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Born again in the light of Buddha

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India's Untouchables are finding new hope by converting to Buddhism

A slow wave of conversions is flowing across India as thousands from the country's most excluded Dalit or "ex-Untouchable" communities seek a fresh start in life as Buddhists.

One new Buddhist is Kotesvara Rao, 29, a cook from the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, and conversion for him was a way out of hell. "My family is very, very low in the caste system. We would not be allowed to sit on a chair if higher castes were there or to share cooking utensils, and we must do all the dirty jobs," he says. "Now I am treated as a brother. Among practising Buddhists there is the real chance to be seen as an individual."

Rao was inspired by Manidhamma, an ordained Buddhist whose story embodies the new aspirations of an emerging Dalit middle class. Manidhamma was born to a Dalit family in a village where his father worked as a bonded labourer until conversion. Manidhamma trained as a pilot and his brother rose to the senior Civil Service post of district collector. These conversions — there are now some ten million Buddhists in India — are part of a small but significant return of Buddhism to India since it died out in its birthplace centuries ago, and they have reawakened debate within the Dalit population of 180 million about the persistence of caste prejudice.

Conservative Hindu society, still supported by many Brahmin teachers, emphasises a "natural hierarchy" of birth. Below the lowest rung in this caste system are those without caste, the so-called Untouchables. India's constitution outlaws caste discrimination, but despite a radical programme of positive discrimination many Dalits experience prejudice and bullying. Many, especially in villages, are denied the basics of life, from decent drinking water to education and work.

Others suffer even worse. The horrific murder of a Dalit mother, Surekha Bhotmange, and her three children after being stripped and sexually abused shocked India. The family were set upon by a gang in Maharashtra, west India, for trying to stop caste Hindus grabbing their land.

While conversion is a step to recovering human rights and dignity in Buddhism — a religion that has always rejected caste — the latest wave of conversions marks the 50th anniversary of the death, on December 6, 1956, of the great social reformer and political leader Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar.

In the opinion of Dalit groups he ranks alongside Mahatma Gandhi for his part in the reform of Hindu bigotry. Indeed, Ambedkar went further than Gandhi, asking whether a Hindu Raj

might be even more scornful of Dalit emancipation than a British one. By demanding proof of equal rights in the Indian independence movement, Ambedkar raised the aspirations of many Dalits — at last here was a Dalit leader ready to reject the iniquities of Hindu social life and even to tussle with Gandhi over Dalit emancipation.

One of Ambedkar's followers is Bodhidharma, a social activist in Pune, Maharashtra, which is a centre of Indian Buddhism. An ordained teacher in Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayak Gana (TBMSG), the Buddhist group known in the West as Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, he offers garlands to his local statue of Ambedkar and, unlike many followers, he adheres to his religious and his political teachings. "Whatever we have become, whatever we have achieved," he says, "it is all thanks to Ambedkar's inspiration to see myself differently."

Though born an Untouchable, Ambedkar rose to become India's first Law Minister and the chief architect of its new Constitution, and he fought many battles for Dalit emancipation in Nehru's first Cabinet.

His differences with Gandhi boil down to their different attitudes to caste. For Gandhi, observance of caste duties did not mean caste discrimination. He led by example, renounced caste privilege and worked for wider acceptance and respect for the human rights of Dalits, whom he dubbed Harijans, the people of God.

Ambedkar was the more radical of the two. Where Gandhi held to a romantic notion of harmonious village life, he exhorted Dalits to get out, get educated; get even. His approach yielded results, with literacy and primary education levels far higher among Buddhist groups than the average. Ambedkarite conversions are now a mass movement, with further rallies scheduled across India.

The atmosphere at Nagpur recently on the 50th anniversary of Ambedkar's own formal conversion to Buddhism just before his death rekindled his vision — but a backlash is already under way.

Despite losing the 2004 general election, the Hindu-nationalist government in Gujarat passed legislation to outlaw conversion to Buddhism and Jainism by defining them as part of Hinduism. The complicity of the state government, led by Narendra Modi, in anti-Muslim atrocities is a matter of record, and this new repression of Buddhist minorities is replicated in laws restricting conversions in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu.

But the new strength that many Dalits find in their Buddhist conversion means that they will no longer tolerate the inhumanity of caste observance. "For me Buddhist conversion is the most important thing we can do, which no one can stop," says Bodhidharma. "It teaches inner strength to treat ourselves and others with the dignity robbed from us."