the concept of the middle way is a form of the third space indigenous to Buddhist doctrine.

Ambedkar understood that, in syncretism with Hinduism, Buddhism developed a pantheon of goddesses and gods who demonstrate Hindu caste and gender ideals, and encourage ritual devotion rather than rational interpretation. He also rejected the practice of sacred prostitution, as it appeared in tantric Buddhism in syncretism with the Hindu practice of devoting girls to a temple. Dalit rejection of the concept of sacred sexuality arises in a context where Dalit women are widely exploited, as justified by Hindu doctrine, through both caste-assigned sex professions and assumed sexual availability of low caste women. Uma Chakravarti points out that reform of devadasi practices which recognized the sexual exploitation of upper caste women in the temple, but ignored the sexual exploitation of low caste women based on sacred justifications: “What is significant is that when the reform of the devadasi system was being pursued no one paid any attention to the low caste basavis, and jogtis associated with various cults of sacred prostitution” (*Gendering Caste* 90). However, Hindu denigration of women’s bodies affected Buddhism as an elite practice in India prior to the neo-Buddhist movement, and it affects neo-Buddhists in contact with the dominant Brahmin patriarchal ideology of their larger community, as discussed throughout this dissertation.

In their writing, Dalit women include their bodies as human bodies. They reject the model of the universal male body, as well as the imposed identity of pollution as it appears in Hindu doctrine and as it has continued through syncretic practices in neo-

Buddhism, as discussed in chapter six. At the same time, they reject the practice of sexual exploitation, especially where low caste women are born into sexual service for upper caste men on the basis of karma. Because they include their low caste, female bodies in their writing, they achieve an understanding of the body which finds a middle path between the extremes of sexual restrictions and sexual exploitation, which are still two extremes of the same Brahmin patriarchal continuum. Dalit women reject the concept of their female bodies as polluted and polluting. They also reject the equally oppressive definition of the female body as pure and ideal, where the glorification of the female image relies on severe restrictions on behaviour and suppression of sexual expression.

In response to regulations on and erasure of their bodies, as discussed in chapter five, Dalit women reject those patriarchal values by writing about their bodies in positive ways or in neutral ways. Since the Dalit women represented in the texts are lay rather than monastic women, the eight special rules for nuns have no relevance for them.²³¹ However, they face equally limiting social rules such as restrictions on their mobility and on freedom of association. Most important are the rules of untouchability which are still enforced upon women during menstruation or childbirth. At the same time, women's anxieties about maternal health in childbirth may be reflected in the appeal of the figure of Buddha's mother Maya, who gave birth without labour or pain; Maya appears in the Buddhist pantheon, though not yet in the neo-Buddhist pantheon. Dalit women negotiate

231 The eight special rules are reproduced in summary in the introduction.

the rules of untouchability in the context of their understanding of their own equality, and reject untouchability as women and not only as Dalits.

Religious Practice

As laypeople, Dalit women may seem not *as religious as* the bhikkhunis; however, it is essential to remember that the Buddhist community is composed of both monastics and laypersons. Historically, Buddhist laypeople adopted the cultural codes of the surrounding community: “Generally, lay Buddhists have followed the norms of their society, rather than a specifically Buddhist code, regarding such matters . . . [as] sexuality, family relations, diet, or even gender roles” (Gross *Buddhism after Patriarchy* 142). Arguably, in India, historical Buddhist monasteries also accepted or continued upper caste privilege. In their rejection of Hindu cultural norms, and particularly Hindu sexism, Dalit women are highly religious. In their participation in the development of new traditions, they create a new approach to Buddhism, based on Ambedkar’s philosophies but not inherently challenging the Buddhist canon, and reject the tradition of lay Buddhism which accepts hegemonic and oppressive cultural norms.

Although the concept of Buddhism as presented in the West is that of the monastic sangha, this image is both elitist and Orientalist, as discussed in chapter three. The multitude of Buddhist legends, particularly the Jataka tales which describe the Buddha’s successive rebirths prior to his enlightenment, acknowledge that enlightenment in this lifetime is unlikely. Ambedkar rejected the popular concept of rebirth as unscientific, irrational, and promoting a Hindu elite philosophy of karma, where individuals in this life

deserve their low status, demeaning roles, and abuse, based on their failure to properly perform their dharma. At the same time, he included the statement “I believe that I am having a re-birth” as the twenty-first vow in his conversion ritual. Ambedkar’s understanding of rebirth rejects the concept that Dalits are responsible for their own suffering because of rebirth, as in the Hindu concept of rebirth. However, he imagines a rational and scientific concept of rebirth which interprets and confirms a Buddhist understanding of rebirth. Ambedkar dedicates Book IV, Part II of his book *The Buddha and His Dhamma* to the question of rebirth and karma in Buddhism.

The concept of rebirth is particularly important to the recognition that lay Buddhists share a religious faith with monastic Buddhists. Although it is possible for a lay Buddhist to achieve enlightenment, major streams of Buddhism suggest that it is unlikely: “Early Indian Buddhism, like much Indian spirituality of that time, sees little hope that anyone could attain detachment and insight while pursuing sense pleasure, bodily enhancement, or family stability and wealth; these things are too distracting” (*Gross Buddhism after Patriarchy* 31). Importantly, Ambedkar shifted the focus of neo-Buddhism to the lay community. The goal of a Buddhist is not necessarily to achieve enlightenment in this life. In terms of Buddhist philosophy, this goal is not necessarily possible, and not necessarily desirable. Likewise, Dalits are unlikely to abolish the caste system in this lifetime. In developing neo-Buddhism Ambedkar particularly drew on the concept of the bodhisattva in Mahayana Buddhism, and the concept of Buddha nature.

A bodhisattva has the potential to attain enlightenment, but vows to remain in the cycle of samsara in order to dedicate herself to working for the enlightenment of all beings.

Although Dalit women do not perform elite Western and Indian definitions of Buddhism, they are fully Buddhist. They self-identify as Buddhist, they practice Buddhism as laywomen, and their religious faith defines them as Buddhists. Dalit women also participate in Buddhist proselytizing through demonstrating and writing their lives as Buddhists, as discussed in chapter seven.

Dalit women also re-imagine religious traditions in Buddhism. Ambedkar rewrote the central Buddhist canon texts to incorporate a message of social justice, including doctrines against caste and gender inequality. Dalit women build on Ambedkar's message of gender equality in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, and include their own experiences, specifically their experiences in female bodies, as neo-Buddhists. They participate in feminist theology:

The uniqueness of feminist theology lies not in its use of the criterion of experience but rather in its use of *women's* experience, which has been almost entirely shut out of theological reflection in the past. The use of women's experience in feminist theology, therefore, explodes as a critical force, exposing classical theology, including its codified traditions, as based on *male* experience rather than on universal human experience.

(original emphasis, Ruether *Sexism and God-Talk* 13)

By including specific female bodies in their texts, Dalit women insist that their experiences as women are legitimate in the religious tradition. Their inclusion also challenges the hierarchies of caste and gender which construct female bodies as either outside of sacred space, or irrelevant to religious practice.

As well as rewriting religious doctrine in terms of their own bodies, neo-Buddhist women are recreating ritual. Ambedkar rejected Hindu ritual as it worshipped the goddesses and gods, and advised neo-Buddhists to take up other rituals, such as weekly prayer gatherings, pursuing education, and mission work through spreading the Dhamma, as discussed in chapters six and seven. However, the rituals which Ambedkar rejected were often replaced with Buddhist rituals which excluded women from roles as ritual leaders. I would suggest that the initial exclusion of women from ritual occurred because of Ambedkar's androcentrism; in revising rituals in which both women and men participate he overlooked women's role in those rituals. Ambedkar abolished the Hindu rituals for both women and men, but only revised those rituals for men.

Because the male authorities of the community exclude women from ritual on the basis of the androcentrism inherited from Hinduism and Buddhism, the women take up the challenge to revise their part in ritual. Neo-Buddhist women in the texts show their creativity in revising their old ritual position and inserting the Buddha's or Ambedkar's names in place of the goddesses' and gods' names. Their approach demonstrates a positive aspect of syncretism in the neo-Buddhist movement. Neo-Buddhist women begin by rejecting the old Hindu traditions and their inherent caste hierarchy or superstition;

however, they are not satisfied with their subsequent exclusion from ritual traditions, as discussed in chapter six. Rather than returning uncritically to their former Hindu ritual, they appropriate the useable parts of Hindu ritual, and translate them into neo-Buddhist ritual which maintains their ritual role as women, but not their ritual inferiority as women and Dalits. Their rewriting of the ritual maintains their difference from the Hindu community while maintaining their membership as female ritual specialists in the neo-Buddhist community.

Identity

Postcolonial studies often notes the concern with identity as posed against British or Western identity in the Indian context. Neo-Buddhism proposes a self-defined Dalit identity as opposed to the Brahmin-defined Untouchable identity, in response to internal colonialism, where internal may refer to colonialism within India as well as psychological colonialism. Conversion enables access to a new identity for Dalits which is both religious and political. Conversion is a symbolic act, which some women admit that they failed to understand completely at the time:

When I look back upon my life, I see the period of conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism as its most significant. Neither the children nor the elders had any idea what religion or conversion meant, of its significance, and about who could act as our guide as far as conversion was concerned. Yet we did convert. The meaning of the transformation began to become

clearer to us gradually through the changing rituals and traditions and through the guidance of our political leaders. (Pawar x)

More importantly, conversion provides a third space for a new model of Indian modernity, which escapes the Hindu nationalist modernity, oppressive in terms of gender, caste and class, among other hierarchies, as discussed in chapter three. I argue that the Three Jewels of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, which Ambedkar re-imagined in neo-Buddhism, provide a historical, textual, indigenous precedent for the practice of liberty, equality and fraternity, otherwise dismissed as corrupt Western and colonialist impositions which undermine the Hindu family—the family at which gender and caste hierarchies are reproduced.

Neo-Buddhism disrupts the hegemony of Hindu identity, including Hindu identity where it reacted against, accepted, or incorporated Western modes of oppression such as racism, sexism, capitalism, and linguistic colonialism. Upper class Dalits demonstrate their membership in the neo-Buddhist community in the context of a hostile surrounding Hindu community. Rather than simply re-adopting Hindu religious markers—which would be an easier path in some ways—they present token markers of membership in the Hindu community, while inserting subtle neo-Buddhist markers which members of their community notice. While their economic status benefits them in many ways, their caste status requires negotiation in order to maintain that economic status. They maintain that balance through religious markers which challenge the upper caste Hindu norm while appearing superficially to support it.

While syncretism in neo-Buddhism sometimes acts to undermine Ambedkar's message of caste and gender equality, it can also act to challenge the presented homogeneity of the Hindu norm. Through a process of rejection and return, neo-Buddhist women are actively rewriting their part in modern India and in neo-Buddhism. In imagining this process of rejection and return, I draw on the Maori theorist Makere Stewart-Harawira's use of the double spiral as a symbol for the creation of a post-colonial new world order. She develops this concept in her book *The New Imperial Order: Indigenous Responses to Globalization* (2005), in the first chapter "Of Order and Being: Towards an Indigenous Global Ontology." I also discuss this image in the introduction and chapter one of this dissertation with regard to the cyclical turning of the wheel in Buddhism, which invokes the cycle of rebirths as well as the wheel of Dhamma, the teachings of Buddhism. I argue that both the double spiral and the Buddhist middle way represent historical indigenous models of the postcolonial third space.

Cross-Cultural Support

A major interest for the Dalit movement is cross-cultural support. Ambedkar noted how the caste system prevented marginalized and oppressed groups from supporting one another: "An anti-social spirit is found wherever one group has 'interests of its own' which shut it out from full interaction with other groups so that its prevailing purpose is protection of what it has got" (*Annihilation of Caste* 40). The Brahmin patriarchal project of segregation of identities prevents mutual support between oppressed groups, and thus allows an elite composed of upper caste men to maintain hegemony over concepts of

Indian modernity. For example, there is a patronizing tendency to sympathize with the oppression of women of other groups, while at the same time practising religious or cultural bigotry, which serves to condemn those women's identity and deny their agency. This attitude reproduces elite attitudes of the Brahmin patriarchy, particularly in the Hindu nationalist perceptions of Indian Muslim communities, and of tribal communities. Depictions of both of these groups stem from Orientalist constructions of these groups which British colonialists developed; while Brahmin elites have rewritten Orientalist depictions of themselves, the replacement of British colonialism with Hindu nationalism has perpetuated the colonial relationships internally, and Indian elites have appropriated Orientalist depictions of internally colonized groups.

As Ambedkar noted, caste hierarchies are reproduced because of each caste group's pride in their place in the hierarchy which is higher than another: "Each caste takes its pride and its consolation in the fact that in the scale of castes it is above some other caste" (*Annihilation of Caste* 65). At the same time, Ambedkar's own life and writings contribute to segregation. Ambedkar was born into the Mahar caste in Maharashtra, and numerous critics have noted the subsequent association between Buddhism and the Mahar caste, and not just the association between Buddhism and Dalit castes. The Dalit woman Mukta Sarvagod points out the conflicts among Dalit communities:

[I]s it not terribly unfortunate, not only for you and me but for the whole country, that he was called the leader only of the mahars! This deliberate

misrepresentation was a result of a condescending point of view, which chose to undermine both Babasaheb and his achievements. . . . Because Baba was a mahar, no mang person chose to come to him even though they lived in terrible oppression and misery. The chambhars are brahmans among the untouchables so they too did not count among his followers.

(148)

However, caste identity must be rejected not only by non-Mahars, but by Mahars as well.

Dalit women writers note low caste pride in an oppressed identity, and

Gross notes that even a positive identity reflects ego attachment:

Ego, as we have seen, is any style of habitual patterns and responses that clouds over the clarity and openness of basic human nature. Self-effacement is just a style of ego different from self-aggrandizement, but both equally cause suffering to self and others. (*Buddhism after Patriarchy* 162)

In the Dalit movement, a positive Mahar identity has detracted from a wider liberation movement. In this sense, identity—whether positive or negative—has undermined Buddhist goals of non-attachment as well as Ambedkar's neo-Buddhist goals of liberating all Dalits and low castes. Even within neo-Buddhist communities, sects have arisen. In a post on the blog *Dalit Nation—The Only Authentic Voice of Dalits*, the author denounces the Friends of the Western

Buddhist Order (FWBO), connected with the Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana (TBMSG), as “another subtle front for Brahminism in the name of Buddhism” (“Friends of the Western Buddhist Cults”). While no sect within the neo-Buddhist movement should be exempt from critique, as I have demonstrated through analysis of the representation of women in the neo-Buddhist movement, neither are sectarian politics useful to a broader Dalit liberation movement.²³² Furthermore, since Alan Sponberg discusses the prominent participation of women in the TBMSG movement in “TBMSG: A Dhamma Revolution in Contemporary India,” sexist as well as casteist attitudes may inform a denouncement of this sect .

In *The Annihilation of Caste*, where Ambedkar writes about cross-cultural support, he also speaks in condescending terms about tribal communities in India: “these aborigines have remained in their primitive uncivilized state in a land which boasts of a civilization thousands of years old” (41). While he acknowledges modes of oppression perpetuated by the Hindu elite, he unfortunately accepts an elite and colonialist perception of tribal peoples as primitive and uncivilized rather than recognizing the Brahmin imposition of those labels which are shared by both low castes and tribal peoples. Kancha Ilaiah provides an alternative understanding of both low caste and tribal civilization as a parallel, and a positive alternative to elite Brahmin civilization. Likewise, Ambedkar’s comments on Islam prevent solidarity between Muslims and Buddhists who

²³² The blog title *Dalit Nation—The Only Authentic Voice of Dalits* lends itself to critique as well, in claiming a monopoly on authenticity. Feminist and race theorists, among others, have noted that the criteria for authenticity limits it to elites.

both converted to escape the caste system, and who still face caste discrimination. While he noted the caste system as practised among Indian Muslims in his book *Pakistan, Or the Partition of India*, and made useful criticisms of the treatment of women in Islam, his attitudes toward Islam fit neatly into Hindu nationalism, and contemporary Dalits have taken up these attitudes without critique of the embedded Orientalist and Hindu nationalist ideologies.

These communalist attitudes fall into a spectrum of identity politics which prevent solidarity across identities, and which the Hindu elite exploit to promote competition between oppressed groups, who might otherwise collaborate to target the elite who benefit from the oppression. Again, Hindu nationalist processes of internal colonialism appropriate and reproduce British colonial strategies of “divide and rule.” Anand Teltumbde critiques caste politics which reinforce caste hierarchies. He points out that in the absence of an immediate Brahmin antagonist, Shudra and Dalit castes clash: “In fact, every caste atrocity, including the most infamous ones such as Kilvenmani (1968) in Tamilnadu, Karamchedu (1984) and Chundururu (1991) in Andhra Pradesh, and Jhajjar (2002) in Haryana, shows that the middle shudra castes are the perpetrators of violence against dalits” (*Khairlanji* 196). He argues further that trans-caste solidarity is necessary for a successful challenge to the caste system: “[Bahujanwad] can be meaningful as a transformative agenda only if it is based on the trans-caste unity of all the lower classes of society” (*Khairlanji* 196). Although Teltumbde argues that class identity is the key to true unity, even in Marxist political groups caste and gender hierarchies persist. Looking

back to chapter three of the dissertation, and the persistence of Brahmin patriarchal caste and gender oppression in Muslim, Christian, and Communist communities, I would argue that this solidarity must go beyond even class, and acknowledge wider systems of oppression in India, such as religious oppression and class hierarchies, which draw on caste hierarchies internally as well as externally.

Online communities provide some avenues for cross-cultural and international solidarity movements. The online format allows for self-published works, with the possibility for a wider readership, as well as online dialogue. The Dalit movement online spans a range of communities, including the International Dalit Solidarity Network's website at www.idsn.org, online archives of Ambedkar's writing, film and video posted on the website www.YouTube.com, and individual blogs. The most successful aspect of these online communities lies in raising international awareness about caste oppression. However, major limitations remain for online communities in promoting cross-cultural solidarity. Most important is the lack of access for the majority of Dalits. As discussed throughout the dissertation, and specifically in chapter seven, education and income are significant and related barriers to accessing written language at the most basic level, preventing internet access at a higher level. Only a small percentage of the Indian population has access to the internet (Hanson).

Further limitations stem from this small percentage of India's population online, and their disproportionate membership in elite communities. Thus the majority of internet users are invested in maintaining their elite status. The reproduction of conservative

ideology, filtered through the Hindu formal education system and Hindu mainstream media, and heavily weighted toward an elite perception of India, often serves to intensify oppressive representations of Dalits, as well as other marginalized groups. At best, online Dalit communities risk becoming an avenue for voyeuristic colonial attitudes, which perpetuate an attitude of Western or Hindu superiority and a belief that Dalit women need rescuing. In many ways, the nature of the internet as an anonymous venue decreases the possibility for compassion. The blog post and comments on Savita Ambedkar, as an example discussed in chapter four, provide a negative opportunity for ritual reproduction of sexist and casteist stereotypes. While online communities carry the potential for solidarity work, they should be used only as a supporting feature.

Positive and Negative Syncretism

Neo-Buddhism's greatest challenge are the incredibly effective strategies of appropriation which have ensured Hinduism's claim to survival through thousands of years of heterodox challenges. Despite apparently destructive challenges to Hinduism, Kancha Ilaiah points out how the elite interests have generally absorbed these challenges into Hinduism:

Brahminism sought to retain its superstructural hegemony through deifying and mystifying counter-cultural ideological schools. Thus, Buddha, Vardhamana, Basaveswara and even a modern social reformer like Veera Brahmam who fought against casteism were deified and mystified. (*God as Political Philosopher* 13)

While the methods and doctrines of worship may be altered, the core hierarchy remains, with opposing elements safely embedded, and with historical hierarchies intact.

For example, Ambedkar and others argue that Buddhism in India was undermined through centuries of Hindu aggression, and finally all but eradicated by emerging Muslim interests. However, the decline of Buddhism was also effected by means of absorbing lay followers, as well as through the inclusion of the Buddha into the Hindu pantheon, as an avatar of Vishnu. A more recent example of this absorption arises in Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's concept of Hindutva (1923), which claims that Buddhists, among other religious groups in India, share a common identity within Hinduism. Several of Ambedkar's 22 vows seek to preempt Hindu reabsorption of the neo-Buddhist community, such as vow five: "I do not and shall not believe that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this to be sheer madness and false propaganda."²³³

In his writing, he also acknowledges a history of reconversion which he attempted to preempt by adopting a conversion ritual for lay Buddhists:

But there was no separate Dhamma-Diksha for those who wanted to be initiated into the Dhamma but did not wish to become members of the Sangh, one of the consequences of which was to go from home into homelessness. / This was a grave omission It was one of the causes which ultimately led to the downfall of Buddhism in India. / For, this absence of the initiation ceremony left the laity free to wander from one religion to

²³³ The 22 vows are reproduced in the introduction.

another and, worse still, follow at one and the same time. (*Buddha and His Dhamma* 238; 5.4.1.11-13)

However, conversion as a moment cannot challenge wider cultural trends toward appropriation and syncretism. Rather, conversion must be a continuous practice, a practice which I have argued Dalit women follow.

In the development of neo-Buddhism, Dalits challenge the definition of Hinduism, and most importantly, the appropriation of Buddhism into that definition. However, the dominant narrative of Hinduism still poses a risk—and perhaps the most significant risk—to neo-Buddhists. Earlier challenges to the Brahmin patriarchy, such as Islam, Christianity, and the bhakti movement, failed to undermine it, and were either appropriated into the umbrella of Hindu homogeneity or excluded from the dialogue entirely. As Chakravarti points out, in the bhakti tradition,

[T]he lowly, humble and marginalized proponents of Bhakti while critiquing caste in the domain of religious tradition did not, or were not able to, mount a serious challenge to the caste system as a structure of social relations. Nor were its women devotees able to escape the patriarchal and caste relations of their time, as there was no order for them to escape into. (100)

The neo-Buddhist movement challenges Hindu hegemony only as long as it challenges the definitions of culture and religion as elite constructions.

Christianity's success as a world religion has been largely the result of its appropriation of existing cultural practices in the process of mission work, seen even in New Testament negotiations to accept compromises in order to gain converts.²³⁴ Since then, Christianity has made gains where it was willing to adopt local deities into its pantheon of saints and interpret local doctrines through a Christian lens, as discussed in chapter three. During the colonial period, these specific practices of religious appropriation operated alongside general cultural imperialism. Christianity was less successful in the South Asian subcontinent. This lack of success was the result of an equally appropriative Hindu approach. In creating homogenizing narratives, elite Hindus' greater success lay in the application of definitions, assisted by colonialist Christians working with a similar model, to local religious groups. The concept of *Hindutva*—the definition of all Indian cultures as essentially “Hindu”—occurs specifically in the context of Hindu nationalism, as a response to British colonialism. If this homogenizing definition of Hinduism is challenged, its status as a coherent religion falls apart.

Using the Buddha's and Ambedkar's philosophies, Dalit women are in a position to challenge Hinduism as it reenters neo-Buddhist culture through sexism, casteism, and classism. Since the dominant cultural model of Indianness is Hindu, a strong temptation exists to adopt those norms once the most immediate demands of food, shelter, education and employment have been met, as discussed in chapter six. However, this illusion of equality is precarious, and relies on deceit on the part of socially mobile Dalits. They

234 I discuss acceptance of the caste system in Christianity in chapter three.

must deceive not only their upper caste peers, but also themselves, in denying their life experiences. For example, they must deny their religious identity, their history, and their agency. Dalits also deny themselves community; when they integrate themselves into upper caste Hindu communities, they reinforce the ideals they worked so hard to escape.

Conclusion

Education has allowed Dalit women to fight against the dehumanizing project of caste, by presenting themselves as thinking, acting people, regardless of their caste, gender or class. Through their autobiographical writing, they insert themselves into the image of modern India. Their writing undermines the Brahmin and patriarchal narratives which either exclude them, or include them through misrepresentation. When Ambedkar proposed reservation policies, he argued that these policies would allow contact between people of all castes and decrease caste bias. Desegregation at the political level has not encouraged the same at the individual level, particularly in the villages, and desegregation has only been a first step away from caste bias. At the level of theory and writing, Dalit writers, including women writers, are challenging cultural dominance by redefining Indian culture from a Dalit and neo-Buddhist perspective. In contemporary India terms such as uncultured, unhygienic, or uneducated popularly replace terms such as untouchable, polluted, or low caste, which are not considered politically correct. A challenge to cultural dominance, including a redefining of the meaning of modern India through Dalit and neo-Buddhist narratives, is a meaningful movement toward the annihilation of caste.

Hindu nationalism is based on an image of India constructed by the elite, and based on hierarchies of caste, gender and religion, among others. This image of India draws heavily on religious narratives constructed during the colonial and pre-independence periods, and continues to develop as a homogenizing narrative. The process of capitalist globalization, which undermines the traditions of resistance constructed during the independence movement, puts economic and social pressure on the middle and working classes. In the absence of British colonialists, Indian “outsiders” including Muslims and Dalits become scapegoats for change within India. Neo-Buddhism, as a reinterpretation of an indigenous Indian religious tradition, destabilizes homogenizing narratives of Hindu nationalism. Dalit women’s writing, in addressing both Brahmin and patriarchal narratives from the perspective of neo-Buddhism, critiques the hierarchical images of Indian and Dalit communities constructed by the elite of those communities, and particularly challenge Brahmin patriarchal narratives where they arise within Dalit and neo-Buddhist communities.

Ambedkar’s vision of a neo-Buddhism that ensured liberty, equality, and fraternity provides Dalits with a means and justification for challenging dominant Hindu narratives. His research showed him the connections between imposed hierarchies, including caste, gender, and class. He worked to abolish the caste system and to undermine gender hierarchies. However, his challenge to oppressive hierarchies does not exclude his own life and writing from examination. Analysis of Ambedkar’s life and writing is

appropriately critiqued using the same methods that Ambedkar used to examine the Buddha's life and writings:

He was nothing if not rational, if not logical. Anything therefore which is rational and logical, other things being equal, may be taken to be the word of the Buddha. / The second thing is that the Buddha never cared to enter into a discussion which was not profitable for man's welfare. Therefore anything attributed to the Buddha which did not relate to man's welfare cannot be accepted to be the word of the Buddha. (*Buddha and His Dhamma* 185; 4.2.5.13-14)

Since Ambedkar insisted that neither he nor the Buddha were divine, their words could—and must—be critiqued, just as Dalit women use their autobiographies to critique the very hierarchies which privilege the rational.

It is not only Ambedkar's understanding of Buddhism which develops into neo-Buddhism, but also a feminist response to Buddhist androcentrism and misogyny, which critically examines Hindu concepts of caste and gender. By challenging sexism within their own community, Dalit women not only demand equality as defined by both the Buddha and Ambedkar; they reject negative aspects of Hindu syncretism in their own communities, whether that syncretism remains from pre-conversion culture or is adopted as a representation of Indian modernity. Generally, Dalit women use Ambedkar's life and writing to oppose caste and gender oppression within feminist and Dalit communities. They face oppressive systems which appropriate Ambedkar's Dalit and feminist theories to reinforce those hierarchies. At the same time, their knowledge of Ambedkar's Dalit and

feminist theories will allow them to challenge systems of oppression which are more subtle, or as yet unacknowledged in Dalit women's writing.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Neo-Buddhist Iconography

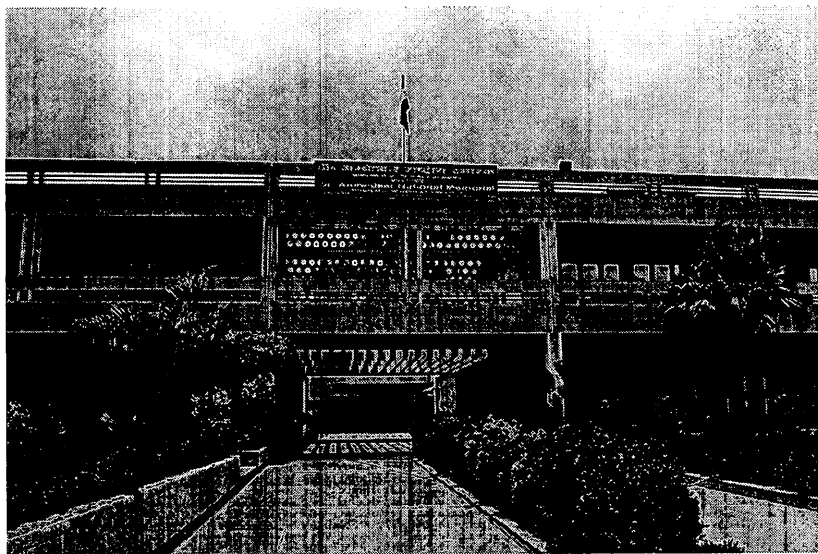


Image 1: Dr. Ambedkar National Memorial; Delhi, India, 2010



Image 2: Kali, popular calendar art (Geisha)



Image 3: Vajrayogini; Tsamchen Gompa, Bodhnath, Nepal, 2010

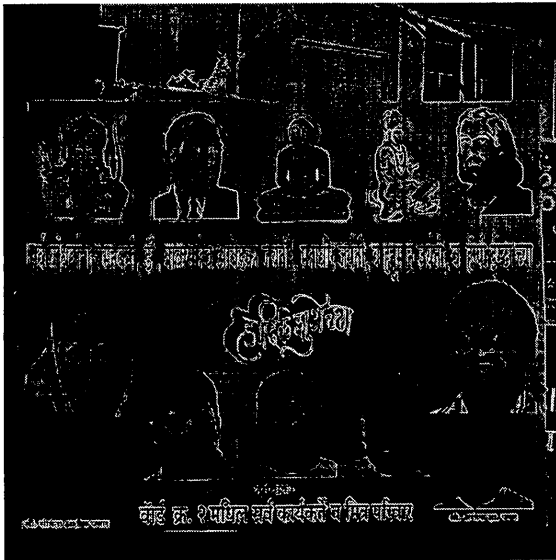


Image 4: Billboard featuring Krishna, Ambedkar, Mahavira, Hanuman and Jesus; Pune, Maharashtra, India, 2011

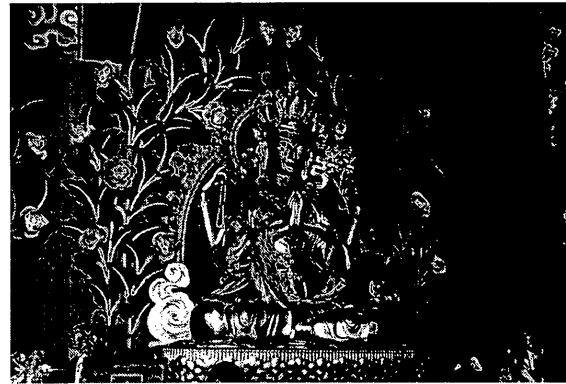


Image 5: Vajrayana Buddhist deity; Tsamchen Gompa, Bodnath, Nepal, 2010

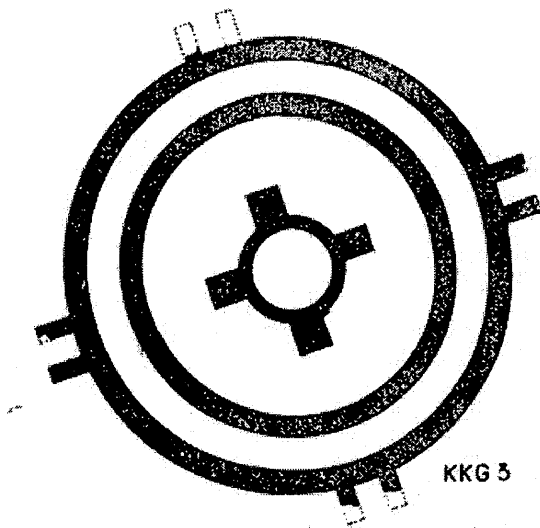


Image 6: Stupa floor plan (Cooler)

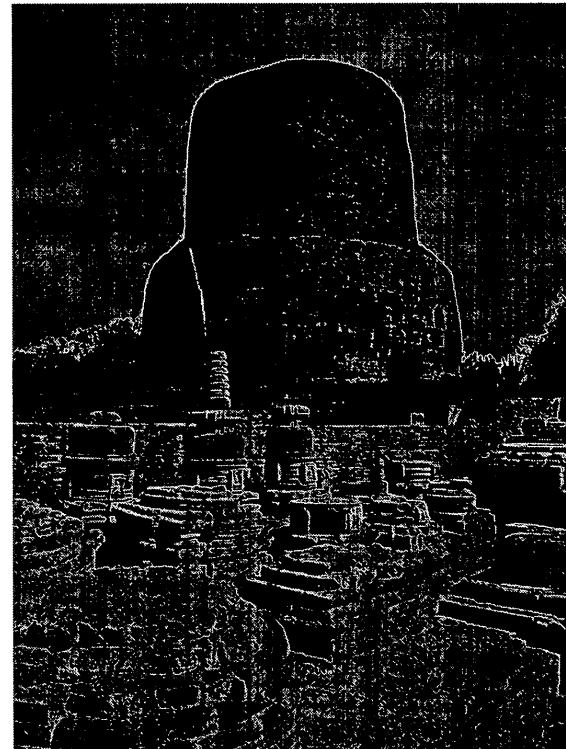


Image 7: Dhamekh Stupa is the oldest known stupa, rebuilt in 500 CE; Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh, India, 2010

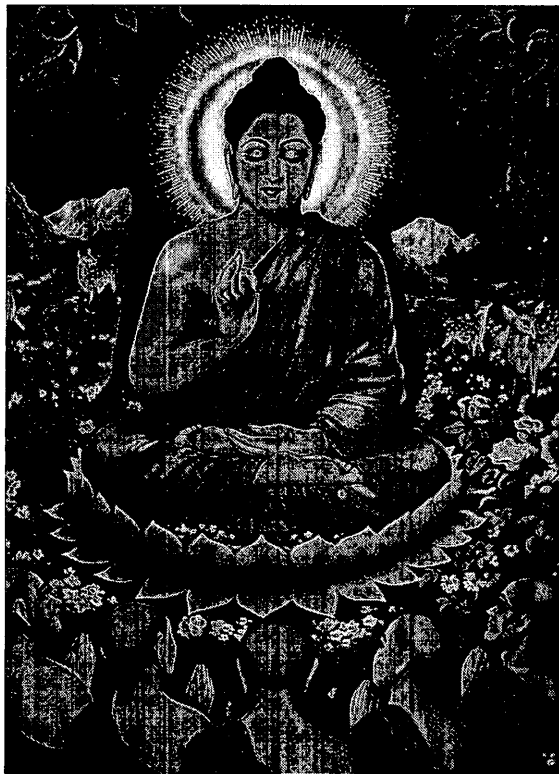


Image 8: An image of the Buddha similar to those commonly used in the neo-Buddhist movement (“Life of Shakyamuni Buddha”)

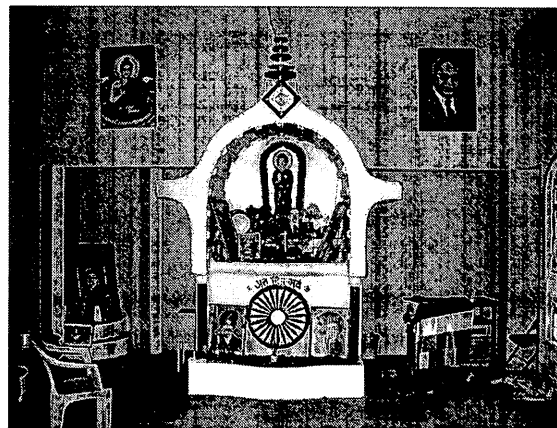


Image 9: Neighborhood Buddha vihar displaying portraits of the Buddha and B. R. Ambedkar; Nagpur, Maharashtra, India, 2009

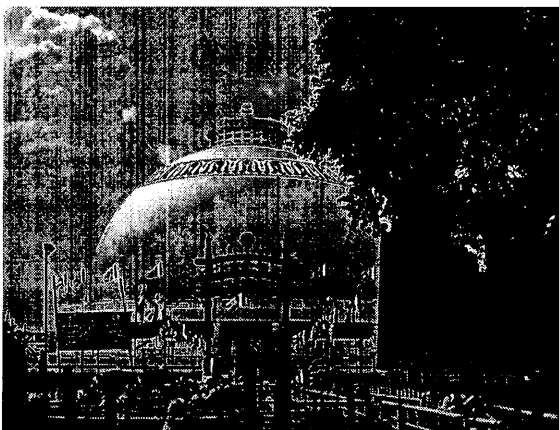


Image 10: The stupa at Diksha Bhoomi, built on the site where B. R. converted to Buddhism; Nagpur, Maharashtra, India, 2009



Image 11: B. R. Ambedkar represented in commemorative statue; Camp, Pune, Maharashtra, India, 2009



Image 12: B. R. Ambedkar represented in folk art statue, Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India, 2010



Image 13: B. R. Ambedkar represented in commemorative statue; Pondicherry, India, 2010



Image 14: Friends of the Western Buddhist Order puja ("Welcome to Dhammachakra")



Image 15: Ambedkar family portrait; from left: Yashwant (son), B. R. Ambedkar, Ramabai, Lakshmi Bai (sister), Mukund (nephew) ("Dr. Ambedkar Family Photo")



Image 16: A reproduction of a painting of Ramabai Ambedkar commonly used in the neo-Buddhist movement; Chaitya Bhoomi, Dadar, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India, 2009



Image 17: Relief sculpture of B. R. and Savita Ambedkar at their conversion to Buddhism; Nagpur, Maharashtra, India, 2009



Image 18: S. K. Bole, B. R. Ambedkar and Savita Ambedkar, 1951 (Anand)



Image 19: Portrait of Savita Ambedkar, 1990 (Murgod)

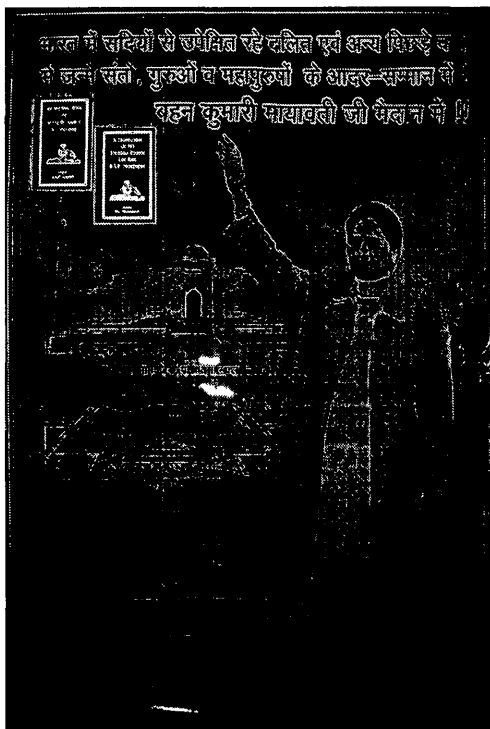


Image 20: Promotional poster for Mayawati, former Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, and leader of the Bahujan Samaj Party



Image 21: Sonia Gandhi, the Italian-born president of the Indian National Congress party (“Sonia Gandhi”)



Image 22: Pratibha Patil, President of India 2007-2012, and the first woman President (“Pratibha Patil”)



Image 23: Indian women ordained into the Triratna Buddhist Order, a branch of Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (“Names for 15 women”)

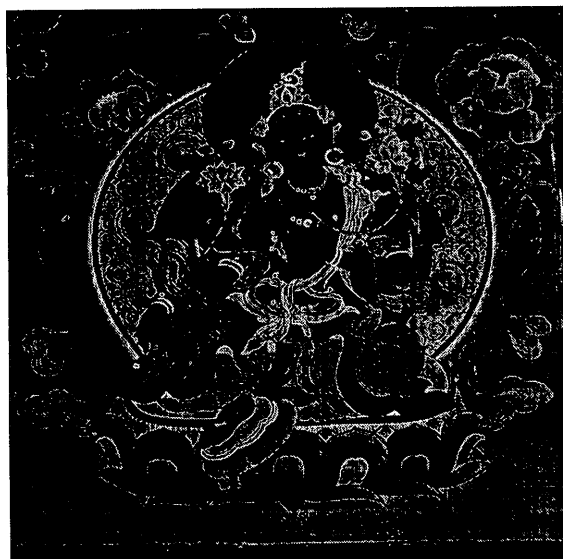


Image 24: Green Tara; Tsamchen Gompa, Bodhnath, Nepal, 2010

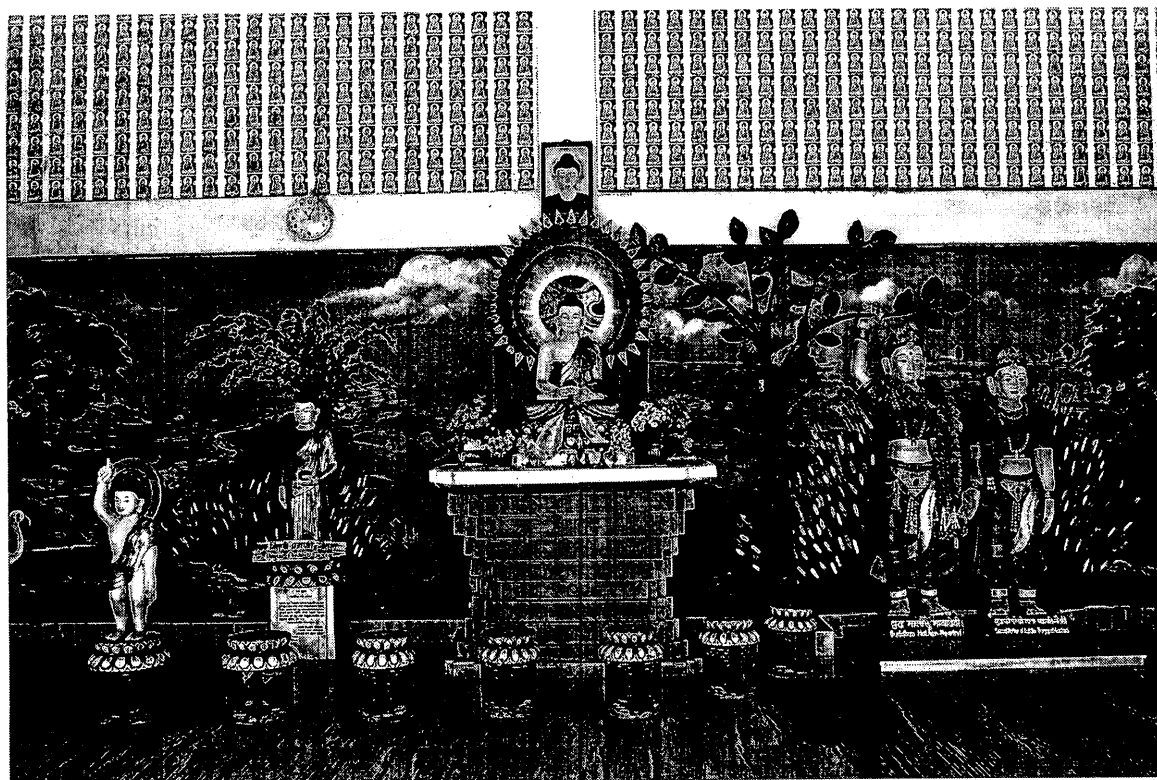


Image 25: Statues representing the birth of the Buddha, including his mother Mayadevi, and his aunt Mahaprajapati Gotami, on the right; International Goutami Nun's Temple, Lumbini, Nepal, 2010

Appendix B: Glossary of Terms

- ajlaf:** A designation for allegedly low caste Hindu converts in the Indian Muslim caste system.
- ashraf:** A designation for Indian Muslims of allegedly Persian descent, who take on the role of upper caste Muslims in India.
- avarna:** Without caste, in Hindu doctrine; this designation includes Dalits and non-Hindus.
- bhakti:** In Hinduism, the devotional path to moksha.
- bhikkhu:** Buddhist monk; also bhikshu (Sanskrit).
- bhikkhuni:** Buddhist nun; also bhikshuni (Sanskrit).
- bodhisattva:** An individual who has the potential to achieve enlightenment but takes a vow to be reborn in order to dedicate herself to alleviating suffering and working for the liberation of others.
- Chaitya Bhoomi:** The cremation grounds, used to refer to the site where B. R. Ambedkar was cremated in 1956 and where his parinirvana is celebrated annually.
- Dalit:** The oppressed; the name chosen by those who are outside of the varna system in Hinduism as an alternative to the externally assigned names Untouchable or Harijan, or to caste names which are used as insults.
- Dalitbahujan:** The oppressed majority, including Dalit and Shudra communities; a term coined by Kancha Ilaiah to promote a unified political identity.
- darshana:** A method of worship in Hinduism which involves mutual gaze with the deity embodied in the icon. This is generally a public form of worship performed in the temple.
- dhamma:** The teachings of the Buddha; also dharma (Sanskrit). In contrast to the Hindu concept of dharma, which dictates an individual's duty based on caste, gender and age, dhamma is a universal path regardless of caste, gender or age.
- dharma:** Duty conveyed through divine law in the Hindu context. A person born into Hinduism must follow her dharma based on caste, gender, and age. The success or failure to follow her dharma results in the effect of karma which dictates her

rebirth into another state. The concept of dharma often justifies control and punishment of lower castes and Dalits as the duty of higher castes.

dhimmi: People of the book; the name given by Muslim rulers to their Jewish and Christian subjects, also followers of the Abrahamic traditions.

diksha: Initiation in Buddhism; originally the vows taken by a layperson entering the monastic sangha of Buddhism but now including all conversions to Buddhism the neo-Buddhist movement.

Diksha Bhoomi: The initiation grounds, used to refer to the site at which B. R. Ambedkar converted to Buddhism or took diksha on 14 October 1956 and at which his conversion is celebrated annually according to the Buddhist/Hindu calendar as well as the Roman calendar; also transliterated as deekshabhoomi.

dwija: Twice-born; the three upper castes—Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya—may participate in the student initiation and study the Vedas.

Harijan: The children of God; the name chosen by Mohandas K. Gandhi to refer to those outside the varna system in Hinduism. Dalits consider this term condescending and insulting.

hadiths: Statements or actions attributed to the prophet Mohammed which are used as tools for interpretation, context and construction of Islamic legal codes.

Hindutva: During the independence movement, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar coined this term to define all Indian cultures as essentially “Hindu,” with the exclusion of Islam. This concept has contributed to Hindu nationalism and communalism in India.

jati: Birth or occupation, a sub-category of varna, or caste.

karma: The process of cause and effect which lies at the core of Hindu doctrine and is mutually linked with dharma. Actions lead to rebirth into another state; in Hindu doctrine an individual’s rebirth as a woman or Dalit reflects a failure to follow her dharma in a previous life.

mahaparinirvana: Usually reserved for the Buddha, the death of his body and his liberation from the cycle of rebirths after he achieved nirvana or enlightenment.

Mahar: A Dalit caste name, or sub-caste of central India; Ambedkar belonged to the Mahar community and neo-Buddhism is most prevalent in this community.

moksha: Liberation from the cycle of rebirths in Hinduism.

nikah: The marriage contract in Islam.

nirvana: Enlightenment or liberation from the cycle of rebirths in Buddhism; also nibbana (Pali).

outcaste: A term which identifies those outside of the varna system; also avarna.

parangi: In India, a foreigner, conveying a sense of impurity in Hinduism due to lack of caste; also feringhi.

parinirvana: Final liberation, death of the body after the achievement of nirvana or liberation.

puja: A method of worship in bhakti Hinduism which involves offerings and prayers to the deity. This form of worship may be performed publicly at a temple or privately at a household shrine. In neo-Buddhism puja involves rituals centred on Ambedkar and the Buddha.

rangoli: Artwork produced by dropping coloured powder in patterns on a surface.

samsara: The cycle of desire leading to rebirth in Buddhism; the process of rebirth within a hierarchy in Hinduism.

sangha: The Buddhist community, which may refer to the renunciate community—as in the bhikkhu sangha—or to the Buddhist community including both monastic and lay practitioners.

sannyasa: The fourth stage of life in the ashrama system, where an upper caste Hindu man renounces his material possessions on the path to moksha. A man in this stage of life is a sannyasi.

satyagraha: An act of non-violent civil disobedience which developed during the independence movement

stupa: The Buddhist memorial dome.

tripitaka: The central canonical texts of Buddhism, referring to the three baskets (pitaka) of the Sutra Pitaka, the Vinaya Pitaka and the Abhidharma Pitaka.

untouchable: A term which refers to those outside the varna system in Hinduism, and identifies polluted and polluting bodies; also outcaste or avarna.

varna: The four-caste or “colour” system tied to the Hindu hierarchy of occupation and dharma, including Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra; the Sanskrit term for caste, which derives from the Portuguese term casta.

vihar: Buddhist temple or place of worship; from vihara, the Buddhist monastery.

yeskar: The tradition in which Mahars are granted the right to beg.