Religions and Development
Research Programme

'*The people know they need religion in order to develop*': The Relationships between Hindu and Buddhist Religious Teachings, Values and Beliefs, and Visions of the Future in Pune, India.

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RaD

Religions and Development

Research Programme

The Religions and Development Research Programme Consortium is an international research partnership that is exploring the relationships between several major world religions, development in low-income countries and poverty reduction. The programme is comprised of a series of comparative research projects that are addressing the following questions:

- How do religious values and beliefs drive the actions and interactions of individuals and faith-based organisations?
- How do religious values and beliefs and religious organisations influence the relationships between states and societies?
- In what ways do faith communities interact with development actors and what are the outcomes with respect to the achievement of development goals?

The research aims to provide knowledge and tools to enable dialogue between development partners and contribute to the achievement of development goals. We believe that our role as researchers is not to make judgements about the truth or desirability of particular values or beliefs, nor is it to urge a greater or lesser role for religion in achieving development objectives. Instead, our aim is to produce systematic and reliable knowledge and better understanding of the social world.

The research focuses on four countries (India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Tanzania), enabling the research team to study most of the major world religions: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and African traditional belief systems. The research projects will compare two or more of the focus countries, regions within the countries, different religious traditions and selected development activities and policies.

The consortium consists of six research partner organisations, each of which is working with other researchers in the four focus countries:

- University of Birmingham, UK: International Development Department, Department of Theology and Religion, Centre for West African Studies, Centre for the Study of Global Ethics.
- University of Bath, UK: Centre for Development Studies.
- Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, New Delhi.
- Nigerian Institute of Social and Economic Research, Ibadan.
- University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.
- Lahore University of Management Sciences, Pakistan.

In addition to the research partners, links have been forged with non-academic and non-government bodies, including Islamic Relief.

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Summary

People's understanding of their own situation, ideas about a better life and strategies for achieving their visions is influenced, amongst other things, by religious values, beliefs, individuals and organizations, with implications for the objectives and strategies of state and non-government development actors.

Short term ethnographic research in two slum settlements in Pune, Maharastra, sought to understand the values and beliefs that influence and shape people's lives, in terms of how they see the world and negotiate their place in it. The research focused on poor, low caste Hindu and Buddhist communities in two typical slum settlements.

It revealed that religion

- influences people's understanding of their society and their place in it, in particular their diagnosis of why they are poor and discriminated against: both Hindus and Buddhists see the world through a caste lens and agree that they are discriminated against because of their low caste status.
- informs people's shared basic ideas of *karma* and *dharma* (roughly translated as destiny and duty)
- provides practical resources for dealing with day-to-day difficulties, including spiritual solace, advice from local religious leaders, and access to material resources and political platforms offered by slum-based religious organizations.
- influences people's responses to their current disadvantaged situation, with some accepting the status quo and pursuing a better next life through religious practices, behaviour, and others seeking to improve their wellbeing and prosperity in this life
- is linked with the emergence of gurus (such as Ambedkar for Buddhists) and nationalist organizations (such as Shiv Sena for Hindus) who articulate people's experience of caste injustice
- motivates people to pursue visions of how they think the world should be and provides them with possible strategies for achieving improved personal circumstances and a more equal society.
- supports the constant reshaping of identity, personhood and agency.

The findings demonstrate that development actors need to:

- develop detailed insights into how poor people understand their situation
- support poor urban residents in their daily battles to survive, through tackling immediate problems, as well as recognizing their aspirations for a more just society and a secure and prosperous future.

- explore the potential for working with selected prominent religious gurus, local religious leaders and slum-based religious organizations to strengthen the voices of the poor and motivate and support local people to challenge oppressive social structures.

1 Introduction

This paper explores how Hindu and Buddhist people living in Pune's slums understand, relate to and challenge the world in which they live. Specifically, it explores the beliefs and values that shape visions of the future towards which people strive. The research was prompted by a desire to assess how appropriate western development discourses are in the different religious contexts of developing countries. It aimed to examine how religious values and beliefs are reflected in the teachings imparted by local religious leaders and interpreted by their adherents, with particular reference to key concepts that underlie ideas about 'development', such as inequality, poverty and social justice.

This research focused on the daily struggles of Pune's poor and the role played in these by religious values, beliefs and practices. It explored whether poor people in Pune talk about their society and their visions of the future in terms of the development concerns of mainstream development agencies, such as wellbeing, poverty and inequality, especially gender inequality. It also explored the attitudes of Pune's poor to some of the tools commonly promoted to achieve a more prosperous and equitable society, for example, gender equality and higher standards of education. None of our informants used the term 'development' or anything directly comparable, but they did all talk about their hopes and desires for the future and were open about the problems they faced. We present in this paper a link between these visions and specific values and beliefs that emerged through our discussions with many different people, primarily Hindus and Buddhists, in the slums of urban Pune.

It was expected that both the values and beliefs about which people talk and the influences that shape their views would differ, even within one slum community. The paper begins by drawing out the values and beliefs about which people talk and then considers how these may or may not impact on their perceptions of their current circumstances and their construction of goals for the future. Part of the investigation therefore involved consideration of how beliefs and values are acquired by people. Much of this paper, as the title suggests, focuses on the role of different types of leaders and teachers in the process of communicating religious beliefs and the values that shape people's world views. The first step is to identify commonly held values and beliefs and then to reflect on how they are established.

The analysis draws on and applies Appadurai's notion of culture as possessing the "capacity to aspire." By this he means that culture has been underestimated in terms of its potential to motivate and help people shape positive visions of the future. He is critical of the heavy emphasis western

development policy places on economic solutions, which often describe culture as part of the problem, holding people in their past and 'backward' traditions (Appadurai, 2004). Our focus on religion adds to Appadurai's argument that culture should be viewed far more positively for what it contributes to people's visions of possible futures. We argue that religion, as an inseparable partner of culture, should also be analysed according to the practical and personal value it brings to people's lives.

Appadurai talks about values as providing the moral principles on which people draw to make decisions. Values can be shaped by a variety of influences, but here the potential role of religion in providing moral foundations or, specifically in the case of Dalit communities, a sense of justice, is examined. Beliefs relate to the cosmological lens through which people understand the world and their place within it. Since most people in India regard themselves as religious, we expected to find high levels of religiosity amongst slum residents. In addition, it seemed likely that the values and beliefs of their religion would resonate in the way that they understand the world and negotiate their place in it, thus informing their worldviews. Once it was established that people in our field sites are religious, we sought to understand how and why they assume particular religious identities. Further, the research investigated whether religion provides them with ways of accessing symbolic and social resources. The research adopted an ethnographic approach that focused on religion as a key dimension influencing the beliefs and values that affect how people live, but was also open to the possibility that other factors were also influential, especially caste, a system of social stratification that is an area of significant contestation in Pune's slums.

2 The study

The research in Pune built on the findings of an attempt to map the scale and scope of religious organizations engaged in development activities, by identifying the different types of faith-based organizations (FBOs) operating in Pune and estimating the numbers associated with different faith traditions and areas of activity (Jodhka and Bora, 2009). A selection of FBOs visited during the mapping exercise was revisited during a scoping visit to Pune in November, 2008. This exercise helped us to understand the priorities of these organizations and to gather some insights into how they view the beliefs and values of the poor groups with whom they work, as well as providing some background to slum settlements in the city and assisting in the design of the main fieldwork.

Established slum settlements in Pune are mixed communities, generally with a Hindu and Buddhist majority and a Christian and Muslim minority. Although many Dalits from the Mahar caste have converted to Buddhism or Christianity, many continue to observe only Hindu practices. In order to understand the role that religion plays in the lives of the poor, the research aimed to reflect at least some of this diversity, and also to examine the movement of people from Hinduism to other traditions. Balancing the time and resources available with the need to capture some of the diversity that characterizes Indian cities and religious traditions, it was decided to select two slum settlements in which to conduct fieldwork during the second phase of the research. The two settings, a slum settlement near the suburb of Dapoli and a second in the Vishwantwadi area, were selected to ensure that diverse insights, views and experiences were captured, to enable a complex investigation into how people describe their current circumstances and visualize their futures. In order to gain access to the slums, we asked for the help of two new Buddhist organizations: Bahujan Hitjay and Manuski. Employees from these organizations introduced us to members of the slum communities in which they worked and helped us establish connections with informants, who then invited us to spend time with them in their homes. Our work concentrated on two of the main religious traditions in these settings: Hinduism and Buddhism.[1]

The findings presented in this paper were gathered between November 2008 and October 2009 during a total of eight weeks of fieldwork. Three periods of fieldwork were conducted by the two authors with the support of local interpreters. As anthropologists, we adopted a participant observational approach. We did not conduct formal interviews. At times we asked to record conversations, but no informant agreed because of concerns about how recorded data might be used. We made extensive fieldwork notes and compiled a log which contained the dialogues we had with people each day, our

observations and any insights gained through local literature and media sources. The data we present here were collected through informal interactions with local people, semi-formal interviews with key figures in the organizations that helped us and analysis of local literature. A total of approximately one hundred interviews were conducted, varying in length and formality. Many interviews inside the slums were conducted in English and the authors were able to communicate with local people at a basic level in Hindi. Through the interpreters more detailed discussion in Marathi was possible.

Obtaining access to suitable organizations and engaging informally with local people was straightforward. Our status as female, foreign outsiders helped us to some degree, as people were happy to talk with us and share their concerns, in the hope that we might be able to influence change. Of course, it would be naive to think that after such a short time we were trusted or that people did not censor what they told us. As with all research, the way in which our informants positioned and saw us undoubtedly impacted on what they told us. However, we spent considerable time in each setting and built up our data over a number of visits and at different times of the year. The variety of people with whom we spoke and the consensus emerging out of our data makes us confident that the analysis presented here is accurate.

The presentation of findings begins by documenting the commonly shared Hindu and Buddhist beliefs about which our informants talked. This section also explores the centrality of the caste system in shaping people's destinies and their perceptions of the world in which they live. The following section reviews how religious teachings are received and enacted in everyday life. It reflects on the nature of local religious leadership and explores some of the roles such leaders play in shaping the lives of people within their community. The visions for the future that our informants talked about are then explored. In the concluding section, the main findings are summarized and some of their implications for development actors identified.

3 Hindu and Buddhist beliefs and the dominance of the caste system

In response to our question "*what role does religion play in people's lives in Pune's slums?*" a professor at the university of Pune suggested that "*it is no surprise that poor people are among the most religious; they have nothing else. Religion represents hope to them - when no other strategies exist, religion becomes even more important*." Our informants in the slum communities described themselves as either Hindu or Buddhist, and it became clear that religion does indeed have a pervasive influence on their outlook - when asked about their lives, respondents consistently drew on religious beliefs in describing how they understand their circumstances. In addition, their attitudes and responses to caste contribute to their understanding of their world and their aspirations for the future, and are closely intertwined with their religious values and beliefs. Religion also shapes the specific rights-based values that convey visions of how they want life to be. First, some of the main Hindu and Buddhist beliefs to which our informants adhere, are outlined, and then how these are intertwined with ideas about caste are discussed.

3.1 Hinduism

The use of the term 'Hinduism' is highly problematic. Hinduism is a hugely diverse tradition, reflecting the geographical and cultural diversity of the Indian sub-continent, and the label is artificial and overly simplistic (Flood, 2003; Tomalin, 2009). This section, therefore, does not present Hinduism as a homogenous and uncomplicated set of religious beliefs and practices, but identifies the key concepts shared by Hindu inhabitants of the Pune slums studied.

Three key concepts are identified by scholars as the core Hindu beliefs and are shared by all the Hindu respondents in this research: *samsara, karma* and *moksha* (Flood, 1996, 2003; Knott, 1998; Tomalin, 2009). Life is considered to be an endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth (*samsara*). *Karma* essentially suggests that one will benefit or suffer as a result of one's positive or negative actions, often in a future birth. Thus *karma* is thought to affect an individual's rebirth into a particular caste as a result of his/her actions in a previous life. Humans must try and live according to the *karmic* law and pursue their *dharma* (duty or role) in order to acquire merit that will see them reborn into a 'better' life. *Moksha* is the end goal, in which unity is achieved between the individual soul (*atman*) and the world soul (*Brahman*). *Moksha* represents the end to the cycle of death and rebirth (*samsara),* releasing the *atman* from the toil of rebirth. What constitutes a 'better' life is linked to the caste system, a hierarchy that ranks people's status and role in life according to how close they are perceived to be to achieving

moksha. High caste men, who live ascetic lives completely devoted to God, are thought to be more likely to achieve *moksha* than persons of lower caste. Gender also plays a part in privileging men as the most likely to achieve the spiritual goal of *moksha*. Women, in contrast, whose religious lives are restricted by their domestic roles, have little time for ascetic practices (Knott, 1996; Leslie, 1989, 1991, 2005). The term *varna,* referring to the four classes into which society is held to be divided (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras), is closely associated with caste. The *varna* system positions individual castes within a broader classification system and thereby ranks them according to levels of 'purity'. Certain groups of people (referred to as 'Untouchables' or, in modern political terminology, Dalits) are deemed so impure that they fall outside the *varna* system altogether. Traditionally, *varna* classification dictated the general types of occupation permitted to the various castes within each of the four categories. For example, 'impure' occupations (such as street cleaning and working with leather) have been associated solely with Dalit castes, or with castes from the lowest Shudra *varna* (for a more detailed discussion see, for example, Killingley, 1991; Madan, 1991).

The caste system is generally referred to as a dominant feature of Hinduism, although it has been convincingly argued that while caste separation did exist in pre-colonial times, the hierarchical ordering was a result of colonial manipulation (Breckenridge and van der Veer, 1992; Dirks, 2001). Moreover, caste is by no means a feature only of Hindu communities; it is a prominent feature of many other religious communities, suggesting that it may be a cultural as much as a religious phenomenon. Traditionally, low caste people pursued caste-specific menial jobs, although this has changed over the years, so that today there is much more diversity in the types of employment that low caste people can access. Nonetheless, their jobs are still generally physically arduous and badly paid. There is no real mobility between castes, although there is certainly mobility between social classes, evidence for which is obvious amongst many low caste beneficiaries of government educational and employment reservations (Beteille, 1996). Thus some members of lower castes have (usually through these state-initiated positive discrimination systems) achieved improved educational and economic status, and have left behind the deprived lifestyle usually associated with membership of a low caste community. However the vast majority of low caste people, especially Dalits, those at the very bottom of the hierarchy, continue to live in extreme poverty.[2]

According to Indian law, there can be no discrimination by caste, and there have been numerous state attempts to 'uplift' what are known in political parlance as 'scheduled castes', 'scheduled tribes' and 'other backward classes.' Nevertheless, members of these low caste communities, including our informants, assert that they continue to be oppressed socially and practically by their caste status. Their continued struggle against the caste system is ongoing, linked both to their desire for social acceptance and their quest for material development. However, many people with whom we spoke felt that they understand their *dharma* (duty) and responsibilities through their caste identity and so many low caste Hindus seek not the eradication of caste but rather reform of the system.

3.2 Buddhism

Buddhist beliefs are founded on the teachings of the Buddha. The concept of *samsara,* involving the continuous cycle of rebirth, is common to both Buddhism and Hinduism. Buddhists believe that rebirth continues until an individual has achieved enlightenment, known as *nirvana,* a state of bliss and release from the endless process of death and rebirth (Tomalin, 2007). The path to enlightenment involves spiritual practices, specifically meditation, in which an individual seeks to achieve a state of non-duality, in which separation between the self and others is diminished. In addition, Buddhism teaches the necessity to comply with a non-violent and non-materialist way of life. Compassion towards others is a central moral principle that Buddhists are expected to enact in their relationships with other people, and indeed with all sentient beings. The status of *bodhisattva* is awarded to those who are thought to have acquired deep spiritual insights and are on the verge of enlightenment. Buddhist society is divided between the *sangha* or monastic community and the laity. The relationship between the two is close, as the laity sees fulfilling the material needs of the *sangha* as an important means through which they can acquire religious merit.

Conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism has been common amongst Dalits in Maharashtra. Our Buddhist informants are all followers of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, who was born in late 19th century Maharashtra into the untouchable Mahar caste, and spent his life trying to challenge the dominant social processes that sanctioned untouchability. An influential political leader, he continues to be revered by Dalits throughout India today. Ambedkar's aim was to foster a sense of self-esteem and autonomy amongst Untouchables, who had traditionally been oppressed in economic, physical and psychological terms by higher castes (effectively meaning everyone else) (Keer,1962; Jodhka and

Kumar, 2010; Zelliot, 1992). He attacked caste-based discrimination on many grounds, including economic and cultural facets of caste inequality (Ambedkar, 1936, 1948). In particular he encouraged Untouchables to pursue education, a highly controversial position considering that under Hindu law they had been strictly prevented from engaging in any form of religious or secular academic learning (Contursi, 1989).

Ambedkar became convinced that caste discrimination was inextricable from Hinduism (Ambedkar, 1936; Beltz, 2004; Fitzgerald, 2000; Keer, 1962). He firmly opposed Gandhi's attempts to modernize the caste system, arguing instead that the very essence of the system implied inequality, so that it could never be 'reformed' in a manner that would allow for social justice. Instead he turned to Buddhism, believing it to be the most egalitarian of all the religions (Ahir,1990). However, he drew out only those aspects of Buddhist teachings that applied directly to his political struggles (Beltz, 2004; Queen, 1996). He used the Buddha's teachings to articulate an anti-Brahmin message and to advocate social equality.[3] Above all, he presented his Buddhism as a religion founded on egalitarian morality and ethics (Ambedkar, 1957; Contursi, 1989; Fitzgerald, 1997, 1999, 2000; Queen, 1996; Sumant, 2004; Zelliot, 2004).

In an effort to concretize the Buddhism that he was promoting for his poor followers, Ambedkar compiled a book entitled *The Buddha and his Dhamma* (1984 [1957]), which is clearly intended to provide an all-encompassing guide for his religious followers. In it he presented his own interpretation of Buddhist teachings, an interpretation that is clearly geared towards enabling Dalits to pursue social action. His teachings centre on the concept of a *bodhisattva*, a person who delays his/her own final liberation from *samsara* in order to help less fortunate or less spiritually advanced people. The *bodhisattva* ideal fits easily into Ambedkar's modern conceptualization of human rights and social justice, since it can be interpreted as a symbol of compassion for others in the context of repressive social and political systems (Fitzgerald, 2000). Liberation, or salvation, is seen as the achievement of an egalitarian society that frees Untouchables from the clutches of their oppressors.

Spirituality or spiritual practice in the form of meditation and worship of both the Buddha and Ambedekar are of central importance to Buddhists living in the slums that we visited. However, we found in conversations with our respondents that spirituality *per se* does not appear to be the primary

reason for the majority of conversions. Instead informants identified converts' motives as primarily political, albeit combined with expressions of religiosity. This was summed up by a community worker who said: *"all we Buddhists are Dalits. This religion is the first step in our struggle."*

Both slum dwellers and NGO workers explained their understanding of spirituality in terms of helping others and spreading justice, illustrating the close relationship between their religious and political lives. In an interview with one staff member of a Buddhist organization, for example, the subject of his understanding of Buddhism and its relevance to his life as an 'ex-untouchable Dalit' was broached. This man is an activist to the core; his entire life is concerned with the caste struggle. Explaining his understanding of Buddhism as a system of 'practical spirituality', he argued that, although prayer and ethereal thoughts are not unworthy, there is little value in them while the world is suffering. He gave the example of the tsunami relief efforts in 2004, claiming that British and American aid reached the Andaman Nicobar Islands before any real Indian assistance, asserting that this happened because the Hindu beliefs of most Indians prevented any useful action being taken quickly. According to him, influential Hindus assumed that a natural disaster on the scale of the tsunami could only have been caused by an excessive accumulation of *pap* (sin) in the world, with the result that their immediate response was to perform cleansing rituals before offering practical help to those in need. [4] He described these beliefs with disdain, asserting that Buddhists would never think in such terms, because of their belief in the primacy of human beings and their needs: "*Untouchables, Dalits, or we may say the Buddhists, understand real spirituality. Real spirituality is about making people human and activating them for the social cause*." For this man, Buddhism is a religion of practicality, politics and social change. Spirituality is understood to represent compassion for people in general, displayed through activism and a struggle to eliminate suffering, whether caused by caste oppression (most commonly) or any other factor, such as a natural disaster. Such views seem to be shared by most Buddhists in Pune, although mostly without this respondent's antagonism towards Hinduism.

4 Imparting and reinforcing religious teachings, values and beliefs

The roles of gurus, religious organizations and local religious leaders in imparting religious teachings and reinforcing values and beliefs are explored in this section. In particular, religious activities, including rituals and the provision of advice on everyday problems, are analysed, to indicate how they reflect and reinforce religious values and beliefs.

4.1 Channels for religious teaching

The wider literature attests that Hindus of all castes generally access religious teachings from a number of sources, including texts, television adaptations of epics such as the Ramayana (Pauwels, 2004), local temple priests, gurus and *swamis* (Knott, 1996; Khilnani, 1999; Mkean, 1996; Mlecko, 1982). Hinduism has a tradition of gurus (people with knowledge, wisdom and authority, who use it to guide others), *sadhus* (male mendicants or holy men) and *swamis* (spiritually accomplished and learned celibate devotees) who offer religious and spiritual guidance. Hindu people in the slums generally identified gurus and local religious leaders as the influences on their religious lives. Our informants reported that they selected a guru to follow on the basis of feeling some kind of spiritual connection to the person concerned.

Life experiences and family influences are significant in determining the choice of gurus and deities that people worship. For example, a young recently married woman in the slum settlement near Dapoli described how she had brought from her natal home an image of Narendra Maharaj, a guru popular in the area of Goa in which she was born and brought up. She talked about how important it was for her to remain a devotee of Narenda Maharaj, as it helped her to retain a connection with her natal family, specifically her mother and sisters, who she knew worshipped him daily. As she worshipped Narendra Maharaj each morning and evening, she thought about her mother and sister doing the same and reflected on her upbringing and her natal home.

Mlecko (1982) describes how gurus in India are simultaneously religious teachers and the focus of worship. Gurus as religious teachers have, according to Mlecko, played an important role in the transmission and development of the Hindu religious tradition. Hindu worship involves *darsan,* which is the process by which a devotee gains spiritually simply by looking at a deity, but also occurs when a devotee looks at an enlightened guru (Fuller, 1992). The deity is believed to be in the image, looking back at the devotee, who lies within the deity's field of power and experiences it (see also Eck, 1981,

1998). The young woman who worships Narendra Maharaj each day claimed that his *darsan* empowered her, enabling her to cope with the poverty of her everyday life.

In the previous sub-section, the influence of Ambedekar in shaping the Buddhist beliefs and values of many Dalits living in the slums of Pune was detailed. Dalit Buddhists position his image next to that of the Buddha, look to him as their guru and teacher, and worship him alongside (or at times instead of) the Buddha. The worship of Ambedekar as a once-living guru, many informants claim, provides them with a motivation to overcome their low status.

4.2 Religious practices and political discourses

The previous section contained some initial reflections on the role played by religion in the lives of slum dwellers and the discussion is elaborated below, by examining religious practices and beliefs. The private and public rituals in which people engage are linked with the almost functional purpose of religion in the lives of the poor, the ways in which, as noted above, people engage with religion as a way of carving out a better economic and social position.

Performance of religious rituals demonstrates the fluidity of religious identity. In particular, for many people, conversion to Buddhism has not necessarily radically altered their religious lives: *"I used to give flowers for Krishna, now I give them to Buddha. No problem!"* one woman from the Vishwantwadi area laughingly told us. Other research, for example Burra's study of rural Mahars (1996), documents how, in the vast majority of informants' village households, images of Hindu gods are displayed alongside those of Buddha and Ambedkar, with most people claiming to pray to both Buddha and Hindu gods. Burra also notes the perseverance of Hindu interpretations of *karma* and rebirth amongst Buddhists in the rural areas she studied, arguing that for many rural Mahars Buddhism is a political tool rather than a guide for their inner spiritual development. Thus public rituals are Buddhist, while private affairs remain decidedly Hindu.

During our own fieldwork period, we did not encounter any urban informants so obviously operating with a dual Hindu/Buddhist identity as Burra's (1996) rural informants. We saw no evidence of Hindu deities on walls or *puja* stands inside the homes of Buddhists, and public rituals tend to be seen as the preserve of the rich and upper castes. At first, it appeared that Burra's findings were not reflected in

the urban setting. However, as time passed, we did notice some (subtle) hints that Hindu sentiments persist amongst at least some urban Buddhists. For instance, it became clear that (in contravention of the twenty two vows that Ambedkarite Buddhist converts take) our informants' belief in Buddha does not detract from their respect for other gods, be they Hindu or other. When visiting Hindu houses, converted Buddhists often continue to pay their respects to Hindu shrines (sometimes by prostrating or, more commonly, by reverently touching the stand on which the religious objects are arranged). This is not simply a mark of respect for a host family's traditions; rather it is a sincere mark of personal respect and veneration of the Hindu religious items. When an elderly woman was asked about this, she explained it in the following way:

> *Those are gods, I should also respect them. It is my choice to worship Buddha, but how can I ignore them when other gods are there before me? Yes, they also are gods. For us* [Buddhists], *Buddha is enough, he gives us what we need, but those other gods are also there.*

Another woman said:

> *Buddhism is not about ignoring all the gods. I have become a Buddha bhakta* [worshipper]*. If a person is Krishna bhakta, does that mean he turns his back on Ram? He does not. But coming away from the people who are with those other gods, that is what matters to us. It is their ideas we have left.*

Thus both these women explained that by worshipping Buddha, they have not renounced Hindu gods. In particular, the second woman was clear that it is the ideas associated with Hindu people that she has renounced, not their gods.

For at least some of our informants, therefore, belief in the sanctity of Hindu deities does not disappear at the time of conversion to Buddhism. Instead there appears to be a conscious choice to focus one's worship on one source of inspiration, namely Buddha, and possibly also Ambedkar, who is often referred to as a *bodhisattva*. This focus does not invalidate or repudiate the sacredness of other divine figures. For most people, their conversion has occurred not because of discontent with the Hindu gods, but because of dissatisfaction with the social system that structures Hindu society. This system is considered by low caste converts to be a human rather than a godly construction, and so amongst ordinary converts, there does not appear to be any animosity towards the gods of the Hindu pantheon. Thus Ambedkar's insistence that the Hindu gods be unequivocally rejected is not complied with by every Buddhist. Conversion to Buddhism in the context under study is based simply on faith in

Ambedkar's political philosophy, and is thus chosen in the hope that it will enable people to escape a social system that condemns them to poverty on the basis of the caste into which they were born. In contrast, many of the more politically active and educated staff members of Buddhist FBOs display an open hostility to Hinduism (including its deities), claiming that the religion was invented by the high castes to assist them in their oppression of the masses.

The practical concerns underlying people's choice of religious affiliation are also evident in both Burra's (1996) study in rural Maharashtra and our own research. For Burra, rural Mahars' Buddhist identity is important only as a message to the outside world – "the inner core [of a person] may remain Hindu but [in her view] this in no way reflects a betrayal of the cause" of overcoming caste discrimination (Burra, 1996, p 168). In the Pune slums, equality and dignity were stressed as the values of greatest importance to people. They were regarded as the basis for a vision of a society in which each person is respected and systems that marginalize whole social groups, such as caste, are restructured or eradicated. In our discussions of Buddhism, slum dwellers referred less frequently to their personal spiritual journeys than middle class respondents, not necessarily because they do not experience religion as spiritual, but because they are, perhaps unsurprisingly, much more concerned with achieving an equal, dignified and economically prosperous existence.

As might be expected, then, the slum context is highly politicized and social mobilization has a religious dimension. In the slum site near Dapoli, new Buddhist organizations work in the same communities that are targeted by Shiv Sena, the army of Shiv, which was founded on June 19th 1966 in Bombay by Balasaheb Thackeray. As documented by Banerjee (2000) and Sen (2007), the development vision vigorously pursued by Shiv Sena combines Maharashtrian nationalism with a rights-based discourse focused on eliminating the elitism of the caste system. Shiv Sena's ideology has been laced with contradictions in this regard. Initially the party adopted an anti-immigrant stance,[5] whilst simultaneously demonstrating fierce anti-Dalit prejudice. However, for political reasons (in order to increase their vote banks), Shiv Sena has more recently become increasingly accommodating of longstanding immigrants from other States, and has reversed its position on Dalits.

In 2003, Uddhav Thakare called for an alliance between Shiv shakti (forces represented by Shiv Sena, but also a euphemism for caste Hindu forces) and Bhim shakti (Dalit forces expressing allegiance to Ambedkar, various factions of the Republican Party, RPI). This move was calculated to attract the young activists of the RPI. More specifically, it also signalled the readiness of Shiv Sena to accommodate the Buddhists (Palshikar, 2004, cited in UNHCR, 2006, p 9). Although this caste-based turnaround may be considered somewhat suspect, the organization does now campaign to end caste-based inequalities, which it blames on what it calls the elitism of Brahmanical Hinduism. There is therefore an overlap between the politicized vision of a more equal and caste-free society articulated by Ambedkar and that of the contemporary leadership of Shiv Sena, which also uses religion as a means of promoting its vision. The importance of the political and religious discourses of these organizations and their leaders in shaping local people's visions of the future came through in our conversations, and was also visually evident. Nevertheless, slum residents have been unable to escape poverty.[6]

Figure 1. Street shrine with an image of the goddess Kali

Photo by authors.

Figure 2: The Maharashtrian king Shivâjî and two images of Ganesha, the elephant God.

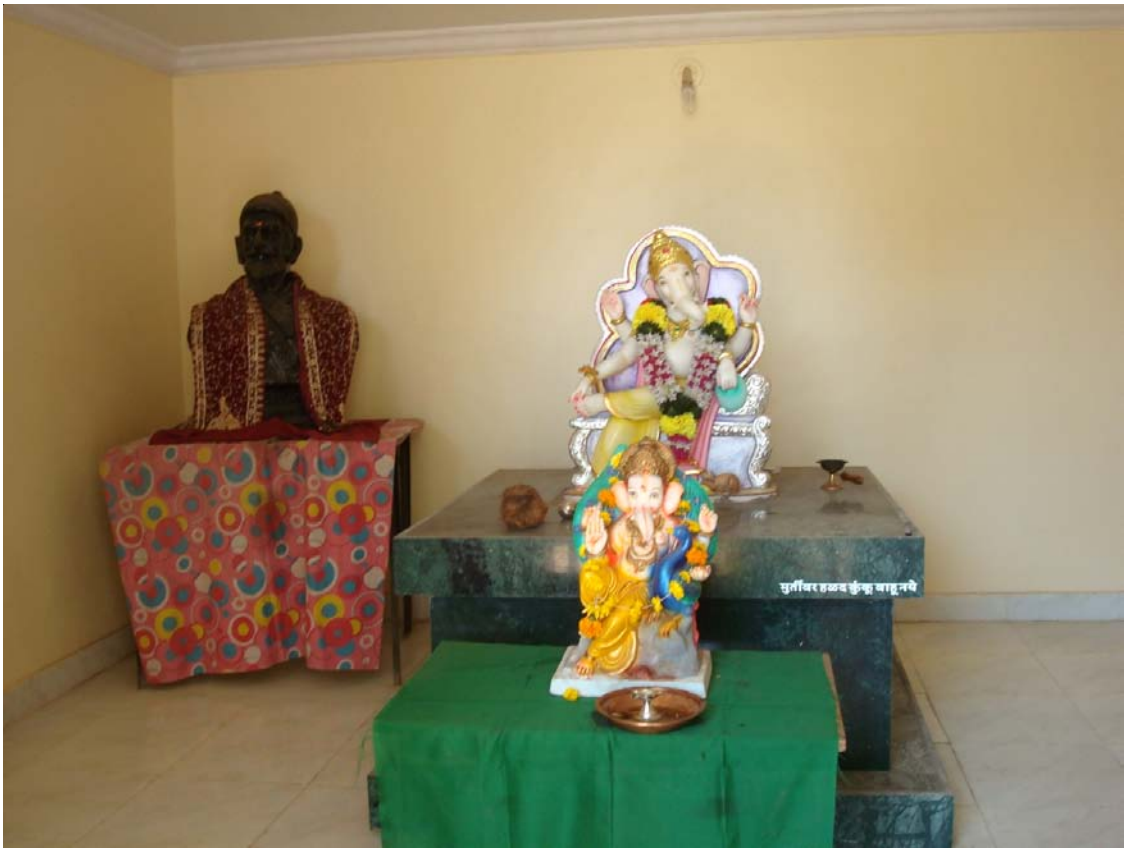

Photo by authors.

Inside the slum settlements, there are both street shrines and *puja* shrines in people's homes. The deities displayed in many of the street shrines are distinctly militant. For example the photograph in Figure 1 is of Kali, the furious feminine deity thought to project the unwieldy and threatening side of *shakti* or feminine energy. Kali is positioned next to an image of the 17th-century Maharashtrian king Shivâjî, whose capital was Pune and who is thought to have inspired the militant and nationalist Shiv Sena movement. These images positioned together project militant symbols that seem to reflect the approach and attitude of Shiv Sena. Although informants were reluctant to discuss the street shrines in detail, some did mention that Shiv Sena funds them. Our observations and conversations with inhabitants of the slum settlement near Dapoli revealed that local people do not worship militant figures such as Shivâjî or Kali, either publicly or privately. Although some have pictures of Shivâjî in their homes to honour his place in the history of the state, they do not perform specific rituals towards him, and thus his appearance in street shrines appears rather incongruous. Our research suggests

that the presence of these militant images in street shrines has a specific purpose: Shiv Sena's funding of such shrines should be seen as political, a way of embedding militant symbols and messages in the perceptions and views of the people who walk by and/or worship at them every day. For example, in another shrine (Figure 2), Ganesha is positioned next to Shivâjî. There is a connection between these three figures: Ganesha is the remover of obstacles and is thought to bring good luck at the start of new ventures, while both Kali and Shivâjî are figures that fight in order to remove obstacles or, more precisely, to defeat negative forces (worldly in the case of Shivâjî). In addition, Kali is a form of Shiva's wife and Ganapati (Ganesha) is their son. Ganesha is a particularly popular deity in Maharashtra, so it is possible that the thinking behind these shrines is that adherents may stop and make offerings to him and then take in or reflect upon the symbolism of Kali and Shivâjî.

4.3 Religious leadership in Pune's slums

In the poor areas of Pune studied, there are religious leaders to whom others, both Hindus and Buddhists, turn for advice and guidance. These figures are not gurus revered in the same way as Ambedkar, but are respected as possessing exceptional knowledge of and insight into matters of everyday life. In the slums, rather than assuming a teaching role, they are authority figures to whom local people turn for help. Information about them emerged during both casual conversations in people's homes and discussions with employees of FBOs working in the slums. The information came exclusively from women; men were much less keen to comment, for reasons that are not entirely clear. It is possible that their reluctance is because they often strive to attain the level of authority possessed by these 'leaders', but are unwilling to admit that they do not have it. The select few leader figures have common characteristics: they are largely male and enjoy relative economic prosperity. In the communities studied there is a substratum of female leaders, but according to our women informants, such individuals seem to have influence only over other women, while male leaders influence both men and women.

According to our discussions with people in the slum site near Dapoli, men and women acquire leadership status because they are thought to possess exceptional religious knowledge and/or are economically prosperous. Some individuals are reported to have acquired a leadership position because they display a high level of religious wisdom and insight. Such wisdom does not necessarily conform to any standard format, instead being recognized by the community as an intangible quality

possessed by a particular individual. Below these leaders there are varying degrees of 'recognition', a sort of tiered system that determines the ways in which a person or family is treated within the wider community. The relative wealth of a family, as well as how close a connection they can claim to recognized leadership figures, contribute to determining a person's status. Both the display of religiosity and close links with others who are thought to have religious knowledge are, in our view, forms of religious capital. People in Pune's slums talked about religion as a means to acquire power and authority, which is expected to lead to greater economic prosperity. In short; claims to religiosity are linked to a perceived increase in the chance of acquiring wealth, which in turn strengthens an individual's standing in the community, giving him/her leadership status and a degree of influence over the day-to-day actions of others because he/she is turned to for advice. Religion (specifically, claims to religious knowledge) thus represents one means through which a person can carve out a leadership role, or at least improve their status and standing in a community.

In the slums studied, men who are considered to have religious knowledge are frequently consulted about problems and asked for advice, mainly in relation to day-to-day problems such as how to pay back debts, increase household incomes, resolve family tensions, choose a marriage partner, or deal with problems such as domestic violence or alcoholism. In return for his recommendations, the advisor generally receives a gift. Although he does not usually demand anything specific, our female informants told us that it is widely accepted that giving something to the advisor is the proper thing to do, particularly after positive results have been achieved as a result of his counsel. According to the women we spoke to, the advice given tends to focus on maintaining family structures. A few respondents felt that such advice is unhelpful, because it often led to women remaining in violent or oppressive marriages. However, many felt that the status quo has to be maintained and disputes resolved, because otherwise the foundations of a whole community might disintegrate. The role of these leadership figures in ensuring that this does not happen was generally welcomed by those with whom we spoke.

Religion shapes the type and nature of the advice these figures offer. For example, advice about a problem such as alcoholism may involve religious advice, as illustrated by the following example. In a conversation with one woman, we were told that her sister had consulted one such religious figure about her husband's alcohol abuse. This man had been missing work and spending what he did earn

on alcohol. When drunk, he had verbally and physically abused her and their two daughters. It was explained to us that the woman had been ashamed to discuss her problems with friends, and that her in-laws, who lived elsewhere in the slum, had not been helpful. In response to her request for advice, the religious man made a couple of interesting suggestions. First, he advised the woman to chant a particular mantra constantly throughout the day, and told her to do so not silently but in hushed tones, as her contribution to solving the problem. Second, he advised that the other contribution to tackling the issue should come from her husband's mother. He offered to visit the mother, to which the woman readily agreed. During this visit he emphasized to the man's parents that their son's life was in jeopardy, and that the gods would not look favourably upon his behaviour. This, he said, would reflect badly on the entire family unless they attempted to solve the problem. He particularly encouraged the boy's mother to take an active role in helping her son, recommending certain rituals that she should perform for him. The person who related this story to us told us that these recommendations were very effective. Apparently, the man was 'cured' of his alcoholism so that now he drinks only a 'manageable amount.'

Deeper probing revealed both the way in which the change had occurred and, even more clearly, the value of religious advice to local people. First, in chanting the recommended mantra in whispers, the wife of the alcoholic had drawn attention to herself. Friends and neighbours began to ask questions and the reason for her behaviour quickly became known. Although most people were already aware of her husband's alcoholism, the change in his wife's behaviour provided an opportunity to discuss it more openly with her. Thus she was quickly engaged in conversations with friends and neighbours where before she had been silent, gaining a valuable source of support and encouragement, while her husband was more openly chastised for his behaviour by members of the community. Second, by encouraging more involvement on the part of the man's mother, the religious adviser gave her a sense of purpose. By boosting her sense of self-importance, the adviser inspired her to act: her ability to aid her son's recovery became something of a matter of personal pride. Thus while she conducted the prescribed rituals fastidiously (and with some publicity), she also took it upon herself to intervene more practically, since she did not want to appear to have 'failed' in her religious duty to challenge his alcoholism. The advice given thus encouraged both greater support for the wife and family intervention. Whether this was the religious leader's intention is not known, since we were unable to discuss the matter with him personally. However, it is clear that the influence he wielded as a result of

his status as a 'wise religious figure' enabled him to intervene successfully in a way that would not have been possible for anyone else. The sister of the woman involved (who related the story to us) was of the opinion that some sort of religious figure should be included in all domestic violence initiatives, in order to direct the participants towards the 'proper' customs and rituals to follow in each individual case.

Female leaders are considered the primary source of information relevant to women. They influence the spread of particular types of knowledge, most often related to female bodies. Thus according to our informants, particular women are frequently approached for information related to bodily processes such as reproductive tract infections or pregnancy. However, male leaders' possession of knowledge that is applicable to both men and women means that they are likely to be more powerful.

5 Religion's capacity to inspire

Our findings reveal a variety of ways in which poor Hindus and Buddhists utilize aspects of their religion to negotiate a better existence for themselves. Most strikingly, as noted above, caste dominated both people's perceptions of themselves and was central to their explanations of why they could or could not achieve certain goals. Caste superseded gender as the primary talking point, which was surprising given that the discrimination and difficulties women in the slums face are compounded by patriarchy. While many women acknowledge the mistreatment they experience because of their gender, they nevertheless highlight caste as the main obstruction to more economically prosperous and secure lives. Considerable research examines the blurred and shifting nature of caste and caste boundaries (Dirks, 2001). Our research produced contradictory views on the extent to which caste is thought to be responsible for poverty and needs to be removed. Some, while blaming their low caste status for their poverty, did not want to see the system removed. This, so we were told, is because even those of a low caste do not necessarily want to lose their caste identity, instead attempting to negotiate a higher status or social recognition for their caste group, thereby increasing their access to wealth and power. In other words, those who want to see caste maintained often actively try to elevate the standing of their own caste in order to secure greater respect and access to better paid employment.

People did admit to being influenced by secular populist sources, such as bollywood films and television dramas, which project aspirational lifestyles of wealth and material comfort. However, they also utilize their religious capacities in differing ways, depending on the specific vision of the future they hope to achieve. Some from the lowest ranked castes or with Dalit status advocate the eradication of caste. For example, a woman named Sunita living in the slum near Dapoli described herself as a low caste Hindu. She was adamant that she is (and will remain) Hindu and not Buddhist, but went on to say that whilst she practises her religion through the daily observance of *puja* in her home and regular visits to the local temple, she feels that the Hindu caste system prevents her from accessing educational and employment opportunities that would "*make her life better*". She was clear that her own desire for the complete removal of the caste system is not part of her religion. Although she cannot see how *karma* has resulted in her being reduced to such a narrow and hard existence, she believes that she must maintain her religious practices and try to help others in order to ensure a better next life. As noted above however, not all Hindus with whom we spoke gave such a clear response, with many stopping short of wanting caste to be eradicated, although they do feel that dignity and respect should be accorded to every human being. When we asked Sunita where her

views had come from, she said that she and her friends often talk about why they suffer such hardship. Although this answer does not reveal the source of her views, she did say when probed that she and her friends often listen to local political figures talk about the problem of caste, including Ambedkarite Buddhist community workers. Thus it is possible that Sunita's articulation of her poverty in terms of caste discrimination and her anti-caste feelings comes from her exposure to new Buddhist teachings, although she has not renounced her Hindu identity and practices.

Interpretations of values such as social equality, respect and human dignity may be fluid. Religious beliefs are often reinterpreted or even rejected as people's lives change and new ideas about the world are disseminated. Another young married woman in Pune, when asked about the problems she faces, talked about feeling excluded from certain opportunities, mainly in relation to employment. Although her husband's reluctance to let her undertake paid employment was one element of her exclusion, she also said that her low caste status would prevent her from securing anything other than unskilled labour or paid domestic work. In response to a question about how she felt about her situation, she said "*this is the way God intended my life to be and I have to make the best of it and work hard to please my husband and family*." Her awareness of the barriers she faces when trying to achieve her vision of some degree of financial independence had not caused her to question the religious beliefs that are generally believed to underpin caste. Instead her *karmic* view of why the status quo remains unequal was clearly expressed. This respondent had resigned herself, but this did not mean that she accepts that she should be treated badly by those around her - she also spoke of the importance of respect, asserting that if her husband did not show her respect, she would challenge him.

Both these women talked about the values of respect and dignity and described a vision of a life in which they have more financial freedom, but each expressed a different perspective on caste: how far it relates to beliefs about *karma* and how central it is to their religion. While drawing strength from their religious identities, both challenge aspects of their existence that they want to change.

Our research, and these two cases in particular, fit Appadurai's belief that poor communities have a deeply ambivalent relationship to the dominant norms of the societies in which they live. Some, such as Sunita and ex-Hindu Dalits who have converted to Buddhism, distance themselves from aspects of their tradition in order to maintain some dignity. Some, as in our second example, seemingly comply

with their own exclusion and degradation by failing to reject caste. Appadurai (2004) suggests that they do this because they subscribe to the larger order of norms, such as beliefs around fate and rebirth and *dharma* or duty, which represent anchoring points that help individuals carve out a worldview that provides stability and offers a promise of a better future, even if not in this life. Although the ways in which people reconcile themselves to the impact of caste vary, all our informants reported that they draw on their religion to help make sense of their circumstances and in their pursuit of a different future. Regardless of the strategies people employ to increase their prosperity, the core values of respect and dignity are retained, as is the belief in *karma*. The centrality of this belief provides the motivation to perform religious practices and ensures a high level of religiosity in the everyday lives of poor people. Many people articulated that performing rituals is one way through which they attempt to acquire *karmic* credit that, it is hoped, will bring them greater prosperity, if not in this life then perhaps in the next. Also, as discussed above, claims to religious knowledge displayed through pious behaviour are one way that an individual can improve his or her standing within the immediate community, resulting in additional wealth, as people pay for the advice of recognized religious experts.

The poor, according to Appadurai (2004), are survivors who will always seek to optimize the 'terms of trade' that underpin their lives. This is what we found in Pune's urban slums, and is true even when it involves discriminating against others. For example, we were told by NGO workers that there is a significant amount of local bickering over which low castes are higher than others. One community worker based in a new-Buddhist organization stated that he finds this constant tension between different castes intensely frustrating, as it succeeds only in dividing the poor and preventing more efficient resistance to poverty and social equality (see also Burra, 1996; Fitzgerald, 1994).

Although poor Hindus in Pune's slums do verbalize the struggles they face as low caste people, generally we found that Buddhists are more vocal in this regard. In addition, they are explicit in their acknowledgment of how Buddhism has provided a conduit of escape from inhibitive caste identities. One Buddhist man, whose family home we were visiting, told us:[7]

> *Earlier my family were Hindus, very low [caste] Hindus with no opportunities. My grandfather liked the ideas of Ambedkarji, and so the family became Buddhist. Since then we have many more chances – every generation is more educated, gets better jobs…we have a better future because of that* [conversion].

Another Buddhist man, the father of an NGO fieldworker, described his own family's experiences in similar terms. He explained that his family had converted to Buddhism while Ambedkar was alive, because Hinduism was not *"helping them to progress."* As Untouchables, his family had been deprived of education, whereas affiliation to Buddhism, he claimed, now allows them entrance into previously unavailable institutions. Interestingly, however, when this topic was pursued with further questioning, the answers became far less clear. For instance, when the same man was asked to explain exactly how Buddhism provides extra opportunities (such as access to education) to its followers, his response was simply that Buddhism eliminates caste distinctions, perhaps representing what he hopes will happen rather than actual social reality.

The positive impact of conversion appears to lie in a raised sense of consciousness and increased aspirations (see also Jodhka and Kumar, 2010). Its main benefit seems to be the renewed voice it gives to new Buddhists. It is a political statement of intent on their part, that through their religious affiliation they declare war on caste discrimination. It is clear that, despite the claims people make, converted Buddhists continue to face problems. In practice, life does not necessarily become easier simply as a result of conversion. We listened to many stories of caste-based injustice from Ambedkarite Buddhists and passions run high when the tales are related, demonstrating high levels of anger and frustration. The more popular stories tend to be gruesome and extreme (for example the Khairlanji massacre[8] is often mentioned), although there are also many accounts of low-level discrimination that occurs on a daily basis. These stories particularly highlight the vulnerable position of poor women, who relate tales of abuse (usually psychological, although occasionally physical) at the hands of their employers (see also Barat, 2004; Rege, 1998).

Indeed stories like this seem to form the basis of an identity of oppression in the Pune slums that we visited. However such stories are told differently by Buddhists and low caste Hindus. Although there certainly is resistance to caste discrimination amongst Hindus, Buddhists are much more vocal about this. For example, they tend to refer to themselves as Dalits more frequently than so-called untouchable Hindus.[9] Initially this use of caste terminology was perplexing, given that Buddhist converts claim that conversion is a means to escape caste. It soon became clear, however, that for these highly political Buddhists, caste is not just a religious category and 'Dalit' is a social and political identity. Numerous employees of Buddhist NGOs stated that untouchability operates on many levels, of which religion is only one, and that it cannot therefore be destroyed by religious means alone. They

do not put all their faith in conversion, although they do see conversion as the first and most important step in their battle for equality: it represents an assertion of their views, a demand for their rights and a promise that they will persist in their struggle.

Our own fieldwork confirmed this hypothesis, as the following examples illustrate.[10]

Rekha is a 34 year old married woman who lives in a slum in the Yerawada area of Pune. A domestic worker with three young children, she has little free time. However, during one of our early visits to the slum, we encountered her at the local Buddhist shrine, taking great pains to decorate its bars with flowers that she had bought herself. We spoke to her on a few occasions during later visits and also visited her home a couple of times, where we chatted to her and her mother-in-law and drank tea. Rekha described her family's adherence to Buddhism in the following words:

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

Rekha's neighbour, Mala, told us a similar story. Like Rekha, Mala is in her mid thirties, and is married with two school-going daughters.

> *I have two jobs. I am working as a servant-maid* [domestic servant] *in two houses. My employers are good – I eat there in the mornings, I play with the children sometimes also. They have given me nice saris at the festivals, and when their sons got married…They are good people. Sometimes I help with cooking also... One earlier employer was not good – she did not permit me to enter the kitchen. She also shouted if*

> *I entered her bedroom without her, because she was thinking I will take something. She had a different woman to cook, I cleaned the floors only. She did not allow me to enter the kitchen because she is a Brahmin. You see, earlier we people* [Dalits] *had to suffer this treatment, it was the normal thing. Now we are not Untouchables, now we do not accept. If we accept it, then how can we keep his picture* [indicating Ambedkar's portrait] *in our homes? We are not Untouchables, we are Buddhists. There is no caste for us. So I did not stay in that house long, and now I have better people* [employers]*…they talk to me like human being.'*

Both these women are frank about the fact that they continue to suffer discrimination because of their caste status. Conversion to Buddhism has not necessarily changed the way that other people perceive them, and has had little if any impact on the ways in which they are treated by prejudiced members of society. Both women referred to Buddhism (represented by Ambedkar rather than Buddha) as a reason why they should not accept discrimination, and as inspiration for their struggle against unfair treatment. Although they made conventional statements such as '"*there is no caste for us*", these seemed to be learned and automatic rather than deeply felt, since the women's subsequent accounts detailed the struggles that they still face as Dalits, albeit as Buddhist Dalits. The tendency to claim that Buddhism has eradicated caste, or that Buddhists receive better treatment and/or have access to more opportunities as a result of their conversion is arguably a part of Dalits' attempts to boost their own self esteem. Buddhist identity is used to provide psychological distance from the untouchable label and to increase self confidence, together providing the impetus to fight for development and equality.

It therefore became clear from our research that many people do indeed use religion to help them improve the material conditions of their lives in practical ways. The title for this paper was suggested to us by an NGO worker who, in conversation, stated "*the people, they know religion is important for their development*". He expanded on this statement by explaining that the majority of development projects in the slums are run by religious organizations. He also noted that, although most organizations do not push people to convert, residents often feel that closer association with the religion of an organization might bring them greater material benefits.

For Appadurai it is in culture that the poor commonly find the resources to “contest and alter the conditions of their own poverty” (2004, p 59) and therefore it is important to build cultural capacity to strengthen the voices of the poor. He draws on the work of Bourdieu (1983) who, although ignoring culture, argued that human actors strategically calculate their actions in order to try to achieve the life they desire. For this reason, Appadurai believes that culture is worth building upon because it is orientated towards the future. Our research revealed that people utilize aspects of their tradition in ways that are directed towards the achievement of a vision for a future life and society. We also argue that the religious teachings of various actors have significant influence and the potential to support the ability of the poor to vocalize their discontent. Specifically, religious guru figures such as Ambedekar and Hindu organizations such as Shiv Sena, have acquired popularity among the poor because they give a public voice to poor people’s own experiences of marginalization. In addition, local leaders whose position of authority has been acquired through claims to religious knowledge are sources of motivation with respect to strengthening the capacity of the poor to act for themselves.

6 Conclusion

The ethnographic approach taken in this research has made it possible to draw out the complex relationships between people's religious beliefs and values and politicized visions of how they would like the world to be. Since religion is a central and very important area of life in the slum settlements studied, the research focused on capturing the specific Hindu and Buddhist beliefs that shape the identities of two of the main religious groups in the city.

The two religious beliefs that emerged most strongly in our research are *dharma* and *karma*. Both of these are gendered, in that they point to differing roles and responsibilities for men and women. According to many Buddhist converts, the Hindu understanding of *karma* guides Hindus towards acceptance of their lot in this life,[11] whereas the Ambedkarite interpretation of the concept encourages a view of *karma* as enacted in a person's current lifetime, thereby removing the uncontrollable fatalistic element. Both interpretations encourage the active pursuit of a better future birth, which is frequently held to involve religious practice. Thus securing a better life through building positive *karma* involves religious practice but also, for some people, conformity to the status quo. While some Hindus are happy to accept the status quo and conform to their *dharma* (although this does not mean that they willingly accept disrespect), others had rejected it through their conversion to Buddhism.

Overwhelmingly, caste and a sense of rights dominate people's views on what they would like to see changed, but their views on how to achieve a better life for themselves and their families vary. Some talked in terms of social equality and greater inclusion, while others merely wanted their own caste status to be regarded with more respect. Women documented their struggles to find employment other than paid domestic work, which would pay them reasonable wages, and talked about wanting their husbands to respect them more. It is clear from the research that caste remains a fundamental barrier to empowerment, despite political and community level efforts and the impact of key figures who have been highly visible and vocal in challenging inequality, such as Ambedekar.

Poor people living in Pune's slums utilize all the resources available to them, including both those offered by community organizations and also various aspects of their religion, including the guidance offered by local religious leaders, the inspiring teachings of gurus, the support garnered through affiliation to specific religious social networks, and the strength gained through the personal reflective moments provided by religious practices. Their religious activities are in turn determined and influenced by a number of other factors, including, particularly for women, natal family and kinship ties,

access to resources and the potential for re-negotiating or eradicating their low caste or untouchable status.

Religion operates in various ways to support people in their everyday lives and in their pursuit of specific visions of the future. It stands out as a key force, helping people to make sense of where they stand in relation to others. It is viewed as possessing both personal and practical potential. It has the capacity to inspire and motivate and may also provide people with the psychological resources to tackle social marginalization and practical problems of day-to-day life. The fluidity of religion offers opportunities for people to renegotiate their identities in a personal quest for greater dignity and social respect. Religious practices are woven into the fabric of everyday life and enable individuals to feel they are building positive *karma* and good energy, which will help them to acquire a better future life. Religious rituals also provide personal and reflective moments that can help young women acclimatize to married life away from their natal families while maintaining a sense of connection with their heritage and area of origin. A system of religious leadership, in which both men and women are turned to for practical day-to-day advice, has emerged in Pune's slums. Religious gurus inspire people to action and religion provides a political platform for local groups to present specific ideological and rights-based discourses. Even politicians targeting the votes of slum dwellers draw on religion to try and sway the electorate, through both Shiv Sena and the numerous parties that describe themselves as Buddhist.

Our research therefore revealed a tier of local leadership that is not often talked about, but which appears to have direct influence over people's day-to-day decision making. These locally selected leaders are familiar with to the day-to-day problems people face, making them a vital source of local knowledge. They are trusted and their advice may inspire people to action, motivating them to make the most of the capacities they possess to make changes (however slight) for themselves. Given the role of religious gurus and local leaders, it appears that they could play more of a role in motivating and supporting local people to challenge oppressive social structures. Raising the audibility of these figures, both male and female, could be one way of strengthening the voices of the poor, although the activities of organizations like Shiv Sena also demonstrate that religion has the potential to exacerbate social divisions.

Although slum residents do not use the language of 'development,' there is some overlap between western development concepts and the goals for the future expressed by slum dwellers. Unsurprisingly, an increase in material comfort is a priority and so too is improved access to education and employment opportunities. However, the complexities of how life is organized, primarily through caste and patriarchal gender ideologies, create additional barriers to achieving these objectives.

Our research suggests that development actors must develop a close, sophisticated insight into how people understand their situations. Concepts of development formulated outside the slum context must reflect the feelings of inhabitants and respond to their needs. The eradication of poverty in the contexts studied requires radical transformation in the lives of slum populations. Such a process of transformation must begin at an individual level, with recognition of the barriers to the achievement of people's potential. Development interventions need to support poor urban residents in their daily battles to survive, as well as recognizing their aspirations for a secure, prosperous and contented future. Through tackling immediate problems, it may also become possible to enable poor people to realize their long term goal of a better, more just and more financially secure existence.

Notes

[1] The Buddhist community in India is relatively small in comparison to those of other faiths, comprising only 0.77 per cent of the Indian population as a whole. Of these, the majority are located in the far north eastern reaches of the country, with a secondary concentration in Maharashatra, where they make up 6 per cent of the population, around 5.8 million people (CoI 2001); see also Mahajan and Jodhka (2009).

[2] Dalits, previously known as untouchables, are so low in the system that they are considered to fall outsideof and beneath 'civilized' caste society.

[3] Brahminism is the orthodox form of Hinduism that promotes the interests of the upper castes and discriminates against low castes and women.

[4] We have no evidence to prove the veracity of this claim; we simply recount it here as an example of local understandings of the connection between religion and social action/justice.

[5] In Shiv Sena rhetoric, an 'immigrant' is someone from another Indian state who has relocated to Maharashtra, usually to Mumbai.

[6] John and Mutatkar (2005) document ratios of rural and urban poverty by religious group using data from the 1999-2000 National Sample Survey. In urban Maharashtra, their estimate show that 27 per cent of Hindus, 22 per cent of Christians, 45 per cent of Muslims, 3 per cent of Sikhs and 39 per cent of 'others' live below the poverty line. According to the Census of India (2001) these 'others' are likely to be mostly Buddhists (only Jainism was mentioned by the census as another significant religious group in Maharashtra, and Jains comprise only 1.3 per cent of the total population of the state). Thus it seems reasonable to assume that between 35 and 40 per cent of Maharashtrian Buddhists live below the poverty line, about 2.15 million people.

[7] Similar statements were made many times by different people.

[8] In 2006, a Dalit family was attacked and several family members brutally murdered in Khairlanji, a village in the Bandhara region of Maharashtra. Dalit protests against the murders were widespread, for it was claimed that the killings were based to a large extent on caste hatred. The final court verdict was announced in 2008, with eight people found guilty of murder.

[9] Hindus and Christians also use the term Dalit frequently and are often at the centre of many anti-caste efforts. The point we make here is that Buddhists in Pune use the word so frequently that it seems to form the core of their identity, despite the fact that Buddhism is supposed to make caste distinctions 'disappear'.

[10] These examples are representative of the stories of many of the people to whom we spoke and are by no means isolated examples.

[11] It should be noted that there are numerous Hindu Dalit groups who would repudiate this claim. However our observations during the fieldwork indicated that it is not an entirely unreasonable interpretation, and also that this perspective is more common amongst Hindus than Buddhists, although not universal amongst the former group.

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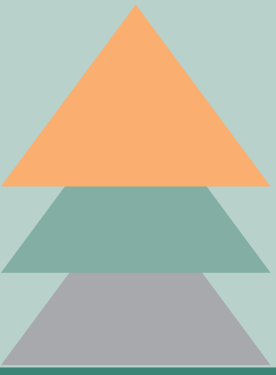

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