

Volume 6 Number 2 (2012): 85-106

<http://www.infactispax.org/journal/>

***Vowing to End Injustice: A Buddhist Social Movement's Narrative
Construction of Social Change¹***

Jeremy A. Rinker, Ph.D.

rinkerja@guilford.edu

Introduction

In Philip Gourevitch's 1998 tome on the Rwandan genocide he writes: "power largely consists in the ability to make others inhabit your story of their reality."² Placed upon the structurally violent backdrop of centuries of caste-based marginalization and injustice, such a statement has a familiar resonance for the oppressed of modern India. Such an understanding of power provides one important key to unlocking the nested intersectionality³ of caste-based forms of personal, cultural and structural violence. But to many *dalits*⁴ (ex-'untouchables') in India, breaking away from the powerful 'caste

¹ This article provides summary findings from the author's 2009 dissertation. Rinker, Jeremy. "Justpeace Prospects for Peace-building and Worldview Tolerance: A South Asian Movement's Social Construction of Justice" (Ph.D. Diss., George Mason University, 2009).

² Gourevitch, Phillip. *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families* (New York: Picador, 1998), 181.

³ Crenshaw, K. *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics* (University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989), 139-67.

⁴ The word 'Dalit' means 'broken' or 'downtrodden' in Sanskrit and was "used as far back as 1931 in journalistic writing." Michael, S.M., ed. *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values* (New Delhi: Vistaar Publications, 1999), 99.

Hindu⁵ story has required more than this understanding of power. For many dalits the creation of a new ‘narrative identity’ as socially engaged Ambedkar Buddhists⁶ has become the only path to liberation from caste oppression. While dalits’ creation of an Ambedkar Buddhist identity is, at least in part, an attempt to make others (especially ‘caste Hindus’) inhabit dalits’ own story of their reality, it is also a radical move towards self-awareness and awakening to a creative vision of social change which aims to foster a new self-image for victims of marginalization. This process of fostering “critical consciousness”⁷ is fraught with dialectic paradoxes, which attention to narrative structure can help clarify and demystify.

Much dialectic uncertainty arises as the result of what I would call ‘identity interpellation,’⁸ a process by which narrative deployment and usage creates a new identity as Ambedkar Buddhist, while also reifying a sense of victimization. Narrative’s ‘auto-catalytic’ ability to create and reify both a unique self-aware identity and hold onto the identity of victimhood acts as both resource and constraint for activists from oppressed communities, including Ambedkar Buddhists. While this interpellated identity creation happens through story, or narrative, it is through structural analysis of the narrative that broader understanding of the social meaning of differing identity positions can be exposed. This approach to narrative structure and identity construction has been under-addressed in Ambedkar Buddhist movement literature. This paper aims to recalibrate focus on a critical aspect of Ambedkar dalit mobilization against oppression.

In an effort to expose and understand one Ambedkar Buddhist movement’s unique vision of social justice, this paper analyzes the narrative structure of the *Triratna Bauddha Mahasangha, Sahayaka Gana* (TBMSG) member’s narratives about injustice. TBMSG as one organization of the wider Ambedkar movement provides an ideal expression of what some have called a “neo-Buddhist”⁹ identity. TBMSG movement narratives were chosen as the unit of analysis because, as more manageable constituent

⁵ The term ‘caste Hindu’ is used here to denote those Hindus (of both high and low caste) that benefit in social, economic, and/or political ways from the current caste-based status quo in Indian society.

⁶ Ambedkar Buddhists consist of the original converts of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s 1956 mass-conversion to Buddhism (somewhere between 380 and 800 thousand people), these converts’ descendants, as well as a number of more recent followers of his prolific thoughts and writings on Buddhism and social change. For a better understanding and description of Ambedkar Buddhists see the following, among others: Beltz, J., & Jondhale, S., Eds. *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004). Kantowsky, Detlef. *Buddhists in India Today: Descriptions, Pictures, and Documents* Trans. by H.-G. Tuerstig (New Delhi: Manohar, 2003). Queen, Christopher, and Sallie King, eds. *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (New York: SUNY Press, 1996). Zelliott, Eleanor. *Dr. Ambedkar and the Mahar Movement* (Ph.D. Diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1969). Zelliott, Eleanor. *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1992).

⁷ Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970), 183.

⁸ Here I am connecting Althusser’s (1971) ideas of interpellation and ideology with ideas of social identity formation. Althusser, L. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press 1971).

⁹ See Queen, C. “Dr. Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation” in Queen, C. and King, S. eds., op. cit.

parts of wider discourses, narratives provide an ideal means to access movement meaning and learning and expose actors' normative commitments.¹⁰ Unmasking the power of narrative structures to subtly control normative constructions, I resource Labov (1972) to provide an analytical framework. Labov's insights into both defining and analyzing the structure of narrative, provides a straight-forward and uniform means to approach the complexity of selected activist stories. In particular, Labov's concept of the "fully-formed narrative"¹¹ provides a helpful starting-point for discerning patterns in the storylines of TBMSG members. Narratives, in this sense, can be seen as moving through non-linear stages - - exhibiting abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result or resolution, and coda (or some sort of stated or unstated point). Of critical importance in using Labov for structural narrative analysis are the evaluative statements that lace any transcribed narrative. These evaluative statements point not only to an "ideal character"¹² as Labov adeptly illustrates narratives often do, but to an ideal society, or more simply put in this case, TBMSG's social justice ideal. Specifically, in focusing on the evaluative statements embedded in TBMSG narrative structures this work focuses on the way in which narrative structures meaning.¹³ From this analytical frame, comparative analysis of collected movement narratives underscores the normative assumptions inherent in activists' theories of social change. Unmasking activist's theories of social change, in turn, provides opportunities for structural change and conflict transformation.

Through underscoring this particular movements' unique conception of social justice via an analysis of narrative structures, the contention will be made that this vision supports inter-group identity relations and, thus, presents a counter to those bent on seeing either religious mobilization as only conflict generative or, more broadly, narrative as an unreliable agent of assessing critical processes of social meaning making.¹⁴ A number of important sub-claims invariably accompany this broader argument for the promise of Ambedkar Buddhists' theory of social change; chief among these sub-claims

¹⁰ See Riessman (1993) for more on narrative and narrative analysis. Riessman, C. *Narrative Analysis* (Vol. 30) (London: Sage Publications, 1993).

¹¹ Often beginning with an abstract of what the story is about such narratives are more completely developed than a minimal narrative. Following the abstract, they often cycle through "complex chainings and embeddings of these elements": orientation, complicating action, evaluation, result or resolution, and coda. Labov, W. *Language in the Inner City: Studies in Black English Vernacular* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), 363. These six characteristic stages of a 'fully-formed narrative' provide a uniform means to approach seemingly disparate narrative threads and weave them into a uniform structural pattern for developing understanding. In Appendix A you can see how this understanding of narrative structure was used as an analytical framework to break-up and code TBMSG narratives for comparative analysis.

¹² Labov (1972), op. cit., 368.

¹³ See Ashley, B. *The Study of Popular Fiction: A Source Book* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1989).

¹⁴ This paper takes to heart the concern of Monk and Winslade in their work on narrative mediation, in which they argue that during processes of traditional mediation "what might be missed is the work done by stories to *construct* realities, not just *report* them [emphasis in the original]." Monk, G. and Winslade, J. *Narrative Mediation: Loosening the Grip of Conflict* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 2.

is both a foregrounding of social justice in Buddhist hermeneutics¹⁵ and the development of an awareness of the ways in which in-group positioning¹⁶ reifies marginalized narrative constructions of social change among the marginalized.

In working to create a “*Dhamma* revolution,”¹⁷ the Ambedkar Buddhists of the TBMSG, the Indian wing of a worldwide Buddhist *sangha* (community), are reconstructing what it means to be a Buddhist, and in the process they are deploying a new understanding of social change in the Indian context. TBMSG’s distinctive vision of social justice appears most visibly in the dialectic between members’ expressions of an injustice identity and their articulation of a new Buddhist identity incarnate upon conversion. In continually choosing the narrative frames of both victim and Buddhist, TBMSG activists proactively re-position the narrative identity of dalits as agents of both spiritual and societal change. It is in this constant choosing that the movement’s theory of social change is actively negotiated. TBMSG’s newly created narrative identity as Ambedkar Buddhists is more than just the opportunistic power struggles of the dispossessed determined to force others to inhabit their reality - - it is representative of a pragmatic epistemology of social justice that blends political discontent with a belief in the need for “literate”¹⁸ and accepting religious identity.

Who are the Ambedkar Buddhists of the TBMSG?

As Kantowsky (2003) explains “Buddhists in India today can be appropriately understood only as a diverse multitude of groups, each with its own peculiar characteristics.”¹⁹ The sub-group of Indian Buddhists who converted to Buddhism following Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s 1956 conversion²⁰ displays one such unique worldview.

¹⁵ Especially helpful in this regard is King, S. *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005).

¹⁶ I take the term ‘positioning’ from social psychological Positioning Theory developed by Rom Harre and colleagues. See, among others, Harre, R., & Langenhove, L. *Positioning Theory: Moral Contexts of Intentional Action* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), and; Harre and Moghaddam, eds. *The Self and Others: Positioning Individuals and Groups in Personal, Political, and Cultural Contexts* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003). Positioning theory can be said to “view action as the setting up of positions, for oneself and others, through the performance of socially meaningful (often discursive) acts within an ongoing storyline (comprising narrative understandings of the context and the contingent rights and obligations of participants).” Bartlett, T. “*Linguistics and Positioning Theory within Conflict Analysis and Resolution: Work in Progress*” Unpublished Paper presented at the first annual Positioning Theory Conference (George Mason University Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, 2006), 3.

¹⁷ See Sponberg, A. “A Dhamma Revolution in Contemporary India” in Queen, C. and King, S. eds., op. cit., 73. *Dhamma* is the Pali equivalent of *Dharma* in the Sanskrit and in Buddhism has many meanings, the most common of which is as a referent for the Buddhist teaching or tradition.

¹⁸ Appleby, S. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 77.

¹⁹ Kantowsky, D., op. cit., 58.

²⁰ For more on this mass religious conversion to Buddhism, perhaps the largest ever in human history, see the following among others: Jaffrelot, Christophe. *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Fighting the Indian Caste System* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Omvedt, Gail. *Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Queen, C. “Dr. Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of

A further subset of these *Navayana* (new-vehicle) Buddhists, the TBMSG (literally ‘The Association of Friends of the Buddhist Order of the Three Realms’²¹) conveys its idiosyncratic understanding of Buddhism through a blending of social and spiritual praxis. As the largest indigenous Buddhist organization on the Indian sub-continent, TBMSG’s combination of social activism and spiritual conversion is uncharacteristic in both reach and scale. Still, despite the growing scale of TBMSG as a social movement²² little scholarly research has been done on this influential sub-set of Indian Buddhist dalit rights activists.

In a cultural context where Hindu polytheistic pluralism all but limited religious difference to Hindu sectarianism, and Islam has remained on the constant guard of the Hindu majority since at least the 14th Century, the opportunity for a modern mass resurgence of Buddhism would have been impossible if not for the political and religious vision of three dynamic leaders. The lives of Dr. Ambedkar, an English Buddhist monk named Sangharakshita, and one of his early disciples, Lokamitra, all intertwine to create the unique story of the TBMSG as a social movement organization. While Dr. Ambedkar, as the catalyst of a new mode of thinking about the connection between spiritual commitments and social change in India, must be the starting point for any dalit rights discussion, he is also the most studied of these three foundational characters.²³ Since Dr. Ambedkar’s life and thought are handled extensively elsewhere²⁴ attention here will be paid to the legacy of his choice of Buddhist conversion.

If we take Ambedkar’s historic conversion as the catalyst for the movement of dalits to Buddhism, Sangharakshita’s dhamma teaching was the catalyst for the formation of TBMSG as a social movement organization. Sangharakshita, a British-born monk,

Buddhist Liberation" in Queen, C. and King, S. eds. op. cit., 47-71.; Sponberg, Alan. "TBMSG: A Dharma revolution in Contemporary India" in Queen, C. and King, S. eds., op. cit., 73-120., and; Zelliott, E., op. cit.
²¹ See Sponberg, A. "A Dhamma Revolution in Contemporary India" in Queen, C. and King, S. eds., op. cit., 76.; Ganguly, D. *Caste, Colonialism and Counter-Modernity: Notes on a Postcolonial Hermeneutics of Caste* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 156. Kantowsky (2003) translates TBMSG slightly differently as the "Union of the Helpers of the Buddhist Great Order of the Three Worlds." Kantowsky, D., op. cit., 135. In 2010, the worldwide movement changed the beginning of its name, upon the request of English leadership, from the Trailokya to Triratna; this significant change established the focus of the community on the three jewels (Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha) as opposed to a more numinous conception of the three realms or Worlds.

²² See Baumann, M. "Work as Dharma Practice: Right Livelihood Cooperatives of the FWBO" in Queen C., Ed. *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 372.

²³ See Zelliott (1969) and Jaffrelot (2005), op. cit. for a good starting point to understand the prolific life and work of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

²⁴ See the authors mentioned in footnote # 23 above, as well as, Keer, D. *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 1991); Omvedt, Gail. *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994); Omvedt, Gail. *Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India* (New York: Penguin, 2004), and; Rodrigues, V., ed. *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), among others, for further discussion of Ambedkar’s life and work. Also see Jaffrelot, C. *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of Low Castes in North Indian Politics* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), among others, for discussion of Ambedkar’s appropriation by various political entities in Modern India.

was ordained in 1949 as a *shramanera*, or novice monk. In 1964, Sangharakshita returned to England after nearly 20 years in India²⁵ and in 1967 founded the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO). Ordaining nine men and three women as the nucleus of the Western Buddhist Order (WBO), the stated purpose of the FWBO was, and remains, “to encourage and facilitate the growth of real individuals,” and to “create a new society in the midst of the old.”²⁶ As the parent organization of the TBMSG, the FWBO provided a broad and radical vision of Buddhist life in the modern world - - one in which like-minded spiritual friends live and work together for the betterment of society.

The TBMSG was founded in 1979 by one of Sangharakshita’s English disciples. While both Ambedkar and Sangharakshita planted the seeds of the TBMSG’s ‘ex-untouchable’ base of support, it took the leadership of Dharmachari Lokamitra to organize and empower the local dalit Buddhists to act. Lokamitra joined Sangharakshita’s Western Buddhist Order (WBO) in 1972, and became ordained in 1974. In 1977, Lokamitra, by then one of Sangharakshita’s most senior disciples, decided to embark on a six-month yoga tour to India. A rally in Nagpur on the 21st anniversary of Ambedkar’s conversion became the catalyst for Lokamitra’s interest in the Ambedkarite ex-untouchable community. Writing from Pune, Maharashtra, Lokamitra frames the overall importance of this Buddhist community in India as “the fastest growing area of our [FWBO] activities”²⁷ and encourages others within the FWBO to help support these distant spiritual kin.

Upon the TBMSG’s inauguration in India, the organization began a new wave of ex-untouchable conversions to the newly formed Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha (TBM), the Indian ordinal branch of Sangharakshita’s WBO. Adopting the FWBO’s hierarchical ordination system, the TBMSG began as a spiritual movement dedicated to the betterment of dalits in and around Pune. For this new organization, conversion to the sangha was seen as the lynch-pin for wider societal change, and from its’ inception TBMSG members have been both critical of other Buddhist movements that have failed to draw on Buddhism’s social import, and adamant about conversion (or taking refuge). From the start, much attention was paid to the “lifelong commitment”²⁸ of the ordination process and the dhamma education associated with the maintenance of this system. Kantowsky (2003) succinctly outlines TBMSG’s ordination system (the path to becoming

²⁵ While it is impossible here to outline all of the people and events that molded Sangharakshita’s specific understanding of Buddhism, his interactions with Dr. Ambedkar, on three separate occasions, seem to have been influential to later developments of the TBMSG as an organization with claims to the heritage of Ambedkar’s conversion. See Sangharakshita, Dh. *Facing Mount Kanchenjunga* (London: Windhorse Publications, 1991) for further discussion. See also Subhuti, Dh. *Bringing Buddhism to the West: A Life of Sangharakshita* (Birmingham: Windhorse Publications, 1995) for more detail.

²⁶ Baumann, M., op. cit., 372.

²⁷ Shubuti, op. cit., 147.

²⁸ http://www.fwbo.org/fwbo/order_members.html (accessed December 23, 2008).

a *dharmachari* - feminine *dharmacharini* - an ancient Buddhist term that literally means ‘dharma-farer’) as steps to approaching the “inner circle.”²⁹

In shepherding the legacy of Dr. Ambedkar’s conversion, the TBMSG seeks to put their vision of the dhamma into practice in three specific ways: 1.) by giving dhamma course lectures, 2.) through retreats of intensive Buddhist practice, and 3.) through the creation of dhamma communities in which members work together for the common good.³⁰ The first of these institutional goals were immediately embraced by the TBMSG movement, while the third goal was a bit more problematic, both culturally and monetarily. In order to overcome these problems, and to achieve the goals of this third practice of the dhamma, the Indian TBM decided to create a social work arm of the organization. Thus, the *Bahujan Hitay* ‘for the welfare of the many’ was created, and the first public health project was started in Pune in the early 1980s.

Today with twenty dhamma centers across India (mostly in Maharashtra), TBMSG is the setting for the community-based social work of Bahujan Hitay, which includes community health projects, educational hostels, kindergartens, and vocational training instruction for dalits. In 1999, Lokamitra, aiming to increase donor diversity, founded a new Indian trust called Jambudvipa. Jambudvipa, the ancient Buddhist name for the Indian sub-continent, represents for TBMSG members “the transformation of society and culture through the ethical and spiritual values.”³¹ The Jambudvipa Trust runs a number of inter-related movement programs that are aimed at two areas of societal transformation: the support of “disadvantaged sections” of Indian society and “bringing people together through spiritual practice to transcend barriers.”³² These two broad aims, geared at helping the underprivileged to “participate fully”³³ in society, find life in the work of the Manuski Center, the Pune-based home of Jambudvipa’s largest and most fully staffed project. Run by local members of various scheduled castes, the Manuski Center has been instrumental in organizing a network of activists in response to caste-based atrocities and aims to cultivate dalit Buddhist activism. Taken together, Jambudvipa, Manuski, TBM, and the Bahujan Hitay make up the TBMSG movement.

As one can see, TBMSG is a diverse spiritual family of “engaged Buddhist”³⁴ organizations and projects aimed at empowering both Indian Buddhism and oppressed

²⁹ Kantowsky, D., op. cit., 144.

³⁰ <http://www.tbmsg.org/index1.html> (accessed December 22, 2008). TBMSG’s website further explains their institution by describing Sangharakshita as “well known and appreciated by Dr. Ambedkar” and as a “translator between East and West, between [the] traditional world and [the] modern, between principles and practices.”

³¹ From *Padmapani: Annual Review of the Jambudvipa Trust, 2007-2008* (Pune, Maharashtra: Jambudvipa Trust, 2008), 4.

³² *Ibid.*, 3.

³³ <http://www.jambudvipa.org/> - accessed June 24, 2010.

³⁴ A Mahayana approach to Buddhism akin to the 1970s liberation theology movements in Christianity, engaged Buddhism advocates a focus on practice in this world coupled with a “new awareness of the social and institutional dimensions of suffering.” Queen, C. "Introduction" in Queen, C. and King, S. eds. op. cit.,

dalit communities. While the TBMSG claims to be on the vanguard of turning all of India Buddhist, this polemical rhetoric does not subtract from the fact that the movement has indeed helped to develop, at least on a small scale, the 'dharma revolution' that Ambedkar's conversion first triggered. If judged by its strength in places like Pune and Nagpur, the TBMSG movement has accomplished a great deal in nearly 30 years. Still, the TBMSG represents only one Ambedkar dalit activist response to oppression.³⁵ While Dr. Ambedkar's life-work acts as the basis for much low-caste political and religious organizing, Nagpur (Ambedkar's chosen place of conversion) has become the focal point of both dalit identity politics and the rise of the influential right wing Hindutva (Hindu Nationalist) youth organization, the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*.³⁶ This paradox that Nagpur is the historical center of the Ambedkar Buddhist conversion movement and RSS Hindutva activism draws attention to the shared discursive space of these broad cultural movements. Despite no direct interaction, both these movements remain in discursive public encounter with the other and unwittingly their narratives structure their mutual interactions. Counter-acting the exclusive rhetoric of the *Sangh Parivar* (family of Hindu radical right religious parties) provides an important social justice context for newly converted Ambedkar Buddhists' of the TBMSG.

The TBMSG Discursive Landscape

Outright expression of Hindu nationalism and chauvinism, in tandem with a Buddhist conception of community (or sangha), provides the motivation for an inclusive Ambedkar Buddhist discourse. Indeed, it is upon this broad discursive terrain that Ambedkar Buddhists are constantly negotiating with both dalits and non-dalits over the legitimacy of their reality. In such a discursive contention, the conversion identity of Ambedkar Buddhists positions dalits as capable of making their own decisions and puts dalit Buddhists in direct conflict with fundamental Hindu forces in society. But more importantly, as a major purveyor of a narrative storyline of Buddhist self-reliance, TBMSG fills an important opportunity space within the wider dalit rights movement. Ambedkar Buddhists' ability to offer a newly self-aware conversion identity is an important counter to the exclusive rhetoric of the Hindu right, as well as, the ubiquitous injustice stories of many Ambedkar followers.

10. For a complete discussion of the historical and soteriological implications of engaged Buddhism see Chappell, D., ed. *Buddhist Peaceworks: Creating Cultures of Peace* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1999); Queen, Christopher, and Sallie King, eds., op. cit., and; Kraft, K. *The Wheel of Engaged Buddhism: A New Map of the Path* (New York: Weatherhill, 1999), among others.

³⁵ Important research remains to be done on many of these organizations, like for example, the Samata Sainik Dal (SSD), a youth organization that was originally begun by Dr. Ambedkar in 1927 and that is still politically active today, or the *Bharatiya Bauddha Maha Sabha* (Buddhist Society of India), an organization that Ambedkar founded in 1955 over his disdain for the Brahmin-controlled Maha Bodhi Society. These organizations are only touched on in Indian Buddhist literature (see Kantowsky, D., op cit. for example).

³⁶ See Ram-Prasad, C. "Being Hindu and/or Governing India? Religion, Social Change and the State" in G. ter Haar, Ed., *The Freedom to Do God's Will: Religious Fundamentalism and Social Change* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 159-196.

In this discursive topography, the language of the TBMSG privileges a notion of social justice that implies often competing conceptions of social identity, social positioning, and power relations. While narratives of victimization and injustice are common among movement members, the dialectic created by an identity narrative of newly self-aware Buddhists often complicates the expression of such narratives. Conversely, the victim narrative often works to qualify the use and deployment of the newly self-aware Buddhist narrative. The storylines of both the identity of victim of caste-based injustice and newly self-aware Buddhist are in discursive competition and the story of the TBMSG movement is a continual balancing of these two identities. It is in finding a balance between these identity dialectics, and the power and social positioning opportunities and limitations they entail, that the TBMSG movement actively engages Ambedkar Buddhist converts in constructing justice. While this attempt to ‘find balance’ is not always apparent to TBMSG members, the power of both these narrative storylines (both individually and in tandem) is exhibited in a diversity of TBMSG social contexts. Still, the embedded nature of these narratives conspires to replicate power and status conditions despite TBMSG members’ attempts to eradicate them.

TBMSG’s internal movement bias towards a focus on creating the identity of newly self-aware Buddhists does, at times, constrain the voice of activist narratives of injustice, just as the opposite is true in the external discursive terrain. The critical implication of such context-dependent rhetorical bias is that the TBMSG movement recurrently reifies the boundaries of its own responses to caste-ism. By not fully noticing the assumptive starting points of the narratives they weave TBMSG’s bias towards Buddhist practice and self-cultivation acts to focus the movement inwardly. Simply not engaging castes from ‘higher’ social strata, the TBMSG movement, thus, misses an opportunity to have the full extent of its social justice narrative realized. Given the many complexities of engaging ‘higher’ social strata, which does not have the same experience of TBMSG members’ suffering, focusing too exclusively on a newly self-aware dalit Buddhist identity narrative does not allow TBMSG members the space to fully explore new means of engendering empathy in non-dalits. As Cobb (2008) has cogently argued “narratives are material...Without narrative intervention, efforts to redress marginalization operate on the basis of accusation that do little to build new relationships, and on the contrary, deepen relational fractures.”³⁷ While such a critical assessment of TBMSG is not meant to discount its important work of providing a new positive narrative identity to a delegitimized mass of dalits, such assessment is intended to foster critical self-reflection on the processes of constructing this narrative identity.

Neither simply a Buddhist nor simply an oppressed victim identity provides the full social legitimacy needed by TBMSG to create and maintain social justice for dalits. For TBMSG activists, balancing these broad narratives is tricky, yet critical. The

³⁷ Cobb, Sara “Narrative Analysis” in Cheldelin, S., Druckman, D., and Fast, L. eds. *Conflict: From Analysis to Intervention*, Second Edition (New York: Continuum, 2008), 106.

complexity of this dialectic dance can be seen in the following statement made by TBMSG founder, Lokamitra, during a 2006 celebration at a TBMSG's girls' hostels near Nagpur:

“The Government of India must not want girls to learn. All this would lead one to think there must be some discrimination here... Sixty to seventy years ago these girls would have had absolutely no chance at any education due to their status as ‘untouchables,’ but look now at what we have done!”³⁸

Such a statement simultaneously highlights both a narrative of past victimization and a present narrative of success that is repeatedly attributed to dalit constituents' acceptance of Buddhism and Ambedkar Buddhist identity. Remaining positive in his stress of the accomplishment that ‘untouchables’ have made against structural violence, Lokamitra keenly positions dalits as both sufferers of social inequality and important agents of social change. His use of the term ‘untouchables,’ rare in dalit circles, is simultaneously a nod to foreign listeners like me, and to the agency of dalits themselves. But TBMSG members' real sense of agency clearly comes from a collective Buddhist identity (emphasized in the ‘we’ that Lokamitra stresses). Lokamitra's statement points to an Ambedkar Buddhist worldview that stresses the crucial role of collectivist culture in actualizing a new status and identity necessary for social justice. Lokamitra's narrative construction provides a cursory view of TBMSG's discursive landscape. The complex positioning of their narrative identities calls for further detailed illustration of how the movement's narrative structure and storyline deployment informs TBMSG activists' normative commitments to justice, as well as, supports a more general lack of critical reflective attention to meanings of justice.

Mapping Commitments to Justice

Movement leaders and activists, though rarely forthcoming with their uncertainty about social justice or its application for contemporary society, do exhibit an implicit hesitancy in the narrative structures they deploy. Though many of the TBMSG leaders and activists at the Manuski Center express a sense that the movement as a whole did not have a very good sense of what social justice looks like, the Dharmacharis and Dharmacharinis involved more directly in TBMSG spiritual activism seem less concerned that such lack of a clear conception is problematic for their work. As a continual balancing of both injustice narratives³⁹ and a socially constructed identity of

³⁸ Personal notes, September, 30th, 2006.

³⁹ The concept of injustice narratives, here, is an elaboration of what Cobb (2008) describes as “essentially stories that elaborate a history of victimization, often at the hands of the Others.” Cobb, Sara “Narrative Analysis” in Cheldelin, S., Druckman, D., and Fast, L. eds. *Conflict: From Analysis to Intervention*, Second Edition (New York: Continuum, 2008), 105. Even though justice narratives are understood as the stories that people tell about fairness, equality, justice, injustice narratives are more than simply their logical opposite. It is important to note that injustice narratives are distinguished from justice narratives by their retrospective as opposed to projective quality.

newly converted Buddhists, the narrative structures of TBMSG activists expose confusion over the creation of a unified Ambedkar Buddhist conception of social justice. It is within TBMSG narrative structures that the ideal of social change is recursively undergoing a process of construction by TBMSG activists, yet most activists are unaware of this process of construction. To illuminate both the construction process and the dynamic potential of TBMSG movement narratives the six-part narrative structure outlined by Labov (1972) proves useful.⁴⁰ Even though such a framework is constrained by an almost total structural emphasis, the systematic insights it empowers about actor's and storyteller's underlying assumptions will help to develop a new idiom to understand TBMSG activist's narrative identities of self aware Buddhist and victim of caste injustice. This 'new' language relies on traditional language rules and conventions, but it is through the analysis and reflection of such rules and conventions that clarity about TBMSG's social justice ideal gets re-negotiated. During such negotiation processes, rhetorical ambiguity, especially apparent in evaluative statements, provides dynamic opportunities for movement actors narrating for change.⁴¹

The amorality induced by a thousands-year-old caste structure has left a deep legacy of psychological pain that conditions social action. Within this context, Buddhist hermeneutics of spiritual friendship and co-dependent origination develop a unique basis for dalit agency. These social aspects of Buddhism challenge common assumptions that Buddhist practice is purely an inner endeavor. In highlighting the interplay between structure and agency, scholars of engaged Buddhism have long attempted to refute this basic assumption of Buddhism's interiority. Still, while TBMSG activists view themselves as making dalits aware of how caste structures have conditioned a lack of individual responsibility, these activists' unquestioned acceptance of an engaged Buddhist hermeneutic is not free of narrative dependency. Like the dependency inherent in dominant victim narratives, unquestioned acceptance of Buddhism's self-actualizing potential conditions the available responses to marginalization. Overcoming collective identity assumptions that have positioned social actors in dualistic opposition either for or against caste oppression, or oblivious to its reach, will require more than a collective identity shift to Ambedkar Buddhism. TBMSG activists at the Manuski Center, realizing the interdependence of identities,⁴² aim to re-negotiate the conditioned dualism of 'us' versus 'them' in making converted Ambedkar Buddhists aware of their own agency in systems change, but their symbolic speech acts do not always provide the full range of trappings necessary to overcome the amorality of structural violence. TBMSG activists are only in the preliminary stages of a very long and complex process of re-constructing identity to overcome past victimization. While not in any way intended to blame the victim, attention to narrative structure draws awareness to the power of narrative choice

⁴⁰ See: Labov, W., op. cit.; Toolan, M. *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction, Second ed.* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

⁴¹ See Polletta, F. *It Was Like A Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁴² See Sen, A. *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006) for a detailed discussion of the levels of identity inherent in human interaction.

in the construction of identity and highlights the fact that TBMSG members (like many traditionally marginalized activists) are often critically un-reflexive in making these choices.

By mapping reality using TBMSG's own narrative creations structural patterns of TBMSG's social justice commitments are exposed. Still, exposure to patterns does not, in itself, overcome the popular resistance to the creation of theories about suffering. As political philosopher Brian Barry writes: "in the poorest countries, people do not need a theory to tell them that there is something wrong with [the] world."⁴³ Yet, the practical utility of a map or model which demystifies the often "hidden transcripts"⁴⁴ of structural violence cannot be overlooked as simply theory-building. Rather, such a map/model can provide some practical grounds for building an active response to injustice. The remainder of this paper illustrates, through select narrative examples, the complex importance of mapping the narrative structures of TBMSG activists via recourse to both Labov's six-part structure of a fully formed narrative (Labov, 1972) and the basic tenets of a positioning analysis⁴⁵ of these narrative structures. As such a structural analysis of the narrative is used to expose positioning assumptions and hidden transcripts, the two key narrative storylines that emerge – one of victim of an oppressive caste structure and the other of a newly self-aware Buddhist – reveal a narrative structure inseparable from the movement's core conceptions of social justice. The following section provides a map of TBMSG narrative structures and unmasks some of their implications.

A Dialogue on Caste: Selected Narratives from a Fishbowl of Suffering

The representative activist narratives⁴⁶ chosen for inclusion here were collected with the assistance of the staff at the Manuski Center during a two-day workshop conducted on July 3, 2008 entitled "A Dialogue on Caste: What Does a Caste-less and Socially Just Community Look Like?" Fifty to sixty calls were made to announce this facilitated dialogue to both TBMSG/Manuski members and friends/supporters in and around Pune's Manuski Center offices. Relying upon the Manuski Center to identify and contact the participants for this workshop had both advantages and disadvantages. Manuski's calling of activists gave the researcher legitimacy with local activists that, as

⁴³ Barry, B. *Why Social Justice Matters* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2005), 3.

⁴⁴ Scott, James. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 183. Scott (1990) juxtaposes public and hidden transcripts of subordination and domination, writing "if subordinate discourse in the presence of the dominant is a public transcript, I shall use the term hidden transcript to characterize discourse that takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation of the powerholders" (4).

⁴⁵ This involves the use of positioning theory as discussed in footnote #16 above. Harre, R., & Langenhove, L., op. cit., and; Harre and Moghaddam, eds., op. cit.

⁴⁶ Names of dalit activist have been changed in the text to protect their identity, despite the fact that some dalit activists argue that given names should be celebrated as a means of social activism. See for example: Valmiki, Omprakash. *Joothan: An Untouchables Life*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

an outsider to this community, would have been much more difficult otherwise. At the same time, relying upon movement activists to decide whom to call allowed Manuski activists to define whom they considered ‘activists.’ In total, 19 people participated in the two-day workshop, eagerly sharing their experiences and ideas on social justice. Though participants were predominantly those working within the Manuski Center’s network of activists, some Pune University graduate students and Ambedkar Buddhist pensioners living in the area also participated.

The discussion in this two-day workshop provided a means to collect diverse movement narratives. As such, the workshop, and particularly the fish-bowl dialogue on personal experiences of discrimination, was invaluable to the development of this research.⁴⁷ Beyond sounding cliché, these narratives reflect a certain everyday lived-experiences often hard to express non-emotionally in public settings. Such narratives often do not enter the public sphere because secure public space necessary for their open discussion is severely lacking.

The two short narratives, transcribed in Appendix A and analyzed narratologically below, express not only the suffering of injustice, but the psychological inferiority that continued marginalization creates. While the chosen narratives provide a general thematic overview of the hour and a half fish-bowl dialogue on day two of the workshop, they also exhibit a sort of reflection-in-action (common in group storytelling) among movement activists. During the course of this fish-bowl dialogue participants were asked to share personal experiences of discrimination. If participants were uncomfortable doing so, they were instructed to instead explain why they had become involved with the TBMSG movement. Each response represents an engaged Buddhist perspective on suffering that exhibits a unique emphasis on the impermanent nature of the oppressive and endemic structures of caste. Taken together they also represent an activist desire to move beyond simple victimization and stake claim on the importance of collective responsibility. The analysis of such narratives shows that narrative assertiveness and victimization merge to develop identity positions that are both constitutive and re-constitutive of successful social and structural change.

Narrative One: The Importance of Being Assertive

Having traveled eight hours by train from where he works as a civil servant with the Indian Rail service, Arjun was an eager dialogue participant. Openly sharing personal experiences with other participants, Arjun clearly exhibited a leadership quality that was fairly common among young Ambedkar Buddhists. In the narrative excerpt chosen for analysis here, he entered the dialogue in an attempt to illustrate his agreement with another participant’s statement that the dalit problem is largely one of self-esteem. Arjun’s narrative is a testament to the fact that the social-psychological effects of

⁴⁷ For more on the structure of the 2-day workshop see the author’s dissertation (op. cit. in footnote #1 above).

oppression, though impermanent, are doggedly lasting.

In orienting⁴⁸ his narrative around references to Dr. Ambedkar's advice on overcoming caste (line 1, Appendix A), Arjun, now in his mid-thirties, quickly launches into a personal story of assertion from his university days. He explains that during a discussion of 'reservations,' people were "visibly stunned" (line 4, Appendix A) when he said that he was from a scheduled caste community. The break with normative convention described in this line leaves the others in his narrative not only surprised, but visibly uneasy. Employing an evaluative statement embedded within the complicating action of the story, he then says in the following lines that "I was not disturbed by what I said... But, it is other people who were disturbed..."(lines 5 and 6). Such evaluative statements validated and reinforced a group dynamic among fish-bowl participants that was primarily concerned with feelings of not being heard in modern Indian society; expressing well the concept of "hidden transcripts."⁴⁹ Such statements convey the apprehension among movement activists over how much to portray themselves as victims and how much to evaluate the progress they have made through being assertive. Some have called this the "positioning paradox"⁵⁰ and activists within the TBMSG are continually engaged in justifying either progress or hardship. The evaluative statements of Arjun emphasize the point of his story, but they also reveal an important dialectic within the movement. Should activists frame their contention from the perspective of a victim or a newly self-aware Buddhist?

It is Arjun's evaluative statements⁵¹ that form the core of his story – they illustrate, or model, a confident scheduled caste identity, something that is stunning and "bothering" (line 10) to others. In making these evaluative statements Arjun is taking a stance on the victim versus newly self-aware Buddhist dialectic, placing himself squarely on the side of those emphasizing Buddhist self-awareness and assertiveness. Here Buddhism provides the best means to eradicating caste through providing a space for critical reflective analysis. But since such statements reveal an individualistic hermeneutic of Buddhism, they miss an important opportunity to foster a collective conception of social change. Such statements also expose an elite interpretation of social reality – one to which others in the fish-bowl can relate. As Taylor, Caouette, Usborne,

⁴⁸ Labov, op. cit., 363. Note again that throughout the narrative analysis in this paper reference will be made to Labov's six part structure of narrative: Abstract [A], Orientation [O], Complicating Action [CA], Evaluation [E], Resolution [R], and Coda [C]. For ease of reference the narrative transcripts in Appendix A are coded according to this basic conception of narrative structure.

⁴⁹ Scott, op. cit., Footnote # 44.

⁵⁰ Taylor, D., Caouette, Usborne, and King. "How Disadvantaged Groups Members Position Themselves" in F. Moghaddam, Harre', Rom, & Lee, Naomi, Eds. *Global Conflict Resolution through Positioning Analysis* (New York: Springer, 2008), 154. In defining this paradox, the authors' state: "in order to maximize group advantage, group members may feel compelled to focus on the group's state of disadvantage."

⁵¹ As Toolan (1988) describes Labov's six stages of the well-formed story he writes: "evaluation consists of all the means to establish and sustain the point, the contextual significance and tellability, or reportability, of a story." Toolan M., op. cit., 151.

and King (2008) have argued “further investigation into the unique experiences of elite disadvantaged group members is warranted”⁵² by highlighting the social-psychological biases inherent in elites’ narrative constructions. Arjun’s evaluative statements point to often-neglected meanings within elite disadvantaged sub-groups – meanings that privilege the self over the group. Such evaluative statements represent one illustration of the complex variation of narratives of social justice within the TBMSG movement.

Explaining in line 6 that others “were disturbed” by his assertiveness as a scheduled caste represents Arjun’s point in this narrative. The fact that the narrator stumbles with how he will express his reflection of his past action (of being assertive) is telling of the deep-rooted psychology of oppression apparent within the Ambedkar dalit community. Arjun’s narrative is a series of evaluative statements that at times provide a “temporary suspension of the action”⁵³ and are aimed at re-constructing and re-positioning the narrative agency of listeners. This ‘temporary suspension’ provides the ability to embed evaluation as coming from another person (or persons in this case) and, therefore, strengthen the import and legitimacy of the narrative. Arjun’s evaluative statements point to a means to overcoming oppression – being assertive. In Arjun’s view, dalit assertiveness and self-confidence are the crucial aspects needed for the creation of a socially just community. By providing corrective to the current unjust reality (e.g. “what we have come across is generally people hiding that they are from a scheduled caste” – line 8), Arjun’s assertion and confidence must be characteristic of any dalit community that attempts to actualize social justice. Further, the narrative position of victim so visible in narratives of other TBMSG leaders interviewed is, in this context, virtually absent. The narrative position of victim, though certainly a familiar milieu to these activists, forms a sort of un-spoken backdrop to the entire fish-bowl discussion. The tacit knowledge of the communities’ victimization, though ever-present, is secondary to and de-emphasized in relation to a narrative position of assertive self-awareness. Arjun’s continual re-construction and re-position of self-assertiveness provides valuable reinforcement of the power of the conversion experience.

Narrative Two: Success and Ensuring Universal Dalit Commitment to the Cause

Another important characteristic of the just community apparent during the fish-bowl dialogue was a need for what one activist described as “intellectual honesty” (individual interview with Patel Bare, July 2008) among dalits. TBMSG activists shared knowing-glances when a particular episode was used to illustrate their frustration over how successful dalits often forget their roots once they succeed. Among workshop participants there was general agreement that this was a key missing element of the just community. One participant, Patel, in drawing attention to the discourse of a recent debate he attended at Pune University, pointedly oriented other fish-bowl listeners to this problem within dalit community. During this debate, the proposed creation of a separate

⁵² Taylor, D., Caouette, Usbourne, and King., op. cit., 160.

⁵³ Toolan, M., op. cit., 153.

hostel to house scheduled caste students at the University was discussed (line 12, Appendix A). Patel complicates the action of his story by informing his listeners that this “was a discussion under the chairmanship of vice-chairman of Pune [University], Dr. Narendra Jadhav” (line 13). The invocation of Dr. Jadhav presents the chance for the predominantly Mahar dalits participants to weigh-in on a familiar issue - - the communities’ expectations of those dalit elites who have become successful in Indian society. As an educated and powerful dalit, Dr. Jadhav is revered, but also held under critical scrutiny by his own Mahar dalit community. The status he has acquired as Vice-chancellor at Pune University seems to make him a lightning rod for dalits’ questions about justice and fairness.

Dr. Jadhav is clearly a controversial figure, who has simultaneously become a symbol of both dalit uplift and betrayal. Yet, despite the fact that Dr. Jadhav is well known in the dalit community, Patel (in lines 18 and 19) feels the need to explain Dr. Jadhav’s relevance as a dalit writer and intellectual. The showing of some deference and respect for Dr. Jadhav’s 2003 book *Untouchables: My Family's Triumphant Journey Out of The Caste System in Modern India*⁵⁴ is aimed at highlighting the import of Patel’s evaluative question delivered in broken English (in line 15): “Why he is thinking like that?” In explaining what Dr. Jadhav *should* think, Patel is making the case that Dr. Jadhav, though the beneficiary of others’ past suffering, is out of touch with the current needs of his community. Positioning Dr. Jadhav as both from the community and standing outside it, Patel is able to argue that he is disconnected and undeserving of the status he holds. In fact, the invocation of Jadhav’s name is a signal to the community - - a means to make clear that increased status alone is not the full answer to the legacy of caste injustice. For Patel, and undoubtedly many other scheduled castes, invoking Dr. Jadhav elicits anger; anger over the sense that he is not being, in Patel’s words, ‘intellectually honest.’ In other words, there is a feeling among many scheduled castes that Dr. Jadhav has, in all his success, not lived up to his dalit roots, but rather succumb to Sanskritization.⁵⁵ Where the line between anger and jealousy lies remains an open question in such interpretation, but such critical anger is readily apparent in many young TBMSG activists.

In lines 14 and 15 of Patel’s narrative the sense of anger and betrayal shows in the way that Patel struggles to find the words to express his feelings. Speaking of the University of Pune discussion on opening a scheduled caste hostel he says: “and he was involved... ahh...he was in support that ...ahh...ahh...to be... ahh ...found ...ahh...

⁵⁴ This book was originally published in India as *I and My Father*. Further discussion of Dr. Jadhav’s book can be found in the author’s dissertation (see footnote #1 above).

⁵⁵ “Sanskritization is the process by which a ‘low’ Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, ‘twice-born’ caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community.” Srinivas, M. N. *Social Change in Modern India* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1966), 6. For a good discussion of the process of Sanskritization and its’ effect on identity see also Jaffrelot, C. “Sanskritization Vs. Ethnicization In India: Changing Identities and Caste Politics before Mandal” *Asian Survey*, 40 (2000), 756-766.

separate hostel for scheduled caste students... and I was shocked that..." (lines 14 and 15, Appendix A). This combination of orientation and evaluation helps to exhibit the frustration and helplessness that Patel feels as a member of the 'lower level' of a disadvantaged subgroup of scheduled castes. In other words, relative to the "elite disadvantaged subgroup"⁵⁶ (i.e. what Indians might call the 'creamy layer'), Patel is expressing a common dalit value judgment about how many of those now a part of the 'creamy layer' have forgotten their community. This is a particularly relevant issue within the TBMSG community as they trace their origins back to Dr. Ambedkar, the model of compassionate giving back the disadvantaged. As indicative of the 'positioning paradox' described above, the within-group element of status further complicates TBMSG activists' narrative decisions. Motivation for narrative choice may depend more on a person's identification of what their in-group is, than on outsiders' attempts to position that person as a part of a particular primary identity group. So as Dr. Jadhav may see himself as a Vice-Chancellor of Pune University first and foremost, those within the dalit community are likely to see him as dalit and then only after that as a Vice-Chancellor. Patel's categorizing this as an issue of intellectual honesty underlines an attempt re-position Jadhav's statements as a betrayal of the Mahar dalit community, but it misses important self-reflexive aspects of narrative's power.

In line 16 Patel uses a type of internal evaluation that Labov sub-classifies as what he calls a "comparator."⁵⁷ In saying: "instead of [thinking that way] he should...ahh...he should have think that scheduled caste students should...should stay with another students," Patel alludes to a desired state of casteless-ness. Later in the narrative (lines 25 and 26 in particular) he goes on to paint a picture of what Dr. Jadhav's vision in actuality creates, but it is the hint of what Dr. Jadhav's vision 'is not' that is Patel's point. This is the crux of what Patel sees as missing from the dalit community and crucial to the creation of a just society. Patel is expressing the need for a unified and integrated community. But the diversity of experiences and identities within such a large community, coupled with a lack of clear markers for creating the integrated society, conspire to make dalit unity extremely illusive. This diversity seems to be largely overlooked by activists like Patel.

So as Dr. Jadhav considers himself part-of the Indian elite, Patel believes that his position as a scheduled caste (dalit) should come before any other identity. The activist assumptions about identity's role in complex systems here are important to emphasize. Placing a relative importance on a collectivist dalit identity, TBMSG activists assume sub-groups (and individuals) to be less important than the wider identity distinction acquired through birth. As a consequence of this initial collectivist assumption, the correlate presumption that being intellectually honest requires obedience to the wider

⁵⁶ Taylor, D., Caouette, Usbourne, and King, op. cit., 159.

⁵⁷ Toolan, op. cit., 156. As Toolan further describes: "Evaluations are grouped by Labov into four sub-types: Intensifiers, Comparators, Correlatives, and Explicatives... comparators evaluate indirectly by drawing attention away from what actually happened by alluding to what might have but didn't happen" (155-157).

group goals easily takes root among dalits. Inversely, any expression of individual interest for maintaining elite status becomes quickly understood as subordinate to collective obedience. In a society that is captivated with status, these altruistic sentiments may be a set of assumptions that are hard to legitimize in social reality. Given India's chronically communal social stratification, balancing group needs with individual wants muddies the waters of any attempt to create a casteless society. Patel's call for intellectual honesty highlights a set of normative assumptions that activists often profess, but rarely reflectively scrutinize. What are the implications of adopting a collectivist worldview in the context of arguing for secular democratic social change? Does a worldview pregnant with individualist assumptions fit in with a Buddhist worldview? Further reflection on such questions is certainly needed for the development of social change, but such questions in practice appear to go unattended by TBMSG activists.

Further, calls for 'intellectual honesty' also reveal the ever-present underlying dialectic between victim and Buddhist identities within the TBMSG movement. Betrayal, or disregard, by elite sub-group members is seen as a kind of re-victimization. The feelings of betrayal and anger that this re-victimization ignite do not appear to be approached from an identity position of Buddhist non-attachment, or loving kindness, as might be expected from Buddhists. On the contrary, the kind of re-victimization Patel's narrative highlights seems to be handled from a more familiar perspective of the raw emotions associated with being victimized. As many research subjects expressed, a legacy of dalit psychology of oppression has crippled and stunted the development of dalit Buddhist activism. The underlying psychology of narratives such as Patel's, point to a motivation for activism that is not based-on some Buddhist identity or ideology, but rather on an identity as victim. Overcoming the constraints of this victim narrative requires much inter-group reflection and work.

Compared to Arjun's identification of assertiveness as a means to the creation of just society, charging others as 'intellectually dishonest' places dalits in the familiar identity position of victim. TBMSG activists could look more deeply into collective Buddhist hermeneutics for the tools needed to address this psychology of oppression, but they do not seem to do so. Buddhist psychology of no-self and non-attachment provides practical resources to help unlock the root causes of dalit marginalization; resources that seem to be under-utilized. Patel's narrative highlights the need to continue to reflect on the underlying assumptions inherent in uncritically combining the identity of victim and that of Ambedkar Buddhist. While Jambudvipa and Manuski activists are beginning to do this work, they are only scratching the surface.

Conclusion

“[Those who become interested in the TBMSG movement] find that there is some model which can be worked out, or run through, by using Buddhism as a tool or a means for social transformation.”⁵⁸

The above quote is telling of the important role that Buddhism plays in TBMSG activists' lives. Neither simply ideology nor dogma, Buddhism acts as a model, for improving both self and society. Seen as a map by which to not only understand, but realize, the ideal, Buddhist teaching provides TBMSG members a guide from which to practice *and* theorize about change on many levels. As a model, there is little doubt that Buddhism is powerful; early Buddhists, indeed, described their task with reference to a metaphor (a complex and ambiguous model in its own right). The Buddha, as a doctor for the ills of the world, is said to have 'turned the wheel of dharma' in order for others to overcome suffering. This awakening of the self to the reality of the world happens through practice. But of course "the self is not reducible to mere introspection."⁵⁹ As complex and contingent, selves are constantly engaged in processes of modeling to attempt to understand the ideal; for Ambedkar Buddhists this modeling process assumes living as both the archetypes of the Buddha and Ambedkar would - - as both beyond and within the social world. Thus, a Buddhist ideal of no-self and a new assertive narrative identity of collective self are simultaneous aspirations for TBMSG activists. But, what does this Ambedkar Buddhist model provide to individual selves in need of a collective conception of social justice? While Buddhist teaching provides the primary grounding for individual TBMSG activists, a structural analysis and reflection on the social constructionist processes inherent in TBMSG's own narratives helps to better articulate the TBMSG movement's collective sense of social justice. A lack of such analytical self-reflection internally in the movement has led the TBMSG to an inadequate grounding from which to pursue social change. It is as if the idea of practice is evident, but fully applying the theory of Buddhist practice to the world remains in its infancy.

TBMSG's conception of social change can only be actualized through activist's open and critical collective self-reflection. Such collective self-reflection requires the pro-active engagement of counter narratives that challenge activist's vision of applied theory. Agency in such a process resides within the movement and appears as socially constructed narrative opportunities to create dialogue with 'others,' however these 'others' might be defined. Failure to engage with the diversity of others makes lasting change impossible. But, beyond traditional contact hypothesis,⁶⁰ such dialogue with the 'other' also entails confronting injustice in the creation and sustenance of new narrative identities that are both inclusive and accepting of a diversity of expressions of marginalization. While creating an Ambedkar Buddhist identity is fine, developing a

⁵⁸ Brown Bag Talk by Manoj Dahiwalé and Dharmachari Maitreyanath, George Mason University's Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, May 15, 2007.

⁵⁹ Rothbart, D., Ed. *Modeling: Gateway to the Unknown, A Work by Rom Harre* Vol. 1, Studies in Multidisciplinarity. (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2004), x.

⁶⁰ For a nice overview of contact hypothesis see Abu Nimer, M. *Dialogue, Conflict Resolution, and Change: Arab-Jewish Encounters in Israel* (New York: SUNY Press, 1999).

sense of understanding of non-Buddhists' reality is just as critical. Despite much emphasis on learning Buddhism, TBMSG overlooks opportunities to teach about 'others.' Awareness of narratives' ability to construct reality is critical to developing religiously 'literate' understanding of others. Such pluralism is often hard to create within social movement organizations given their tendency for in-group polarization, but some evidence points to religious organizations as among the most fertile ground for such authentic value exchanges and identity re-positioning to occur.⁶¹ In short, the narrative structure of TBMSG stories reveals a great deal about how to foster lasting solutions to caste inequality, but activists must first be attentive to narrative process.

Still, the solution to enriching un-reflexive conceptions of social change is not solely an issue of obtaining economic or political power as some suggest.⁶² True transformation of society entails a collective re-construction of social change that arises from engagement with others. In following Habermas:

“As long as we do not free ourselves from the naïve, situation-oriented attitude of actors caught up in the communicative practice of everyday life, we cannot grasp the limitations of a lifeworld that is dependent upon, and changes along with, a cultural stock of knowledge that can be expanded at any time.”⁶³

Beyond simply economic or political power, renewed social position (or even a new identity) what oppressed dalits of the TBMSG must strive for is a self-reflective engagement with 'others' of all castes and religious identities. While true that this sense of “cosmopolitanism” is brought on by *the work* of political, economic, and social change,⁶⁴ it is the collective engagement with our own narrative identities that ushers and maintains broad-based transformation and sustains inclusive social justice methodologies within society. TBMSG leadership stands in an ideal place to mediate this reflective engagement.

⁶¹ For some discussion of this in the American context see Swartz, H. *Organizing Urban America: Secular and Faith-Based Progressive Movements* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). Further, while there have been very interesting studies on cosmopolitanism from below [see for example Kurasawa, F. *The Work of Global Justice: Human Rights as Practices* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), and; Rajagopal, B. *International Law from Below: Development, Social Movements, and Third World Resistance* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003) as particular examples that have hinted at the religious nature of human rights contention from below] there has been little comparative study of effectiveness of secular versus religious expressions of social movement organization and discourse.

⁶² See the comments of dalit writer Chadra Bhan Prasad on the role of capitalism in "In an Indian Village, Signs of Loosening Grip of Caste," *The Washington Post*, 31 August 2008, A1. Also see Prasad, C. B. *Dalit Diary: 1999-2003; Reflections on Apartheid in India* (Chennai: Navayana Publishing, 2004). For an important reading of Marxist movements in India see Omvedt, G. *Reinventing Revolution: New Social Movements and the Socialist Tradition in India* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1993).

⁶³ Habermas, J. *The Theory of Communicative Action: Lifeworld and System A Critique of Functionalist Reason* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987), 133.

⁶⁴ Kurasawa, F. op. cit., 157. In arguing for the cosmopolitan approach, Kurasawa cogently argues: “cosmopolitan solidarity stands as the culmination of the *work* of global justice” (157, emphasis added).

TBMSG's competing narrative identities of newly converted Ambedkar Buddhist and victim of injustice provide an untapped ambiguity and ambivalence from which to understand the movement's social justice ideal and make that ideal real. It is through recourse to social actors' narrative constructions that multiple identities can be mediated, power asymmetries can be explained, and collective re-positioning realized. In finding that Ambedkar Buddhist's narratives are aimed at creating and maintaining a social identity in which a particular social justice ideal becomes the central storyline from which to transform the persistent reality of discrimination, the vague outlines of an integrated model to create the casteless society (i.e. social justice) can be seen. In clearly mapping the broad lines of this model much work remains to be done, even as processes of narrative construction provide some clarity.

APPENDIX A: FISH-BOWL NARRATIVES (JULY 3, 2008)

Participant narratives are numbered consecutively even though they did not occur in straight succession. At the end of each transcribed line, Labov's six-part structure: Abstract [A], Orientation [O], Complicating Action [CA], Evaluation [E], Resolution [R], and Coda [C] has been added as a means to make visible narrative structure. In addition, lower-case [p] has been added when short pauses were transcribed and capital [P] inserted in places where a longer pause were detected. Words placed in [brackets] are also added for clarity, including [inaudible] when recorded speech was inaudible.

Arjun's Narrative

- (1) Looking forward from what [Manoj, another TBMSG activist, quoted from Ambedkar] I think being assertive is a very very important tool. [O, E]
- (2) When I joined my penning [i.e. studies in University] we were about 15 professionals [A]
- (3) ...[p] so there was a discussion going on about reservation and this and that – and...ahh...my professors were sitting together [O]
- (4) So then I said that I come from a scheduled caste category and everybody was so visibly stunned [CA]
- (5) ...and as you said...ahh...I was not at all disturbed by what I said in that gathering – that I am a scheduled caste [E]
- (6) But it is the other people who were disturbed by the very thought that I had...I had... been so assertive in arguing that I am a scheduled caste [E]
- (7) ...and as long as three, four months later people came and told me that this was the first time in our lives that we found someone who can tell openly in a gathering of about 15 odd people that he came from a scheduled caste. [E]
- (8) What we have come across is generally people hiding that they are from a scheduled caste [E]
- (9) And this was the first time...[p] and people are telling me after four, five months of what I said... [O]

- (10) ...so they are still stunned by[p]...by [p]... my telling was bothering them and not me actually [E, C].

Patel's Narrative

- (11) Yes, I would like to share one same thing, but differently [A].
- (12) Some days before in Pune University there was an advertisement of one discussion going on that ...ahh...there should be a separate... [p] ahh... hostel for scheduled caste students at Pune University [O].
- (13) ...and...ahh...it was a discussion under the chairmanship of vice-chairman of Pune, Dr. Narendra Jadhav [O, CA]
- (14) and he was involved...[p] ahh...he was in support that ...ahh...ahh...to be...ahh...found...ahh...separate hostel for scheduled caste students [O]
- (15) and I was shocked that...ahh... why he is thinking like that? [E]
- (16) ahh... instead of [thinking that way] he should...ahh...he should have think that scheduled caste students should...should be stay with another students...[p] [E]
- (17) ...ahh so many other hostels are there [O]
- (18) Ahh...I couldn't understand that Narendra Jadhav is also dalit, from a scheduled caste, and he wrote many books that...ahh... he is very famous [CA]
- (19) [p]...He has one very famous book that "I and My Father" and he has written this about [how] he came to this stage [CA]
- (20) and he knows that... how caste system works... and how caste system degrades or how caste system takes backward people of ...ahh...downtrodden of people of the lowest state of this social system... [CA]
- (21) and...ahh...I have one question with...ahh...professor of...ahh... Pune University and I asked him "Why you people are thinking like that?" [E]
- (22) "This Indian caste system...[p] you [are] establishing new type of caste system within Pune University, which is...you call...[p] this is the Oxford of...[p]... India... [Others in the fishbowl add: The East]... the Oxford of the East... or the Oxford of India... [E]
- (23) and he [the Pune University Professor] has no answer at that time [E]
- (24) This is the quite different thing than Brahmin wanted to try this person to bring...[p]..ahh... upward [Arjun: "Right!"]... here is the scheduled caste person who is...ahh...who is ... vice-chancellor, but he is in support of form separate hostel for scheduled caste people... to keep away or keep beside them... [E, C]
- (25) ...and if you see...ahh [p]...I have good experience in Bihar and Maharashtra also that every scheduled caste hostels with students being... ahh... scheduled castes living in that hostel, they are neglectable [neglected]. [E]
- (26) If you can... If you see that information college, which is very famous college in History at Pune, and there is a hostel for scheduled castes, a different hostel, and it is nearby garbage... there is garbage everywhere... [E, C]