For the Benefit of the Many:

Resignification of Caste in Dalit and Early Buddhism

Thesis

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Abstract:

There is an inherent ambiguity in the Dalit reclamation of Buddhism as an ideological resistance to caste hierarchy. The Dalit Buddhist movement and early Indian Buddhism both set out to remake key identity categories, re-imagined the ideal community and engaged in parallel critiques of caste essentialism. In addition, each offered strategic departures from Brahminic caste discourse, resignifying the given terms of difference in an effort to eliminate social inequality. However, Dalit Buddhism, as characterized by the writings of B.R. Ambedkar, and early Buddhism, as represented in the Pali cannon, operate with two distinct grammars of symbolic appropriation. While Ambedkar’s writing offers a new name, history, and value for those most disadvantaged by caste hierarchy, the Pali scriptures engage in the appropriation of caste categories and their re-ascription. In other words, Ambedkar produced a new identity for an existing object (“untouchable” becomes dalit), while the Pali scriptures appropriate caste categories (ariya, brāhmaṇa, etc.) and re-apply them other objects according to a hierarchy of valued practice. It will be argued that the utility of these divergent grammars is in part determined by the primary social body taken as the natural form of discursive reification. This social body, whether the monastic sangha or the Indian nation as a whole, is both the audience and object of signification. Furthermore, Ambedkar and early Buddhist writers appear to differ in their
understanding of the goal of resignification itself: to create a more inclusive discourse (and therefore society) or to finally move beyond the limitations of discourse altogether. This investigation calls attention to distinguishable forms of symbolic change, provides some explanation as to their utility, and considers the final purpose of discursive change itself. As such, it has implications for both a theoretical understanding of strategies of counter-hegemonic discourse, and for the more practical task of a contemporary embodiment of Buddhist values.
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Introduction

My interest in the Dalit Buddhist movement came initially out of my own investigation of self-identity as a second-generation American Buddhist. There was no real question for me that I had personally taken refuge in the Buddha’s teachings but I deeply wanted to understand what that meant outside of the small, largely European-American, community in which I was situated. When I came across writings by and about the Dalit Buddhist movement I encountered a resonate voice. My political and social consciousness was rising and I was moved by the popular Dalit narrative of struggle and emancipation. Yet, anti-caste resistance and the visceral promise of Dalit emancipation spoke to another kind of Buddhist identity quite distinct from my own. My task was to learn then the meaning of Buddhism in this revival community, as well as the location of caste in the early stages of the Buddhist project.

I encountered an academic discussion of the Dalit Buddhist movement that often turns, implicitly or explicitly, around an evaluation of its authenticity.¹

¹ In a sense, no writer discussing the Dalit Buddhist movement can avoid this problem of authenticity as the movement stands at the intersection of at least two dimensions of legitimacy: the Buddhist and the Modern/Postmodern. Within these, some writers have celebrated the value Ambedkar placed upon rationality and equality in a just society, and contrasted it with the pre-modern/post-modern Hindu Right (Nanda 2003, Ilaiah 2009, for example). In this characterization, Ambedkar is an exemplary subaltern rationalist, but as such, the centrality of religious identity in his program needs to be explained away. Others have celebrated the post-modernist features of Ambedkar’s synthesis of secular and religious modes (Ganguly 2005). In this view, his departure from a pure secularism demonstrates the authenticity of his non-Western social position. Another scholar has described Ambedkar’s life and work as moving through pre-modern, modern, and post-modern stages (Queen 1996). Here, Ambedkar’s legitimacy is
While there is much that could be said in this regard, this question in itself cannot elucidate the distinctive ideological transformations which have lent to the success of the movement. In fact, the concern with authenticity can be seen as an expression of the fact that the Dalit movement hinges on a self definition which is the product of a contextually situated resignification.

What is more fruitful then, is an investigation into the distinctive departures this movement makes from what preceded it and the changing forms of ideological social-embodiment. Much has already been written which puts Ambedkar and his conversion project into the context of the decolonization and aspirational modernization of South Asia (e.g. Omvedt 1995, Zelliot 1996, Shah 2001, Jaffrelot 2005). Less has been written to put the movement into conversation with the early Buddhist scriptures Ambedkar himself identified (in a qualified fashion) as the source of his social/political/religious philosophy.²

The material and symbolic disadvantage of those marked as “untouchable” by a strong ideological stream within Hinduism, produced conditions where by new narratives and new names became both available and necessary. The departure of Indian Buddhism and its subtle assimilation into Hinduism throughout the 5th to the 14th centuries, allowed for the possibility of its rediscovery in the 18th and 19th centuries such that, in the 20th century, Dalit intellectuals could write, through the style of reclamation, a story of submerged struggle and invest their desire for equality with a historical consciousness.

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² Some work has been done to indicate the sources of Ambedkar’s philosophy (Eg. Fiske and Emmrich 2004) but little substantive comparisons between Dalit and early Buddhist thought have been undertaken.
However, as this essay will show, ambiguities were produced when Dalits reclaimed Buddhism as an ideological resistance to caste hierarchy. While early Buddhists\(^3\) do appear to have stood against caste essentialism, they did so in a strategically distinct way.

It is my assumption here that all ideological formations are strategic reworking of past forms. What is especially interesting to me are the various styles of reworking which create subjects from the conditions that structure and subordinate. Dalit and early Buddhists made divergent choices as to how to talk about individuals and identity with respect to caste, according to alternate logics. I am interested to identify the conditions that, in some sense, determine, not just the given signs invested with new meaning, but the operations of transformation between past symbolic forms and new ones. What I hope to show here, is that particular understandings of audience and objects of social change impacted the chosen grammar of transformation that worked symbols of caste-essentialist ideology into anti-caste discourse. I take this to be a starting place for an investigation into the operations of meaning and signification. This essay will seek to locate the larger naturalizations which influence the grammars of renaming, and show that resignifications operate according to recognizable, situated patterns. It is also one place to begin a reevaluation of Buddhist identity as a social project, and to spark a conversation in the larger Buddhist community.

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\(^3\) For the purposes of this essay, I use “early Buddhist” somewhat loosely to designate the largely consistent program put forth in the Pali cannon texts, in line with other scholars such as Kalupahana (1995). While more precise historical designations are possible, they would not be useful here.
around Dalit Buddhism as a distinct form of “Buddhist modernism” (McMahan, 2008) and revival.

The first section outlines my theoretical approach which is indebted to both post-structuralism and early Buddhist philosophy. I see much to be gained from considering *signification*, as understood by Charles Long and Judith Butler, alongside the Buddhist approach to semiotics characterized by the doctrine of “skillful means.” The essay will then outline Ambedkar’s project of caste critique, renaming and social embodiment. Turning to early Buddhism, I will sketch the Buddhist project with respect to caste and critique, renaming, and social embodiment that occurs in the Pali cannon. The subtle but striking difference in grammars of resignification is the problem around which this essay turns and it will be necessary to introduce two other examples of symbolic change (Gandhi and the Satnāmpanth) in order to bring out the most salient explanation for this difference. The evidence indicates that the social body which forms the object and intended audience of resignification is the primary factor in determining the grammar adopted. In the final section, the implicit teleology of Long, Butler, and Ambedkar’s resignification will be contrasted with the soteriology of early Buddhism, so as to highlight an open question for contemporary Buddhists.
Signification and Skillful Means

It is useful to establish a few key terms in this investigation and their relation. Rather than a structuralist concern with pure systems of signs, I am interested in the process of whereby signs emerge, the process of signification. My use of this concept has much in common with the post-structuralist semiotics of Charles H. Long (1986). Long sought to elucidate the symbolic conditions of African American religious experience and the emergent forms of discursive and theological resistance. Because of the ways the African diaspora has been deeply marked by the experience of the European colonial enterprise, for Long, signification is specifically the external construction of non-Western communities through colonial power. “By signification I am pointing to one of the ways in which names are given to realities and peoples during this period of conquest; this naming is at the same time an objectification through categories and concepts of those realities which appear as novel and ‘other’ to the cultures of conquest.” (p.4) My use here is then an extension of Long’s, as the operation of discursive power here is deployed at times prior to Western colonialism (in the context of early Buddhism) and in a ambivalent fashion with regard to European power (in the context of Ambedkar).

The “other” which caste language defines (signifies) is not “novel,” as in the case of Long’s material, but is an intimate abject. It is not the dichotomy of
the “primitive” and the “civilized” that emerged out of, and in order to justify, a violent colonial encounter. Rather it is the “unclean” against which Brahmanic discourse defined itself as “pure.” The language of caste in India is deeply marked by the operations British imperialism, as Nicholas Dirks has made clear, but caste itself has also been deployed against the hegemony of the imperial project. (Dirks 2001) As will be seen below, Ambedkar’s appropriation of Western discourse provided leverage against the largely indigenous structures of inequality that had marginalized Ambedkar and his community.

Long sees his project as that of “crawling back through history” (p.9) to uncover what he calls “new and counter-creative signification.” I prefer the term “resignification” to emphasize the fact that when existing signs of social difference are deployed in a new fashion they thereby construct their own systems of signs which no longer necessarily stand “counter” to that of the past. And, while these voices are counter-hegemonic in the sense that they stand consciously against the dominant language of power, they also reproduce aspects of this domination, according to a new logic, even when their intention is the creation of a society structured by equality. For this reason I also do not take Brahminical signification as, in any sense, truly original. Their own project of naming and knowing itself emerged out of the conditions of meaning structures against which they reacted. That the genealogy of Brahminical categories is opaque does not close the possibility of their recovery.  

Collins gives this plausible social and ritual explanation for the self-designation of Brahmins: “The Brahmins, calling themselves ‘the human gods’, sought to put in the gods’ place their own sacrificial ritual, both as an explanation of the origin and significance of the universe, and as the sole vehicle of worldly or other-worldly advancement.” (1982, p.31)

4 Nevertheless, what Long
saw in African American counter-hegemonic discourse, I find in Dalit and early Buddhist caste resignification, that is, the “expressive deployment of new meanings expressed in styles and rhythms of dissimulation.” That is, styles and rhythms that, in a sense, deconstruct the structures from which they emerge, whose difference can provide openings for a project of critique. Significantly, for both Long and myself, “The religious experience is the locus for this resource.” (ibid.)

Judith Butler has also contributed considerably to understandings of signification and resignification. Her theoretical modes implicitly operate in the task of recovering chains of signification. Butler’s attention to the moments of meaning making, where norms and discursive structures contain foreclosed possibilities that can be exploited, is applicable well beyond the subjects of her inquiry - even as much of her interest in a post-Lacanian psychoanalysis must, in my opinion, be shed. Central to this work is Butler’s extension of Foucault’s “paradox of subjection,” or “subjection” (Butler, 1997) Saba Mahmood summarizes this paradox as “the very processes and conditions that secure a subject’s subordination are also the means by which she becomes a self-conscious identity and agent.”(Mahmood 2005, p.17) In order to speak and gain a position in power structures, one must adopt (albeit in a modified form) the very symbolic system against which one is positioned. All resignifications reinscribe aspects of system which came before, voices of counter-hegemony must express themselves through systems which were imposed from the outside. At the same time, all significations impose imperfect systems onto their subjects
allowing, or even manufacturing, their own transgression and upending. Building on Faucault, Butler writes, “The term which not only names, but forms and frames the subject...mobilizes a reverse discourse against the very regime of normalization by which it was spawned.”(1997, p.93)

Many of these realizations are not limited to the post-structuralist theory, but had already been the subject of inquiry, in an alternate form, in early Buddhist thought. A key idea in discussions of semiotics for early Buddhists was that of “skillful means.” While various schools have understood this doctrine differently, it articulates a basic approach to signification and resignification within the Buddhist tradition. The phrase itself, *upāyakauśalya*, literally “skill in means,” appears in the Pali texts but not as a technical concept. Skillful means has been primarily associated with the Mahayana school and, while it was articulated as distinct doctrine in this later period, it is clear that it exists implicitly in the Pali cannon. Particular passages in the Pali cannon “indicate that there is a coherent matrix in pre-Mahayana Buddhism for the emergence of the more or less technical terminology.”(Pye 2003, p.119)

In contrast to Vedic thought, early Buddhists rejected the view that a single language was superior in communicating the truth. Rather the Buddha, for example, described himself, in one passage from the *Dīgha Nikāya*, as having “made [the Dhamma] acceptable” to various audiences and “whatever might have been their sort I made myself of like sort, whatever their language so was my language.”(quoted in Buescher 2005, p.19) As Pye notes, “... Buddhism does not reject other thought systems but associates with them, with a view to
realizing the intention of the Buddhist system.” (p.123) One result of this explicit policy of appropriation is that “this mode of correlation may involve a paradoxical, provisionally positive acceptance of ideas which are quite different from and even contradictory to the central intention or meaning of Buddhism itself.” (ibid.)

In the same way, the discourse through which an agent can potentially become liberated can, if misused, also reinforce her own subordination. The parable of the water snake, in the Alagaddūpama Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya, is given to demonstrate that the Buddha’s teachings, if learned with the intention of bettering ones position at the expense of others, can be harmful rather than liberatory (just as a water snake, if grasped in the wrong place will curve around to bite one’s hand). The teachings of the Buddha, dependent as they are on local and relative language, can move an individual out of the oppressive norms that contribute to their suffering but, if approached with the wrong goals in mind, it can also potentially recreate the conditions of that suffering in new forms.

The investigation here thus seeks to identify particular ways that Dalit and early Buddhists appropriated the language of caste in an effort to “skillfully” provide a path out of caste consciousness. Whether these paths have been effective is an open question, but what is of interest to this study is the different solutions that were put forth in each context from parallel discursive locations. Both Dalit and early Buddhists reinscribed caste onto anti-caste discourse but in importantly different ways.
Ambedkar's project

Bhimrao Ramji Ambekdar (1891-1956), more than any other icon, ushered the “ex-untouchable” subject through the reordering that was South Asian decolonization. B.R. Ambedkar was born in the Indian state of Mahārāshtra among an ‘untouchable’ community, the Mahār. This “sub-caste”, or jāti, lived largely on the outskirts of villages and were, according to local economies of caste, expected to act as messengers and general laborers as well as take care of the disposal of dead cows. The British colonial authority added another layer of meaning to Mahār social location when they identified them as a ‘martial race’ providing them access to a degree of economic mobility as military recruits. Ambedkar's family benefited from his father's role in the British military, and the young Bhimrao studied in army cantonment school. On account of his caste, he was expected sit apart from his classmates and receive water from a separate source. Nevertheless, he thus gained access to an otherwise unavailable education that allowed for Ambedkar to study in Bombay. Because of his educational achievement, he attained sponsorship from the politically progressive Gaekwad Maharaja of Baroda who provided a the funds for the aspirational student to study abroad. After earning a Ph.D. in economics from Columbia University, and further advanced study of Law at the London School of Economics, Ambedkar returned to India where he rose to national prominence,
representing depressed classes in colonial government, and taking up visible causes such as educational, temple, and water access for Mahārs. Ambedkar’s outspoken and controversial views alienated him from many national liberation leaders. Nevertheless, he was included in the process of defining the new nation, most visibly in being appointed to chair the committee that drafted the national constitution (adopted in 1950).

As part of his first tasks as an activist, Ambedkar sought the right of untouchables to enter Hindu temples, but he quickly became disillusioned with Hinduism at large and the conservative elements in the Congress Party in particular. As early as 1935 he promised “I will not die a Hindu,” but it wasn’t until the last year of his life, in 1956, that he lead an estimated 300,000 ‘ex-untouchables’ away from identification with Hinduism into a new Buddhism. Ambedkar defined a new political subjectivity for those who had suffered under the practice of untouchability, and his influence as a central symbol of ‘Dalit’ emancipation continues to grow.

The Dalit subject as Ambedkar conceived it rests, in part, on its association with ancient Indian Buddhism. Although Ambedkar located himself through his writing within Western thought-ways, he also situated his ideology within an Indian history by appealing specifically to the Indian Buddhist tradition. While he was highly critical of the Buddhist establishment he encountered, Ambedkar identified with Buddhism and viewed his own movement as the revival of what he saw as a 2500-year indigenous struggle against Brahmin power.

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5 Ambedkar gave 380,000 as the number of participants. (Rodrigues 1993, p.299)
Buddhism’s unique position in the pantheon of ‘world religions’ as a semi-secular tradition allowed for Ambedkar’s incorporation of secular-modernist modes under an explicitly religious identification. Ambedkar did not simply advocate an integration into an existing Buddhist tradition but thoroughly revised Buddhism according to a politically engaged and rationalist hermeneutic. Like many other religious reformers, he rhetorically sought to recover a ‘pure’ tradition against its ‘corrupted’ established forms. In doing so, he excised some features often thought to be essential to Buddhism as a religion.\(^6\)

Despite many differences, Ambedkar had in common with early Buddhists a resistance to the claims of Brahminical Hinduism, including the idea that caste determined ability. His own life was given as a counter example, as his success in the field of learning was unquestionable but he also explicitly rejected the Brahmanical understanding of caste essence. Nothing more graphically demonstrated this symbolically than his public burning of the *Manusmriti* in December 1927, a text which describes in detail the ideal system of purity and hierarchy among the four *varṇa*.\(^7\) Ambedkar’s critique of caste took the form of speculative history, in which the caste was explained and therefore demystified.

His first systematic critique of caste, was developed long before his Buddhist conversion, in a paper for an anthropology seminar at Columbia

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\(^6\) including the Four Nobel Truths, the central role of the monastic community, the emphasis on attainment of Nirvana, etc.

\(^7\) The *Manusmriti*’s most inflammatory passages describe the punishments recommended for Shudras that step out of their traditional role, but the general philosophy of caste can be summarized in passages such as these: “413. But a shudra, whether bought or unbought, he [a brahmin] may compel to do servile work; for he [the shudra] was created by the Self-existent to be the slave of brahmans. 414. A shudra, even though emancipated by his master, is not released from servitude; since that is innate in him, who can set him free from it?” (Fisher & Powers, 1998, p.50)
University in 1916. He argued that the basis of caste was the practice of social exclusion through endogamy. In his view, this practice was initiated by Brahmans and later imitated by other groups. Brahmanic scriptures further legitimated caste by giving it divine authority and lawgivers, such as the author of the *Manusmriti*, reinforced existing class distinctions by incorporating them into systems of ritual purity.

Ambedkar departed from the understandings of Western educated scholars, which saw caste hierarchy, like race, as the remnant of invasions through which darker-skinned indigenous groups where subordinated by lighter-skinned proto-Europeans (the theory of “Aryan invasion”). Ambedkar astutely observes that “European students of Caste have unduly emphasized the role of colour in the Caste system. Themselves impregnated by colour prejudices, they very readily imagined it to be the chief factor in the Caste problem. But nothing can be farther from the truth, and Dr. Ketkar is correct when he insists that ‘All the princes whether they belonged to the so-called Aryan race, or the so-called Dravidian race, were Aryas. Whether a tribe or a family was racially Aryan or Dravidian was a question which never troubled the people of India, until foreign scholars came in and began to draw the line. The colour of the skin had long ceased to be a matter of importance’” (Ambedkar 1989)

He further elaborates this critique of prevailing scholarly understandings of caste in his 1947 book *Who were the Shudras?* where he argued that ethnic and linguistic division throughout the subcontinent did not correspond with caste, and

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8 titled “Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development” it is available in full at http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/txt_ambedkar_castes.html
therefore, must have predated it. Dark-skinned Dravidian-language Brahmins live alongside dark-skinned Dravidian-language Shudras in South India, while light-skinned Indo-European-language Brahmins live alongside light-skinned Indo-European-language Shudras in the North. Ambedkar also looked to the Vedas themselves for evidence of an Aryan invasion and found that, “(1) The Vedas do not know any such race as the Aryan race. (2) There is no evidence in the Vedas of any invasion of India by the Aryan race and its having conquered the Dasas and Dasyus supposed to be natives of India. (3) There is no evidence to show that the distinction between Aryans, Dasas and Dasyus was a racial distinction. (4) The Vedas do not support the contention that the Aryas were different in colour from the Dasas and Dasyus” (Ambedkar 1947)

Based on his reading of various Sanskrit texts Ambedkar elaborated on his earlier theory arguing in favor of an alternate history which explained the creation of the “once born” Shudra caste. In his view, the fourth varṇa emerged from the other castes as a result of the Brahmin control over ritual inclusion. Nowhere does the Aryan invasion figure into the creation of social division. He summarized his conclusions this way:

(1) The Shudras were one of the Aryan communities of the Solar race. (2) The Shudras ranked as the Kshatriya Varna in the Indo-Aryan Society. (3) There was a time when the Aryan Society recognized only three Vamas, namely. Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas. The Shudras were not a separate Varna but a part of the Kshatriya Varna. (4) There was a continuous feud between the Shudra kings and the Brahmins, in which the Brahmins were subjected to many tyrannies and indignities. (5) As a result of the hatred towards the Shudras due to their tyrannies and oppressions, the Brahmins refused to invest the Shudras with the sacred thread. (6) Owing to the loss of the sacred thread the Shudras became socially degraded, fell below the rank of the Vaishyas and came to form the fourth Varna.
Ambedkar’s vision of a de-racialized and anti-Brahminical caste history was distinct in his time. A contrasting analysis taken up by Ambedkar’s contemporary Periyar (E. V. Ramaswami). A Tamil social reformer, Periyar established the “Self-Respect Movement”, an organization dedicated to the overthrow of caste. Like Ambedkar, Periyar saw Hinduism as inextricably linked to Brahmin privilege. But unlike the Maharashtrian Ambedkar, the Tamil Periyar advocated Dravidian National pride and saw Shudras and untouchables as “Adi Dravidas”, the original inhabitants of Southern India. He called upon them to shake off the control of North Indian invaders just as Indian nationalists sought the departure of British rule. In this way, Periyar could appropriate anti-colonial sentiment for the purposes of denouncing the historical oppression of low-castes, something Ambedkar could not do as directly on account of his alternate history of caste.

However, unlike Periyar, Ambedkar’s tactic effectively avoided the overlay of scientific racism onto caste difference. It has been suggested that Ambedkar’s stay in the US, and his observation of the struggle of African Americans as a racial minority impressed upon him the dangers of the essentialization of racial identity. (Zelliot 1996, p.82) Just as Periyar could claim moral superiority if low castes were the victims of an ancient invasion, others could claim a racial inferiority on the basis of their failure to repel invasion.

We will see below, that while differences exist between the early Buddhist and Ambedkar’s own critiques of caste, they parallel each other to a large
degree. Although the hegemony to which they were responding were not identical, early Buddhists like Ambedkar, resisted any theory which located caste in biological difference. In addition, early Buddhists like Ambedkar, proposed a theory of caste origins which emerged from social struggle. While Ambedkar’s particular theory differs in significant ways from that proposed in the Aggañña Sutta, which will be discussed below, (for example, the Kṣariyas are the first caste to be separated in the Pali account, while Brahmins are the ones to begin the process of division in Ambedkar’s) both explain the division of classes through the exercise of human greed and selfishness. Despite these parallels in critique, the signification strategies taken by each to eliminate caste by revising caste discourse importantly diverge.
The making of ‘Dalit’

More than just the national symbol of disadvantaged castes, Ambedkar represents modern self-redefinition of those considered the lowest of all in caste position. Ambedkar was clear about the power of language and the need for those labeled “untouchable” to adopt a new name. “The social attitude of the Hindu is determined by the very name ‘Untouchable’... The Untouchables know that if they call themselves Untouchable they will at once draw the Hindu out and expose themselves to his wrath and his prejudice.” (Ambedkar 2002. p. 236-237)

The term ‘Dalit’, was introduced around 1928 in Ambedkar’s Marathi newspaper Bahishkrit Bharat (the “Ostracized [or Outcaste] India”) and was gradually popularized after him.(Rao 2008) Dalit has become the most widespread way for “ex-untouchables” in South-Asia to re-inscribe themselves as political agents. While “untouchable” marks a group of people from the outside according to their ritual distance, the term “Dalit” (literally “Broken”) re-imagines from within a community, a people once-whole, divided and made victim by acts of systematic violence.

In Ambedkar’s paradigm, Dalit social and individual transformation is to be achieved through three related tactics. First, political participation through legislation and the electoral process (a system he helped design as the architect of the Indian constitution). Second, economic advancement through educational
improvement (something he himself acquired). And third, rejection of Hindu religion and conversion to a rationalized and socially engaged Buddhism.

Key to all of these was a reformulation of caste consciousness where the stigma of cultural and ritual inferiority was to be replaced by a narrative of loss and recovery. Explicitly departing from a Vedic naturalization of *vāma* as a inevitable division of human life, Ambedkar sought a historical explanation for caste oppression. “His analysis was but the first stage of an ideological counter-offensive in which he sought to endow Untouchables with a glorious past and a prestigious identity through which they could regain their self-respect and overcome their divisions.” (Jaffrelot 2005, p.38)

A year after publishing his alternate historitization of the Shudra castes, Ambedkar published *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchable* (1948) and further developed a narrative of lost glory for untouchables. By uncovering the origin of untouchability he lay the groundwork for its end. For Ambedkar, untouchables were the original people across various parts of India who had lost their social cohesion in local tribal warfare. “In many cases, a defeated tribe became broken into bits. As a consequence of this, there always existed in Primitive times a floating population consisting of groups of Broken tribesmen roaming in all directions.” (Ambedkar 1948) These “Broken” people (*dalit* in Marathi) were relegated to the outer edge of villages in semi-autonomous communities. According to Ambedkar, during the rise of Buddhism in the 3rd century BCE, these groups adopted the new egalitarian religion. When Brahminism reestablished itself as politically dominant, it was the Dalits who
were last to give up their adherence to the Buddha’s teachings. In particular, they refused to adopt the emerging practice of cow protection and as a result they were shunned and relegated to unclean occupations. “...Untouchability was born some time about 400 A.D. It is born out of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism which has so completely moulded the history of India...” (Ambedkar 1948) Few scholars today accept the historical accuracy of most aspects of this theory, but a key feature of Ambedkar’s work is the re-inscription of the untouchable individual as a historical subject and the revival of Buddhism as a revolutionary anti-caste ideology.

The creation of a narrative of untouchable past and the articulation of a radical anti-caste agenda gradually gained prominence. “Dalit” has now eclipsed Gandhi’s “Harijan” across India and Nepal, as the preferred term of self-identification for those treated as untouchable. While the term is grounded in Ambedkar’s thought, Ambedkar became widely known across India through his English writing which did not use the term, simply referring to a “Broken” people. Ghanshyam Shah points out that “Dalit” didn’t fully emerge into South Asian public discourse until the 1960s:

Marathi-speaking literary writers, neo-Buddhists by persuasion, began to use the word Dalit in their literary works instead of Harijan or achchuta. Dalit writers who have popularized the word have expressed their notion of Dalit identity in their essays, poems, dramas, autobiographies, novels and short stories. They have reconstructed their past and their view of the present. They have expressed their anger, protest and aspiration... [Dalit] does not confine itself merely to economic exploitation in terms of appropriation of surplus. It also relates to suppression of culture - way of life and value system - and, more importantly, the denial of dignity.(2001 p.22)
Those who self-identify as Dalit reject both the stigma of untouchable status and the paternalistic, accommodationist re-formulation Gandhi popularized. This new terminology embodied a new self-understanding as political agents on the front lines of a humanist struggle. The exploitative class system was hegemonically supported, in Ambedkar’s view, by superstitions, mysticism, and appeals to irrational scripture (“Brahminism” in Ambedkar’s parlance). It stood in contrast with the rational, modern, political action based on appeals to universal, rights discourse carried out by a vanguard of Dalit activists and their allies.

Expressing some of the aspirational meanings of the term, student activist and blogger Moggallan Bharti, wrote in 2005,

“Dalit” is itself an intentionally positive term. Dalit identity is not a caste identity. Dalit is a symbol for change and revolution. It is an all-encompassing term which carries the aspirations of wider deprived and oppressed sections of society. Dalits believe in humanism and are best capable to achieve a combination of “naturalism of man and humanism of nature”, to use an expression of Marx, enabling therefore to become complete in themselves.

As Gail Omvedt summarized:

Dalits or ex-untouchables had a crucial role to play in defeating Brahmanic Hinduism and opening the road to a society of equality and liberation. Whereas Ambedkar had originally emphasized the destruction of caste as a prerequisite to economic equality (socialism), now he began to argue that untouchables were the carriers of Buddhism, the liberatory message of Indian tradition. (Omvedt 2001)

Ambedkar placed great emphasis on Buddhist conversion as a key element of the project of identity transformation. He argued that rejection of Hinduism was necessary for the elimination of caste and the social uplift of Dalits. While Ambedkar hesitated to choose a new religion until long after the
departure from Hinduism was assured, Buddhism allowed for a complete narrative of loss and recovery as it could be constructed as the original Dalit religion. Ambedkar could simultaneously recover something rightly his as well as lay claim to a symbol of the Indian influence on the world, with little local competition over its meaning. Furthermore, the Buddhist claims of rationality and equality harmonized with the very same modernist values that he appealed to in opposition to Brahminism.

In an article titled “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion” written in the 1950 addition of the *Maha Bodhi Journal of Culcutta*, (written after Ambedkar’s announcement of an intention to convert to Buddhism but before the formal conversion) Ambedkar writes, “Religion is bound to loose respect and therefore become the subject of ridicule, and thereby not merely loose as a governing principle of life, but might in course of time disintegrate and lapse, if it is not in accord with science.” (quoted in Kadam, 1997, p 41) In his view, only Buddhism was able to withstand this test.

Furthermore Ambedkar emphasized what he saw as Buddhism’s synchronism with the best of Western ethical notions. In a radio interview in 1954 he said:

“Positively my social philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words: Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Let no one, however, say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution. I have not. My philosophy has it roots in religion, and not in political science. I have derived them from the teachings of my master, the Buddha.” (Keer 1990, p.456)

While the Dalit rights movement is diverse and largely secular, the Dalit Buddhist Movement that emerged under Ambedkar’s leadership and continued to
grow after his death forms the most orthodox embodiment of his complete project. For Ambedkar, a changing of names was necessary but not sufficient to escape the stigma of untouchability; they must also adopt an identity that is explicitly outside the Hindu fold. (Ambedkar 2002, p.237) Even when knowledge and practice of Buddhism is small, many Dalits see the Buddha as a symbol of their own remade self in the struggle for emancipation. As Shankarrao Kharat, a Mahar-Buddhist intellectual, put it:

I have accepted the Buddhist Dhamma. I am a Buddhist now. I am not a Mahar nor an untouchable nor even a Hindu. I have become a human being.... The chains of untouchability which shackled my feet have been shattered.... I am now free. I have become a free citizen of Independent India (quoted in Shah, p. 205)
Ambedkar’s nationalist project

While Ambedkar constructed a religious identity for Dalit communities he was also deeply engaged in defining Indian identity against the rule of the British and his reformulation of the untouchable subject was articulated in the context of nationalist, anti-colonial struggle. Ambedkar was first-and-foremost seeking to eliminate caste division within the Indian nation. In addition to his work on the Indian constitution to explicitly make caste discrimination illegal, Ambedkar sought to discursively construct a new India through a recovery and reevaluation of the Indian past. Buddhist conversion can be seen as having been largely motivated by this project of imagining a non-Hindu, and yet, not fully secular, Indian identity.

Ambedkar was responding to the prevailing conception of Hinduism (and with it, caste) as the primary source of Indian self-understanding. Secular nationalists effectively overwrote the distinctiveness of India by implicitly locating the source of knowledge in the West. A secular vision could imagine an India without caste, but in doing so, it might "condemn virtually the entire corpus of traditional cultural institutions in India, both elite and popular" as "manifestations of a premodern social formation".(Chatterjee, 1993, p. 173) Ambedkar’s work can be seen, in part, as responding to this dichotomous framework. He rejected the necessity of the Indian caste system and advanced a modernist restructuring of
society, but by referring explicitly to an ancient Indian tradition, he sought to simultaneously reinforce nationalist sentiment. Like Hindu nationalists he put religious identity at the center of the discussion, but he refused the conceptual assimilation of Buddhism into Hinduism, placing the conflict between these two at the center of Indian history.

Ambedkar’s ‘recovery’ of Buddhism, a religious tradition nearly gone from India by the colonial period, provided a mythology of return and a source of cultural symbols and intellectual traditions. Buddhism’s spread throughout East Asia and influence on the societies of China, Japan, and elsewhere adds value to India’s understanding of its own past,⁹ as does the growing interest in Buddhism among the progressive West. Buddhism as a philosophy, with its resemblance to a scientific secular humanism allowed Ambedkar to represent the tradition as a symbol of India’s inherent cultural modernism, without lending support to a caste-based social structure. His nationalist goals for choosing Buddhism for a new religion can be noted in his comment that conversion to a Islam or Christianity would, “denationalize the Depressed Classes” (quoted in Jaffrelot, 2005, p. 122) and thus undermine the nationalist project.

The role of Buddhism as a source for an alternate nationalism can also be seen in Ambedkar’s contribution to the construction of Ashoka, the third-century-BCE Buddhist ruler, as the primordial articulation of the ideal Indian nation. Ambedkar advocated the adoption of the Ashokan chakra (wheel) as the center of the Indian flag, and the Ashokan lion pillar as the Indian emblem. (Jaffrelot 2007) The choice of a Buddhist symbol served to reinforce an alternate anti-

⁹ For example, see the representation of Buddhism in Heera (2007).
caste foundation for Indian identity. Reviving Buddhism in India thus had discursive power that lent authority to the Dalit Buddhists as national vanguards. Ambedkar himself did define a role in his system for the Buddhist monastic sangha, but not as the central social body of significance. Ambedkar himself lived a married life and never seems to have considered entering the order. The sangha, in his characterization, is intended to serve in a larger political project. In Ambedkar’s posthumous work on Buddhism, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957), he argues that the purpose of the *bhikkhu* (monk) is as an activist, renouncing the householder’s life so as to focus more energy on social change. Ambedkar rejects what he sees as the self-focused behavior of the typical *bhikkhu*, renouncing the world and focusing on personal salvation. “A Bhikkhu leaves his home. But he does not retire from the world. He leaves home so that he may have the freedom and the opportunity to serve those who are attached to their homes, but whose life is full of sorrow, misery, and unhappiness, and who cannot help themselves.” (1956, 5.II.4) In fact, Ambedkar increased the role of lay community relative to the monastic Sangha in general. He encouraged the performance of a lay initiation ceremony not just a monastic initiation (Ambedkar 1957, 5.IV.1). When Ambedkar himself converted to Buddhism, the ceremony was performed by a senior Sri Lankan monk, but Ambedkar then took it upon himself to perform the conversion for the multitudes present, no longer relying on monastic authority. We can see then that the monastic community was not the primary social body for Ambedkar but was secondary to his larger nationalist project.
In his introduction of the Indian constitution to the Constituent Assembly, Ambedkar makes clear his view that caste is the primary obstacle for India to become a unified nation:

I remember the days when politically-minded Indians, resented the expression “the people of India”. They preferred the expression “the Indian nation.” I am of opinion that in believing that we are a nation, we are cherishing a great delusion. How can people divided into several thousands of castes be a nation? The sooner we realize that we are not as yet a nation in the social and psychological sense of the world, the better for us. For then only we shall realize the necessity of becoming a nation and seriously think of ways and means of realizing the goal.... The castes are anti-national. In the first place because they bring about separation in social life. They are anti-national also because they generate jealousy and antipathy between caste and caste. But we must overcome all these difficulties if we wish to become a nation in reality. For fraternity can be a fact only when there is a nation. Without fraternity, equality and liberty will be no deeper than coats of paint. (1949 speech, reproduced in Ahluwalia 1977, p.200)

Ambedkar’s participation in the construction of the Indian nation allowed him an effective access to discursive and material power. In taking up a nationalist project, he committed himself to a vision which would include all Indians within the imagined social body. In doing so he allied himself with the vision of the state which saw untouchables in their populational entirety. Even as Ambedkar sought to eliminate the basis of their difference, he had to begin by calling attention to their existence and putting forth a narrative which explained their distinct position. He was then positioned to persuade his audience of the obstacle the unassimilated communities of Dalits presented in the emergence of a unified Indian body. Rather than the abject of the cosmic man, as represented in the Brahminic tradition, Dalits “exemplified a crucial space of alterity,” (Rao 2008, p.17) that could critique Indian society, the vanguard of modernization and
the recovery of “an indigenous democracy that has included women, outcastes, and royalty alike.” (ibid.)
The early Buddhist social project

According to Dutch scholar, Koenraad Elst, "Neo-Buddhism is based on a mistake." In his estimation, "Dr. Ambedkar opted for Buddhism ... mostly on the wrong assumption that Buddhism was an anti-caste reform movement." (2001, 11.9) In contrast to the Buddha as social reformer that Ambedkar paints, (especially in his posthumous work, The Buddha and His Dhamma, 1957), Elst argues that the Buddha “was quite unambiguous about the futility of worldly pursuits” and includes as worldly any efforts to change social structure. According to Elst, “The encounter with worldly suffering (typified by an old man, a sick man and a corpse) had convinced Gautama to turn away from the world and to focus on spiritual exercises. The monks did not want to be disturbed with social problems, and the atmosphere they created for themselves in their monasteries was meant to focus their attention on their spiritual practice, not on the social needs of laymen.” (p.13)

There is a sense in which Elst is correct. Ambedkar recovered what was useful to him from the Buddhist tradition according to a rationalist and socially engaged hermeneutic. In fact, part of what Elst is recognizing is a real

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10 Tellingly, Ambedkar explicitly rejects this traditional existential renunciation narrative. Ambedkar discounts this as contrary to reason and puts in its place a story in which Siddhartha is political motivated to abandon his entitlement to the throne in order to avoid an immanent war. (Ambedkar, 1957)

11 For Ambedkar, social-material salvation is the Buddhist goal rather than existential salvation. This however is viewed as a recovery, rather then a modification: “the Buddha has a Social Message. …[that has] been buried by modern authors.” (Ambedkar, 1957, 3.II.1)
difference in the teleology or eschatology of Dalit and early Buddhism, which will be explicated in the final section. But contrary to Elst’s claim, early Buddhists did not see awakening as fundamentally independent from “worldly pursuits” and the Buddha’s program of renunciation was a transformation of social relations, not their abandonment.

The influential Sri Lankan Theravadan monk, Walpola Rahula emphatically denied the image of the socially removed Buddhist. “Those who think that Buddhism is interested only in lofty ideals, high moral and philosophical thought, and that it ignores the social and economic welfare of people, are wrong. The Buddha was interested in the happiness of the people. To him happiness was not possible without leading a pure life based on moral and spiritual principals. But he knew that leading such a life was hard in unfavorable material and social conditions.”(Rahula, 1985, p.104) Rahula points to places in the Pali scriptures where the Buddha is recorded as teaching that one need not become a renunciant to attain high spiritual states; that particular minimum material conditions, that the society should provide, are favorable to spiritual success; that poverty is the cause of immorality and crime; as well as outlining the proper lay person’s relationship to wealth and which professions to avoid.

Nevertheless, the question, for the moment, remains weather the Buddha specifically set out to transform social relations with respect to caste, and if so, how. Complicating this question is the fact that the conditions of social stratification twenty-five hundred years ago are no doubt distinct from caste in
contemporary South Asia. Thus, the Buddha’s critique of the social structure of his time may have little bearing on Ambedkar’s critique of caste.
Caste discourse in the early Buddhist period

Nicholas B. Dirks, in his thorough study, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, (2001) has shown how the 'caste system,' as such, came into existence under the British colonial administration which homogenized dynamic and regionally dispersed formations of social relations. "The idea that varna - the classification of all castes into four hierarchical orders with the Brahman on top - could conceivably organize the social identities and relations of all Indians across the civilizational expanse of the subcontinent was only developed under the peculiar circumstances of British colonial rule." (Dirks 2001, p.14) Furthermore, Orientalist knowledge asserted "the precolonial authority of a specifically colonial form of power and representation." (ibid.) Caste "was anchored to the service of a colonial interest in maintaining social order, justifying colonial power, and sustaining a very particular form of indirect rule."(p.14-15) Dirks claim is that, it was only after the British displaced Indian political society (in both its Hindu and Muslim forms) that they constructed Indian society according to Brahmin imaginings as a way to justify their rule. Until the British came to dominate South Asia, kings were not subordinate to Brahmans (as is the scriptural ideal), and the religious domain did not supersede the political. (Dirks 2001, p.11; Dirks 1993).
This older structure can be seen in the Buddhist scriptures where the Kṣatriya (or Khattiya in Pali) are described as being above the Brahmins when the four varṇa are described. (Walshe 1987, p.548; Singh 2008 p.292) However, even at this time it is clear that a Kṣatriya-centric ordering was being contested. In the Ambaṭṭha Sutta for example, a Brahmin argues that all other varṇa are subservient to the Brahmins and should pay homage to them. (see Walshe 1987, p.114)

While caste’s significance may have increased with Brahminical understandings reified through the colonial experience, it is clear that the major pieces of caste ideology and praxis were already in existence by the early Buddhist period. It has not been established whether rules of endogamy and inter-dining had developed fully at this time, but based on textual evidence, varṇa (the four-fold division of individuals), jāti (the innumerable smaller endogamous communities) and gotra (exogamous clans within jāti) were already in established by the 6th century BCE even if they were not uniformly observed. (Singh 2008, p.292) Untouchability also seems to have existed at this time, although the term asprishya, used in the sense of a social group condemned permanently to such a status, first appears in the Viṣṇu Dharmasūtra, probably written between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE. In earlier Dharmasūtras, the Chandāla jāti in particular are subject to extreme prejudice, and any contact with them is seen as polluting. The Pali texts also refer to the existence of slaves (dāsa) who were bought and sold and whose freedom was severely restricted. (Singh 2008, p.294)
It is clear that there was significant stratification in the early Buddhist period. Furthermore, much of the language that is used today was also used to describe the basis of these social differences. While no term such as “caste” existed to generalize all the ways that birth determined social status, the Dharmasūtra texts indicate that Brahmanical thought sought to develop unified understandings of social difference, grounded in essentialist characteristics. These ideologies are often depicted in the Pali cannon as counterpoint to the viewpoints expressed by the Buddha. References to caste ideology in early Buddhist scripture indicate that the influence of Brahminical thought had reached outside of Brahmin communities at least as far as educated Kṣatriyas, such as the Buddha, and the monastic community who composed the Suttas. In fact, early Buddhism was not alone in rejecting caste essentialism, as other non-Vedic ideologies (such as that of the Jain and the Ājīvika communities) also developed their own critiques.

It appears then that conditions and discourse in the Buddha’s time were similar enough to today to allow the usage of the term ‘caste’ in a loose sense. It is now necessary to make clear the ways that the Buddha, explicitly or implicitly, advocated a caste-free society.
Early Buddhist critique of caste ideology

Within the canonical Pali scriptures, the Buddha is represented as putting forth an anti-caste program in at least three distinct ways: i) through explicit critique of chaturvarṇa (the four varṇas) as a system of essential qualities of being or ability, ii) through a process of resignification whereby caste language is redefined and reapplied to non-caste referents, iv) and through the creation of a social body of monastics who abandoned caste taboos and among whom caste difference was (ideally) erased. In a broad sense, these three strategies of caste resistance are the same as those taken up by Ambedkar. Though situated differently, it has much in common with Ambedkar’s critique discussed above. The next section will outline the early Buddhist resignification of caste and demonstrate the terms of its divergence from the Dalit project. It will then be appropriate to consider their alternate methods of social embodiment.

In the Pali cannon, the Buddha explicitly states that caste does not impact ones ability to attain nirvana, and that everyone is subject to the same laws of karma and impermanence. Most famously, it is recorded that the Buddha was asked if there is any real difference between the members of the four varṇa and, after a dialogue on the factors that contribute to an individual exerting him/her self, he tells his audience that, just as various kinds of dry wood would make the
same fire, all people, if exerting themselves, would achieve the same release from suffering. (Kannakatthala Sutta, MN 90)

In the pointed Assalayana Sutta (MN 93), the Buddha is asked directly about Brahminical ideology, "Master Gotama, the brahmans say, 'Brahmans are the superior caste; any other caste is inferior. Only brahmans are the fair caste; any other caste is dark. Only brahmans are pure, not non-brahmans. Only brahmans are the sons & offspring of Brahma: born of his mouth, born of Brahma, created by Brahma, heirs of Brahma.' What does Master Gotama have to say with regard to that?" (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2010) In response, he gives a series of arguments, saying, among other things, that regardless of vāṇa, one who kills, steals, etc. is subject to a negative rebirth and one who avoids such acts is reborn in a positive condition; that all vāṇa are capable of developing a mind free from hate and ill-will; and, perhaps with some irony, the Buddha points out that members of all castes can become equally clean when washing with soap. The Sutta closes with a short narrative of a sage known as “Devala the Dark” who proves through logic and miracle the falsehood of this Brahmin-superiority doctrine, described as an “evil viewpoint”. (ibid.)

Interestingly, in the Pali cannon, one can find what could be called ‘biological' arguments against caste. For example, some scriptures argue that humans are a single unified species, therefore the Brahminical claim, that humans are divided into separate essential categories, is not valid. The most canonical scripture to this effect is the Vāsetṭha Sutta (MN 98) in which the Buddha is asked about the distinctiveness of Brahmin birth. The Buddha replies
by listing various kinds of animals and plants within which “their birth is their distinctive mark”. With human beings however, “no difference of birth make a distinctive mark in them.”(Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2011)\(^\text{12}\) In particular, “In human bodies in themselves nothing distinctive can be found.” As a result “Distinction among human beings is purely verbal designation.”(ibid.) A striking parallel exists with critiques of biological racism in the last century, a feature which was not lost on Malalasekera and Jayatilleke, Sri Lankan authors of a 1958 tract titled Buddhism and the Race Question, published by UNESCO. They write, “It would thus appear that Buddhism is in accord with the findings of the modern biologists who exploded the doctrines of racism and would urge the biological unity of mankind...” (1958, p.37)

Early Buddhist biology saw the development of the child in the womb as due to not just to the combination of the male and female fluids, but also the impressions of former lives in the karmic bundle that animates the personality. This contributes to another kind of biological argument against caste essence. “It is said that the psychic factor of the spirit seeking rebirth (gandabbho) cannot be considered as belonging to any particular caste, so that the essence of one’s personality is beyond caste distinctions.”(ibid. p.44, with reference to the Assalayana Sutta)

Finely, in a somewhat ironic biological argument, in some Pali texts the Buddha points out, that while the Vedas describe the birth of the Brahmin caste

\(^{12}\) Malalasekera and Jayatilleke use the translation by Fausboll in Sacred Books of the East which gives the wording “As in these species the marks that constitute species are abundant, so in men the marks that constitute species are not abundant.” (Malalasekera and Jayatilleke 1958, p. 36)
from the mouth of Brahma, Brahmins today are born the same way as everyone else. *(Assalayana Sutta and Aggañña Sutta DN 27)*

Also, what could be called ‘anthropological’ arguments are given in the Pali cannon. The point is made that the division into four *vāma* is not universal, as there are places where only a higher and a lower class exist, as well as places where individuals have the ability to move from one class to another *(Assalayana Sutta)*. Further more, if one has the means, a lower caste person can employ a higher caste person and out of necessity a person of high caste will do the work ideally ascribed to a lower caste. The Buddha also gives examples of great sages who are respected and revered despite their “low” birth (e.g. *Ambattha Sutta*, DN 3)

The early scriptures also provide an interesting narrative for the origin of caste that emphasizes the contingent construction of the *vāma* division. *(Aggañña Sutta DN 27)* This “Buddhist Genesis”\(^\text{13}\) serves an anti-caste agenda by providing an alternative to the Vedic explanation and naturalization of caste as a product of divine will. In summary, the world cycle is described as beginning with luminous, weightless beings in a world of water. As greed and craving intervened, these beings gradually passed into stages of harder, material form. Laziness and the hoarding of rice caused private property to develop which allowed for the possibility of theft. Thieves necessitated the appointment of a judge who determined justice, the Maha-Sammata, or “great elect”. This individual was the first Khattiya, (the term used in the Pali cannon for Kṣatriya, the warrior / noble *vāma*) and as “the Lord of the Fields,” provided the *vāma* its

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\(^{13}\) a designation given to the Sutta in one of the first English translations: Edmonds 1904.
etymological derivation. Those who “Put Aside Evil And Unwholesome Things” 
\((Bāhenti: \text{‘aside’})\) became the first Brahmin. Making leaf huts in the forest, they 
gathered alms for food and spent their days in meditation. Those who adopted 
various trades became the merchant class (‘various’: \text{vissa}, became \text{Vessa}, the 
Pali form of \text{Vaiśya}), and those that lived by hunting became the Sudda (\text{Śūdra}). 
Among all of these classes, some individuals entered into a state of 
homelessness like the Buddha and his disciples, and eventually “became 
liberated by the highest insight.” (Walshe 1987, p.415)

There is little justification given for this prehistory, apart from the Buddha’s 
omniscience and the etymological explanation of Pali \text{vam} \text{a} terms. Nevertheless, 
a narrative like this one clearly seeks to undermine caste by postulating it as a 
contingent, not an essential, division.\textsuperscript{14} No God determines the essential 
categories of humanity but rather social stratification occurs as part of a process 
of decline and results from immediate social needs. Liberation occurs when 
individuals depart from these categories aspiring to something like the pre-
decline condition of non-differentiation.

In so far as Ambedkar also put forth a series of critiques against caste 
essentialism and provided a narrative origin of caste which undermined the 
absolute character caste difference, the early Buddhist project has much in 
common with that of the Dalit Buddhist. With regard to resignification however, 
some meaningful differences are apparent.

\textsuperscript{14} It should be pointed out however, that this origin narrative arguably also naturalizes caste as an 
inevitable product of a process of (de)evolution.
Resignification of caste discourse in early Buddhist scripture

We saw above that central to Ambedkar and subsequent Dalit activists is a renaming of untouchable communities, the creation of a new origin narrative and the construction of a new role for manifesting the potential of modernization within the Indian tradition. In general, Ambedkar takes the objects of caste difference to be fixed and provides these objects (in particular the untouchable) with new names and new value. In contrast, the Buddha treats the vocabulary of caste terms as fixed and reascribes their meaning onto new objects. While both exercise discursive power to remake social conditions, they do so in arguably opposite ways. The Buddha’s resignification strategy can be seen through the redefinition of three main terms and their variations: āriya, brāhmaṇa, and caṇḍāla (outcaste). In addition, it is worth considering the non-deistic use of the term brāhma.

Āriya, often rendered in English as ‘Aryan’ (because of its Sanskrit spelling), is now quite overloaded with meaning as a result of its history as a term of Eurocentric racial purity. The Rgveda describes a long struggle between ārya and dāsa/dasyu people in which the ārya, who are described as “white,” triumphed over the dasyu, described as “black,” - although these terms may not refer to physical differentiation. (Hock 2005, p.286-290) While there is now little

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15 The history of the Eurocentric appropriation of this term (a kind of resignification) is fascinating but doesn’t concern us here. See Ballantyne (2002) for a useful analysis.
consensus that Aryans of India could be distinguished from others on the basis of appearance, in the early Buddhist period (or before), the term did have an association with the Brahmin caste. Brahmins have often traced their own ancestry to this Vedic narrative and the term ārya designated a high-caste identity.

The Buddha also frequently uses this term, but here it takes on another meaning. Invariably, it refers to something worthy of praise or an individual with great virtue. Central to the Buddhist message are the “Four āriya (Noble) Truths” that begin the Buddha’s first sermon. Other things described as noble in this sense include the āriya-puggala (noble person, enlightened individual), the āriya-magga (noble path), āriya-vāsā (noble dispositions), and the āriyadhana (noble wealth, qualities that serve as ‘capital’ in the endeavor of self-cultivation; eg. conviction, virtue, etc.). In the Dhammapada, verse 270 tells us, “Not by harming living beings, is one a noble one [āriya-puggala]. By being harmless to all living beings, is on called ‘a noble one.’” (Fronsdal, 2005, p. 70)

One narrative, found in a widely read commentary on the Dhammapada (attributed to Buddhaghosa, 5th century CE), describes a time when the Buddha encountered a fisherman named Ariya. The Buddha observes that Ariya’s occupation does not align with his name because a true āriya would not harm living beings. Subsequently the fisherman sees the truth in the Buddha’s teachings and attains the first stage of the noble path. This short tale illustrates a common pattern found in many places in early Buddhist writing, i.e a redefining of terms such that the true āriya is determined by action not by birth.
Brāhmaṇa, a term rendered ‘Brahman’ or ‘Brahmin’ in English texts, is used in the Pali scriptures in at least two ways. As we saw above, the texts often refer to people of Brahmin caste directly even as the basis of their caste identity is critiqued, but they also frequently refer to the true Brahmin, like the āriya, as being determined by deeds not birth. As Collins explains:

Whereas for Brahmanical thought it is being born a Brahmin in social fact which gives the highest status in religion (and indeed everything else), for Buddhism it is the man who practices Buddhist precepts to their utmost who has the highest status, and who is therefor the (‘true’ or ‘real’) ‘Brahmin’. That is to say, while the particular religious content has been changed, even reversed (typically from a Brahmanic social to Buddhist ethical emphasis), still the overall formal structure -here ‘being a Brahmin’ as the highest value - remains the same. (Collins 1982, p.32-33)

In the Dhammapada, a whole section of verses repeats this basic theme. Verse 396, for example, “I call no one a brahmin, for being born from a womb, from a mother. Someone who has anything, is called ‘self-important.’ Whoever has nothing and does not cling, I call a brahmin.” (Fronsdal, 2005, p. 102) Verse 393: “Not by matted hair, not by clan, not by birth does one become a brahmin. The one in whom there is truth and Dharma is the one who is pure, is a brahmin.” (ibid, p. 101)

This usage is not limited to the Dhammapada but, like āriya, the use of brāhmaṇa to refer to a set of practices or a state of being rather than an ancestral lineage is widespread in the scriptures. The Vāsetṭha Sutta, discussed earlier in relation to the biological arguments against caste, provides many verses which describe the virtues of the true brahmin. “Who endures without a trace of hate; abuse, violence, and bondage too, with strength of patience well arrayed: He is the one I call a brahmin. Who does not flare up with anger, dutiful,
virtuous, and humble, subdued, bearing his final body: He is the one I call a brahmin.” or “Who has passed beyond the swamp, the mire, saṁsa-ra, all delusion, who has crossed to the further shore and meditates within the jhānas, is unperturbed and unperplexed, attained Nibbāna through no clinging: He is the one I call a brahmin.” (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 2011)

The Sutta makes clear, “For name and clan are assigned as mere designations in the world; originating in conventions, they are assigned here and there. For those who do not know this fact, wrong views have long underlain their hearts; not knowing, they declare to us: ‘One is a brahmin by birth.’ One is not a brahmin by birth, nor by birth a non-brahmin. By action is one a brahmin, by action is one a non-brahmin.” (Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi, 2011) What is interesting for our purposes is that, in addition to recognizing that name and clan are designated socially and not arising out of biological essence, a particular strategy of remaking names is taken up. Specifically the terms of difference are redefined such that the Brahmin is no longer simply an occupational designation. Nor are Brahmins depicted as social parasite, as is common among contemporary anti-caste writers (eg. Ilaiah, 1996). The early Buddhists sought to co-opt the positive associations of Brahminhood and redefine its terms to suit their own project.

The same applies to the negative associations of the term caṇḍāla, which may have referred to a specific untouchable caste. The Manusmṛiti recommends the social and ritual isolation of caṇḍālas, they are instructed to eat from broken dishes and wear clothing scavenged from the dead. Their work shall be the disposal of corpses and the execution of criminals (see Manusmṛiti sections
This name is still given to untouchable caste individuals in parts of India today and is considered derogatory. In the Pali cannon, a few places redefine this term to refer not to a group of people but rather those lacking positive qualities. In relation to lay practice, the short *Cāṇḍāla Sutta* (AN 5.175) defines the term this way:

Endowed with these five qualities, a lay follower is an outcaste of a lay follower, a stain of a lay follower, a dregs of a lay follower. Which five? He/she does not have conviction [in the Buddha's Awakening]; is unvirtuous; is eager for protective charms & ceremonies; trusts protective charms & ceremonies, not kamma [karma]; and searches for recipients of his/her offerings outside [of the Sangha], and gives offerings there first. Endowed with these five qualities, a lay follower is an outcaste of a lay follower, a stain of a lay follower, a dregs of a lay follower. (Thanissaro, 1997)

In the *Vasala Sutta* (SN 1.7) the Buddha encounters an irritable Brahmin who, upon seeing the Buddha, calls him a *cāṇḍāla*. The Buddha proceeds to lecture him about the “conditions that make an outcaste”, starting with “Whosoever is angry, harbors hatred, and is reluctant to speak well of others (discredits the good of others), perverted in views, deceitful — know him as an outcast,” continuing to for nineteen more stanzas. (Piyadassa 1999) He then tells a short story about one who was born from a *cāṇḍāla* father and who went on to be so famous and spiritually accomplished that Kṣatriyas and Brahmins attended to him. This underlines the thrust of the Sutta, that birth has nothing to do with one’s potential for spiritual and ethical accomplishment and eventually others will recognize this.

One striking enlightenment poem included in the Pali cannon, by an otherwise unknown figure called Sunita, illustrates the journey of an outcaste into
the community of monks whose practice brought him to the point of being revered by the gods themselves. It is worth including here in it entirety as it is one of the few places where a person of a marginalized caste speaks in his own voice.\textsuperscript{16} It is interesting to note that the resignification in the closing passage, where the author is called a “a brahmin supreme”, is in the voice of the Buddha not the author’s own. In addition the gods in this narrative reascribe the author’s birth calling him “O thoroughbred of men.”

In a lowly family I was born, poor, with next to no food. My work was degrading: I gathered the spoiled, the withered flowers from shrines and threw them away. People found me disgusting, despised me, disparaged me. Lowering my heart, I showed reverence to many.

Then I saw the One Self-awakened, arrayed with a squadron of monks, the Great Hero, entering the city, supreme, of the Magadhans. Throwing down my carrying pole, I approached him to do reverence. He — the supreme man — stood still out of sympathy just for me. After paying homage to the feet of the teacher, I stood to one side & requested the Going Forth from him, supreme among all living beings. The compassionate Teacher, sympathetic to all the world, said: "Come, monk." That was my formal Acceptance.

\textsuperscript{16} While “Sunita” is most often a female name in India today, the author here is taken to be male and, at least in this translation, is referred to by the gods with signifiers of masculine gender.
Alone, I stayed in the wilds, untiring, I followed the Teacher’s words, just as he, the Conqueror, had taught me.

In the first watch of the night, I recollected previous lives; in the middle watch, purified the divine eye; in the last, burst the mass of darkness.

Then, as night was ending & the sun returning, Indra & Brahma came to pay homage to me, hands palm-to-palm at their hearts:
   “Homage to you, O thoroughbred of men, Homage to you, O man supreme, whose fermentations are ended. You, dear sir, are worthy of offerings.”

Seeing me, arrayed with a squadron of devas, the Teacher smiled & said:
   “Through austerity, celibacy, restraint, & self-control: That’s how one is a brahman. He is a brahman supreme.” (Thanissaro 1994)

We can now see operations of caste resignification in the Pali cannon. It is worth diverging slightly for a moment to consider another fundamental resignification which contributes to the rejection of the ideological basis of caste stratification: Brahma, the absolute form of God. Paramanshi Jaideva writes, “Having denied existence of god or Brahm, Buddhist philosophy rejected the creation of Vedic social system based on four classes... Now untouchable people, not considering god the reason of their poverty and inferiority, could achieve redemption by being self-dependent.”(Jaideva 2002, p.239-240) While, in Jaideva’s view, the Buddha’s rejection and resignification of a creator God is
intended primarily to undermine the foundations of *vāma*, such a strong claim
cannot be justified. Nevertheless, it is useful to point out that the early Buddhist
position *does* undermine Brahmanic caste understandings independent of other
motivations. It is also significant to note that the Buddha, in the Pali texts, uses
the same basic tactic with respect to Brahma as he does with caste designations.
On the one hand, he argues directly against what is seen as a harmful view,
while one the other hand, he co-optes the central terms of this hegemonic
ideology and redefines them to accord with his own teachings.

While it is not useful here to analyze them in detail, many passages from
the Pali canon dispute the existence of a creator deity which is eternal and
omnipotent. (eg. Tiknipata Sutta AN 61 and Devdlha Sutta MN 101). In addition,
falith in scriptural narratives is critiqued on the grounds that it cannot be attested
to by any person in memory (unlike the experiential teachings of the Buddha).
Belief in God is often placed in the same category as other morally destructive
wrong views such as those which deny the karmic results of action or teach
absolute determinism. These views are said to have bad results because of their
effect on ethical conduct. On the other hand, various powerful beings, invisible to
the untrained eye, are described in the scriptures and their existence is taken for
granted. Brahma is described this way in particular passages, not as the
supreme God but merely a super powerful being among others. (eg. *Brahma-
imantanika Sutta* MN 49)

Most interesting for us are the places where Brahama is redefined to refer
to mental states rather than a God at all. The central case of this is the *Tevijja*
Sutta (DN 13). The Buddha is asked by two Brahmins if the paths they are following lead to union with Brahma. The Buddha criticizes their teachers asking if they or anyone they studied under ever came face-to-face with Brahma. The Brahmins admit that they haven’t and ask the Buddha for the way to do so. The Buddha subsequently instructs his new students in ethical living and a meditative practice intended to cultivate and emanate loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. These four states of mind are said to be “immeasurable” and are called the brahmavihāras, or “divine abodes”. We see then that even though the Buddha disputes the existence of a transcendent God, he is perfectly willing to describe the path to union with such a being, and approach very much in accord with the philosophy of “skillful means.”

In another passage, the Buddha likens the rebirth of his disciples from his universal teachings to the mythical birth of Brahmins from the mouth of Brahma. “He who has faith in the Tathāgata is settled, rooted, established, solid, unshakable by any ascetic or Brahmin, any deva or māra or Brahmā or anyone in the world, can truly say: ‘I am a true son of Blessed Lord, born of his mouth, born of Dhamma, created by Dhamma, an heir of Dhamma.’ Why is that? Because Vāsetṭha, this designates the Tathāgata: ‘The Body of Dhamma’, that is, ‘The Body of Brahmā’, or ‘Become Dhamma’, that is ‘Become Brahma’.” (Walshe 1987, p.409, Aggañña Sutta DN 27) We see here again how the Buddha appropriates the central symbols of his opposition and re-ascribes them to his own philosophy and practice. Here Dhamma can be interchangeable with Brahma if necessary, as no particular set of vocabulary is fixed and absolute.
The path to awakening is described in terms which have other meanings and contexts, thus they must be remade for this new purpose.
Sangha as social body

In contrast to Ambedkar’s nationalist project, the early Buddhists had little or no sense of a national body. While kingdoms existed, their importance in determining identity was small. The Buddha himself explicitly rejected the importance of his own kingdom when he left the palace and entered a homeless life. When the Buddha does speak about government, it is in terms of the perfect ruler, the “wheel turning monarch,” (eg. *Cakkavatti Sutta*, DN 26) who can create a harmonious nation by applying the universal Dhamma to himself and to his domain of rule. Although the Buddha frequently advises people of all kinds, the primary community he develops is the monastic order. The *sangha* (or “assembly”) imitates the lifestyle of the Buddha and is instructed to carry on his teachings after his death. The intricate monastic rules of the *Vinaya* may have largely developed later, but the community itself was established as soon as the Buddha began to teach. The *Vinaya* served as a legalistic foundation for an alternative, geographically non-confined, institution. Its coherence would be independent of regional kingdoms and its final accountability ideally internal.

Differentiated by seniority and divided by gender, the Sangha was explicitly intended to be indifferent to caste, class, etc. Individuals of low caste could gain authority in the Sangha, for example Upali, a former barber,\(^\text{17}\) who

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\(^{17}\) Haircutting as an occupation is considered unclean, as it involves human bodily waist, and is often associated with the untouchable castes.
was admitted to the Sangha before the members of Siddhartha’s court in order that those who had once held a high social position would learn humility by honoring Upali as their senior. (*Vinaya, Khandhana, Cullavagga*, 7)

In the *Uposatha Sutta*, the Buddha is recorded as saying “Just as whatever great rivers there are — such as the Ganges, the Yamuna, the Aciravati, the Sarabhu, the Mahi — on reaching the ocean, give up their former names and are classed simply as 'ocean'; in the same way, when members of the four castes — noble warriors, priests, merchants, and workers — go forth from home to the homeless life in the Doctrine and Discipline declared by the Tathagata, they give up their former names and clans and are classed simply as ‘contemplatives, sons of the Sakyan.’” (Thanissaro 1997b) The Sangha then provides a new birth, symbolically from the body of the Buddha himself, after which caste is erased. The perpetuation of caste in the population at large was less important than the elimination of caste from the new body of disciples.

It is also significant however that Pali stories depict the Buddha’s disciples disregarding taboos of purity with regard to the external community. The monastic community depended on offerings of food from lay people and disregarded previous rules that had prohibited food prepared by the hands of low castes. Unlike the Satnāmpanth described below, the Sangha sought to abolish understandings of purity and impurity rather than simply reinscribing them according to a new logic. For example, in one famous (but non-canonical) story the Buddha’s attendant Ananda, who himself was at one time a member of Siddhartha’s Kṣatriya court, encountered a young woman, named Prakriti, near a
well. He asked if she could provide him with some water. The woman warned Ananda that she is of low caste, but Ananda was indifferent and asked for the water anyway. Prakriti was so moved by Ananda’s kindness that she fell in love and eventually joined the Sangha.\textsuperscript{18} It is noteworthy that the appropriate response to the moving act of acceptance on the part of Ananda is for this marginalized person to enter the monastic community, the body of this alternate discourse.

It should be noted however, that while he taught against the significance of caste, the Buddha was never recorded as explicitly recommended that lay people give up caste practices. Among the professions which are excluded from right livelihood is the buying and selling of people, i.e. human trafficking, but the employment of individuals according to traditional divisions of labor could have been prohibited, but is not.

We see that the Buddha was primarily concerned with creating a social body which began with him and radiated outward as new members joined. Within the Sangha, members ignored caste distinctions and previously high-caste members were expected to violate their old caste taboos. Caste distinctions were erased within the monastic Sangha but, even as caste essentialism is critiqued, it might remain to some extent in the lay community.\textsuperscript{19} Lay people form part of the

\textsuperscript{18} Its origin is obscure but this story is contained within the Divyāvadāna collection. Interestingly, this narrative was the subject of a 1938 dance drama by Rabindranath Tagore, titled Chandalika as well as an incomplete work by Richard Wagner, titled “Die Sieger” - “the Victor.”

\textsuperscript{19} It is worth noting that caste remained in some historically Buddhist societies, such as Sri Lanka, and in Buddhist communities in Nepal, albeit in a usually less severe form than in Hindu India. See some discussion of caste in Wickremeratne’s Sri Lankan memoir (2006) and the caste dimensions to recent changes in Buddhist Nepal in LeVine & Gellner (2005).
community known as the “fourfold assembly”, but the Sangha is the primary object of embodiment.

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20 Made up of lay men, lay women, monks, and nuns.
Grammars of (re)signification

It should now be clear how the counter-hegemonic re-inscription strategies the Buddha and Ambedkar take are distinct. In a sense, they are the polar opposites of each other, yet they have in common their rejection of the existing caste-based social structure. The Buddha, like Ambedkar, appears to have sought the annihilation of caste consciousness, and like Ambedkar, he took the language of this very consciousness as his point of departure. Caste was to be eliminated by remaking the terms of caste themselves. While Ambedkar reified fixed sets of populations, and relocated their sign and value; the Buddha effectively reified a set of terms and emotional values, and relocated their physical correspondence. To use the language of Sausure’s semiotics, for Ambedkar, the signifier changed while the signified remained the same, while the Buddha changed the signified while keeping the signifier intact. In the terms of Gottlob Frege’s philosophy of language, Ambedkar changes the sense of caste language while keeping the reference more-or-less the same. The Buddha on the other hand changes the reference while there are some qualities of sense which are preserved in the Buddha’s appropriation of names.\(^{21}\) In order to end categorization according to caste each strategy relocated an aspect of that

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\(^{21}\) In Frege’s system, the sense could not remain the same for the Buddha as, if it is complete, it is immutable. (Makin 2000, p.118-119)
categorization leaving another aspect fixed. We can see these as two distinct grammars of resignification.\textsuperscript{22}

It should be pointed out that the Buddha’s strategy was eventually unsuccessful with regard to terms such as Brahmin and caṇḍāla, as they both today refer not to ethical conduct but to specific hereditary communities. This may have been a product of the inevitable failure of Buddhism to resist Brahminism in India. The rise Vedic Hinduism incorporated some insights of Buddhism while rejecting these resignifications in favor of a reestablishment of vama and a deistic ground of reality. At any rate, the failure of the strategy in the long run does not diminish the purchase it apparently had initially in India among those who compiled the Pali cannon.

Part of what is so striking about these different signification strategies is ‘naturalness’ of Ambedkar’s in the modern context and the comparative inconceivability of the Buddha’s today. Consider for example the parallel situation of African Americans in the US. Their disadvantaged social position has been addressed discursively by a series of name changes ‘Negro’, a term connoting a racial essentialist category became ‘Black’, a reference to phenomenological morphological difference or a position of relative depravation, which becomes, at times, ‘African American’ a marker of a shared history and geographical diaspora. If one were to attempt instead to appropriate the terms of difference

\textsuperscript{22} By “grammars of resignification” I am referring to sets of open-ended rules that govern the operation of meaning transformation. Just as the grammar of a particular language makes possible the composition of phrases, sentences, etc., the grammar of resignification of a particular political-ideological environment makes possible the composition of subjects and identifications. The observation of distinct grammars in these contexts implies the possibility of a grammar of grammars, a kind of underlying grammar that governs the realm of all possible operations of symbolic transformation, but it is not clear if such a Chompskyan universal grammar is necessary or identifiable.
and argue that the “true Negro” is one who acts in some negative way while the “true White” is someone who acts in some positive way without regard to skin color or birth origin, it would have no purchase in our ideological environment. Yet this strategy is effectively that which is found throughout the Pali cannon with regard to caste. This could indicate something essentially different between caste and race as ideological formations, but that nevertheless leaves the difference between Ambedkar and early Buddhist resignification with respect to roughly the same ideological formation, unexplained.

Here Long, Butler, and others provide us little help. While Long is interested in the remaking of “blackness” in a post-colonial and even post-modern period, where African Americans have had to make themselves with and against the modern, my subject of study is a kind of pre-modern construction against an apparently modern one, so critiques of modernism are insufficient to explain the data uncovered. Butler’s work is useful in elucidating the ontologies of interpolation, but it indicates little explanation for why different forms of resignification take place.

The factors that determined the different signification strategies are no doubt numerous, but the striking difference between early and Dalit Buddhist grammars calls for some attempt at explanation.
Comparative Examples: Gandhi and the Satnāmpanth

Here, one possible explanation must be considered; that of social location. The Buddha’s advantaged position as a member of the aristocratic caste, in contrast with Ambedkar’s location within the community most in need of uplift, could have determined the Buddha’s adoption of an imaginative resignification in contrast with the realist approach Ambedkar took. From this view, subaltern communities must begin with the bare surrounding material conditions and see their social location as a fixed point even as the name given to that location (and the narrative surrounding its origin and future) is flexible. After all, while the Buddha would be interpolated within the category Kṣatriya his primary resignification operated on categories he stood outside, the highest and lowest castes. Recall, that in the awakening poem by Sunita, given above, the author does not use his own voice to resignify but rather it is done from the outside in the voice of Buddha or the devas. Ambedkar stood within the community he most desired to rename and this may have determined his ability to appropriate terms to apply to himself. The claim that social location determined signification strategy cannot be completely discounted, but it is useful to put it into perspective by considering two other relatively recent strategies of caste resignification: Gandhi’s own renaming of untouchability as well as that of the use of symbols in the Satnāmpanth community.
Mahatma (Mohandas) Gandhi was troubled by the mistreatment of untouchables and also recognized that the existence of untouchability undermined the legitimacy of the Hindu community. He imagined an ideal varṇa-based society of the Vedic past which had been corrupted over time. "...varna ... simply means the following on the part of us all the hereditary and traditional calling of our forefathers, in so far as that traditional calling is not inconsistent with fundamental ethics...varna as we observe it today is a travesty of the varna that I have described to you."(from a 1927 speech, in Gandhi 1993, p.210) In this sense the ideal varṇashrama dharma could be distinguished from living caste. “There is nothing in common between varṇashrama and caste.”(ibid. p.211) For Gandhi, caste was based on a system of superiority and inferiority while the ideal varṇa system respected all individuals and their occupations as equal and necessary for a harmonious whole. In part, he evoked an ethical basis for varṇa designation while still fundamentally rooting caste in hereditary qualities. “Varṇa is determined by birth, but can be retained only by observing its obligations. One born of Brahmin parents will be called a Brahmin, but if his life fails to reveal the attributes of a Brahmin when he comes of age, he cannot be called a Brahmin.” (1934, in Gandhi 1993, p.217-218) In general, Gandhi saw differentiation of labor according to caste as a non-capitalist social system that allowed for greater local autonomy, as well as a force that had preserved Indian culture over the centuries. He also accepted the theory that birth in a particular varṇa was determined by past karma and accurately represented an individual's ability.
Although his political project was quite different, Gandhi, like Ambedkar, renamed the community of untouchables in an effort to change their value in society with the final goal of eliminating them as a separate category. Gandhi resisted anything which might divide Hindus and undermine their efforts to shake off colonial domination. In 1932, Gandhi came into direct conflict with Ambedkar over the question of a separate electorate for the untouchable “Depressed Classes.” Gandhi took up a fast, threatening to continue until death unless Ambedkar relented and allowed for a system of reserved seats instead (the resolution is known as the Poona Pact). Subsequently, Gandhi took up the campaign of uplift for the disadvantaged in greater earnest. In his writing, untouchables became Harijans, or “children of God” borrowing the term from a female untouchable Bhakti saint of the 17th century, Narsinh Mehta. In explaining his usage, Gandhi wrote, “The ‘untouchable’, to me is, as compared to us (caste-Hindus), really a ‘Harijan’-a man of God-and we are ‘Durjana’ (men of evil). For whilst the untouchable has toiled and moiled and dirtied his hands so that we may live in comfort and cleanliness, we have delighted in suppressing him”.(quoted in Shah 2001, p. 21).

Gandhi was in a relatively privileged position with regard to caste. Although he was not himself a Brahmin, he was far from disadvantaged on account of his birth. Nevertheless, like Ambedkar, he sought to change the position of untouchables, in part, by changing their name and the value associations that went along with it. While Ambedkar sought to eliminate varṇa from existence, and Gandhi sought to purify it and assimilate Harijans into the
greater body of Śūdras, both effectively used the same grammar of resignification, changing the sense, but not the referent, of caste discourse.

The Satnāmpanth, provides a useful contrast. This community sought to transform caste by reorganizing its hierarchy.(Dube 1998) A religious movement originating in the state of Chhattisgarh, in central India, around 1820 among the untouchable Chamar community, the Satnāmpanth destroyed images of the deities and rejected ritual authority of Brahmins in favor of a formless God, the Satnām (true name). The founder, Ghasidas, himself a Chamar, began a system of hereditary gurus which served as the ritual and hierarchical center of the community. While Satnāmīs rejected the dominant ideology of ritual purity, they reproduced it within their own somewhat autonomous communities. Satnāmīs took up practices associated with higher castes, such as abstinence from meat and alcohol, as well as cow protection. They began to wear a kanthi, a black string with wooden beads, and later took up the practice of waring the janeu, the sacred thread of the high ‘twice-born’ castes. A central act of inclusion into the community was the drinking of the amrit, water that had been used to wash the guru’s feet. While to the larger casteist view this would be unacceptable, among the Satnāmīs, drinking the amrit was considered a necessary and purifying ritual. From a Satnāmī perspective, they themselves form the center of purity, while the other castes, both high and low by traditional

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23 Dube explicitly avoids using the term “movement” to describe the Satnāmīs, as it carries with it “dominant connotations of a preordained trajectory, a definite direction, and a determinate destination.”(p.21) My casual use of this term in this essay remains, as it will not undermine my purposes for a limited reference to the Satnāmpanth here.

24 Water being a medium through which caste pollution can travel, the feet being the least pure part of the body, and the guru a descendant of the original Chamar founder, this would be considered a highly polluting substance.
designation, are external and polluting. Satnāmīs were forbidden to marry outside of their community or share food, but unlike traditional ṛṣā, they did accept other castes into their community through a process of initiation.

The discourse of the Satnāmpanth is largely oral so their linguistic resignification is unclear. There is no evidence that they called themselves Brahmins or others outcastes. Nevertheless, Satnāmīs appropriated symbolic practices which clearly represented higher castes. The logic of purity upended but not rejected. The Satnāmpanth counter-hegemony in many ways resembles the discursive resignification practices of early Buddhists. They did not identify all Chamars with a shared history and a new name (as Ambedkar did with Dalits at large) but rather appropriated existing symbols of caste authority for their own use, ascribing ritual purity to an individual’s location within their own ritual system rather than according to a Brahminical conception of birth privilege. They symbolically redefined the “true Brahmin” as those of value within their own system of meaning, and the “true outcaste” as those excluded from their community despite their own exclusion from mainstream Hindu society.

It seems then, from this imperfect sample, that while social position impacts discursive strategies, it is not the primary determinant. Gandhi has more in common with Ambedkar, in terms of his signification grammar, while Satnāmpanth has more in common with early Buddhism.

It is worth considering briefly another possible explanation. It could be that the Buddha is not making a strong ontological claim but is speaking, in a sense, poetically. Perhaps his reapplication of terms is not meant to carry any weight but
is only a stylistic convention expressing a kind of irony. This is present arguably in the enlightenment poem reproduced above, where the author, once dejected, now, according to a different standard claims to be counted among the highest Brahmin. This assessment cannot be completely written off, but the prevalence of this stylistic convention in early Buddhist period nevertheless seems to warrant an explanation. Since the 1970s, Dalit poetry become a prolific genre and, as far as I know, no poem re-ascribes caste terms to alternate referents the way it is done in early Buddhism, so it cannot simply be the difference of discursive genera. When the term ‘Brahmin’ appears, for example, it is invariably with a negative connotation. Symbols of high caste are also denigrated. Rather than taking up the sacred thread for their own as the Satnāmīs did, even symbolically, we see poems such as this one by Tamil Dalit, Devadevan, titled “Infection”:

The chief doctor came,  
Examined my friend  
And raised his head.  
In the direction of the ears  
That were throbbing with worry  
And concern and questions  
He bent his head  
And from his white-gloved hand  
Held a dirty sacred thread  
And said,  
“This could have caused  
The infection.” (excerpted from Devadevan, 2006)

It is my contention, this sample indicates that the social community, the body of imagination, that each signifier takes as its audience and location of operation, plays the greatest role in determining the strategy. In this way, two salient characteristics of these strategies can be explained. First of all, we see the flexibility of reference for the Buddha in comparison to Ambedkar’s inclination
to see the meaning of terms as fixed. Second, we can note Ambedkar’s concern
with populations in their entirety rather than immediate interactions with
individuals and communities.
The body of caste and post-caste society

It is notable that the ideology of caste takes the image of the body as the starting point for talking about the ideal society. In addition, adherence or rejection of the purity system is a thoroughly embodied practice that represents communal inclusion or exclusion. The intention here is not to reify the organismic metaphor of society but to recognize the importance of social embodiment in discursive operations.25

Brahminic orthodoxy, which sees varṇa as the purest form of caste, derives its authority from Vedic scriptures, in particular, the Puruṣa Sūkta of the Rigveda, which is frequently recited in Brahminic ritual and describes the primordial sacrifice. This sacrifice, performed by the gods, and of the cosmic man, “Puruṣa,” brings the world into existence and establishes the current cosmic order. The Puruṣa Sūkta describes the emergence of the four-fold social body (in addition to the creation of the Sun, the Moon, the air, etc.) out of a devision of Puruṣa’s mystical body. The Brahmins emerge from his mouth, the Kṣatriya (the term in the Puruṣa Sūkta is rajanya) emerge from the arms, Vaiśya from his legs, and Śūdras from his feet.26 All humanity is represented as having emerged from this divided body and human essences are as natural as the

25 For one critique of the organismic metaphor with regard to nationalism see Cheah 2003.
26 The Buddhist scriptures represent a slight variation. In the Pali texts the Brahmins describe themselves as having emerged from the mouth of Brahma directly rather than Puruṣa. Nevertheless, the core idea is the same.
division of day from night. Just as a man (this body is invariably represented as male), is made up of parts that each have their own function, society is divided into communities with their own specialized labor. In addition, the logic of cleanliness, keeping the dirt of one’s feet out of one’s mouth, can be mapped onto the exclusion of the lower castes from the table of the higher. Here each part of the body has its location and cannot replace one another; as a result, this metaphor naturalizes the inflexibility of the ideal system.

This discourse is rooted in the self conception of the Brahmin caste and provides a system of understanding from a Brahmin-centric perspective looking out onto human diversity. Untouchability, as such, does not exist in this Vedic ideal, but it is not hard to see how the untouchable represents the unspoken abject of this social body. Like the refuse and feces which untouchable communities are often relegated to dispose, these communities themselves become the excluded undesirable remainder of society. In addition, the non-Hindu foreigner has no proper place within this system and was at times viewed on par with untouchable communities or simply within the large body of Śūdras.²⁷ The Vedic ideal outlined above was much elaborated upon in various bodies of Brahminical literature, but the genealogy of such conceptions of community is not our concern here. The importance of this discussion here is to highlight the orthodox conception of the social body against which the resignifications here take place.

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²⁷ See Halbfass 1988, for a detailed discussion of the role of the foreigner, or mlechha, in Indian thought.
Each resignification of caste we have described above seeks in some way to reconstruct hierarchy through the positive construction of a new social body, which can include the abject, while inevitably constructing a boundary that divides the inside from the outside. The core difference in this regard is that Ambedkar and Gandhi saw the population of India, as a whole, as the appropriate location of action, and the audience for their discourse, while the Buddha and Ghasidas created a new social body beginning first with themselves, through a process of expanding inclusion.

While no detailed account will be given here, it is worth noting that the semiotics of Charles Sanders Pearce, unlike that of Saussure, insightfully includes a consideration of the audience in the act of signification. We must then consider the expected audience of each text or symbolic operation. In the Pali scriptures, in so far as they report to be records of the Buddha’s teachings, the audience of the significations is the assembly who had gathered to listen to the Buddha’s speech. As a subsequent oral text, memorized and recited in community, the audience included monastics and, to a lesser extent, lay people. Ambedkar wrote primarily in English in an effort to reach beyond the region of Maharashtra and the audience then should be thought of as including, at least, the educated members of the Indian nation. Similarly, Gandhi was writing for more-or-less the same audience as Ambedkar, while the symbolic acts of the Satnāmī community where primarily confined to that community, as were early Buddhists to their own monastic order.
Not only are social bodies here the audiences of the resignifications they are also the objects, in so far it is these communities that are ideally being remade by the act of signification. The grammar of resignification shared among nationalist actors parallels that of the bio-political state apparatus itself. Gandhi and Ambedkar saw untouchables in their entirety as a population and sought to assimilate them into the Indian social body by remaking them discursively through the construction of a new name. While “Dalit” is gaining as an official term, it is treated as roughly synonymous with the bureaucratic “Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes” itself an elaboration on “Depressed Classes”. The nation at large sees its constituents through the practice of census taking, and the nationalist must stand with respect to an identity constructed through those same categories.

Similarly, as we saw above, Ghasidas forms the Satnāmpanth in the process of teaching. Members ritually enter the community voluntarily through acts that would otherwise be considered polluting. Satnāmīs do not concern themselves with symbolically marking other populations that they do not directly encounter. The Buddhist and the Satnāmī messages are in a sense universal, as their communities have no expressed limit to their expansion, but they do not define their object as reformulating the social relationships of a discrete sub-set of the world’s population (as is the nation). Language and symbolic meaning then can be flexible as those who enter into the community can transform old meanings into new ones. The Buddha can speak of the ‘true Brahmin’ among his disciples as he is not speaking to an audience that extends beyond them, and
Satnāmīs can take up the sacred thread as the meaning of the sacred thread at large is not at issue.

Consequently, it appears that the primary factor that impacts the signification strategy is the social body of relevance. For the Buddha to make use of the conventional terms of caste, retaining their positive or negative value, but changing their literal correspondence, he must have an imagined community that emanates as it accepts his discourse, not an imagined community which existed prior to his emergence.
For the benefit of the many

My investigation undertakes a certain level of abstraction but is necessary to recognize that a resignification is never done and complete once and for all, but must be redone in modified forms repeatedly, what Judith Butler calls the iterability of performance. (Butler 1990) Dalit identity is not a final and established condition but must be remade in new situations. As the vanguard of Indian modernity, it is reestablished not just through naming, but also through actions such as attending schools or engaging in political activism. Not only is it reinterpreted in different contexts and for various purposes, it is also often contested from the outside. Most dramatically this contestation takes the form of a kind of counter resignification taken up against Dalit identity through anti-Dalit violence.

While considerable change has occurred to produce legislation which ostensibly protects Dalits against discrimination and provides reservations for “Scheduled Castes” in politics and education, violence against Dalits, or “caste atrocities” as they are legally designated, have not subsided even as their political and educational rights have been secured. Some had ventured to say in the 1980s that, “The political objective behind the conversion was achieved,” and “The third generation of Neo-Buddhists does not face discrimination on grounds of caste.” (Bhave 1988, p.xxxviii) Yet, nothing more clearly showed the

28 in the Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989
prematurity of this pronouncement than when in 2006, four members of an educated Dalit Buddhist family were publicly tortured and killed in their village of Khairlanji, in rural Maharashtra. The horrific quality of the story and images of the aftermath of the rape and murder of a forty-year-old woman, her twenty-one and nineteen-year-old sons, and her seventeen-year-old daughter, as well as the apparent and complacency of the police, provoked anger and instigated political action. While this was not the first time Dalits have taken to the streets in the aftermath of caste atrocities, the Khairlanji killings provoked the largest Dalit protest to date. (Jaoul 2008) The perpetrators of this crime have now been brought to the courts and sentenced, yet this kind of occurrence shows no sign of abating. According to one often quoted statistic “every day three dalit women are raped, two dalits are murdered, two dalit houses are burnt and eleven dalits are beaten”. (Teltumbde 2008, p. 9). The most vivid sign that the Dalit political project is not over are these acts of communal violence which continue to appear in the news across South Asia.

This graphic violence can be seen as an attempt to remark Dalit bodies as abject. In so far as it is a kind of resignification, it operates on the bodies of Dalits to re-relegate them to the outside the realm of the possible by literally negating their existence. In opposition to this attempt to return Dalits to a location of the abject, Dalit Buddhist discourse seeks a space for individuals in this community to express themselves within Indian society. In this way it has much in common with other marginalized groups in its attempt to open and expand the structures of subject making in order to make room for their own complete lives. Charles
Long, for example, was interested in the development of “theologies opaque” as a source of a “deconstructive theology” that could dismantle theology itself as a mode of discursive power and “claim or prepare a place and a time for the full expression of those who have suffered alterity and oppression”. (p.194-195)

While Butler might critique the finality and teleology of this statement, she has much in common in her call for a critique that is “guided by the question of what maximizes the possibilities of a livable life, what minimizes the possibility of unbearable life or, indeed, social or literal death.” (Butler 2004a, p.8)

Part of the appeal of Buddhism for Ambedkar was evidence of a similar sentiment. Symbolically central to how Ambedkar imagined the modern revival of Buddhism is the bahujana, or “the many” taken to refer to the marginalized communities which had been left out of elitist hegemony. This phrase originates from a passage in the Mahavagga section of the Vinaya patika:

And the Blessed One said to the Bhikkhus: “I am delivered, O Bhikkus, from all fetters, human and divine. You, O Bhikkhus, are also delivered from all fetters, human and divine. Go ye now, O Bhikkhus, and wander, for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, and for the welfare of gods and men. Let not two of you go the same way.”

(translation from Davids & Oldenberg 1881, p.112)

This concept of a Buddhist quest for “the good of the many, for the happiness of the many” (bahujanahitāya bahujanasukhāya) also grounds the Dalit renewal of Buddhism as a system of thought concerned with welfare and happiness generally not just soteriologically. Ambedkar deployed it in his conversion speech on the 15 of October, 1956, as the defining feature of
Buddhist philosophy. It can be said that Ambedkar was seeking to resignify Dalit identity in order to make a space and time for “the many” as livable subjects.

The paradox of subjectivation, that Butler astutely develops in her work, problematizes any inclusive desires. For any expansion of discourse or “place and time for full expression” necessarily reproduces aspects of the power from which it sought to free itself. The evidence above indicates that the social body, which forms the object and intended audience of resignification, is the primary factor in determining the grammar adopted. In this way any project of resignification is situated in a larger social-discursive context which will reproduced even with the act of renaming or name appropriation. As we saw, Ambedkar took up a project of remaking caste that retained some of the assumptions of colonial discourse and state apparatus. Dirks writes, “Caste in its present form(s) may be the precipitate of a tragic history, but it is now, for better or for worse, a fundamental component of political struggles that seek to redeem that same tragic past.”(2001, p.301)

The ideal ends of resignification for Ambedkar, Long and Butler, however can potentially be distinguished from the early Buddhist philosophy of skillful means in this final goal. While Long sought space for the expression of marginalized voices in legible discourse, early Buddhists sought the final

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29 The *bahujan*, often in the hyphenated form “Dalit-bahujan” has come into use to refer to the disadvantaged majority in India by Kancha Ilaiah and others. It is a core concept for the Bahujan Samaj Party (founded in 1984) which has had reasonable success, especially in North India under the leadership of Mayawati, the leading Dalit woman politician today. The phrase *Bahujan hitay, Bahujan sukhay*, has been popularized and has even been adopted as the slogan of All India Radio, India’s public radio service.
abandonment of discursive structure itself. In this way they provided a kind of provisional solution to the paradox of subjectivation by imagining a way of being outside the reproduction of discursive subjection and, in fact, outside any attachment to a concept of the self or subject.

The *Alagaddūpama Sutta*, which includes the parable of the water snake discussed above, also indicates a place which would be the end of discourse with the parable of the raft. The Dharma is likened to a raft that one builds in order to cross a river. It is good to hold tightly to the raft while crossing over, but once on the other side it is best to let it go and leave it behind: “...you should let go even of Dhammas, to say nothing of non-Dhammas.” (Thanissaro 2004) The implication here is that the Buddhist teachings in their entirety are themselves only strategically useful but are not essentially absolute.\(^\text{30}\)

While nearly every Buddhist takes up the precept “to refrain from communicating falsely,” absolute truth itself cannot be indicated directly. Nevertheless, one must continue to communicate in some way. The paradox of subjection then is replaced by a new paradox, in which the operations of discursive power can be abandoned only by adopting a final truth which itself cannot be spoken.

Ambedkar makes no indication in any of his writings that he is interested in the possibilities of this place “on the other shore.” For Butler, a location outside of discourse is unrepresentable and therefore impossible (or at least

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\(^{30}\) It is significant that the two parables that express directly the dangers of attachment a particular way of expressing knowledge or reality are followed by a discussion of one of the most thorny and deconstructive Buddhist doctrines, that of ‘no-self.’
“psychotic”\textsuperscript{31}). As this location cannot be directly spoken about, but only indicated, it’s existence is necessarily unprovable. Thus, Dalit and early Buddhists operate not just with different grammars of resignification but also different ontologies, or at least teleologies, with respect to the resignification project. We see then, while it is not accurate to claim, as Koenraad Elst does, that early Buddhism is “otherworldly,” (after all, as can be seen above, the Buddha had a very immediate social and material project) it is useful to recognize that the early Buddhist project can be said to seek a goal beyond Ambedkar’s. The social-discursive project is not enough. It is not the final condition of true happiness.

While many Western Buddhists have focused on the final goal of resignification, they have overlooked the necessary social embodiment of language and meaning. It would be a benefit for more non-Dalit Buddhists to recognize that making a time and space for “those who have suffered alterity and oppression,” at least in an intermediate sense, is part of the Buddhist call to act “for the welfare of the many.” This need not necessarily be done through the monastic or non-monastic Sangha, but could potentially operate on the nation, as in Ambedkar’s case, or on emergent forms of transnational community.

On the other hand, contemporary Dalit Buddhists have implicitly accepted the grammar and ontology of Ambedkar’s resignification which defines them in that identity location, but many of these individuals are now as well versed as any

\textsuperscript{31} In a 2000 interview, for example, Bulter says “So, I come into being on the condition that I am radically unknowing about my origins, and that unknowingness is the condition of my coming into being - and it afflicts me. And if I seek to undo that, I also lose myself as a subject; I become undone, and I become psychotic as a result.” (in Butler 2004b p.332)
in Buddhist scripture and philosophy and are in a place of choosing with respect to the final purpose of the reconstruction of discourse (notwithstanding the violence brought to bare against their necessary project). The creation, and reiterative recreation, of Dalit identity in the face of violence can create the conditions for livability, but it also maintains a distinct caste identity. Dalits, as Dalits, can never be free from caste because their own identity exists with respect to their “tragic history”. Is it a benefit for Dalits to seek a time and a place for themselves, not just for their “full expression,” but for something beyond expression itself? This is an open question.
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