Cultivating Ethics – Preliminary thoughts on Conversion and Caste

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Sohail Gupta
M.Phil. Development Practice, Centre for Development Practice
Ambedkar University, Delhi

This paper is going to present a part of an Action-Research work based in Ghota, an Adivasi village in Uttar Bastar Kanker district of Chhattisgarh state in India. The work was with families in Ghota who have converted to Christianity who face ostracization by their respective families and the village. The paper will seek to bring in conversation Deleuze and Guattari, and Ambedkar to explore cultivation of ethics of conversion. I start by critiquing a secular thought of conversion as a mere changing of religion, and argue for looking towards the caste system as underscoring history of conversion in the region. I then push towards inquiring into the ordinary ethics through the work of Veena Das and Saba Mahmood to show how ordinary religious practices contain within them possibilities of cultivating a new body. Anchoring on these I explore the work of Deleuze and Guattari in Capitalism and Schizophrenia, as well as B.R. Ambedkar’s work on Buddhism and his own conversion to argue towards conversion as a process and the need for a worldly ethics.

The paper forms a partial conceptual basis of an ongoing action-research in the Bastar region of Chhattisgarh. The action-research’s objective is to engender a subject that may be critical of the ethics in conversion, the ethics based on immanent evaluation of the mechanisms of the caste system in ordinary life. In Ghota and Bhanupratappur, the village and block respectively where the action-research is taking place, what has transpired is a growing presence of multiple religious interventions. On one hand are the decades of RSS-Shiv Sena (Hindutva) intervention of what has come to be known as “Hinduisation”. The other is the century old Protestant missionary efforts. The last and the fairly recent one is the counter-assertion of Gonds against the development project1. My focus is primarily on the first two i.e. Hinduisation and Christianity. Both B.R. Ambedkar and Kancha Ilaiyah would substantiate the difficulty in calling any Hindu a Hindu in the first place because of a lack of any fundamental tenet based on which one can claim to be a Hindu, the likes of which are available for example with Christians, Muslims, or Buddhists (Ilaiyah 2005; Ambedkar 2016). Yet Ambedkar suggests one can still claim to be Hindu provided they observe the varnaashrama i.e. the four varna order and the four ashrama. With the absence of the Brahman and the Kshatriya varna in Ghota and Bhanupratappur what is observed is a distorted following of this order. Firstly, ashrama is absent. The varna order however is present though again not how it would be in caste Hindu villages. Ghota consists of caste Hindus (OBCs) and Gonds (STs). While the Hinduisation project has claimed certain casualties among Gonds i.e. certain Gonds would refer to themselves as from the “Hindu dharma”2, one cannot call even the caste Hindus present here as “Hindu” if we follow Ambedkar’s argument. This is not to say that the Gond is no longer Gond if she refers to herself as from the Hindu dharma, in fact it remains to be inquired why either the Gond or the caste Hindus refer to themselves as Hindu.

The specificity of this region is the predominance of the Adivasi, in the case of Ghota the Gond3. The religiosity of both the caste Hindus and the Gond are interacting to activate an observance of spiritual practice specific to the village and the region. Amidst this is the incoming Christianity that has tried to convert both Gonds and OBCs4. What is peculiar about this conversion though is that the dharma of the convert is retained

1 The Gond specifically say the following: “humne vikas nahi chaiye, humne adhikar chaiye” (we do not want development, we want rights).
2 I use both ‘dharma’ and ‘religion’ in this paper albeit not interchangeably. Dharma’s definition is provided in the following section. The discussion on what the difference between the two is and the need for redefining religion belongs however in another paper.
3 The other dominant Adivasi in the region are the Halba. Halba are present in Mohgaon, the village adjoining Ghota and part of the Ghota panchayat. Halba are the politically more dominant Adivasi.
4 Though the OBCs statistically are greater in this project in this region as opposed to North Chhattisgarh where STs are greater in number. This reversal could be also to do with which ST group is exactly opting for Christianity in North Chhattisgarh.
i.e. a Yadav practicing Christianity would still claim to be from the Hindu dharma while simultaneously denouncing the observance of the traditional rituals in her village and Bhanupratappur. The same holds true for Gond converts. Endogamy will still be strictly observed in the converts i.e. a Abhir practicing Christianity would still only marry a Abhir. What is remaining to be inquired is the ordinary ethical relationship with their ecology that is informed by the caste system and how it is affected by conversion. On the surface the change seems to be limited to prayer sessions, going to the church on sundays, and not observing traditional ritual events. Which is not to say that Christianity is limited to denouncing traditional practices, but the question that have we really moved on from what we are denouncing? Practicing Christianity has also positioned these converts in an antagonistic relationship with the village, primarily in terms of support in labour, with only the converts acting as supporting labour for each other. The chief antagonist apparently are the Gond. The Hindutva forces do not seem interfering in matters of operation of the Church. The reasons for this are unknown. Perhaps Islam and the resurgent Koya dharma of Gond pose a higher threat. However, I argue in the next section that they recognize that this Christianity does not actually pose a threat to the development project, a project informed by the caste system or “Hinduism”.

This introduction serves to lay the ground which the paper hopes to conceptualize. Let us build on the last sentence i.e. how does this Christianity not pose a threat to the caste system? Alternatively, why does the caste system persist even in religious conversion? That caste system permeates all religions in the subcontinent is not a new observation. The history of conversion in the subcontinent has observed lower castes converting to Buddhism, Sikkhism, Islam, Christianity, and others. And yet in each there seems to be a Brahmanical intervention where as an example, Ashrafs and Syeds would occupy a higher caste group in Islam and practice untouchability both within and outside their fold, and a similar activity in other religions. What differentiates places like Ghota and Bhanupratappur from the macro narrative is the overt denial of calling oneself Christian and yet following Christianity i.e. one would still call oneself a Hindu. The question of why this denial is beyond the scope of this paper. What is of importance though is the conversion itself. What exactly is this conversion that allows caste system to flow through? Is it conversion at all?

**Conversion in the Secular paradigm**

At Ghota, and Bhanupratppur, two types of conversion are flagged: ‘dharma parivartan’ and ‘mann parivartan’ in the claim “humara dharma parivartan nahi hua hai humara mann parivartan hua hai” (We have not converted our dharma, we have converted our mind). While the latter is quite ambiguous in the explanation of even the ones using it, the former has been explained with certain clear markers. According to the Christian group at Ghota as well as the Pastor of the church at Bhanupratappur dharma parivartan is more of a legal change. When one goes to the tehsil or block office and gets their surname changed from say “Yadav” to “Jacob” it would count as dharma parivartan i.e. the surname change also carries with it registering yourself as a Christian legally in the State surveys. The other explanation offered is that when a woman marries into a household of a legally recognized Christian she becomes a Christian herself. This brings two points into our notice. The first is the obvious one that ‘dharma parivartan’ is clearly different from ‘mann parivartan’. While the former requires a legal change, the latter does not. But even then is dharma parivartan only a mere legal category registration? Following its Sanskritic roots and its usage in Indian philosophies (Vedantic, Jain, or Buddhist) ‘Dharma’ would entail a set of laws and a philosophy of life that one religiously subjects themselves to, disciplines oneself under it leading to the transformation of the mind and the body. The claim by the converts at Ghota and Bhanupratappur is that mann parivartan i.e. the surname change also carries with it registering yourself as a Christian legally in the State surveys. However this legal change the distinction between the two then seems to be misleading and a function of a secular imagination leading one to think that dharma and mann are mutually exclusive. The sharp mutually exclusive distinction between the dharma and mann leads to also imagining mann itself as pre-representational, as transcendental. First, there is an abandonment of a pre-given

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5 The converts say that the Gond have a problem with the conversion to Christianity, however the whole village seems to have an issue with it. The politics of this needs further inquiry.

6 I recognize that certain political economic conditions inform this legal change which is considered in the action-research. However, the paper limits itself to the socio-spiritual realm for the purpose of the argument.
Hindu “mann” without inquiring into the genealogy of it, and second an adoption of a pre-given Christian “mann” without evaluating it. This in no way means that there exists an unreflexive attitude towards conversion, rather to point out that the reflexivity is less to do with appropriation, and even less appropriation on a social level, and more to do with individual abandonment and adoption of mann.

This distinction is not limited to Ghota or Bhanupratappur. Conversion in general is largely (mis)understood as changing one’s religion i.e. abandoning the current religion and adopting another one. An example of mass campaigns of conversion comes from colonialism i.e. Christian missionaries involved in converting the colonial subjects into Christians. In ancient history/mythology the examples come from Prophet Mohammed’s conversion of the masses into Islam, Jesus’s followers’ conversion of the masses into Christianity, Buddha’s and Asoka’s conversion of the masses into Buddhism, etc. or in medieval history as well that of Sikhism. Each period, and each campaign of conversion has mobilized different mechanisms. There is of course a difference between conversion during colonialism and during ancient campaigns. We will get back to the difference later.

The modern conversion campaigns are perhaps the development project(s). The first is the many development projects funded by national and international religious organizations. The second and the more devious one, is one already proven by scholars such as Kancha Ilaiah, the development that has worked extensively to change how we associate ourselves with market, state, education, health, science, technology, and so on, and comfortably position the Brahmanical order on top of it (Ilaiah 2009). This mode of conversion is what informs our need for intervention the most, for it is here, particularly in South Asia and India, that along with “Christianization” through these forces a simultaneous “Hinduisation” too has taken place. This leads to a confusion whether it is Hinduism that has been Christianized (the claim that saying “Hinduism” itself is a Christian thing) or is it Christianity and other religions in the region that have been “Hinduised”/ Brahmanised. This form is dangerous as it does not coerce the masses to convert to a particular religion; it is not missionaries but development itself that has worked on a profound level to convert ethics, that which precedes religion. By changing our associations with ordinary life development prepares ground for the “actual” conversion, where values that these various religions posit, particularly Christianity and Hinduism, do not seem to be so different than what our ordinary life asks us to do. So whether we choose to convert into Christianity or not, we are all already Christianized. And Brahmanism makes it possible to declare oneself as an atheist, in a continent with a strong history of polytheism, and yet practice Brahmanism. We do not worship our gods anymore, and yet we worship them through development. We can at once denounce Hindutva politics and yet follow it. This is perhaps the situation at Ghota and Bhanupratappur where Christian converts can denounce Hindu dharma, and yet follow it through other means.

All this just serves to show that conversion, especially in South Asia and India specifically, is not simply a matter of changing religion. In India the caste system underscores the conversion of religion i.e. it is difficult to be rid of one’s caste or step out of the caste system when one converts from Hinduism to any other religion, even though the imperative of most acts of mass conversion in Indian history has been to be rid of the caste system. This is because there is a difference in the secular imagination of conversion and the caste system’s theory of conversion, the latter being sufficiently untheorized in scholarship. The secular imagination views conversion as merely changing one’s private practices, of individual spiritual salvation, which is partly the fault of the secular state that views religion as a private matter. Religion is and always has been the domain of the public, it has social consequences, and it shapes the very lifeworld of subjects who adopt the particular religion. A society that is infested deeply with the caste system for millennia any incoming religion would obviously publicly clash with this. And this clash is not merely a clash of private practices and beliefs as secular thought would have us think, but a clash of totally different and radical ways of organizing socio-political-spiritual life. Thus the problem of conversion in India is the clash of the deeply entrenched social life the caste system has produced with the new social life the other religions have historically organized themselves around. Neither can the Indian society move completely into the existing other religions, nor is it currently able to leave the caste system. It has to make for itself a new religious order, one that organically evolves out of the Indian experience. But has this not been attempted before? Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism are prime examples of religious challenges and
movement away from the caste society from within the Indian experience. And yet they seem to have been infested by the same disease.

Conversion as a Process - Immanent Evaluation and Immanent Experimentation

I am arguing for a collapse of the mutual exclusivity of ‘dharma’ and ‘mann’ and a rethinking of their relationship. Why? To answer this we must take a short detour into Saba Mahmood’s ethnography in Cairo and her critique of agency in secular feminist politics. Saba Mahmood’s work illuminates the reality that there are different methods of critical reflection and praxis that exists within a particular religious order that are often in opposition to how criticality is understood in secular politics. It is not that politics of piety does not detail accounts of suffering, particularly ordinary suffering, the question posed is whether secular praxis is equipped to address it? Mahmood’s ethnography provides examples of Muslim women in Cairo disciplining themselves into the fold to address ordinary ethical problems; appropriating Islam by submitting to it to address ordinary suffering; building for oneself a new world and not focusing as much on merely “resisting” (Mahmood 2012). The ethnography argues, and I concur, how the mind and body are disciplined critically via religious submission rather than looking at mind and religion as separate. Here Mahmood denies the mind and body any pre-representation, and focuses on how it is cultivated immanently. Similarly the mutual exclusivity of dharma and mann is also a product of the religious-secular binary i.e. secular politics and needs to collapse.

However, what is perhaps not paid much attention to in Mahmood’s account is the role of desire. A young Yadav woman, the longest practicing “Christian” convert in Ghota who leads the evening prayer sessions, is of the opinion that people’s apathy towards Christians would only dissipate if they themselves convert to Christianity; otherwise they will never understand her and other Christians. I differed with her asking how is it that she can say this while claiming that I understand them when I myself am not a Christian and neither do I plan to convert to Christianity? Her response is that I might understand them, but I do not know “the truth”. And I think to myself that of course we cannot claim to know the truth unless we are in the fold, but what is the purpose of converting in the first place? To know the truth? To understand? Or something else? If the stand is that till mann parivartan does not happen people will not understand each other or know the truth, the question is how will parivartan of mann happen if they do not understand each other or know the truth? In other words either you convert to a religion to understand what it is, or you understand the religion before you convert to it. What escapes both these stances is the ‘how’ of conversion; giving weight to how we convert rather than what we convert into. The ‘what’ again positions the mann as pre-representational, as if there is something out there transcendental for us to grasp and give meanings to. It is not that Mahmood does not deal with the ‘how’, but working with a foucauldian/butlerian framework her ‘how’ is concerned with disciplining the mind in light of the conditions of existence produced by the religious order. It is concerned with cultivating a new world (and not merely resisting it or responding to it), but it is not concerned with affecting the world (which is also not merely a response). Our ‘how’, of affecting the world, will require a turn to a theory of desire that allows us to tap into those conditions that precede or escape the religious order, of ordinary ethics that are foreclosed by the religious-secular divide. Such a theory finds its roots not in anthropology, but in psychoanalysis and philosophy of Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze.

In short, Guattari and Deleuze would conceptualize desire as productive and that which breaks instinct and habit (Deleuze and Felix 1977). While one disciplines one’s instinct and habit through submission there is possibility for the body to affect the system on terms that are other than the system itself; something Mahmood herself observes in a footnote (Mahmood 2012, pp.18). For us this possibility is of relevance because while Mahmood is dealing with women who are into the Islamic fold for quite a while (since birth even), we are dealing with conversion. This means that we have to look at disciplining mann not post-facto i.e. not after adoption of a new religion, but during the conversion, where conversion is to be conceptualized as a ‘process’. Conversion as a ‘process’ entails two parts both functioning simultaneously: The first part is that we re-conceptualize mann (de)territorialized as an ‘assemblage’. As an assemblage the constituents of the mann produced by a religious order can be put under evaluation through those terms of the ordinary life that are not necessarily a product of the current religion. This requires a genealogy of the ordinary ethics i.e. that in our
ecology which seems to be neutral and non-value laden might just be a product of the morality of an ancient (un)ethical order, in our case the morality of Hinduism, or it may already be a “Christianised” morality that has been produced as a result of years of “secular” development interventions. As an illustration, fire is seen both as pure and purifying under Vedantic philosophy. Thus when a Dalit village is burnt it is not just an act of killing Dalits, it is an act of purification of space under the (patho)logic of the Vedas (Sarukkai 2012). Such a thing as fire then, and what associations we have with it in our ordinary ethics ought to be immanently evaluated, and the task is of changing our association with it through immanent experimentation. Another example is, though I have tried hard to denounce Hinduism and my family rituals in my daily life I would still touch a fallen book while picking it up and kiss the same hand. This is an ethic that I have developed overtime that I do it almost as a reflex. But the genealogy of this ethic perhaps lies in growing up in a Hindu household, school, and social circle, concerned with maybe that we have insulted Saraswati, the god of knowledge and need to do a small prayer to be forgiven.

Our next part is of changing association – to work on desire itself. Though desire breaks instincts and habits it also reconstitutes them. We need to focus on setting parameters for both breakage and reconstitution. What I am trying to allude to is the disciplining of desire. We immanently evaluate and immanently experiment, but that ought to have a direction and not rely on randomly letting desire act on breaking and reconstituting; to answer to desire, but to evaluate desire and experiment with desire itself. Since both parts are still under development I will take help from Ambedkar to allude to what possibly I am trying to say:

Disiplining the desire would be closer to principles here than rules. While Ambedkar’s focus is how religion itself ought to be defined, I want to add that conversion too ought to follow a similar line of thought.

At this point I hope I can finally say what I mean by “ordinary life” or “ordinary ethics” or “ethics”? Following Michel Foucault, Mahmood, and Veena Das, I understand ethics as a deliberate transformation of the self in the everyday, for both the ‘care of the self’ and love for the other (Foucault 1986; Das 2012; Mahmood 2012) Therefore ethics is not a transcendental pre-representational rule that lead to dramatic actions at a point in time, but is rather cultivated locally in the ‘ordinary’ life of which dramatic actions are expressions. The ethnographic works of Das and Mahmood show how the subject cultivates ethics in the material realm, i.e. it is the ‘ordinary’ material practices that not only alludes to ethics of the subject, but also to the desire of the subject to cultivate ethics (Das 2012; Mahmood 2012). This desire to cultivate ethics is where Guattari and Deleuze help us go even beyond to show that ethics is not just produced by the world, but helps us affect the world and transform the world into perhaps a worldly ethics, and not an ethical world. The former is where immanent evaluation and experimentation is, and the latter is the following of transcendental pre-representational ethics. This is visible, for example, in Ambedkar’s life where he too desires to lay down principles for the Dalit masses to follow by cultivating ethics in The Buddha and His Dhamma. But for decades leading to him finishing this text Ambedkar is continuously engaged in a battle of ethics with his contemporaries, and of course against the caste system, pushing them to not worry about knowing transcendental ethics but practice immanent evaluation of the ordinary. To suggest an instance, Gopal Guru highlights that Ambedkar’s critique of Gandhi questioned not Gandhi’s exploration of ‘truth’ but whether Gandhi was ‘truthful’ (Guru 2017) thus bringing the question of ethics back to the ‘ordinary’ life.
Thoughts towards an Anti-Caste Conversion

To go back to the question asked at the beginning, is what is happening at Ghota and Bhanupratappur conversion at all? Since we have just begun in Ghota I cannot be sure whether what is happening is conversion or not. Obviously much more work is required. But what is empirical is that caste system does permeate. Whether our new model allows caste system to push through or not remains to be tested. To develop it further however what also needs to be produced simultaneously is the caste system’s theory of conversion, again beyond the scope of this paper but one that I intend to undertake in my action-research.

In conclusion let us go back to a distinction made earlier in the paper, that of the examples of ancient campaigns and colonialism. The difference is not in the time, but in the method. Colonialism dealt with spreading an already established religion. Whether it was through coercing or coaxing what they did not have to deal with was developing new moral systems. They had to get people into already established moral systems. But initially for the same religion the problem had to have been different. How do you convince people to follow a set of new principles? This question is a highly political one and one where I cannot make a distinction between the political, the pedagogical, the ethical, or the religious. Perhaps a possible answer to this is that one, your new religion has to obviously come out of the contemporary ethical troubles people are dealing with, and two, that it has to allow them to make conscious and responsible choices. While the situation at Ghota and Bhanupratappur might allow the latter (which is also questionable), the religion itself is not an expression of the ordinary ethics. Which is not to say that one does not adopt Christianity, but to develop a capacity to appropriate it in light of how we have (rudimentaly) conceptualized conversion.

Ambedkar’s position on conversion is precisely this: The question of what one must convert to comes after the question of how one must convert – the ‘how’ will determine the ‘what’. And the question of how one must convert ought to take us to our ordinary ethics, the archaeology of our moral value systems. Ambedkar chooses Buddhism not before putting into critical scrutiny Hinduism and the moral system it propagates. Why one should convert out of Hinduism is an equally important question to him as is why one should convert into Buddhism. And while he scrutinizes Hinduism, he performs a simultaneous scrutiny and recovery of Buddhism i.e. before he can convert into Buddhism he also converts Buddhism.

REFERENCES