

## **UNTOUCHABLE'S CONVERSION IN INDIA (WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MEHTAR CASTE)**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*As in ancient times, Mahatma Budh was the first reformer who set an example by introducing a Chandala named Sunit into his religion. Mahavir Swami initiated a Chandala named Harikesh Bal in Jainism and set a unique example for the untouchables. The varna System is based on the concept of ritual purity which cannot be identified with hygienic cleanliness. In fact, many ritually pure places and objects would be considered hygienically unhealthy. This brings to the fore the question of the fifth group which is kept outside the system viz., the 'outcastes' or the 'untouchables' while it is fairly certain that the origin of this group has an economic base i.e., division of labor and a definite function in society, the concept of impurity is linked more to the ritually dominant group i.e., the Brahmins than the economically and politically dominant group. In other words, the 'untouchables' are not outside the caste system but are essential to preserve the ritual 'Purity' of the Brahminic groups, to perform 'polluting' functions for the other groups and to continue the interdependent economic system.*

**Keywords:** Ancient Times, Untouchables, Varna System, Hygienically Unhealthy, Hygienic Cleanliness.

### **Introduction**

*Conversion is the act of adopting a new religion. People convert to different religions due to many reasons, including conversion from faith. Conversion on death bed includes for profit and matrimonial conversion and forced conversion. Different examples of conversion are seen in different periods of history. One cannot fully agree with Dumont (1970:54) when he views the caste system purely from the Brahminic point of view and says that impurity of the untouchable is conceptually inseparable from the purity of the Brahmin. "They must have been established together, or in any case, have mutually re-in forced each other, and we must get used to thinking of them together." The 'untouchables' have to be viewed as persons deprived of political and economic power. Their politico- economic subordination is crucial. Their low ritual status, while adding to their deprivation, also gives it a religious legitimation. Unlike varna, jati refers to the politico-economic domination which depended mainly on landownership and the political fluidity of pre-British India. Some studies (Davis 1951:24) indicate that the population of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh remained static at more or less 125 million from 1600 to 1800 A.D. Consequently land was abundant, and if a jati was dissatisfied with its lot and had some manoeuvrability, it could abandon its village, occupy some unused land and found a new village and establish itself as landowning group and claim a dominant status. Similarly, the king could claim special privileges because of his political domination in a society which, unlike the West, did not have a politically powerful, suprastructurally organized hierachial organization to support its priestly class against the state. Consequently, ritual superiority was rarely, if ever, linked to economic and political domination. However, as mentioned above, the religiously dominant i.e., the ritually pure group also had the function of legitimizing the political or economic dominance of the group in power. This need of legitimation rendered the ritual and secular groups interdependent since the former depended on the latter for its economic subsistence and the latter depended on the former for its survival as a dominant groups within the caste hierarchy. Thus the two dominant groups became dependent both at the infrastructural or village level and in the suprastructure of the state. As Dumont (1970:77) points out: This sort of Complementarity can lead to a real contradiction when it is a matter of completely ordering the datum in accordance with a single principle. In our case, the power exists in society, and the Brahmin who thinks in term of hierarchy knows it perfectly well; yet hierarchy cannot give a place to power as such, without contradicting its own*

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principle. Therefore, it must give place to power without saying so, and it is obliged to close its eyes to this point on pain destroying itself. In other words, once the king is made subordinate to the priest as the very existence of hierarchy presupposes, it must give him a place after the priest, and before the others, unless it is absolutely to deny the dignity and the usefulness of his function. Consequently, viewed from a ritual point of view, the king becomes the instrument through which the ritually mystified world is linked with the real world and order is maintained. Seen from a politico-economic angle, the king as the supreme judge, and the Brahmin, as the supreme counselor, ensure continuance of this social order of domination.

### The Bhangi (Mehtar) : Untouchable Caste

A caste of the removers of night soil and the cleaners of latrines belongs to a well defined group in the Indian social order. All such workers in India are today included under the general nomenclature 'The Bhangi'. For this occupational group there are various names and titles in use in different parts of the country but the better known term is "The Bhangi". Thus they are known in south India as held meaning 'cry' and that they were called so because they had to cry out to demonstrate their identity while moving on the roads. According to another theory it is derived from the word hilna meaning 'be domesticated'; another source of derivation is from hela meaning basket load or hel or hil meaning filth mud. The title for them in Gujarati is Halalkhor<sup>2</sup> - one who eats what is lawful, one whose earnings are legitimate. This euphemistic title is said to have been introduced by Emperor Akbar. 'Khakrob'<sup>3</sup> is from Persian words 'khak' meaning earth and 'rob' meaning sweeping. In the Punjab the Bhangis are known as Chuhra<sup>4</sup> and this name has been derived from their work of collecting and sweeping up scraps (Chura-harna). Similarly in Bombay they are known as Ghare<sup>5</sup> and Bhangi. The Bengali name 'Hari'<sup>6</sup> is supposed to have come from haddi-bone. The Hari was the bone gatherer and was familiar to the early settlers of Calcutta under the quaint designation of harry-wench. In Rajasthan they are called Mehtar<sup>7</sup> and this name has been derived from Persian Mehtar- prince, said to have been applied to them in derision. The Bhangis might have adopted gratifying appellations as prefixes to their caste name. thus the Bhangis of Uttar Pradesh call themselves 'Valmiki'<sup>8</sup> who are followers of Valmiki Rishi, the first Sanskrit poet and the famous author of the Ramayana. Though this caste is known by different names, the sweeper community in most states appears to have had the same stock of traditions and legends. The title Bhangi is now generally employed and has, therefore, been taken as the designation of the caste. Details regarding names have been given in the following table.

States/Union Territory	Names
Bengal <sup>9</sup>	Hari, Hadi
Uttar Pradesh	Valmiki, Dhanuk
Madhya Pradesh	Mehtar, Bhangi
Assam	Mehtar, Bhangi
Orissa	Mehtar, Bhangi, Valmiki, Madiga
Bihar <sup>10</sup>	Mehtar
Tamilnadu	Thoti
Andhra Pradesh	Madiga
Punjab	Mira, Lalbegis, Chuhra, Balashahi, Valmiki
Maharashtra <sup>11</sup>	Ghare, Bhangi
Gujarat	Halalkhor, Hela, Barwashia
Delhi <sup>12</sup>	Bhangi, Valmiki
Karnatak <sup>13</sup>	Madiga
Kerala <sup>14</sup>	Madiga
Rajasthan <sup>15</sup>	Bhangi, Mehtar, Chuhra, Valmiki

Some socio-religious reform movements have taken place among the Bhangi Caste of Rajasthan. The Arya Samaj and the Harijan Sewak Sangh that emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were concerned with one major programme - the amelioration of the depressed classes. Both the organizations concerned themselves mainly with the problem of the untouchable castes. The Arya Samaj organized socio-religious and educational programmes for the Bhangis of Jodhpur. Similarly the All India Harijan Sewak Sangh founded by Mahatma Gandhi in 1932 adopted, as its major objective, the amelioration of the condition of the untouchable caste, both the Arya Samaj and the Harijan Sewak Sangh took special interest in the upliftment of Bhangis. It is the aim of this paper to discuss the Jain movement that has emerged very recently among the Bhangis of Jodhpur, Rajasthan in terms of the factors responsible for its emergence, ideology, organization, leadership and their implications in the wider context for Indian society. We shall begin with the question.

### **Factors in the Emergence of Jain Movement**

At the point, we must discuss briefly the history of an event that took place in June 1984 among the Bhangis of Jodhpur, Rajasthan. This event is regarded as one of great socio-religious significance by the Bhangis particularly by those in Jodhpur. In June 1984, while returning back to Jodhpur, a Jain sadhvi named Kanak Prabha was reported to have stayed at a Bhangi's house in a village, situated in Jodhpur district, a village thickly populated by Jains. It is said that the Bhangi's House was so neat and clean that the sadhvi decided to stay there. When this news spread in the village, it enraged and Jains who criticized and objected to the act and condemned it. In this atmosphere of tension and commotion the sadhvi referred the whole matter to Acharya Sri Tulsi one of the leading seers of Jain dharma to avoid further escalation of tension. It was reported to us that after an interval of a few days when Acharya Sri Tulsi arrived at the village, the matter was placed before him. After hearing the whole matter in detail the Acharya it is said, not only firmly supported Sadhvi Kanak Prabha's stay at the Bhangi's house but also justified it. On the whole, though the local Jains tried to object to the sadhvi's stay, they were utterly demoralized by the presence of Acharya Sri Tulsi. An ordinary incident thus turned into a major incident of the social reform movement. We shall try to bring out the sociological relevance of an important event that took place there. Our analysis is based on published documentary sources, casual interviews with a few Bhangi leaders present and of a few other general members. We held detailed discussions with two of the leaders whom we happen to know well. Our only object of writing, is to point out to a certain definite trend taking place in the process of upward social mobility among the Bhangis their conversion to Jainism. Such a conversion assumed a great importance for the lifestyle of the Bhangis, not only because it is a great socio-religious event but also because it provided an opportunity for taking important socio-religious decisions. It is considered to be a very important occasion especially by the leaders who took this opportunity to accept Jainism.

### **The Press Conference of August, 1984**

On 18<sup>th</sup> August 1984, Naru Lal Kandara, a local Bhangi leader, convened a press conference at Hotel Gopikrishna, situated at the Sojatee Gate, Jodhpur. In the press conference Naru Lal Kandara explained and discussed in detail, the basic philosophy and tenets of Naval dharma a dharma propagated by the Bhangi Saint-reformer Naval Sahib<sup>16</sup> and his role in the socio-religious reform of the untouchables in India. When Acharya Sri Tulsi, who camped at Jodhpur during the next Chaturmas came to know of it, he called Badri Ram Maharaj- the chief Gaddi- Adhiksh of Naval dharma at Jodhpur to his camp at Tated Bhawan, Sardarpura, Jodhpur. It was the first organized meeting between Acharya Sri Tulsi and Badri Ram Maharaj. Acharya Sri Tulsi wanted to know about Mahrishi Naval and his socio-religious philosophy. According to Naru Lal Kandara, Badri Ram Maharaj could not satisfy Acharya Sri Tulsi. After an interval of three days Acharya Sri Tulsi invited Naru Lal Kandara and Kundan Dass Maharaj- an eminent Bhangi of Naval dharam – and ultimately they impressed Acharya Sri Tulsi to initiate a socio-religious reform movement among the Bhangis of Jodhpur city.

### **The Formation of the Socio-Religious Samiti**

Against this background, on the instructions of Acharya Sri Tulsi, a socio-religious reform samiti was constituted to guide and help the Bhangis in their socio-religious activities and programmes. A few Jain workers such as Mohanlal Jain and Bandhu were attached to the samiti. Kanraj Salecha Mautri of the Bhartiya Sanskar Nirman Samiti, Jodhpur, a preacher and staunch supporter of the Anuvrat campaign and social worker among the Bhangis of Jodhpur was given charge of the team.

### **The Bhartiya Sanskar Nirman Samiti, 1973**

Acharya Sri Tulsi is the founding father of the Anuvrat movement in India. The formation of the Bhartiya Sanskar Nirman Samiti in 1973 (Muni Sumermal, 1984:312-315) by Acharya Sri Tulsi was an expression of the attitude among the Terapanth Jains. Acharya Sri Tulsi felt the need of social reform among the weaker sections of society. Kanraj Salecha Mautri, who preached an unorthodox approach to the Jain religion, had become a popular figure among the Bhangis of Jodhpur. Because of his fluent and simple language, Kanraj Salecha had attracted a small following, specially from among the Bhangis in the area. He preached Jain philosophy and the basic tenets of the Anuvrat movement and bitterly criticized untouchability and other evils of modern life. As a result, pro-Jain feelings had developed among the Bhangis. Kanraj Salecha's work among the Bhangis prepared the ground for their conversion to Jainism.

### **Movement against Social Vices among the Bhangis and Socio-Cultural Changes**

In their reformist activities, social workers proceeded slowly and step by step to bring about reform among the Bhangis. Social workers went to various Bhangi bustees like Ratanada, Naval bustee, Nadi, Masuria, Rai-Ka-Bagh Harijan bustee and others to point out social evils. They urged Bhangis to sanskritise their ways of life in order to raise social status, using as their frame of reference, the Jain dharam. Some awareness and enlightenment was spread by this method. The workers meetings helped to build up contact, solidarity and recruitment and they involved more and more people in the reform activities. The proliferation of caste associations provided an organizational network. We shall now try to reconstruct the sequence of the events that produced momentum in the reformatory programme in Jodhpur.

#### **Planned efforts**

- **Ninth September, 1984**

On 9<sup>th</sup> September, during the Anuvart Welfare Week, the Anuvrat Samiti, Jodhpur, started celebrating a vice-free day. On the same day, Acharya Sri Tulsi called a meeting of the Bhangis at Tated Bhawan, Sardarpur. About 8,000 Bhangis, including women and children assembled and listened to the sermons of Acharya Sri Tulsi. In this cordial and happy atmosphere, Acharya Sri Tulsi addressing the Bhangi audience asked them to abstain from eating meat, drinking liquor and smoking. He exhorted them to lead a simple and pure life free from all vices. The assembled Bhangis were very impressed by these sermons which were a fight against orthodox ideas of pollution. The sermons also showed that it was possible for the Bhangis and other low castes to come into the fold of Jainism and achieve commendable results. The movement then concentrated on preaching and creating an atmosphere among the Bhangis for giving up social evils.<sup>17</sup>

- **Tenth September**

From 10<sup>th</sup> September onwards several Bhangi families of Jodhpur started attending the religious meetings Acharya Sri Tulsi regularly. At the end of the meeting, they used to touch the feet of Acharya Sri Tulsi to get his blessing. Acharya Sri Tulsi became responsible for a thorough transformation of the style of life involving new religious beliefs, rituals and outlook among the Bhangis. He provided an ideology that raised the self respect, honour and individual worth of every person of this caste.

- **Fifteenth September**

The newly elected samni-warg (preacher) led the socio-religious reform movement under the direction of the Tera Panth Dharam Sangh. On 15<sup>th</sup> September under the leadership of Smt. Pragyaji, the first sermon of the samni-warg was held at Ratanada Bhangi bustee in the evening, under the presidentship of Kundan Dass Maharaj- the Adhipati- Bharatiya Naval Dharam Sabha and an influential local Bhangi leader. In their speeches, the samni-wargs asked the Bhangis to abstain from eating meat and drinking liquor and smoking. They also emphasized various social reform activities. This meeting was attended by several Bhangis including women and children.

- **Nineteenth September**

The second meeting of the reform samiti was held at Pancholio-ki-Nadi and it was presided over by the local influential Bhangi leader, Nemichand Chanwaria. More than 700 Bhangis from local bustees and adjacent areas participated in it. Some of the leading exponents of Jain dharam addressed the meeting. Sarla Praghya appealed for reform among the Bhangis and said that adherence to social evils came in the way of sanskritisation of the Bhangis. Further attempt was then made to enlarge the scope of the reform samiti.

- **Sneh Sammelan**

In order to meet this need and to expand the numerical strengths of the Anuvart followers, and attempt to forge a united front of the Bhangis for their upliftment and unity, a large joint meeting of Bhangis and Jains – sneh sammelan- was held on 2<sup>nd</sup> October at Pal Road, Sardarpura, Jodhpur. Ahmed Bax Sindhvi the then Law Minister, who inaugurated the sneh sammelan condemned the untouchability prevailing in the society and pointed out the importance of the philosophy of Anuvart campaign<sup>18</sup> in bringing the men closer to each other. A member of the Jain community himself, Chandan Mal Ved, the then state Canal Minister, In his address stressed the need of social reform and urged the Bhangis to become socially and religiously awakened and integrated. He hoped that they would take advantage of the Anuvart campaign. Among others who attended the sneh sammelan were Yashpal Jain, Magolal, ex-Minister of Haryana, Nirmal Kumar Jain, Devendra Kumar Karnawat, Ratan Lal Chhajed,

Puranchand and Narpat Ram Barbad, MLA (Cong.) Not only prominent political leaders but also leaders of the Bhangi caste spoke during the sneh sammelan. The significant point was that the local Bhangis, under the supervision of Smt. Mohan Lal Jain Prepared and served the food to the assembled audience.

### **Acharya Sri Tulsi and his Anti-Untouchability Campaign**

On 3<sup>rd</sup> October, a big sammelan for the campaign against untouchability was organized at Tated Bhawan, Sardarpura, Jodhpur. Acharya Sri Tulsi himself presented and presided over the sammelan. It was, according to its participants and organizers, attended by about one thousand Bhangis representing places like the Masuria Bhangi bustee, Naval bustee, Pancholio-ki-Nadi, Lakharon-ka-Bass, Ratanada bustee and so on. To enable the Bhangis to attend the sammelan, the Municipality of Jodhpur granted half day leave to its workers. In his speech, Acharya Sri Tulsi referred to the Bhangi problems and exhorted them to abandon social evils in life. The Bhangis now entered a new phase, the phase of direct contact with Jain philosophy. A poem was composed and read out on this auspicious day by Naru Lal Kundara, the Bhangi leader, in honour of Acharya Sri Tulsi's anti-untouchability campaign in Jodhpur. An English translation of this poem is as follows:

All human troubles are removed in,  
The darbar of Acharya Tulsi,  
The untouchables oppressed by the world are,  
Embraced there.  
This is a gathering of saints and holy persons,  
Everybody gets engrossed in bliss.  
Those who drink Tulsi's ambrosia,  
They only deserve his blessing.  
They alone receive his message and  
They only are admitted in his fold.  
Why ? O, people do not be afraid of Anuvrat,  
O, ignorant persons, this is the altar,  
Where heads are sacrificed.  
Naru Lal Dass says, come all together,  
The gates of Tulsi's Darbar are open to all.  
There is no ground for worry,  
It is here and alone that  
Anuvrat are performed.

### **The Jains Display their Fury**

The most active opposition came from the traditional Jains. The Jains have special religious respect and devotion to Acharya Sri Tulsi. When the Jains saw the Bhangis sitting in the pandal for the first time in large numbers, they were very angry and created an uproar in the pandal. They opposed the Bhangis presence and branded them anti-religious. The traditional Jains from this region are religious and have deep rooted animosity towards the Bhangis. And as the Jains greatly respect Acharya Sri Tulsi, the presence of the Bhangis near him rally inflamed them. By and large, all the Jains present in the pandal opposed the presence of the Bhangis in one way or another. The Jains not only opposed the Bhangis but also criticized Mohanlal Jain and Kanraj Salecha for their moral support. They were more worried about their day-to-day religious programmes. Many of them could not afford such religious metamorphosis and they also feared that their social contact with the Bhangis would be criticised by others.

### **Opening of the Vanchnalal in Bhangi Bustees**

As in the past, the Jain workers took a few steps for the educational development of the Bhangis. In the year 1984, five vanchnalais in different Bhangi bustees namely, Lakharon-ka-Bass, Pancholio-ki-Nadi, Naval bustee, Masuria and Ratanada were started by Jain workers which promoted the educational development of this community. The vanchnalais provided a few books on the Anuvrat campaign and also subscribed to some of the leading local Hindi newspapers- Rajasthan Patrika, Jalte Deep, Jangan, Jan Pratinidhi and so on. During this period the members of the Anuvrat campaign made considerable efforts to popularize its ideology. They realized that the ideology of Anuvrat could bring both enlightenment and status in society to their caste. They also believed that only under the impact of Anuvrat philosophy, could their community be able to give up absolute social customs and imbibe the spirit of reform.

## Jainism and Culture Change in Rajasthan

### A brief history of conversion to Jainism in Rajasthan

In Rajasthan, conversion of the lower castes to Jainism can be traced to the early fifties of the present century, when Gurudev Pandit Shri Sameer Muniji Maharaj (also known as Sudhakar) converted ten Khatik families to Jainism in Chittorgarh region, in order to check the widespread practices of killing goats and sheep among the Khatiks. Later on efforts were gradually directed to various other regions. Mention may be made of some important regions like Pratapgarh, Mimbahera Chhoti Sadri and Kuraj in Rajasthan and Neemuch, Mandasour and Ratlam in Madhya Pradesh. The adopted name for the converted Khatiks is the Hindi word Virvals which literally means courageous or valiant. According to another theory, in the Jain religion, the 24<sup>th</sup> Tirthankar was Mahaveer and those who follow him are called Virval. But in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, the word is used to refer to converts from the untouchable, especially the Khatik caste, to Jainism. However, the converts to Jainism from the caste Balai are never called Virvals, but are referred to as Dharampal. This means that the term Virval means Khatik converted into Jains and Dharampal means Balais turned into Jains.

### The Bhangi Jain Converts of Jodhpur

As stated earlier, the history of Jainism among the Bhangis of Jodhpur goes back to 1984, when the Jain anti-untouchability campaign started functioning under the leadership of Mohan Lal Jain and Kanraj Salecha, and under the initiative and patronage given to them by Acharya Sri Tulsi- the founder of the Anuvrat movement in India. The Bhangis are concentrated in different bustees known popularly as Bhangion-Ki-bustee. In all, they inhabit 42 Bhangi bustees and residential places scattered all over Jodhpur city. Concentrated in 24 municipal wards. These bustees have 1189 Bhangi families with a population of 7166, of which males number 3737 and females 3429. The Jain workers who worked among the Bhangis of Jodhpur had to wait for the last few years for any real progress in conversion. To the joy of the Jain workers, the first door was opened when six Bhangis were converted in November, 1984. The most important thing is that all the converts took the Jain diksa from Acharya Sri Tulsi. The question of the conversion of the members of the Bhangi caste to Jainism in Jodhpur has engaged the writer's attention for some time. The conversion in Jodhpur actually took place by the end of 1984 but did not come to light until the beginning of 1985. The conversion of the six Bhangis to Jainism is an individual process. Such enterprising Bhangis belong to the educated elite whose own perceptions have dominated Bhangi polemics. Their size is perhaps considerably limited at present. Nevertheless, the significant point is not the size of these courageous person, but the emergence of elitism among the Bhangis. These courageous people have demonstrated the growing upward social mobility of the Bhangis. The Bhangi converts in Jodhpur belong to different caste gotras, Pandit, Hans, Tajee, Arya, Bariashah and Kandara<sup>19</sup>. But it is true that in all the cases, the Bhangi Jain converts still retain their caste gotra. The Bhangis in Jodhpur too have in recent years registered considerable social mobility one effect of which has been the emergence of young Bhangis who are simply not prepared to accept the status traditionally ascribed to them and to submit to the dictates of the caste Hindus. This group is bold enough to assert its right to equality. Conversions appear to be adopted by young Bhangis as a way of escape from the alleged humiliation and atrocities of the caste Hindus. Now the question is : why did the Bhangis opt in favour of embracing Jainism rather than any other religion like Buddhism and Christianity? Let us now, in the light of our field situation, examine the reasons in greater detail. Two explanations can account for this pattern. Firstly, the Jain missionary activities have been directed to preaching the real tenets of the Anuvrat campaign and Jain philosophy among the public in general and the ex-untouchable castes in particular. They have prepared a considerable body of religious literature in Hindi which has found wide dispersal throughout Jodhpur. It could be that option of embracing Jainism might have been suggested to them by their increased awareness of the faith brought out by their exposure to the missionary religious literature. A second factor that may have influenced the choice of the Bhangis could be the status of the Jains in Jodhpur. Jodhpur Jains have traditionally been engaged in trade and business and constitute an economically and politically strong community. It is possible that the decision of the Bhangis to convert to Jainism might have been determined by the support they would have in their fight against the oppressive domination by the locally powerful caste Hindus by their belonging to an economically prosperous and politically strong and respectable community. When the Bhangis of Jodhpur were first converted to the Jain fold, they were encouraged by Jain workers to take up small trade or business such as production and selling of domestic consumer goods, and they were given some facilities and expertise also in this connection. The Bhangis and Jains often remark "They (converts) are Bhangis by culture and Jains by religion" it is because the Bhangi converts have still retained all their previous beliefs and customs<sup>20</sup>.

### **Concluding Remark**

The Jain movement took place at a time when Acharya Sri Tulsi was camping in Jodhpur during Chaturmas. Such a situation provided fertile ground for Jain workers to initiate the movement with a view to bring socio-religious reform among the Bhangis and also to give them a chance to lead a simple and vice free life. Mohanlal Jain and Kanraj Salecha played a decisive role in bringing about this change. They put their organization and network in action and succeeded in prolonging the programme for a few years because they were determined to do something real and concrete in this field. The movement left a deep influence among the Bhangis of Jodhpur. There was a feeling of jubilation among the workers of movement (the Jains) over their remarkable success in bringing the Bhangis nearer to Acharya Sri Tulsi. After 1984, the anti - untouchability campaign and reform movement for Bhangis received poor response. Even the initiators who were the moving spirit behind the movement were discouraged because of a general lack of response from the Bhangis. They have learnt a bitter lesson.

### **Conversion to other Religion: Sporadic Efforts to Collective Mobilisation**

The question of conversion from Hinduism to any other religion did not come up for the first time in 2020. It was a recurring phenomenon, as noted in earlier studies (see, caste and Political Mobilization: The Bhangi, 1980, Ambedkar and Dalit Movement, 2008, Ambedkar and The Bhangis: Efforts for their Upliftment, 2018). In the middle of the twentieth century, the Bhangis of Jodhpur in particular and Bhangis of Rajasthan in general quick to perceive the advantage of conversion to Christianity in terms of English, job and a freedom from the orthodox Hindu notion of untouchability and from the other form of discrimination. Conversion to Christianity had practical advantages but Buddhism with its concern for egalitarian values and human compassion, had an emotional appeal. Jawahari Lal Jawa-a resident of Lakharon-ka- Bass, Jodhpur (1948) drew his inspiration from Christianity for his revolutionary step and later Narsingh Dev Gujarati from Bagar, Jodhpur had embraced Christianity in 1974. Mohanlal Jawa-another resident of Beawar, District Ajmer and Social Welfare officer, Government of Rajasthan, and Mohanlal Pandit a resident of Lakharon-Ka- Bass, Jodhpur had converted into Christianity in 1988, and respectively as a means of emancipating the Bhangis. However, with the emergence of Baba Saheb Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and his philosophy, the Bhangis gained self respect within the framework of Buddhism and attraction for other religions lessened to great extent. In the process of mobilisation, the next steps of the Bhangis was a further move in direction of separation from caste Hindus. The vast majority of the Bhangi community continued to live as before in Jodhpur. Their lot, however changed, for it was here that Ambedkar Study Kendras made their efforts and got success. The first Bhangi conversion was made in 1973. Through an initiative ceremony, Bhanwar Lal Pandit- a matriculate Bhangi from Bagar Basti, was the first to be converted into Buddhism. He took the Diksha in an All India Buddhist Mahasammelan held in RamLila Ground, New Delhi in 1973. The Sammelan was presided over by Dalai Lama. As early as 1973 and after four full years conversion to Buddhism was initiated. The initiative was taken by four person namely- Rajan Lal Jawa (Resident of Lakharon- Ka-Bass, Jodhpur), Om Prakash Jawa (resident of Chandi Hall, Jodhpur), Daulal Changra and Chena Prasad Pandit (both resident of Udai Mandir Basti, Jodhpur). All the four person took the Diksha at Diksha Sammelan organised at Ghantaghar, Jodhpur, nearly 43 years ago (1977) by Buddhist Society of India, Jodhpur. L.R. Bali- a well known Ambedkarite leader came from Jalandhar, Punjab and Bhante Shant Raksak from Delhi presided over the function. However, It is important to mention that these sporadic efforts did not achieve the character of a movement. The Hathras gruesome incident in September 2020, Uttar Pradesh, once again brought to surface the frustration of Valmiki (Bhangi/Mehtar) to remain within the fold of Hinduism, which is so oppressive to them and other low castes. On Tuesday, 6 October, 2020 on a telephonic talk with the author, J.P. Singh- a retired Joint Commissioner, Department of Commercial Taxation, Uttar Pradesh and currently, founder president of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Shoshit Samaj Shiksha Prasar Samiti, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, reiterated that earlier to Hathras incident, the Valmiki from Bareilly and Muradabad, Uttar Pradesh converted to Christianity before 2005. Likewise, earlier to 2006 the conversion to Christianity was took place in Banaras by Dom (also called Mehtar). The Charismatic influence of Christianity once again raised the wave of conversion. In 2020 after fifteen full years, the ride of conversion rose again with full vigor and was this time initiated by youth elements of Karhera village. There was a strong move on the part of social activists/ workers favouring conversion to Buddhism. A notable social activist, who was associated with the activities of conversion campaign before gruesome incident occurred in Hathras, was Pawan Valmiki<sup>21</sup> of Karhera village, District Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh. He, 28, passed Middle School long back. From his childhood to till date Pawan Valmiki felt the social discrimination and injustice in Uttar Pradesh. They are discriminated on shop to get grocery items. Pawan Valmiki's father, Ravindra Kumar is a Kabir Panthi. Pawan Valmiki was not interested in practicing the Hindu customs, traditions, rituals,

festivals etc. and he took the lead in the agitation against social discrimination and atrocities on caste fellows. Pawan Valmiki believed in Buddhism because Ambedkar's ideology/Philosophy attracted him. His family members are totally vegetarian. Pawan's grand father – Leel Chand (Nanaji) was a man with progressive ideas. He was a staunch Ambedkarite, who did LLB. Long back. He met Kanshi Ram who was then founder of BSP and worked for BSP. Even before the Hathras incident happened in September 2020, the Valmikis of Karhera had organized a meeting at village in August 2020<sup>22</sup>. The Valmikis not only decided to abandon Hinduism but also authorized Pawan Valmiki to invite member of Ambedkar's family. In August 2020, Pawan Valmiki<sup>23</sup> went to Mumbai to meet Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's great grand son Rajratan Ambedkar and apprised him about the decision to convert. Pawan Valmiki not only apprised Rajratan Ambedkar about convert but also requested him to preside over convert ceremony.<sup>24</sup> Around this time in September 2020, Hathras incident occurred. Valmikis perceived the danger to caste. This happening made spirited speech urging the valmikis to abandon Hinduism as it is impossible to overcome all kind of humiliation and discrimination by the Upper Caste Hindus. Thus, as pre decided, on October 14, 2020 a ceremony was organized in Karhera Village.<sup>25</sup> A large number of Men, Women, Boys, Girls, Youths and Children were assembled. Bhante Mahan<sup>26</sup> from Delhi administered the oath ceremony to assembled Valmikis numbering 236.<sup>27</sup>

#### **The Times of India<sup>28</sup>(Friday, 23 October 2020) of Jaipur Edition Carried the following Story**

“On October 14, at least 236 members of Valmikis community claimed to have converted to Buddhism in the presence of B.R. Ambedkar's great grandson Rajratan Ambedkar. In a video uploaded on you Tube, Rajratan Ambedkar is purportedly seen administering oaths to a group of people”. After this happening, soon Uttar Pradesh government<sup>29</sup> became alert and ordered to look into the whole issue of conversion campaign. The Ghaziabad administration and Police said that they had found no evidence of the alleged conversion and the certificates the villagers were showing contained no details. The police have registered an FIR against the unidentified persons for promoting enmity between the religious groups (IPC Section 153 A) on a complaint by a person who claimed to be from Valmiki Community. The case has been filed at Sahibabad Police Station. Although Ghaziabad administration and police had found no evidence yet the visit of functionaries of various political parties continued to meet the local Valmikis. For instance, when a political functionary met Kamlesh<sup>30</sup> - a local Valmiki and wanted to know some –thing from him, then Kamlesh explained the situation to him thus: “We have taken this step just for the daughter of Hathras. This could happen to us tomorrow”.

#### **Pawan Valmiki<sup>31</sup> made a Statement Attacking on Political Parties**

“Our conversion is directly related to the Hathras case. Altogether, there are 70 Valmikis families in Karhera. Of them 50 families have converted. It is wrong to say that these certificates are forged. Politics is being played now, which is why an “FIR” has been filed”. Going through these developments, on Thursday, December 10, 2020, author talked to Dr. Dharpal Peehal<sup>32</sup> – a retired Professor of Hindi and former Dean, Faculty of Arts, Usmania University, Hyderabad, who himself belonged to this community and became Buddhist long back. When author asked Dr. Peehal about conversion of Valmikis at Karhera village, his reply was that: The Valmikis of Karhera village became free from the orthodox Hindu notion of untouchability and made history after 73 years of independence of the country, when they were embraced Buddhism in group. Earlier to this, there was no such incident in community/caste's history leading group conversion in the country. The social activists/workers of the campaign achieved major success by this. They have popularized the philosophy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar which gave Valmiki's movement an ideology and community a distinct identity. They sought to reform their way of life by a process of self- withdrawal, organization and protest. The spiritual transformation was, however, complementary to the protest to overcome all kind of humiliation and discrimination by upper castes. The Chamar of Dehradun, Jatav of Agra, Mahar of Maharashtra and other low castes across the country supported Ambedkar ideology and became staunch followers of his philosophy. On the contrary from pre independence to post independence, most of the Valmiki's across the country were staunch followers of Gandhi. In a surprising development on October 14, 2020, Valmikis of Karhera village had left Gandhi. It is a unusual event. This is a historic day in the Valmiki's caste history. The Valmikis of Karhera village will exemplify the others. This is a voice against injustice. This is a voice in support of exploited and marginalized groups of society (Valmikis). They have shown their solidarity with Hathras victim family. D. Jennifer a research scholar from School of Social Sciences, Jawahar Lal Nehru University, Delhi, visited a few Valmikis Bastis in Uttar Pradesh and Delhi NCR and collected their views for atrocities and convert. On Friday, the first day of January 2021, D. Jennifer wrote an essay, “Caste, Covid and The City” in The Indian Express. We get an idea of how Firozabad Valmiki Basti in Tapa Mayapuri and Dalit women from Budhera Valmiki Basti Delhi NCR openly criticized and condemned caste based discrimination, with the



steady rise in caste atrocities across the country in general and Uttar Pradesh in particular from the accounts of D. Jennifer. She, in her essay of 1<sup>st</sup> January 2021 said: "As I traversed the narrow lanes of Firozabad's Valmiki Basti in Tapa Mayapuri. I saw the plight of Sanitation workers, who walk the thin line between daily humiliation and economic needs, and whose anger was amplified by the terrible killing of one of their own "We clean your city, we get up early in the morning and sweep your streets clean and this is the way you treat us back", they said. These were strong Dalit women who could see through the blatant casteism of the state machinery As the Uttar Pradesh government cracked down on those who raised their voices against brutalities, Dalit women from Budhera's Valmiki Basti in Delhi NCR publically rejected caste and discrimination converting to Buddhism". It is clear from the foregoing description that the state looked upon the Valmiki mainly as Second grade citizen and was bent upon putting down the Valmiki's mainly in the name of maintaining public peace and public peace meant the peace of Thakurs and Brahmins. Secondly, the essay played an important part in publicizing the miserable conditions of Valmikis in Uttar Pradesh and Delhi even after 71 years of abolishing untouchability.

### **Mehtar(Bhangi) Caste Conversion to Buddhism**

Eminent Sociologist Professor Shyamlal mentioned in His book "**Caste and Political Mobilization The Bhangis**" that in the past and in the present, many untouchables have attempted to escape the stigma through conversion to other religions which espouse equality e.g. Islam, Christianity, Sikhism and most recently to Buddhism. The most recent effort has been the movement led by Dr. Ambedkar for conversion to Buddhism. Despairing of ever achieving equality within the Hindu fold, he led a crowd estimated at 300,000 to 600,000 people in a mass conversion ceremony in October, 1956- shortly before his death.<sup>33</sup> In the process of mobilization, the next step of the Bhangis was a further move in the direction of separation from caste Hindus. The vast majority of the Bhangi community continued to live as before in Jodhpur. Their lot, however, changed, for it was here that 'Ambedkar Study Kendra' made their efforts and got success. The first Bhangi conversion was made in 1973. Through an initiation ceremony, Bhanwarlal Pandit<sup>34</sup> - a matriculate Bhangi from Bhagar Bustee, was the first to be converted into Buddhism. He took the 'Dhiksa' in an All India Buddhist Mahasammelan' held in Ramlila ground. New-Delhi in 1973. The Sammelan was presided by Dalai Lama. Soon after this, 3 more persons, Himmat Ram Jodha (Meghwal by caste), Om Prakash Jawa and Chenprasad Pandit (both Bhangis) took the 'Dhiksa' in Rajasthan Buddhist Sammelan' held at Ajmer in 1973.<sup>35</sup> As early as 1948 and again in 1974, conversion in Christianity was initiated. The initiative was taken by Narsingh Dev Gujarati-a dynamic and powerful person who was the architect of Dr. Ambedkar Kendra, on September 8, 1974<sup>36</sup> embarrassed the Christianity at Jodhpur. Suffering severe social and economic disabilities as dehd caste, the Bhangis sought escape from the hierarchy of ritual purity in Buddhism and Christianity. They saw Buddhism and Christianity as protectors and in them, they saw the possibility for socio-economic change and advancement. Many sought to abandon the arduous occupation which had degraded them in the eyes of those of high castes. In Jodhpur, if their social position has not greatly improved, Christianity and buddhism have given the Bhangis hope of a release form their suffering under the dominance of upper Hindu castes. M. Glen and Sipra Bose Johnson comments that: "This sense of self esteem may indeed be an extremely important resource for people attempting to better their lot in society."<sup>37</sup> It is important to note here that in recent years particularly after independence, individual mobility has become possible for the Bhangis, but there are no signs of group mobility. In case of Bhangis the reasons for this can be well explained in the words of M. Glem and Sipra B. Johnson. They pointed out that: "Conversion seems to have occurred in castes, which have already achieved, in comparison to other untouchable Castes in India, a degree of mobility and some access to the resources of wealth, education and privilege."<sup>38</sup>

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