Original Article

'*The people know they need religion in order to develop*': Religion's Capacity to Inspire People in Pune's Slums

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Abstract People's understanding of their own situation, ideas about a better life and strategies for achieving their visions are influenced, among other things, by religious values and beliefs, with implications for the objectives and strategies of state and non-government development actors. Semi-ethnographic research in two slum settlements in Pune, Maharashtra, sought to understand whether and how religion influenced and shaped people's ideas about how to pursue development. The research focused on poor Hindu and Buddhist Dalit communities. Unsurprisingly, the people interviewed linked their lack of social and economic development to caste prejudice. Despite agreement that caste was a barrier to equality, however, different responses to it were expressed. Building upon ideas put forth by Appadurai (2004), we analyse the ways in which people exercise varying forms of non-economic capital to achieve social recognition and equality, which are believed to underpin development more generally.

La perception qu'ont les gens de leur propre situation, leurs idées concernant leur mode de vie optimale, ainsi que les stratégies à mettre en œuvre afin de réaliser leurs visions sont souvent influencées – entre autre – par des valeurs et croyances religieuses, ce qui implique des conséquences pour les objectifs et les stratégies des acteurs étatiques et non gouvernementaux du développement. Des recherches semi-ethnographiques effectuées dans deux bidonvilles de Pune, dans l'Etat du Maharastra, en Inde, ont cherché à déterminer dans quelle mesure la religion influençait et façonnait les idées des habitants concernant leurs perception du développement, ainsi que la meilleure manière de le promouvoir. Ces recherches se sont concentrées sur des communautés pauvres de Dalits hindous et bouddhistes. Comme on pouvait s'y attendre, les personnes interrogées évoquent un lien entre leur faible développement économique et social et les préjugés de caste. Bien qu'il soit universellement reconnu que le système de caste constitue un obstacle de taille pour le développement, les solutions exprimées concernant le phénomène variaient, et en nous appuyant sur les idées de Appadurai (2004), nous analysons comment différents individus exploitent différentes formes de capital non économique afin de promouvoir leur reconnaissance et l'égalité sociale, que nous considérons, plus globalement, comme étant à la base du développement.

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Introduction

This article explores how Hindu and Buddhist Dalits[1] living in Pune's slums understand, relate to and challenge the world in which they live. We present in this article a link between Dalits' visions of (or hopes for) their socio-economic futures, and specific cultural, religious and spiritual ideas that emerged during our discussions with them. Specifically, we aim to demonstrate how Hindu and Buddhist Dalits relate to their religious identities in strategic attempts to improve their lives. This analysis draws on and applies

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Appadurai's (2004) notion of culture as possessing the 'capacity to aspire'. By this he means that culture has been underestimated in terms of its potential to motivate and help people to shape positive visions of the future. He is critical of the heavy emphasis western development policy places on economic solutions, which often describe culture as part of the problem, holding people in their past and 'backward' traditions (Appadurai, 2004). In our analysis, we essentially take Appadurai's theory for a test drive, applying it to the data from Pune and evaluating its applicability in this new context.

Our findings support Appadurai's (2004) argument that culture should be analysed more carefully within development research, because of its critical role in shaping people's visions of possible futures. Appadurai (2004, p. 60) notes that culture has long been associated with 'pastness' (that is, tradition, habit), whereas 'development is always seen in terms of the future – plans, hopes, goals, targets'. He argues, quite rightly, that development research would benefit greatly from a more nuanced understanding of the relationality of cultural norms, values and beliefs about how life should/could be. Further to this is Appadurai's (2004) critical argument that strategic approaches to development can be found within broader frames of cultural consensus, and thus that the most locally appropriate development visions and approaches tend to emanate from within cultural structures. We argue that religion, as an inseparable partner of culture, should be studied carefully in this capacity. In our research, we found religion to emerge through devotional practices, cosmological concepts about the world and spirituality, as the inner experiential dimension to religion. The article ultimately expands upon Appadurai's (2004) analytical frame, suggesting that aspects of religion, including both spiritual and socio-political dimensions, represent sources of capital that can go towards envisioning and 'purchasing' development, particularly in terms of social recognition. If mobilized, therefore, this capital carries the potential to transform communities and societies.

India is a country with high levels of religiosity, and at the outset of the research we hypothesized that this would be replicated among slum residents. Once we established that this was indeed the case, we sought to understand how religious values and beliefs are reflected in the way that members of these Dalit communities view the world and negotiate their place in it. Further to this, the research investigated whether religion provides people with ways of accessing symbolic and social resources. The research adopted a semi-ethnographic approach that focused on religion as a key dimension, influencing how people relate to socio-economic development concerns that, according to people in Pune's slums, are conceptually framed by issues of caste discrimination.

The article is divided into three parts: the first presents background information regarding our methodology and the context of our field sites. We then move on to consider the data provided by Hindu informants in relation to Appadurai's (2004) theoretical model, essentially arguing that, although they do seek socio-economic change, they are not thinking outside of their religious/cultural system, and are thus limited in their 'capacity to aspire' for radical change. Proceeding to a discussion of Buddhist informants, we argue that their religious conversion has enabled them to create and articulate a different way of being that rejects oppressive aspects of cultural/religious practices, namely, caste. They have essentially pushed and reshaped the boundaries of their religious/cultural environment. We apply various aspects of Appadurai's (2004) model, including the 'capacity to aspire', 'voice' and 'recognition', concluding that these concepts are in fact useful in our analysis of the Pune data. However, we also note that the model has certain shortcomings in that it does not go far enough in identifying the different forms of capital available to Hindu and Buddhist Dalits. The conclusion offers a summary of the key

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findings and considers how practitioners of development may be able to use religion as a vehicle to inspire movement towards the achievement of local development goals, especially in the context of social justice.

Methodology and Background Information

Established slum settlements in Pune are mixed communities, generally with a Hindu and Buddhist majority and a Christian and Muslim minority. Although many Dalits from the locally dominant Mahar caste (to which our informants almost exclusively belonged) have converted to Buddhism,[2] many continue solely to observe Hindu practices. In order to understand the role that religion plays in the lives of the poor, the research aimed to reflect at least some of this diversity, and to examine the popular movement of Dalits from their traditional Hinduism to the Buddhist religion. The two settings, a slum settlement near the suburb of Dapodi and a second in the Vishrantwadi area, were selected to ensure that diverse insights, views and experiences were captured, to enable a complex investigation of how people describe their current circumstances and visualize their futures. In order to gain access to the slums, we asked for the help of two new Buddhist organizations: The Deepak Project, part of Bahujan Hitay, and Manuski. Employees from these organizations initially introduced us to members of the slum communities in which they worked and helped us establish connections with informants, who then invited us to spend time with them in their homes.

Our work concentrated on two of the main religious traditions in these settings: Hinduism and Buddhism.[3] The findings presented in this article were gathered between November 2008 and October 2009 during a total of 8 weeks of fieldwork. Three periods of fieldwork were conducted by the two authors with the support of local interpreters. We sought to take a semi-ethnographic approach and did not conduct formal interviews, instead entering into many informal conversations with people, attempting through these interactions to draw out key information in relation to our research questions. We then complemented the insights gained through these conversations with observations of how people used community shrines and interacted with religious symbols. In addition to this informally gathered data, we also spoke with key figures in the two Buddhist organizations that helped us gain access to the slum sites. We supplemented these insights with an analysis of the organizations' grey literature. A total of approximately 100 interactions were conducted and recorded in a research journal. These conversations varied in length, some long and in-depth, and others amounting to fairly brief exchanges.

Hindu Dalits: Negotiating within the Boundaries of Their Religious/Cultural System

Traditional Indian sociology (for example, Weber, 1966) assumed that religious concepts such as *karma* (action that breeds results) and *dharma* (social duty) prevent Hindus from seeking social change; it was asserted that Hindus both view inequality as a deserved result of actions in previous births (*karma*) and believe that they must fulfil the duties ascribed to them as their caste-based birth right (*dharma*).[4] This 'armchair' sociological view has since been challenged on many fronts, and modern theories now insist that low caste and Dalit people do not in fact accept social stigma and poverty as their due (for an overview of research on caste, see, for example, Beteille, 1996, Breckenridge and van der Veer, 1993; Deliege, 1992; Dirks, 2001, Fuller, 1996; Searle-Chatterjee and Sharma, 1994). The Hindu

informants in our study voiced dissent when questioned about the fairness of their socially degrading caste position, stating that unjust caste-based discrimination both caused and maintained their poverty.

In this context, an interesting disparity was observed between the responses of Hindu and Buddhist informants. Hindu informants did not argue that caste should be eradicated, and maintained that it was still necessary in order to facilitate the achievement of *karma, dharma* and ultimately *moksha*. Buddhists, as explored further below, tended to discuss caste broadly as an inherent social problem and stated that it must be removed if social justice is to be achieved. In contrast, the Hindus we spoke with were more likely to concentrate on the unfairness of their *own* caste positions rather than on the removal of the institution. In this regard, a high proportion of Hindu informants focused on comparisons between their own lifestyles and those of higher castes, noting that the behaviour of members of their own caste was as 'good' as their supposed social superiors. They made reference to typically Hindu notions of purity, such as food habits, including claims of near-vegetarianism and religious piety.[5]

There was nothing in our discussions to suggest that these Hindu slum dwellers have engaged with a revision of *meaning* related to social subordination, for example they still tend to accept broader Hindu caste-based concepts of pollution and honour. In broaching issues such as (traditionally 'pure', and thus respectable) vegetarianism, for instance, they were arguing that as a caste they did not deserve their low position within the hierarchy, by striving to indicate their possession of a level of embodied cultural capital that contradicts their Dalit status. It would appear, therefore, that our Hindu respondents were engaged to some extent in a process of Sanskritization (Srinivas, 1989), as opposed to identifying with a wholesale war against the caste system as an institution (see also Moffat, 1979; Mosse, 1994).[6] Furthermore, while studies such as Moffat's (1979) famous work on caste-based consensus focus purely on traditional notions of honour and purity, our Hindu informants also referred to what we may think of as 'secular' development concerns. People were keen to highlight family members' (most often young sons') attainment of education, and noted that educational achievements (traditionally the preserve of higher castes) should further ensure not only material growth, but also their caste's social progress within the existing system.

How should we best explain these Dalits' acceptance of traditional concepts of purity, honour and so on, which have traditionally oppressed them? Appadurai offers one view when he argues that, in their relationship with cultural norms, 'the very poor, in any society, tend to oscillate between "loyalty" and "exit" ' (2004, p. 69; cf. Hirschman 1970). In other words, Appadurai believes that poor people everywhere have an unpredictable and yet 'black and white' engagement with cultural norms, which sees them moving erratically between total acceptance/compliance and radical rejection. Appadurai (2004, p. 65) thus opines that:

> many untouchables in India comply with the degrading exclusionary rules and practices of caste because they subscribe in some way to the larger order of norms and metaphysical propositions which dictate their compliance.

This is not applicable to our Hindu informants in Pune, however. The Hindus with whom we spoke may have accepted the 'larger order of norms and metaphysical propositions' surrounding caste as an institution, but they certainly do not comply with the degrading rules or practices related to their own caste position: in fact, they aim to challenge the idea that they should be seen as 'low' caste at all.

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Rather ironically, we believe that a better explanatory framework for this situation can be derived from different arguments of Appadurai (2004), to be found within the same paper. In his discussion of the 'capacity to aspire', which he views as a cultural capacity tied in with social norms and ideologies, Appadurai (2004) argues that aspirations for a 'good life' are inevitably located within cultural paradigms. People's capacities for aspiration are shaped by the experiences and opportunities that they have previously been exposed to within their cultural environments (with this rationale, he also reasons that the rich are more capable of aspiration than the poor). For Appadurai (2004), therefore, the poor have weaker 'navigational maps' with which to envisage potential roads to socio-economic progress, and as such they are restricted by their own limited, culturally defined experience.

This theory helps to illuminate the fact that Hindu Dalits are pushing for their own development according to their culturally demarcated 'navigational maps', which do not offer them a believably viable alternative to concepts of caste hierarchy. Therefore, in an effort to improve their own socio-economic positions, the Hindu Dalits to whom we spoke are trying to manufacture cultural capital in order to navigate their way to the 'good' end of the system within which they already exist, as opposed to challenging the system itself. The development vision that they have is therefore bounded by the caste system.

It must be emphasized, however, that this acceptance of the institution of caste is certainly not to be mistaken for passive victimhood; many Hindu Dalits are vocal about the injustice they face, and challenge it with the resources available to carve out a better existence. They hope to achieve respect for who they are, and inclusion into wider society with access to equal opportunities. These demands overlap with those of the Buddhist Dalits discussed below, but stop short of the idea that the Hindu tradition, specifically the caste system, is to blame for their misfortune. Rather for our Hindu informants, their 'wrongful' positioning within the system is the problem to be addressed in the struggle for development.

Buddhist Dalits: Redrawing the Religious/Cultural Lines

A consequence of this understanding is the emergence of an important question: how may oppressed communities be inspired to see an alternative to the cultural 'truths' within which they are so entrenched?

We believe that an understanding of how more radical challenges to the status quo emerge can be achieved by applying Appadurai's (2004) theoretical model of development. In order for oppressed people to aspire beyond the immediate cultural boundaries of their experience, he argues that cultural norms that limit 'navigation' towards development have to be challenged. One aim of development must therefore be to remove cultural constraints by challenging the norms that restrict people, although this should certainly not be interpreted to mean that culture should be 'targeted' as antithetical to development. As Appadurai (2004) argues, new beliefs may have to be fostered in communities through conscious intervention, but these need not be 'foreign' interventions, as all cultures are infinitely re-interpretable and full of possibilities for alternative visions of potential futures (Peach, 2000; Tynedale, 2003). For Appadurai (2004), all aspiration is inevitably culture-driven, and thus development projects must find ways to facilitate new forms of aspiration *within* cultural structures. In this framework, culturally established and recognizable language and concepts can be used successfully to enable a new 'consensus' that embodies

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the 'transformation of core norms that surround the poor in any particular sociocultural regime' (Appadurai, 2004, p. 81), and thereby to promote new, wider-reaching ambitions.

So exactly how is the 'consensus' to be created, which is needed to underpin the new 'capacity to aspire'? Appadurai (2004, p. 83) argues that this is best done through 'the deliberate orchestration of forms of language and special social performances which we could loosely refer to as "ritualized"λ'. This, we would like to argue, is exactly what was achieved by Dr B.R. Ambedkar, the Maharashtrian Dalit who, in the 1950s, forever changed the face of caste politics.

Navayana Buddhism: Facilitating the 'Capacity to Aspire'

Ambedkar, who was born into the Mahar caste, dedicated his career to achieving social equality for low-caste and 'untouchable' people like himself. A high-profile intellectual, lawyer and politician, Ambedkar was a patriotic Indian, even involved in drafting the Constitution of India at the time of his country's independence from colonial rule. He was, however, deeply critical of the culture and religion that had for so long suppressed and degraded his ancestors. He therefore sought to challenge endemic sociocultural inequalities, but was determined to do this on Indian terms, without resorting to alien cultural/religious paradigms.

Acknowledging that religion was a core aspect of Indian lives, including those of poor untouchable communities, Ambedkar searched for a religion to replace Hinduism, which he unreservedly blamed for the existence of caste prejudice (Ambedkar, 1936; Keer, 1962; Fitzgerald, 2000; Beltz, 2004). He recognized the potential of religion as a source of inspiration, and saw its potential as a mobilizer, rather than simply as a coping mechanism to be used within an unforgiving social environment. He turned to Buddhism, another ancient Indian religion, believing it to be the most egalitarian of all faiths (Ahir, 1990). However, he drew out only those features of Buddhist philosophy that applied directly to his political ambitions (Queen, 1996; Beltz, 2004), using the Buddha's teachings to articulate a message of anti-Brahminism, and to advocate a pragmatic approach to the achievement of social equality. In an effort to concretize this new form of Buddhism that he promoted for his poor followers, Ambedkar compiled a book entitled *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957), which is clearly intended to provide an all-encompassing guide for Dalit converts. Above all, he presented his Buddhism as a religion founded on egalitarian morality and ethics (Ambedkar, 1957; Contursi, 1989; Queen, 1996; Fitzgerald, 1997, 1999, 2000; Sumant, 2004; Zelliot, 2004).

Ambedkar's Navayana Buddhism is a perfect example of consensus building affected by, in Appadurai's (2004, p. 83) terms, 'the deliberate orchestration of forms of language and special social performances which we could loosely refer to as "ritualized"λ'. Ambedkar (1957) manipulated the language of Buddhism to create an entirely new platform from which to pursue his political goals. His interpretation of *karma*, for instance, relocated the concept from the past to the present: unlike in other Buddhist traditions, Navayana *karma* operates solely in the current lifespan, preventing the belief that the present disadvantage has been caused by long-forgotten past lives. As we have outlined in more detail elsewhere (Bhatewara and Bradley, 2012), our research suggested that Ambedkar's reinterpretation and subsequent promotion of traditional philosophical ideas like *karma* are the lynchpins of contemporary Dalit Buddhist activism. Trust in his interpretation of *karma*, for example, provides people with hope, which is crucial for the energy needed to pursue development. This hope stems from the belief that efforts will

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reap results in the current lifetime, thereby motivating the poor to persist in their struggles against material and social degradation.

Similarly, Ambedkar's interpretation of compassion (*karuna*), a concept very much at the core of 'traditional' Buddhist teachings, also serves to promote Dalit activism. The concept of compassion in 'traditional' Buddhist schools is connected to the cultivation of a particular mindset within the individual, which ultimately leads to his/her enlightenment. As King (2009) notes, the concept is closely linked to the ultimate aim of eradicating ego – as one strives to care more for the well-being of others, one focuses less and less upon one's own desires. In modern 'engaged' Buddhist schools, however, the concept is reinterpreted to 'translate the wisdom and compassion that Buddhists strive to develop into concrete action on behalf of all sentient beings' (King, 2009, p. 4). Navayana Buddhism is no exception; for Ambedkar's followers, compassion is the core aspect of spirituality, and it follows that if compassion is practical, then so is spirituality.

During our research, both slum dwellers and NGO workers explained their understanding of spirituality in terms of helping others and spreading justice, illustrating the close relationship between their religious and political lives. In an interview with one staff member of a Buddhist organization, for example, the subject of his understanding of Buddhism and its relevance to his life as an 'ex-untouchable Dalit' was broached. This man is an activist to the core; his entire life is concerned with the caste struggle. Explaining his understanding of Buddhism as a system of 'practical spirituality', he argued that, although prayer and meditation are valuable and admirable, there is little merit in them while others are suffering. He gave the example of the tsunami relief efforts in 2004, claiming that British and American aid reached the Andaman and Nicobar Islands before any real Indian assistance, asserting that this happened because the Hindu beliefs of most Indians prevented any useful action being taken quickly. According to this man, influential Hindus assumed that a natural disaster on the scale of the tsunami could only have been caused by an excessive accumulation of *pap* (sin) in the world, with the result that their immediate response was to perform cleansing rituals before offering practical help to those in need.[7] He described these beliefs with disdain, asserting that Buddhists would never think in such terms, because of their belief in the primacy of human beings and their needs:

> Untouchables, Dalits, or we may say the Buddhists, understand real spirituality. Real spirituality is about making people human and activating them for the social cause.

For this man, Buddhism is a religion of practicality, politics and social change. Spirituality is understood to represent compassion for people in general, displayed through activism and a struggle to eliminate suffering, whether caused by caste oppression (most commonly) or any other factor, such as a natural disaster. Such views were shared by most Navayana Buddhists in our study, although mostly without this respondent's antagonism towards Hinduism.

Even this brief consideration of Ambedkar's presentation of select Buddhist principles shows how his Buddhism facilitates the 'capacity to aspire'. Spirituality is turned by Ambedkar into something that validates hope, and culturally endorses the struggle for social and material progress outside the confines of the caste system.

Seeking 'Recognition'

Of course, an increased 'capacity to aspire' does not automatically lead to actual social change or material development. It is, however, a starting position on the road to what

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Appadurai (2004) calls 'recognition'. He borrows this term from Charles Taylor (1992), whose concept of 'recognition', located within the wider sphere of multiculturalism, essentially comprises a demand for a politics of difference.[8] Taylor (1992, p. 25) argues that:

> a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.

This certainly seems applicable to Dalits, who were traditionally depicted as ritually impure and unworthy, and were subsequently oppressed in psychological, economic and physical terms by the rest of Hindu society (Keer, 1962; Zelliot, 1992; Jodhka and Kumar, 2010). Indeed, it is in this context that Buddhism shows itself to be a psychological tool for Dalits, which has assisted in fostering self-esteem and the will to strive for deep-seated social change.

It is evident that Navayana Buddhism serves a vital psychological function, widening the 'navigational maps' of Dalits and thus increasing their 'capacity to aspire'. In this light, Dr Joseph D'Souza, international president of the Dalit Freedom Network, states that:

> *Changing their religion means they – and more important, their children – think of themselves differently… This mental change impacts on their behaviour as they attempt new careers or fight for dignity by embracing their legal rights.* (quoted in Duke, 2008)

Therefore, for many Ambedkarite Buddhists, the *immediate* benefits of conversion lie in the shift that it facilitates in attitudes related to self and community worth (Singh, 2008). The following example portrays this point clearly. Rekha is a 34-year-old married woman who lives in a slum in the Yerawada area of Pune. A domestic worker with three young children, she has little free time. However, during one of our early visits to the slum, we encountered her at the local Buddhist shrine, taking great pains to decorate its bars with flowers that she had bought herself. We spoke to her on a few occasions during later visits and also visited her home a couple of times, where we chatted with her and her mother-in-law and drank tea. Rekha described her family's adherence to Buddhism in the following words:

> This family became Buddhists in the last generation – it was the same also with my own [natal] family. We are benefitting slowly from the change … of course we are still living here! But it is true that my own children are better educated and we have higher hopes for their future because of Buddhism. We have belief now that things can change – and this is only possible because we are not Untouchables anymore. Our parents broke free of that … . So my own life – no maybe it is not much better than theirs [her Hindu neighbours] … but my children are definitely doing better because we believe it is possible. We are not Untouchables, we are Buddhists, and we know that we can come up. We can demand what is fairly ours. In that way only, our children are doing better … I go there [to the community Buddhist shrine] because it reminds me to keep the right attitudes … life is still not so easy. My husband is not always working, my father in-law is also not well. She too [indicating her mother in-law] complains of pain in the legs often. I mostly have to take care of all these people … . So I go there to the shrine and I put flowers or say some prayer. That helps me remember what he [Ambedkar] did for us, the hard work he did. He set us free, so we can also work hard to become something now. We are free now to work for our own progress.

This psychological adjustment, essentially the development of positive self-regard, is the epitome of what Appadurai (2004, p. 79) calls 'recognition from below', whereby oppressed communities recognize and project their own eligibility for respected subjectivity.

However, 'recognition' has to do with more than self-image, and thus 'recognition from below' is only part of the story. As Appadurai (2004) explains adeptly, 'recognition' also relates to how those with power interact with those without it. Naturally, the 'capacity to

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aspire' is not enough to effect development; as those in need of development do not generally have the resources necessary to develop, they need to acquire them from elsewhere. As such, they need to acquire the agreement and support of those with economic and/or social power. In 'recognizing' the intrinsic value of communities different to their own, powerful majorities are encouraged to facilitate (or at the very least to stop actively preventing) the proactive, self-led development of those other communities.

The subjects of Appadurai's (2004) own study aimed to convince aid donors to allow them to run their own building projects, something that they could achieve by insisting upon their abilities vocally and persistently. These people ultimately gained the respect of economically powerful people by demonstrating those abilities, and upon gaining the trust of the donors they were able to take charge of their own development. Although Appadurai (2004) focuses on 'recognition' as an almost singular key to progressing development with the assistance of powerful actors, our data suggest that such an interpretation may be somewhat narrow. Our research among Navayana Buddhists in Pune indicated that the Ambedkarite struggle for socio-economic progress has had a complex relationship with the politics of difference. Appadurai (2004, p. 65) claims that the poor generally aim tactically to improve the 'terms of trade between recognition and redistribution' in their lives, and we certainly do not disagree with this. However, Ambedkar and his followers have actually trod a calculated and shrewd line between the politics of difference on one side, and cultural capital on the other. Arguably, these are conflicting concepts, and yet Navayana Buddhists have managed to benefit from them both.

The Mechanics of Recognition

Before we look at the specifics of this process in more detail, however, we need to think about the mechanics involved. The mechanics of 'recognition' is decidedly cultural, and is dependent to a significant extent on what Hirschman (1970) and subsequently Appadurai (2004) call 'voice'. In Hirschman's (1970) paradigm, referred to above, 'voice' is the only alternative to 'loyalty' and 'exit' in times of organizational trauma ('organizations' being any organized group, including nations or social systems). Instead of accepting the status quo or attempting to leave the system altogether, exercising 'voice' is an attempt to negotiate a better position within the current environment through debate and contestation. Appadurai (2004) applies Hirschman's (1970) model extensively, arguing that development projects must increase the ability of the poor to exercise 'voice', partly because it is a democratic necessity, but more importantly because it is the only way to discover 'locally plausible' ways to alter socio-economic dynamics: to gain the 'recognition' that is so important for development. Crucially, Appadurai (2004, p. 67) also argues that 'voice' has to be located within the culture in which it is exercised:

> to take effect, it must engage social, political, and economic issues in terms of ideologies, doctrines, and norms which are widely shared and credible, even by the rich and powerful. Furthermore, voice must be expressed in terms of actions and performances which have local cultural force … . Likewise, as the poor seek to strengthen their voices as a cultural capacity, they will need to find those levers of metaphor, rhetoric, organization, and public performance that will work best in their cultural worlds.

Keeping these ideas in mind, let us now think about the ways in which Buddhist Dalits have tried to achieve 'recognition' in their quest for socio-economic justice.

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In terms of the politics of difference, Dalit conversion to Buddhism has been an obvious attempt to demand 'recognition' as a distinct community with its own characteristics. It has been important for Buddhist Dalits to have a platform from which to declare independence from the unjust Hindu paradigm of caste. As one Buddhist male put it:

> Only by saying 'we are no more one of you' could we shake off the discrimination.

Thus, the converted Buddhists sought 'recognition' from those in positions of social and economic power by removing themselves from the identification system that oppressed them. In adopting an entirely new social identity as Buddhists, they tried to reinvent themselves, shedding their traditional image as the lowly, polluting part of Hindu society and adopting the new identity of a parallel community seeking to engage with the Hindu majority on equal terms. Exercising 'voice' through the language of religion has obvious cultural value. In the words of a Dalit NGO worker:

> Indians have a long history of religion. Hinduism is the oldest religion in the world, and the Indian people have always been pious people. Now, some say this is changing … maybe it is, but not as quickly as they say. In fact the respect that Indians have for religion still goes further than anything else. In that way, Buddhism has given us [Dalits] a way to fight fire with fire. If we fight caste with just our own words, will they listen? No. But thanks to Babasaheb [Ambedkar] we can fight it with Buddhism, with words coming from Buddha himself.

Unfortunately, however, the quest for a politics of difference has arguably been fairly ineffective, for there is little evidence that the Hindu majority actually views Dalit Buddhists any differently than it does Hindu Dalits. In fact, we listened to many stories of caste-based injustice from Buddhists, which highlighted the fact that, despite the claims that people often make about Buddhism's innate liberatory capacity, conversion to Buddhism does not automatically relieve converted Dalits of discrimination.

Rekha's neighbour, Mala, told us an indicative story. Like Rekha, Mala is in her mid-thirties, and is married with two school-aged daughters.

> I have two jobs. I am working as a servant-maid [domestic servant] in two houses. My employers are good – I eat there in the mornings, I play with the children sometimes also. They have given me nice saris at the festivals, and when their sons got married … . They are good people. Sometimes I help with cooking also … . One earlier employer was not good – she did not permit me to enter the kitchen. She also shouted if I entered her bedroom without her, because she was thinking I would take something. She had a different woman to cook, I only cleaned the floors. She did not allow me to enter the kitchen because she is a Brahmin. You see, earlier we people [Dalits] had to suffer this treatment, it was the normal thing. Now we are not Untouchables, now we do not accept. If we accept it, then how can we keep his picture [indicating Ambedkar's portrait] in our homes? We are not Untouchables, we are Buddhists. There is no caste for us. So I did not stay in that house long, and now I have better people [employers] … they talk to me like a human being.

From stories like this, it is clear that 'recognition from below' does not necessarily lead to 'recognition' from 'above'. Navayana Buddhists are achieving results, but slowly. Ambedkarite NGOs do implement successful and important development projects geared towards the attainment of social justice for oppressed sections of society,[9] but their aim to tap into a politics of difference, whereby Hindu caste society shows respect for the Navayana Buddhist community as a distinct and equal social minority, has so far not been particularly effective.

Our discussions with Navayana Buddhists indicated that their aim is to achieve society-wide acceptance of a politics of difference, which would paint them as an equally worthy community and yet one with specific socio-economic needs (Young, 1990). However, the

stories that they narrated also signalled that, in reality, many of the gains they have made from religious conversion have come through the pursuit of a particular form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1983). Generally speaking, if the politics of difference is understood to mean respect for individual group identities and the comprehension of unique group needs, then 'cultural capital' should be a relatively incompatible concept, as it works on the basis of power relationships within a *singular* cultural group. We have found, however, that both operate concurrently in the lives of our Dalit informants. We will discuss this briefly now, before drawing the article to a conclusion.

Extending Appadurai's Model to Include Religious/Spiritual Capital[10]

In this final section of the article, we argue that Appadurai's theory, which has been used effectively to account for the empirical data presented in the main body of the article, does not actually stretch far enough to explain Dalits' multifaceted use of Buddhism in their social struggle. We thus suggest the extension of Appadurai's theoretical model to include the concept of cultural capital, and in this context particularly one subtype of cultural capital: religious/spiritual capital.

A particularly skilful aspect of Ambedkar's adoption of religious conversion as a political tool was that it did not automatically exclude those Hindus who chose not to pursue it. Although converted Dalits aim to present themselves as a separate social group outside the Hindu fold, their adoption of Buddhism has in fact allowed them to remain within the wider Indian philosophical tradition. If they had converted to Christianity or Islam, this would not have been the case, but Buddhism emerged directly from Hinduism, and despite some important differences these religions share many of the same concepts and ideals.[11] Indeed, Buddhism is even viewed as a sect of Hinduism by some Hindu commentators (for example, Golwalkar, 1966), and the Buddha is frequently depicted as an incarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu, one of the most widely worshipped divinities in Hinduism. As one of our Buddhist informants noted, the fact that Navayana Buddhists have based their anti-caste philosophy on the Buddha's teachings makes it more difficult for Hindus to reject that philosophy outright:

> Even Hindus say Buddha is Vishnu, so they must respect what he says.

In their promotion of Buddhist ideals, which are supposedly venerated by the Hindu majority as part of their own wider philosophical tradition, these Dalits are therefore demonstrating a movement towards the culturally valued, or so-called 'refined', perspectives that exemplify embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1983).

We believe that it may be useful to make this argument more precise, however, by locating our informants' responses within the frameworks of what other authors have (sometimes interchangeably) termed 'religious' or 'spiritual' capital. By focusing in on 'religion' or 'spirituality' as a specific manifestation or subtype of cultural capital, these authors have sought to demonstrate in more specific language how people gain from explicitly religious/spiritual beliefs and participation. No author has yet presented a theory that we consider definitive, and as a result we prefer to borrow from two different perspectives here, that of Stark and Finke (2000) and that of Verter (2003).

First, for Stark and Finke (2000, p. 120):

> Religious capital consists of the degree of mastery of and attachment to a particular religious culture.

For our analysis of Dalit Buddhism, the most useful aspect of Stark and Finke's (2000) theory is the emphasis that they place on the affective dimension of religious belief. The emotional bond that individuals feel with their religion can take many forms. For some, a feeling of connection with the divine can undoubtedly facilitate both hope/ambition and inner calm (Narayan, 2000). For others, such as our Dalit informants, a political ideology that promotes dignity is made especially valuable because it is framed in religious terms. At a fundamental level, Dalits' emotional bond is with the battle for social justice, and this is justified through its location within a religious framework (Buddhism) that is culturally valued. Such an understanding of religious/spiritual capital ties in with the arguments made earlier in the paper about the psychological effects of religious conversion, in terms of 'recognition from below'. By validating Dalits' pleas for social equality in a culturally appropriate way, Ambedkar's Buddhism has enabled Dalits to believe (or perhaps we should say it has 'purchased' them the ability to believe) unequivocally in their own value as human beings.

The difficulty that we have in employing Stark and Finke's (2000) theory of religious capital in its entirety, however, arises from their understanding of the concept as 'explain[ing] the religious activity and satisfaction of individuals' (Finke, 2003, p. 3); they present religious capital as a means to provide satisfaction and maintain the status quo. This is obviously problematic if we wish to use the theory in relation to social struggles, and in this regard Verter's (2003) definition, which posits religiosity as a site of social conflict, is more useful. Stark and Finke (2000) recognize that 'mastery' of religious knowledge is inherent in religious capital, but Verter (2003) takes this further by arguing that the possession of religious knowledge and devotion can be recognized as a matter of discernment, and thus as a symbol of status within dominance related struggles. As Verter (2003, p. 159) argues, religious knowledge and a projected spiritual outlook is:

> a measure of not only position, but also disposition; it is the knowledge, abilities, tastes and credentials an individual has amassed in the field of religion … . Its efficacy resides in the fact that it … is mistaken for competence within a naturalized social order. (Verter, 2003, p. 159; our italics)

Spiritual learnedness, proficiencies and inclinations may, as Verter (2003) claims, be valued as important resources in the symbolic economy, and indeed on the symbolic battlefield. Importantly, however, this is valid only within a cultural framework that recognizes/values the specifics of that type of religiosity/spirituality. In this context, it may be argued that by retaining their position *within* the sphere of indigeneous Indian philosophy, Dalits are managing to create and benefit from a religious/spiritual capital that was entirely unavailable to them before their conversion to Buddhism.

According to one Buddhist Dalit activist and NGO worker:

> It is harder for them to ignore us, or dismiss us as ignorant because we are educated in the same ideas as theirs. Babasaheb's [Ambedkar's] teachings show the real, the correct way to use Hindu ideas [e.g. karma, dharma etc]; that is in ways that benefit all people equally as human beings. Our job as activists is to show them ['oppressive' Hindus] that they have not understood those principles correctly. The Buddha said all people are equal. To treat any person badly, as in the caste system, will get you bad karma.

This informant's argument is therefore that 'mastery' of their new religion, which creates embodied religious/spiritual capital, has gained Buddhist Dalits the (although reluctant) respect of caste Hindus. He believes that higher caste Hindus will essentially be forced to show Dalits more respect as a consequence of their newfound ability to advocate a well-established and locally revered religious ideology in service of their own position.

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Indeed, he is even saying that Dalits' 'mastery' of Buddhist ideology will place them in a position to be society's moral teachers and reformers.

Although it would be over-optimistic to claim that the newly acquired respect from caste Hindus is far-reaching, it is nevertheless an important beginning in the Dalits' struggle for social acceptance. As Jayasree, a slum resident, succinctly stated:

> We are still Dalits to them. But to them we are better Dalits than before, when we were Hindus, because of our Buddhist philosophy. And eventually, who knows what will happen?

In other words, by claiming a level of spiritual insight and practice, they are able to command respect from those outside of their own traditional caste grouping. Again, although this expression of spiritual capital has not managed to eradicate caste hierarchies, one Dalit NGO worker described it as *the first step in our struggle*.

Conclusion

The aim of all our Dalit informants, both Hindu and Buddhist, is to achieve 'recognition', although the precise forms of 'recognition' that they seek are not the same. Hindus have sought social mobility through the pursuit of a politically limited form of embodied cultural capital; by emulating the preferences and behaviours of higher castes (Sanskritization), they hope to be 'recognized' as a respectable community within the Hindu hierarchy. In contrast, Navayana Buddhist discourse facilitates the consensus needed to instigate a political battle for pro-Dalit socio-economic change, and provides a culturally appropriate narrative or 'voice' (Hirschman, 1970) for this political struggle. In using religious conversion in this way, Ambedkar did not ask his followers to reject or step outside of their cultural world, but merely to see religion as possessing the capacity and potential to support real and lasting development.

Our data suggest that Appadurai's (2004) notion of cultural capital needs to be extended. We found in Pune's slums multiple examples of the attempted acquirement and utilization of cultural capital, including religious/spiritual capital. The ability to pinpoint religious/spiritual capital within wider frames of cultural capital is important if the complex ways in which different groups exercise their agency is to be understood. It is also important to develop Appadurai's (2004) model if we are to reach a more accurate picture of development processes as internally dynamic, rather than always imposed by outside experts. Appreciation of development as something often, if not in the main, successfully initiated from the grassroots through the utilization of cultural resources already available is vital if longer-term social transformation is to be achieved. The imposition of western development values and concepts has been shown again and again not to work. Primarily, this top-down approach fails because it does not fully engage with the realities of how inequalities impact on peoples' day-to-day lives, and is unable to formulate a response that reflects and values the worldviews of those involved.

Religion in our study became the tool through which Buddhist Dalits, under Ambedkar's leadership, challenged the sociocultural status quo and became psychologically motivated, freed from their low-caste identity. This liberation has enabled Buddhist Dalits to exert socio-political agency in a more meaningful, further-reaching capacity than their Hindu counterparts. We also found that religious/spiritual capital underpins the Buddhist Dalit platform (profoundly so in the case of activists), providing a way for people to exhibit their inner abilities and potential. By demonstrating high levels of religiosity/spirituality,

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they can also demand respect as intelligent and knowledgeable people whose political demands should be listened and adhered to.

Diverse forms of capital represent invaluable resources in the wider context of social development. For development practitioners looking in on the obvious social deprivation of Pune's poor, an understanding of how individuals use available forms of capital to negotiate and challenge injustice should feed into the goals and design of projects. Development workers may not need to raise awareness within communities about the subordination they face, and they may not need to suggest ways of challenging it; instead, they simply need to work alongside local people, supporting the (cultural) agency and strategies already being employed by them. Money spent on consciousness-raising is thus unnecessary in this context; cultures and religions provide natural arenas within which individuals reflect on and acknowledge the injustices they experience. Development workers bring material capital that, if combined with other local forms of cultural capital, including the religious/spiritual manifestation, brings the potential to produce lasting transformation. Indeed, the very fact that Dalit Buddhists now run NGOs working alongside their own communities is testament that direct interventions are not always necessary. The Dalit activists and development workers with whom we spoke talked about their frustrations of being constrained by the goals of donors (secular and faith-based), who they felt did not fully understand the level and extent of the injustice facing Pune's slum dwellers. The lessons for development practitioners on the outside seem clear: stand back, listen, observe and support.

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Notes

1. 'Dalit' literally means 'downtrodden' or 'oppressed' in the Marathi language. The term has been widely adopted to describe members of formerly 'untouchable' communities as part of their political stance against caste discrimination. Our informants were all members of the Mahar caste, the biggest Dalit caste in Maharashtra, and the caste into which B.R. Ambedkar, the famous caste reformer, was born.
2. A much smaller number have also converted to other faiths, such as Christianity or Islam.
3. The Buddhist community in India is relatively small in comparison to those of other faiths, comprising only 0.77 per cent of the Indian population as a whole. Of these, the majority are located in the far north eastern reaches of the country, with a secondary concentration in Maharashatra, where they make up 6 per cent of the population, around 5.8 million people (CoI, 2001); see also Mahajan and Jodhka (2009).
4. As an aside, it should be noted that Hindu *dharma* is intrinsically caste defined and gendered; men and women have different paths to pursue through life (*svadharma*) (Leslie, 1989, 1991, 2005; Knott, 1996). Female *dharma* is termed *Stridharma* and essentially sets out a path of motherhood and domestic responsibilities. Women's religious and domestic roles converge, fulfilling dharma as a woman entails being a loyal and devoted wife. Images such as those of the goddess Sita are thought to convey idealized models of womanhood. Male *dharma* in contrast is determined largely by caste, in that men designated as twice born or *dvija* (top three *varnas*)

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are expected to pursue a series of life stages or *ashrama*, from student, to householder, husband and father to the renouncer (Flood 1996). Overall male dharma, regardless of caste, entails materially providing for the family. In this article we do not critically engage with the gendered nature of *dharma* but apply the concept generally as referring to religious duty, acknowledging that this means different things for women and men and for different male caste/*jati* groupings.

5. In this context some people (although too few to be relevant to this study) also referred to Mahar 'myths of origin', which supposedly prove their caste's, deserved place further up the hierarchy (cf. Deliege 1993; Zene 2000).
6. It was interesting for us to note that Hindu respondents often stated, almost mechanically, that the caste system was created by deceitful upper castes who wanted to discriminate against other sections of society. However, following such statements, they went on to discuss how their *own* caste does not 'belong' in the Dalit category (indicating that their own caste is 'superior' to other castes who do in fact belong in that category). The former argument is a popular political statement, but their tendency to revert to traditional notions of caste in claiming their own rightful place in society demonstrates how these people do continue to operate within traditional paradigms.
7. It must be noted that we have no evidence to prove the veracity of this claim: we simply recount it here as an example of local understandings of the connection between religion and social action/justice.
8. Following Young (1990, p. 158), we interpret the term 'politics of difference' to be the idea that 'equality as the participation and inclusion of all groups sometimes requires different treatment for oppressed or disadvantaged groups'.
9. See for example www.manuski.org
10. We draw from two theories in this section, one of which refers to 'religious' capital and the other to 'spiritual' capital, although they address largely the same issues. The question of which term is preferable is fairly complex. We do not have room to enter into this debate here, hence our use of the double term religious/spiritual capital.
11. Aside from the issue of social hierarchy, the differences between Hinduism and Buddhism tend to emerge only when the philosophies are studied in depth. The most important of these is arguably the Buddhist repudiation of God and soul. However, at the surface level, and unlike Abrahamic faiths, both traditions include belief in rebirth, *karma, dharma* and so on, as do other 'home-grown' Indian religions.

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