ABSTRACT

Ethnic identity and social mobility are interrelated.

Ethnic identity is psychology of a sense of belonging. It provides a sense of community, oneness, sameness, and a sense of solidarity. It creates a separate and unique place in the society. All these things lead to upward mobility of a community within a stratified society.

Social mobility is the movement of an individual or group from one social position to another. It is a change in one's social object or value, beliefs, education, occupation, income, status, power, and prestige. It is a change in person's overall social position.

The present study provides empirical evidence of the relationship between ethnic identity of the Buddhists in Pune and consequent social mobility of the community. The study concentrates on the Mahar's experience of their New Ethnic Identity. The investigation focussed on the basic question: did conversion to another religion and assertion of a new identity contribute to lessening of the social disabilities, dis-privileges and oppression experienced by the Mahars in the Indian social system, and became a strong basis for social mobility? Thus, at the theoretical level, the investigation would help us in the conceptual clarification of the role of 'Ethnic Identity' in promoting 'social mobility' of the Buddhists in the Indian society.
The Buddhists under study, irrespective of their level of education, occupation, income, and age maintain their Buddhist identity very strongly. The important way of maintaining the new identity is to adhere and propagate the doctrine of Buddhism; at the same time rejection, negation of Hinduism and also alienation from Hinduism. The another most important way of maintaining the new identity is to express devotion, faith, love, respect and great esteem towards Dr. Ambedkar. Being loyal and faithful to him they maintain strongly their identity given by him. It has created a strong sense of belonging amongst the Buddhist community.

The Buddhists maintain their identity strongly because they feel that it has given them a sense of self-respect, esteem, dignity, pride, confidence, new values and created self awareness, educational awareness, revolutionary consciousness and political consciousness among them. According to them maintaining the new identity implies conceptual change, change in one's mental make-up, change in one's outlook, and was brought about by the rejection of caste and untouchability.

The Buddhist institutions played a crucial role in establishing, promoting, maintaining, strengthening the new ethnic identity and simulating the Buddhist culture among the masses. It also provides educational, social and health facilities to the poor Buddhists. The Buddhist community has contributed to the upliftment of its members.
The Buddhists have shown upward educational and occupational mobility. The rate of literacy is increasing very fast amongst them. They are very hopeful and conscious about their children's career.

In addition to higher education and occupation, the Buddhist identity also played a role in reducing the social distance between the Buddhists and the upper castes. The Buddhist identity has helped them in shedding their perceived lower status in caste hierarchy, and acquired a new sense of confidence while dealing with the upper caste. There are some transformations taking place in the relationship between the Buddhists and the upper castes. There is a trend of having friends belonging to the upper castes among the Buddhists and inter-dining takes place more frequently between them. Majority of the inter-caste marriages are hypogamous. More young men are acquiring higher education and higher status jobs. The trend seems to be reversing towards hypogamy. The Buddhist elite are aware of the fact that hypogamy predominates over hypergamy in their community. So, they are demanding hypergamous marriages.

The Buddhists seem to be empowered. They feel that they are on a par with the upper caste but at the same time they feel that it is not reciprocated. Such change has not really occurred in the upper castes. Except a very few, majority of the upper caste consider the Buddhists as
improving community but lower than the upper caste. They use the term 'Buddhist' for identification of the Mahars.

It is demonstrated that most of the Buddhists are politically active. This is seen in their pattern of participation in political meetings, election campaigns, agitation, and elections. Their spatial mobility shows that they follow a pattern similar to other urban population. But this has not led to loss of identity. They reinforced their identity through participation in ethnic associations.

There is strong impact of urbanization and industrialization on the Buddhists under study. They used important means of mass media for awareness and information of national and international events. In addition to urbanization and industrialization, the Buddhist identity played an important role in breaking down the traditional beliefs and values. They show their scientific temper and rational views towards their religious and social life through various ways. This trend can help them in achieving upward social mobility.

It appears that Dr. Ambedkar's leadership, his movement of conversion to Buddhism, maintenance of the Buddhist identity, role of the Buddhist institutions, community's contribution, maximum use of reservation policy, educational and occupational mobility are helping the Buddhists to achieve their desired goal.