

Construction of a Buddhist Identity for Dalits in Tulsi Ram's Autobiography

Introduction

As Philippe Lejeune has famously postulated, one of the distinguishing features of an autobiography is the fact that its author, narrator and protagonist are the same person (cf. Lejeune 1989). In this essay, I do not differentiate between the first two, but I refer to the main character of Tulsi Ram's (Tull'sī Rām)¹ autobiography as "protagonist" in order to avoid confusion.

In his essay "Self-making and world-making" Jerome Bruner aptly outlines the structure of an autobiography with the following words:

What after all is an autobiography? It consists of the following. A narrator, in the here and now, takes upon himself or herself the task of describing the progress of a protagonist in the there and then, one who happens to share his name. He must by convention bring that protagonist from the past into the present in such a way that the protagonist and the narrator eventually fuse and become one person with a shared consciousness. (Bruner 2001: 27)

When authors deviate from this scheme, it becomes particularly interesting. Tulsi Ram was a renowned academic and Dalit² author, who regularly published critical

¹ A note on transliterations of names: striving to achieve an easy reading flow, I use the common anglicized version of people's names (e.g. "Tulsi Ram") as well as names of castes (e.g. "Chamar") and names of places (e.g. "Dharampur") and only add the transliterated version in brackets when the name appears for the first time in this essay. If no anglicized version is known to me, the transliterated version is used throughout. Titles of books are transliterated as a rule.

² This term is problematic for many reasons. However, to avoid complications and introduction of new terms, I use it throughout this essay as a collective term referring to "members of the Scheduled Castes and/or people formerly labelled as untouchable".

articles on issues related to Dalit identity, contemporary politics and literature in Hindi magazines. His critically acclaimed autobiography remained unfinished and is comprised of two books – *Murdahiyā*, which covers approximately the first 16 years of his life in the village Dharampur and *Maṇikarṇikā*, which covers ten years he spent in Varanasi. In the case of this autobiography, one of the most interesting deviations from the above pattern is that a significant number of varied Buddhist stories – by which I mean freely retold³ excerpts from the *Vinaya Piṭaka*, the *Mahāvamsa* and other texts – are used as parables and generously scattered over the two books. It is the aim of this essay to attempt to reveal a purpose behind the author’s usage of these parables.

The genre of autobiography occupies a special place in the sphere of Hindi Dalit literature for Dalit autobiographies have been widely praised as authentic documents of Dalit experience and studied for their socio-political significance. However, research on the subject has been largely focused on content analysis while an analysis of form has rarely been in the foreground.⁴ Yet, as Laura Brueck has successfully argued in her book *Writing Resistance: The Rhetorical Imaginations of Hindi Dalit Literature* (2014), Hindi Dalit writers expertly as well as extensively use a wide range of narrative techniques in their short stories. I argue that authors of Hindi Dalit autobiographies stylise their narrative form not less skilfully and consciously than authors of short stories. One of my main research aims is to analyse these styles and techniques.

In this essay I will demonstrate, how Tulsi Ram presents as a given fact the theory first suggested by Bhim Rao Ambedkar (1948) that before being labelled as “untouchables”, Dalits have been Buddhists; how he proceeds to add his own evidence of the same and encourages conversion of Dalits to Buddhism by didactically using Buddhist stories as parables in his autobiography.

Ambedkar: Buddhist past and future

In the year 1948, Bhim Rao Ambedkar, the economist, politician, social reformer, the so-called father of the Indian constitution, but – most importantly for this article – the father and inspiration of the Dalit movement and a prolific author wrote *The Untouchables Who Were They And Why They Became Untouchables?* This book was published one year after the publication of *Who were the Shudras?*, a

³ A comparative analysis of the originals of these stories with the way they have been retold by Tulsi Ram might be worth an exploration, but is beyond the scope of this essay. All “Buddhist stories” relayed here are based solely on Tulsi Ram’s narrative.

⁴ The works of Laura Brueck (2014) and Toral Jatin Gajarawala (2013) are in my view the best examples of such analyses.

book, in which he tried to establish a Shudra (*śūdra*) genealogy according to which Shudras were Kshatriyas (*kṣatriya*) demoted to the rank of Shudras as a revenge for violence and humiliation imposed by them upon Brahmins (*brāhmaṇa*). In this second book, he now tried to establish the origins of the Untouchables⁵ by asking how they came to be living outside villages: did they have to move outside after they became Untouchables or were they already living outside for some other reason?

By explaining the inner workings of so-called primitive societies all around the world, he argues that it was not uncommon for tribal wars to lead to the near-complete destruction of a tribe or clan⁶. Ambedkar calls the remaining members of such tribes Broken Men and argues that when the tribe that won the war settled down, Broken Men naturally stayed outside at the fringe of this new settlement as they had no tribe of their own to establish a settlement with. Since the tribe of the new settlement still was in danger of being attacked by other tribes, and since Broken Men due to their small numbers were in danger themselves, Ambedkar argues that the two parties came to an agreement, according to which Broken Men settled outside village boundaries in order to keep watch and sound the alarm in case of an invasion.

Following this argument, Ambedkar declares that Broken Men were the ancestors of Untouchables and states that they became Untouchables because Broken Men had been Buddhists. He explains that Buddhists were despised by Brahmins and presents evidence that they were treated as Untouchable by Brahmins by referring to the Sanskrit drama *Mṛcchakaṭikā* – written by the poet Shudraka (*Śūdraka*) around the 5th century CE. However, he continues, since the stigma of untouchability only stuck to Broken Men and not to all Buddhists, there must have been another reason for it. Following an analysis of the results of the Census of India and the beef eating habits of the people of India, Ambedkar determines that Untouchables by definition consume beef, which for him is the only explanation for untouchability that is consistent with all known facts. He concludes that Broken Men must have refused to give up eating beef and consequently were labelled Untouchables by the dominating upper-caste Hindus.

⁵ In this section I follow Ambedkar's own writing style, in which he writes the words "Untouchable" and "Broken Men" starting with capital letters and without quotation marks.

⁶ I refer to a book that is available online, which makes it impossible to name concrete pages for reference. However, the corresponding information can be found in Part II "Problem of Habitat", Chapter III Why do the Untouchables live outside the village?" under the following link: <http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/39A.Untouchables%20who%20were%20they_why%20they%20became%20PART%20I.htm#a03> (3.10.2020)

While the question whether Ambedkar's theory is plausible or not is not relevant for the present essay, the fact that he endeavours to find "respectable roots"⁷ for the so-called Untouchables and tries to prove that their ancestors were Buddhists is very significant. As Brueck explains,

"...for Dalits, literature offers access not only to history but also to a world of individual and community progress and the means to construct a shared identity. First, Dalits must deconstruct the identity, crystallized over centuries, of the powerless, the lowly, the untouchable, and then replace it with a new kind of self-expression that will transform not only the way they see themselves but also the way society sees them". (Brueck 2014: 63)

Both, Ambedkar's *Who were the Shudras?* as well as *The Untouchables Who Were They And Why They Became Untouchables?* were attempts at such a deconstruction and the creation of a new collective identity for marginalised groups of Indian society.

Ambedkar himself famously converted to Buddhism in an unprecedented ceremony on December 6th 1956 together with almost half a million Dalits (Bellwinkel-Schempp 2011: 1). In his last work *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, posthumously published in 1957, Ambedkar formulated his own version of Buddhism – the *Navayana* Buddhism – and openly promoted renunciation of Hinduism and conversion to Buddhism as a means of social emancipation for Dalits.

Arun Prabha Mukherjee suggested that Ambedkar's writings could be considered as a "pre-text" to contemporary Dalit literature (quoted in Kumar 2018: 50). I support this view and argue that when more than sixty years later Dalit writer Tulsi Ram wrote his two-book autobiography, he picked up where Ambedkar left off and not only added another proof of the Dalits' Buddhist ancestry, but also implicitly advocated conversion to Buddhism – even if seemingly not to what Ambedkar called *Navayana*.

Our ancestors were Buddhists

As already mentioned above, the two books of Tulsi Ram's autobiography – *Murdahiyā* (2012, quoted acc. to 2nd edition 2014a) and *Manikarnikā* (2014b) – are filled with stories from Buddhist texts, which at the first glance seem disconnected from the main narrative. However, a closer look at these stories reveals that they are far from being random. On the contrary, they follow a pattern that exposes a clear purpose, which, as I argue, is twofold: to provide further evidence for the Buddhist identity of the Dalits' ancestors before they became labelled as

⁷ Compare Jaffrelot (2000): 31–40.

Untouchables and to implicitly advocate conversion to Buddhism as a means of being accepted into a larger group – the one of Buddhists. Through a close reading of relevant passages, I will demonstrate how this is accomplished.

On page 49 of *Murdahiyā*, while talking about home remedies used by Dalit women, Tulsi Ram remarks that his grandmother, too, was this kind of a “physician” (*baidya*)⁸ and that she, as well as other elderly women, used to keep her preparations in animal horns. In fact, she used to keep in them any kind of small objects. No doubt, he continues, that during the times when it was allowed to eat *dāṃgar*⁹, grandmother used to take home the biggest horns of dead animals in order to keep them as receptacles. Only years later, he continues, did he learn about the ten amendments to Buddha’s rules that were agreed upon during one of the early Buddhist councils, the very first one of which was that a Buddhist monk could gather salt in an animal’s horn.

Since then this Buddhist custom of collecting [objects] in horns was maintained. The fact that Grandma kept medicine, money and even threads and needles [in them] proves that our ancestors centuries ago at some time surely must have been real Buddhists. Those horns of Grandma’s are evidence of this^{10, 11}.

In this instance, Tulsi Ram explicitly states his opinion that the Dalits’ ancestors must have been Buddhists. He does not repeat it as plainly again, rather, the text seems to assume that the fact has been established. In the many instances of Buddhist interventions to follow, Tulsi Ram identifies his protagonist with characters from Buddhist stories ever substantiating the reader’s impression of the existence of an historical link between Dalits and Buddhists.

Buddhist parables in Tulsi Ram’s autobiography

The following passage is particularly interesting as it is the same story used by Ambedkar in his *The Untouchables Who Were They And Why They Became*

⁸ Tulsi Ram 2014a: 49

⁹ According to *Murdahiyā*, “*dāṃgar*” is the meat of household animals (cows, buffaloes etc.) who died of natural causes – as opposed to being slaughtered. Before independence, approx. around 1860-70 it was usual for the “*Chamars* from our region” to eat this meat. The practice was later more or less abandoned under Ambedkar’s influence. (Tulsi Ram 2014a: 15)

¹⁰ All translations from Hindi are my own.

¹¹ Hindi original: *tabhī se sīṃg meṃ saṃcay kī yah bauddh prathā jāī huī. Dādī dvārā davāeṃ tathā paisā, yahāṃ tak ki sūī dorā bhī rakh'nā siddh kar'tā hai ki hamāre khān'dān vāle sadiyoṃ pūrv kabhī khāṃṃī bauddh avāśya rahe hoṃge. Dādī kī ve sīṃgeṃ iskā pramāṇ hai.* (Tulsi Ram 2014a: 50)

Untouchables? as evidence that Buddhists were despised by Brahmins and were consequently often treated as untouchable.

In the course of his narrative, Tulsi Ram relates an incident that occurred when his protagonist, as a young boy, went to another village to take part in school examinations. Upon arrival at a river he tried to wash himself and was attacked by an upper caste boy. Tulsi Ram comments on this incident:

This, too, was one of those unhappy childhood memories which for years constantly kept irritating me. But when about two decades later I got the opportunity to read the eighth chapter of Shudraka's timeless play *Mṛcchakaṭikā* (The little clay cart) this bad feeling was quenched forever¹².

Tulsi Ram then proceeds to tell a story from the *Mṛcchakaṭikā* in which the meeting with a Buddhist monk is perceived as a misfortune by several characters. The monk is then attacked – simply for his presence and because he had bathed in the nearby pond – just as the boy-protagonist had been attacked in the main narrative. Tulsi Ram points out that even though the monk's words were polite, his assailant kept reacting as if he was being insulted.

Evidently, in this play, that was written in the period of the campaign run by violent Vedics¹³ against Buddhists in the ancient times, Buddhists, who opposed the caste system, were seen as bad omens. At that time, this was a common conception among Vedics about Buddhists. Shudraka expressed it in the *Mṛcchakaṭikā* in an aesthetic form. What happened to me before my arrival at the lake of Babura Dhanua during the hard times of the famine, in it, Ramcharan Bhaiya was my present day Shakar [(Śakār, the assailant's name)]. Had I known about the Buddhist monk from the *Mṛcchakaṭikā* at that time, I may not have felt that much suffering, but when two decades later Buddhist philosophy found a home in every fibre of my being, then, when I got acquainted with the *Mṛcchakaṭikā*, I felt as if the Buddhist monk from this centuries ago written play was I myself¹⁴.

¹² Hindi original: *bac'pan kī asahāy yādoṃ meṃ yah bhī ek aisī yād thī, jo varṣoṃ tak mere dimāg ko har'dam kured'tī rahī. kintu is'ke lag'bhag do dashak bād jab mahākavi śūdrak kā sadābahār nāṭak 'mṛcchakaṭikam' (miṭṭī kī gārī) ke āṭh'veṃ aṃk ko parh'ne kā maukā milā, to sārī durbhāv'nā hameśā ke lie miṭ gayī.* (Tulsi Ram 2014a: 83f)

¹³ I am inclined to think that Tulsi Ram uses the word “*vaidik*” to emphasize the fact that he speaks about things that happened in the Vedic period, which is why I, too, decided to use this for the English language rather unusual term.

¹⁴ Hindi original: *jāhir hai prācīnkāl meṃ vaidik hīmsāvādiyōṃ dvārā calāye jā rahe bauddh'virodhī abhīyān ke daur meṃ likhe gaye is nāṭak meṃ jāti vyvasthā virodhī bauddhoṃ ko ap'śakun samjhā jātā thā. us jamāne meṃ vaidikoṃ kī bauddhoṃ ke bāre meṃ yah ām av'dhārṇā thī, jis'kī abhivyakti 'mṛcchakaṭikam' meṃ ek saundaryaśāsTrīy vidhā meṃ śūdrak ne kī hai. baburā dhan'huvāṃ ke pokh're par pahūṃcne se pah'le jo kuch mere sāth us akāl kī kar'kī meṃ huā, us'meṃ rām'caran bhaiyā mere ādhunik śakār*

The fact that Tulsi Ram chose this particular story, indicates that he must have been influenced by Ambedkar's *The Untouchables Who Were They And Why They Became Untouchables?*, even if he does not mention it in the narrative. In fact, in his autobiography, Tulsi Ram does not write much about Ambedkar and his ideas, but Buddha and to a lesser degree Karl Marx, the two personalities, who influenced Ambedkar's *Navayana* Buddhism profoundly (cf. Jaffrelot 2005), are ever-present in the narrative.

Tulsi Ram emphasizes on several occasions throughout his autobiography (especially in the first part) that he was treated as "a bad omen" (*ap'sakun*)¹⁵ not only by strangers, but even by the members of his own family and household (because of the small-pox with which he was sick as an infant, leaving him blind in one eye). By identifying himself with the Buddhist monk and his own attacker with Shakar, the upper caste assailant from the Buddhist story, he constructs a historical link between the interconnections between present day upper and lower castes and historical Vedics/Brahmins and Buddhists, thus implying that Buddhists of ancient times and Dalits of today are the same people.

Tulsi Ram identifies his protagonist with several other characters from Buddhist stories throughout the two volumes of his autobiography. Moreover, many, if not all, of the Buddhist characters with which he identifies his protagonist either already are Buddhists or undergo a transition from being in some sort of a bad situation to being accepted into the Buddhist *saṅgha* as a consequence of what happens in the parable. Bearing in mind that the first part of these parables virtually mirrors Tulsi Ram-the-protagonist's situation at the given moment in the narrative, their second part, namely the acceptance into the Buddhist *saṅgha*, can be viewed as the desired consequence for the protagonist – as presented by the author.

The following series of examples illustrates how Tulsi Ram utilises Buddhist stories to determine that any person, however bad a situation they might be in, can be accepted into the Buddhist *saṅgha*.

For instance, when the adolescent protagonist, having run away from home to continue his studies and living in a student hostel, is visited by two young relatives, they end up in the notorious Kalinganj district of Azamgarh, trying to sneak a peek at a *muj'rā* dancing girl through the window. The young men are soon discovered and chased away, while the narrative continues with a Buddhist story about thirty men, who – having gone to the forest for amusement with their wives and a

hī the. yadi maim us samay 'mṛcchakaṭikam' ke us bauddh bhikṣu ke bāre meṃ jān'tā hotā, to śāyad ut'nī pīṛā kī anubhūti nahīm hotī, kintu do daśak bād jab bauddh darśan mere rom rom meṃ ghar kar gayā thā, to 'mṛcchakaṭikam' se av'gat hone par mujhe aisā lagā ki māno sadiyoṃ pūrv likhe gaye is nāṭak meṃ vah bauddh bhikṣu maim hī thā. (Tulsi Ram 2014a: 84)

¹⁵ For instance, Tulsi Ram 2014a: 49.

prostitute – ran around looking for the prostitute, who stole their jewellery. Buddha’s “philosophic question” (*dārśanik praśn*): “Do all of you want to look for that woman or for yourselves?”¹⁶ awoke their sympathy and having listened to the Buddha’s spiritual counsel all thirty of them became Buddhist monks.

Later, they became known as ‘Bhaddavaggiya monks’. Perhaps, if the three of us had been with them, surely, we, too, would have joined the group of ‘Bhaddavaggiya monks’?¹⁷

In this episode, the protagonist and his two friends are identified with men, who are said to be looking for pleasure as a result of having lost themselves, an allegory for what is happening in the main narrative. The fact that the men from the parable agree that they should be looking for themselves and as a consequence are accepted into the Buddhist *saṅgha* reflects Tulsi Ram’s desire for his protagonist to become a Buddhist as well.

Tulsi Ram not only portrays his protagonist as a bad omen, he also narrates how he run away from home at the age of fifteen to be able to continue his studies; how, living a lonely life, he first devoted himself to college education, and then became a student at the Banaras Hindu University. It is thus not surprising that he chooses loneliness and a search for a sense of belonging as one of the main motifs of his narrative. After an episode in which he was treated very kindly and affectionately by a new friend, Tulsi Ram-the-protagonist proceeds to go to the *Manikarnika ghat*¹⁸. When he reaches the *ghat*, Tulsi Ram explains that “this place had become my favourite place in Banaras. Whenever I saw it, my *Murdahiyā*¹⁹ danced before my eyes in the afternoon like a mirage.”²⁰ Here, the protagonist is reminded of the great nun Patacara (*mahān bhikṣuṇī paṭācārā*), who, before becoming a nun, had lost all members of her family in one day and “was walking

¹⁶ Hindi Original: *tum sabhī us strī ko dhūh'nā cāh'te ho yā svayaṃ ko?* (Tulsi Ram 2014a: 176)

¹⁷ Hindi Original: *bād meṃ cal'kar ve 'bhadṛ vargīy bhikṣu' kah'lāe. sambhavataḥ yadi ham tīnoṃ un'ke sāth hue hote, to bhadṛ vargīy bhikṣuṃ kī śreṇī meṃ avaśya ā gae hote?* (Tulsi Ram 2014a: 176)

¹⁸ One of the holiest cremation grounds among the sacred riverfronts (*ghats*), alongside the river Ganga.

¹⁹ The name sake of the first part of Tulsi Ram’s autobiography, *Murdahiyā* is the name of a “multipurpose working ground” (*bahuddeśīy karmasthalī*) of the village Dharampur (near Azamgarh), which combined a cremation and a burial ground, a grazing place, agricultural fields, a playing ground for Tulsi Ram and his friends – in short, it was a “strategic centre” (*sāmarik kēdr*) for the Dalits of the village (Tulsi Ram 2014a: 5). The author often uses it as a metaphor for “home”.

²⁰ Hindi Original: *yah sthalī banāras meṃ merī sab'se cahetī sthalī ban gaī thī. ise dekh'te hī merī murdahiyā āṅkhoṃ ke sām'ne nāc'tī dopaharī yānī mṛgṭṛṣṇā jaisī dikāī dene lag'tī thī.* (Tulsi Ram 2014b: 71)

naked in a half-crazed manner here and there in the cremation ground of Shravasti like mad consumed by sorrow".²¹

One day, in this state, naked, she passed the place, where Buddha was giving a council. The monks tried to chase her away, but upon Buddha's saying she came closer. One monk threw his upper garment upon her, she wrapped it around herself, listened to the Buddha's council, was freed from sorrow and became a nun.²²

As in the previous example, the first part of this parable reflects the reality, in which the there-and-then-protagonist finds himself. Tulsi Ram identifies his protagonist with the woman who lost all her family members, since, clearly, he, too, felt like he had lost all his family, when he ran away from home. The narrator continues thus:

Afterwards, I went to Manikarnika many times and every time it seemed to me that at some point I will meet Patacara right there walking from somewhere or other.²³

So, according to the narrative, every time the protagonist goes to *Manikarnika*, a place that he identifies with "his *Murdahiya*"²⁴, which is home and a place of comfort in Tulsi Ram's vocabulary, he expects to meet the Buddhist nun, who despite having lost her family, became free from sorrow when she heard the Buddha's counsel and joined the *saṅgha*. There is no doubt that the text implies here that this is exactly what Tulsi Ram wishes to have had happened to his younger self."

Somewhat apart stands the story about thieves who were saved from a death sentence, because they had joined the *saṅgha*. It is told after the episode in which the protagonist, a hungry student-to-be, stole forty paisa that were accidentally left lying outside and used it to buy some sweets. The incident reportedly caused the protagonist so much pain and suffering that he became "lifeless" (*nirjīva*)²⁵. This revelation is followed by a passage in which the author explains the Buddha's views on theft and proceeds to tell this "historic incident" (*aitihāsik ghaṭ'nā*)²⁶: a

²¹ Hindi Original: *śrāvastī ke śmaśān meṃ śokagrast hokar ardh'vikṣipt avasthā meṃ naṃgdharaṃg pāgḷom kī tarah cillāṭī-vilakh'tī idhar-udhar ghūmā kar'tī thī* (Tulsi Ram 2014b: 71)

²² Hindi Original: *ek din isī avasthā meṃ naṃgdharaṃg vah jahāṃ buddh up'deś de rahe the, udhar se guj'rī. bhikṣuṃ ne use bhagāne kī kośis kī, kiṃtu buddh ke kah'ne par vah pās ā gā. ek bhikṣu ne ap'nī saṃghāṭī yānī kamar ke ūpar vālā cīvar us'ke ūpar pheṃ'kā, jise us'ne orh liyā aur buddh ke up'deś ko sun'kar vah śok'mukt hokar bhikṣuṃ ban gā.* (Tulsi Ram 2014b: 71)

²³ Hindi Original: *is'ke bād maiṃ anek bār maṇikarnikā gayā aur har bār mujhe aisā lag'ne lag'tā thā ki kabhī na kabhī paṭācārā kahīm na kahīm se ghūm'tī mujhe vahīm mil jāegī.* (Tulsi Ram 2014b: 71)

²⁴ See, for instance, Tulsi Ram 2014b: 52

²⁵ Tulsi Ram 2014b: 20f

²⁶ Tulsi Ram 2014b: 20f

band of thieves robbed and killed some Buddhist monks and was caught and sentenced to death consequently. However, between the robbery and the thieves' arrest, some of them had joined the *saṅgha*, and when those "thief monks" (*cor bhikṣu*)²⁷ were watching their "associate thieves" (*ap'ne saḥ'yogī corom ko*)²⁸ being led to the place of execution, they said to one another how fortunate it was that they had joined the Buddhist *saṅgha*. Otherwise they, too, would have been executed. When the Buddha heard about this, he made a rule that no thief could become a member of the *saṅgha* and the thieves were forced to leave.

Tulsi Ram does not exactly identify his protagonist with these thieves, nor does he elaborate on the consequences the expulsion had for the "thief monks" (*cor bhikṣu*)²⁹; they may or may not have been executed subsequently. Instead, Tulsi Ram proceeds to tell his own story, according to which, he never forgave himself for the theft of the forty paisa, but was initiated and accepted into the Buddhist *saṅgha* twenty-two years later. This development points toward Tulsi Ram's belief that under certain conditions everyone, even a "common thief" (*sādhāraṇ cor*)³⁰, as he calls himself on this occasion, can become a member of the Buddhist *saṅgha*.

Each of these parables leads to an instructive conclusion, which is that any person, however bad the situation they find themselves in – whether they lost themselves, their family, or made a mistake that makes them deeply suffer – can be accepted by the Buddhist *saṅgha* and freed from suffering.

Saved by the Buddha

On several occasions, particularly in the second part of his autobiography, Tulsi Ram claims to having been "saved" by the Buddha (cf. e.g. "Buddha had saved me" *buddh ne mujhe bacā liyā*, Tulsi Ram 2014b: 82). This claim first occurs in the beginning of *Maṇikarṇikā*, the second book of his autobiography, with an uncertainty almost leading to despair when the protagonist is in the transitional state between running away from home and starting his life as a student. Staying with his cousin in Calcutta during the summer, in the evenings he goes to watch trains from the top of an abandoned crane.

That view seemed very fascinating to me, but in the middle of scientific attraction, worry about the future would force me to burst into tears. Sitting on that crane, my outcry became non-existent among the noise of the trains. Discouraged by the uncertainty of the future, I several times felt like jumping from the crane and throwing

²⁷ Tulsi Ram 2014b: 20f

²⁸ Tulsi Ram 2014b: 20f

²⁹ Tulsi Ram 2014b: 20f

³⁰ Tulsi Ram 2014b: 20f

myself under a train, but Buddha appeared in front of me and I started to view suicide as a sin.³¹

The crises that Tulsi Ram claims to having been saved from range from suicide via being an existentialist to the plotting of a violent scheme of an “elimination of class enemy” (*varg duśman kā saphāyā*)³² as propagated by his protagonist’s Naxalite friends. As happens in all similar instances, in which Tulsi Ram’s protagonist is said to be “saved by the Buddha”, this incident, too, ends with the Buddha’s victory in a bad situation with potentially disastrous results: “In the end, Buddha’s *ahimsa* won and I forever renounced the politics of the ‘elimination of class enemy’”³³.

Tulsi Ram’s several times repeated claim to having been “saved by the Buddha” must be interpreted not only as a personal statement, but at the same time as another way of advocating conversion to Buddhism. Thus it can be concluded that, in his autobiography, he advocated conversion to Buddhism while implying that any person, no matter how bad the situation they are in, can join the Buddhist *saṅgha* and be saved by the Buddha.

Conclusion

The construction of a new shared and respectable identity for the Dalits is one of the distinctive characteristics of modern Hindi Dalit literature. Tulsi Ram joins Ambedkar in his argumentation when he states that centuries ago, before being labelled as Untouchable, present day Dalits must have been Buddhists. Endeavouring to deconstruct the centuries old identity of the powerless and deprived Untouchables, he uses a number of Buddhist stories in the two parts of his autobiography not only to provide another proof for Ambedkar’s hypothesis, but also to create a virtual link between present day Dalits and Buddhists of ancient times as well as to advocate conversion to Buddhism as a way to escape suffering.

³¹ Hindi Original: *vah dṛśya mujhe bahut lubhāv'nā lag'tā thā, kiṃtu is vajñānik ākarṣan ke bīc bhaviṣya kī cīmtā mujhe phūṭ phūṭ'kar rone par majbūr kar detī thī. us kren par baiṭhe-baiṭhe merā ārt'nād un rel'gariyoṃ ke śor meṃ astitvavihīn ho jātā thā. bhaviṣya kī anīścay'tā se ūb'kar kāī bār kren se kūd'kar tren ke nīce ā jāne kā man kar'tā thā, kiṃtu buddh sām'ne ā jāte aur maiṃ āmahatyā ko pāp samajh'ne lag'tā thā.* (Tulsiram 2014b: 33f)

³² Tulsiram 2014b: 114

³³ Hindi Original: *aṃtataḥ buddh kī ahimsā jīt gaī aur 'varg duśman kā saphāyā' vālī rāj'nīti se hamesha ke lie maiṃne samnyās le liyā.* (Tulsiram 2014b: 114)

References

- Ambedkar, B. R. 1957. "The Buddha and His Dhamma" in: *ambedkar.org – a Dalit Bahujan media Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and his people* (<<http://www.ambedkar.org/buddhism/BAHD/45A.Buddha%20and%20His%20Dhamma%20PART%20I.htm>> accessed: 20. August 2020).
- Ambedkar, B. R. 1948. "The Untouchables Who Were They And Why They Became Untouchables?" in: *ambedkar.org – a Dalit Bahujan media Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and his people* (<http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/39A.Untouchables%20who%20were%20they_why%20they%20became%20PART%20I.htm> accessed: 20. August 2020).
- Ambedkar, B. R. 1947. "Who were the Shudras?" in: *ambedkar.org – a Dalit Bahujan media Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and his people* (<<http://www.ambedkar.org/ambcd/38A.%20Who%20were%20the%20Shudras%20Pre%20face.htm>> accessed: 20. August 2020).
- Bellwinkel-Schempp, Maren 2011. *Neuer Buddhismus als gesellschaftlicher Entwurf : Zur Identitätskonstruktion der Dalits in Kanpur, Indien*. Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet.
- Brueck, Laura R. 2014. *Writing Resistance : The Rhetorical Imaginations of Hindi Dalit Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bruner, Jerome 2001. "Self-making and world-making", in: Jens Brockmeier, Donal A. Carbaugh (eds.): *Narrative and Identity : Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Gajarawala, Toral Jatin 2013. *Untouchable Fictions : Literary Realism and the Crisis of Caste*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe 2005. *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability : Analysing and Fighting Caste*. New York: Columbia University Press
- Kumar, Ravi Shankar 2018. "The Politics of Dalit Literature", in: Joshil K. Abraham, Judith Misrahi-Barak (eds.): *Dalit Literatures in India*. 2nd ed. Oxon and New York: Routledge.
- Lejeune, Philippe 1989. *On Autobiography*. Minnesota, US: University of Minnesota press.

Ram, Tulsi 2014a. *Murdahiyā*. 2nd ed. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan.

Ram, Tulsi 2014b. *Maṇikarṇikā*. New Delhi: Rajkamal Prakashan.



