

# Castaways of Caste

*Rather than remain untouchables,  
some Hindus chose to abandon their faith*

by Jayashree B. Gokhale

On October 14, 1956, hundreds of thousands of Maharashtrian untouchables, led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, came to Nagpur, India, to renounce their ancestral Hindu faith and convert en masse to Buddhism, breaking completely with the traditions that held them on the lowest rungs of Indian caste and class order.

For weeks before, Ambedkar's followers had publicized the event throughout the villages of the western Indian state of Maharashtra, exhorting entire communities to come to Nagpur and embrace Buddhism. Mahars streamed into the city, clogging major transportation routes. The crowds were dressed in white and were in a festive and joyful mood. The conversion ceremony began at nine in the morning with Chandramani Mahasthavir, the most aged and venerable *bhikku* (monk) in India, administering the Buddhist oaths (*tisarana*) to Ambedkar.

One of the chief architects of the Indian Constitution of 1950, Babasaheb Ambedkar was revered among Mahars as the first untouchable to graduate from high school, the first to receive a B.A. from an Indian university, the first to earn graduate degrees (from Columbia and London universities), and the first to be a barrister-at-law. He had long protested his predicament as an untouchable. "It is an unfortunate fact that I have been born a Hindu," he stated at a conference of untouchables in 1935. "It was not in my hands to oppose or change that. But I can say this with the utmost sincerity and gravity: I will not die a Hindu." Conversion, Ambedkar concluded, would be the only way for those so long oppressed to escape the taint of untouchability.

He was the first to receive his new vows, repeating each three times: "I take refuge in Buddha; I take refuge in *Dhamma* [Buddhism]; I take refuge in the *sangha* [monkhood]." The crowd at the ceremony, counted at well over half a million,

waved the ocher flags of Buddhism and shouted "jaya Buddha" (victory to the Buddha, or long live the Buddha) and "jaya Bhim" (victory to Ambedkar). Ambedkar then administered the oaths to the crowd, vows that included the total renunciation of Hinduism, the complete acceptance of the Buddhist creed, the rejection of the notion that the Buddha was an avatar of Vishnu, and the resolution to abjure Hindu ritual practices surrounding death. Afterward Ambedkar declared that he felt as if he had walked away from hell. Bhimsen Detha, a contemporary Buddhist novelist, describes the event this way:

In the villages of Maharashtra, Maharwadas had woken up with a start. They had all flung away their village duties, and had stripped away the darkness of thousands of years. The tyranny of tradition had ended;

the power of the village headmen no longer held sway. Shoulders that had carried away dead cattle and hands that were callused from chopping wood could now rest. The touch of the new revolution had destroyed the old weight of slavery! The poor souls who for centuries had been oppressed by injustice and cruelty had now become free. The chains of caste had been smashed ... the crowd was overwhelmed, carried away in a sea of joy with the conversion to this religion.

The possibility of leaving Hinduism has always been attractive to the lower castes in Hindu society. Conversions to Islam and to Christianity brought tangible benefits. Sometimes undertaken at the behest of local leaders, these conversions were most often matters of individual choice that did not involve the community as a

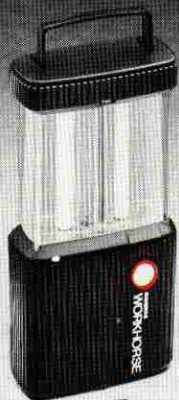
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*A picture of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is carried by Hindu converts to Buddhism in a demonstration against caste violence. Formerly untouchables, they now refer to themselves as dalits, "poor and downtrodden."*

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whole. Under Ambedkar's influence, some 55 percent of Maharashtra's untouchables converted. In 1951, there were barely 2,500 Buddhists in all of Maharashtra. By 1961, five years after the conversion, the Buddhist population was some 2.7 million. The majority of those who converted were, like Ambedkar, Mahars—the most numerous of the untouchable communities of Maharashtra, the third most populous state in India. (The Indian government, which under the country's 1950 constitution guarantees equal rights to all, refers to the untouchable communities as Scheduled Castes.) By 1971, the 3.2 million Maharashtrian Buddhists outnumbered any of that state's other Scheduled Castes.

Untouchables, as traditionally despised, impoverished, and scattered minorities, occupy the lowest reaches of India's dominant Hindu caste hierarchy. According to Hinduism's theory of varna, or caste, untouchables are permanently defiled and defiling; their role in Hindu society demands perpetual subordination. They play an essential part in the division of labor, performing all the tasks considered polluting by Hinduism—removal of animal carcasses, attending funeral pyres, leatherworking, and garbage disposal. Their position traditionally required that they live in sequestered neighborhoods beyond the village gates; their contact with caste-Hindus was limited lest their presence pollute. In India today, many of these historical and occupational patterns persist, so that, for instance, most garbage-men and scavengers are of the Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Caste neighborhoods are at the edges of the village.

The Mahars were traditionally village servants. They considered themselves to be the original sons of the soil, who were conquered and enslaved by the Aryans. Very early in their history the Mahars were given a grain allowance from the villagers and tax-exempt lands in return for performing their hereditary tasks. These tasks were not connected to any specific occupation or trade but rather involved menial assistance in village administration. They were required by village and state authorities to contribute free labor on demand, for either public or private services. It was their job to remove the dead animals from the village streets and, after taking the hides and eating the meats, dispose of the carcasses. In addition, they were watchmen, couriers, and—in a function supporting their claim to be the original settlers of Maharashtra—adjudicators of boundary disputes. Their lack of any proprietary occupation or independent economic base meant that they

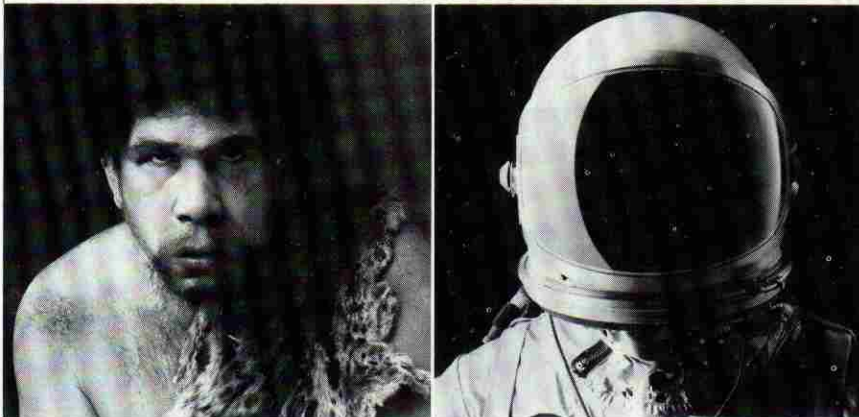
were totally dependent upon the village and state for their sustenance. The state, in turn, upheld the caste hierarchy and ideology.

Central to varna are the notions of pollution, purity, and karma. Untouchables, repositories of pollution, must perform their tasks without demurrer. They must endure their degraded and subservient position in the present social system in the hope that obedience and sublime faith will overcome their untouchable status in the next life. By adopting Buddhism, which rejects the distinctions and divisions of caste, the converts were attempting to combat the consciousness of caste. What followed was a dramatic rejection by the Mahars of their traditional practices and social customs. They banished images of Hindu deities from their households in favor of portraits of the Buddha and Ambedkar. Although continuing to perform some administrative and clerical services for the government (and thereby retaining their tax-exempt land), they ceased performing their tasks as village servants. The converts stopped eating carrion and no longer disposed of a village's dead animals, leaving the task to the Mangs, another of the Scheduled Caste communities. In response, the villagers stopped making contributions of grain to the new Buddhists. The absence of this allowance, coupled with the loss of income from the sale of the hides of dead animals, reduced their income in the village. Many young Buddhists left the village in search of livelihoods, mostly as casual laborers.

The conversion also encouraged migration for the purpose of education. Rural Mahar-Buddhists became determined to educate their children despite the costs and sacrifices. A survey by the Mahar-Buddhist People's Educational Society showed that 80 percent of Scheduled Caste students in Aurangabad were the first in their families to attend college and that almost 85 percent of the parents and guardians were illiterate. Eighty percent of those surveyed said they had to sit outside the classrooms in their primary schools owing to the observance of untouchability in the villages where they began their education.

There has been a concurrent cultural and literary renaissance. The converts refer to themselves as *dalits*, "poor and downtrodden." The *dalit sahitya* (literature of the poor and downtrodden) is compared by Mahar intellectuals to the literature of black Americans. The first imperative of *dalit* writers is to attack and overcome the Hindu Sanskriti, which, one *dalit* wrote, "for thousands of years enslaved the *dalits* and did not even give

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them the right to live as human beings." *Dalit* writings vigorously denounce Hinduism, deride Hindu gods, and express contempt for superstitions and a hatred of caste. Using local dialects and colloquialisms, the literature is often deliberately provocative, blasphemous, and obscene. At the same time, *dalits* write of the desire to connect their changed lives to the life of the untouchable communities from which they arose. "My autobiography," writes one *dalit*, "is the story of the freedom struggle of the untouchables."

The Buddhist conversion succeeded in removing the blemishes of pollution and restoring to individuals a sense of self-respect and humanity, allowing them to get out from under the encumbrances of caste. Nevertheless, the social relationships among lower-caste communities, never strong, have been further strained. Buddhist identity has separated the Mahar-Buddhists from other Scheduled Castes as well as from caste-Hindus. The Mangs and the Chambhars, who together make up 50 percent of the Scheduled Caste communities of Maharashtra, remained Hindus. Those who did not convert often saw Buddhism as an affectation with few deep roots. This suspicion was compounded by caste-Hindu resentment at the nonperformance of traditional tasks by the converted Mahars. While many



villagers were glad they no longer had to provide Mahars with grain allowances, they were offended at having to do unclean chores that had previously been left to the Mahars. Hindus were also angry with the new Buddhists for daring to flout Hinduism and no longer accepting their place in the caste hierarchy.

In retaliation, various forms of boycott and harassment were used against the Buddhists. In some villages they were barred from the village streets or from the temple of Mariai, the Mahar deity. After conversion, the temples became community centers for the new Buddhists. In other villages, caste-Hindu farmers ceased plowing or seeding the lands of the Mahars as they had formerly done. In one account, when the Mahars decided not to remove a dead water buffalo, the angry caste-Hindus burned down the Mahars' huts. The increase in tension between the new Buddhists and the caste-Hindu villagers prompted more of the *dalits* to leave the village.

The unconverted Scheduled Castes reacted against the new Buddhists when they maintained their claim to government job quotas set for once-untouchable Hindus. Recognizing that the Scheduled Castes were a minority that had long suffered from social discrimination, the Indian Constitution set up a special protec-

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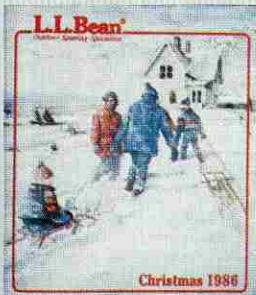
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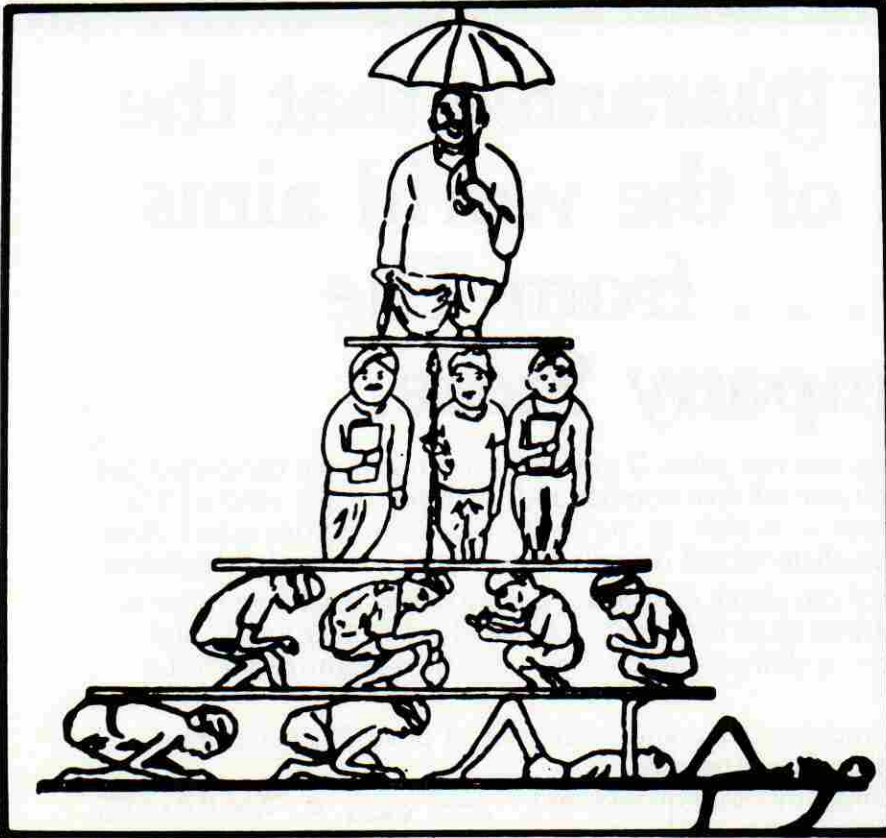
tion for them. Quotas reserved seats for Scheduled Castes in educational and government institutions. The Mahar-Buddhists, although no longer untouchables or officially members of the Scheduled Castes, still claimed rights to these reservations. Those who did not convert protested that the Mahar-Buddhists wanted to eat their cake and have it too. To obtain access to the quotas, converted Mahars often deny their Buddhist identities, once again affirming the hold of caste over their lives.

In the cities, the Mahar-Buddhists—with their emphasis on education—now receive a greater share of the government benefits reserved for the untouchable communities. They gain more scholarships and government grants for college and represent the majority of the Scheduled Caste students in Bombay.

In the villages, the Mahars who converted are sharply distinguished from other Scheduled Caste villagers. They are more demanding of their constitutional rights, for which caste-Hindus see them as troublemakers. Demands to use the village well, which are often spearheaded by the Buddhists, have brought violent caste-Hindu reactions. In February 1974, Hindus with night sticks severely beat members of the Buddhist community of Sonavale in Maharashtra when they attempted to draw water from a communal well, after the well reserved for the untouchables had gone dry. In a village in the Poona district of Maharashtra, Mahars were subjected to *bahishkar* (a severe form of social and economic boycott) when they contested the election for the district council with an independent candidate rather than support the candidate proposed by village leaders.

From the late 1960s the incidence of atrocities against the Buddhists increased significantly. The rural police and the civil administration are overwhelmingly in the hands of caste-Hindus (non-Brahmin Marathas in particular), and the perpetrators of the atrocities may get the tacit, if not the overt, support of the law. The demands and pleas of the Scheduled Castes often fall on deaf ears.

Statistics collected by the Ministry of Home Affairs indicate that Maharashtra ranks second among all the states in the number of complaints filed by Scheduled Castes. In the 1970s, some particularly brutal assaults came to light. In a 1972 case, the so-called suicide of a Mahar-Buddhist boy in Nagpur district was discovered to have been a ritual murder. Buddhists are often singled out as targets of violence. In a macabre compilation of atrocities committed against them since



The Hindu caste system as depicted by Gobi David, a dalit artist. From top: Brahmins; warriors and merchants; shudras and peasants; and untouchables.

independence, a noted Buddhist scholar lists ritual murder, blinding, burning, and rape. These incidents are not confined to villages. A caste-Hindu mob attacked a Buddhist neighborhood in a Bombay suburb in 1974, and a government inquiry concluded that the riot was tantamount to a caste war. Four years later, riots erupted in Aurangabad and rapidly spread into the adjoining rural areas. These incidents arose over renaming Marathwada University, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University.

The continuing violence, the latest of which took place just last year in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, demonstrates the strength of caste prejudice in Indian society. Despite the proclamation of their Buddhist identity, the converts are still regarded and treated as untouchables by most Hindus. Thirty years has not been long enough to change that. Still, the number of the converted grows. Some five million Buddhists now make up more than 8 percent of the population of Maharashtra. These people call themselves Buddhists despite the personal struggles this commitment often entails. "I am a Buddhist now," wrote one. "I am not a Mahar or an untouchable, not even a Hindu. I have become a human being." □

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