

# **Nonviolent Action and the Paradoxes of Sustaining Nonviolent Strategic Choice**

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## **Abstract**

Why do social movement activists choose nonviolent action to address their grievances? While political process theorists have long argued that strategic choice is shaped by political opportunity structures, new means of agitation have both expanded the range of political opportunities available to social movement activists, as well as, raised important questions about the relative importance of collective values and 'worldview' in both constructing identity and understanding the successful maintenance of strategic choice. This paper aims to explore the role of shared values in choosing and sustaining nonviolent commitment. While some have argued that "success with nonviolent action does not require (though it may be helped by) shared standards and principles" (Sharp, 2005), dedicated study of the shared values necessary for the success of nonviolent activists' nonviolent contention has been limited in social movement scholarship. Dalit-Bahujan social contention in India provides a unique illustration of the paradoxes involved in naming and framing nonviolent values (what Docherty 2001 would actively term "worldviewing"). Not only do value commitments play an important role in developing the strategic choice of nonviolent social movements, but the narrative identity of Dalit-Bahujan activists in India shows that values are a necessary and critical component of the maintenance of an identity aimed at sustained nonviolent action. Shared worldview conceptions are crucial for the maintenance of successful nonviolent choice and commitment.

## **Key Words**

Nonviolent Social Movements; Worldview; Social Justice; Identity, and Strategic Choice.

"...success with nonviolent action does not require (though it may be helped by) shared standards and principles" (Sharp, 2005: 21)

"The Brahmins have defined knowledge in their own image. But the fact still remains that each caste has built a treasure house of its own knowledge and its own vocabulary. Each caste has built its own special consciousness" (Illiah, 2009: 6)

### **Introduction**

This paper is about collective consciousness, group knowledge systems, and the shared values that social movements create and continually refigure to achieve their strategic purposes. More specifically, it is about how a particular South Asian anti-caste social movement constructs and enacts their nonviolent agenda for social change upon the backdrop of both past-oriented narratives of marginalization and future-oriented rhetoric about the importance of developing a new religious identity. Through a case study analysis of a particular social movement organization's nonviolent activists, the importance of collective worldview commitments in both the creation and maintenance of nonviolent strategy is investigated. Close study of Triratna Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana (TBMSG) activists reveals both important factors that shape nonviolent social movements (NVSMs) and the implications of these factors for the politics of marginalized identity in postcolonial India. The TBMSG, an Indian Buddhist order of mainly former 'untouchable' dalits that are mobilizing against caste-based oppression through, among other activities, organizing regular Buddhist retreats between various 'downtrodden' castes, as well as, through ongoing public protests and agitations, represents a nonviolent social movement rife with the many organizational complexities and framing paradoxes that one would expect from a group with such an iconoclastic mission and goals. In focusing on the question of why and how TBMSG social movement activists choose nonviolent action as the primary pragmatic strategy to address their grievances, this paper aims to explore the role of shared values in sustaining successful nonviolent choice and commitment. In asking: "What is the connection between strategic and principled nonviolence?" the paper aims to privilege the role of shared value commitments in engaging in nonviolent activism. Contending that a lack of clarity on shared values in a social movement is the proximate cause for defaulting to violent strategy, this paper further contextualizes the complexity of adequately sustaining nonviolent strategic choice. TBMSG's nonviolent activism articulates an innovative relationship between justice, identity, and storytelling while also exposing the paradoxical implications of marginalized peoples' use and deployment of their chosen identity. Thus, there is much we can learn from Ambedkar Buddhist activists-one larger contingent of Dalit-Bahujans (the oppressed majority) - about the connections between shared values and collective nonviolent action.

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Though political process theorists have long argued that strategic choice is shaped by political opportunity structures, modern realities have both expanded the range of political opportunities available to social movement activists and raised important questions about the relative importance of collective values and 'worldview' in understanding successful strategic choice. New electronic means of gauging the pulse of movement activists psychology and beliefs - social media like twitter, the internet, and SMS messaging - has informed activists and academics alike and enabled new knowledge creation, identity construction, and, thus, better informed strategic choice and framing. Beyond the typical exploration of the rational pragmatics of strategic choice, social actors' normative commitments play a critical and under-explored role in maintaining successful nonviolent activism. While new technological outlets of expression have increased the opportunities for activists to engage in the critical processes of "world-viewing," what can this tell us about their ability to sustain a commitment to nonviolence? Through analyzing TBMSG as a nonviolent social movement and exploring TBMSG member's activist discourse as a proximate factor in their nonviolent identity construction, I argue that TBMSG's particular brand of nonviolent activism is rife with an important sense of identity justice; a justice that is both inconceivable outside the auspices of conceptions of collective social identity and critical to TBMSG's nonviolent goals (see Rinker, 2013 for further definition of 'identity justice'). Highlighting the crucial connections of identity and justice helps explain the critical importance of narratives choice and deployment in the maintenance of nonviolent strategy. The pragmatics of strategic choice, do not diminish the importance of principled problem solving, on the contrary the rationality of nonviolent action empowers normative commitments to nonviolence.

TBMSG activists' worldview commitments, as expressed through the narratives they deploy, are as critical as political opportunity structures to the development and maintenance of nonviolent action and this paper aims to underscore this importance. Worldview commitments, while particularly critical to the maintenance of nonviolent activism are also important for the development and dissemination of nonviolent strategy. But, in order to justify the centrality of normative worldview commitments in nonviolent activism, a few points of clarity must initially be made. Firstly, what exactly do I mean by the idea of 'identity justice'? Secondly, what is a nonviolent social movement (NVSM) and why do I classify TBMSG as one of them? Finally, why does the dichotomy of nonviolent action as either principled or pragmatic fail to adequately address the role of worldview in social change? After answering each of these questions briefly in the next three sections, the paper will then move

to a brief case study of TBMSG as a nonviolent social movement by highlighting some narrative conventions of organization activists as a means to illustrate the critical role of normative worldview commitments in maintaining identity as nonviolent activists.

### **Identity Justice**

In describing how identity and justice are imbricated in the narrative processes of social construction for activists it becomes clear that separation of these concepts is not only impossible, but futile. Particularly in any legacy of marginalization and injustice, calls for justice become the leading storyline upon which the creation of a new self-aware identity is based. As Paulo Freire has argued, "without a sense of identity there can be no struggle" (Freire,1970). Justice for self and social identity of group becomes indistinguishable in the context of overcoming oppression and marginalization. Although the ambiguity this connection fosters provides the potential for violent response, it also holds hope for well-maintained commitment to nonviolence over time. Often calls for justice lead to "threat narratives" that engender and justify violence against an out-group (Korstelina and Rothbart, 2006), but such a justice voice also holds the potential to eschew violence and strengthen pro-social identity formation. So, why do some oppressed movements form a 'revolutionary' mindset as opposed to a revolutionary one? And why do shared values converge with identity in such a way as to engender compassion, shun revenge, and sustain nonviolent commitment? I believe the answer to these questions lies in the very imbricated connections between identity and justice. The self is ever aware of its relation to others - this is especially true in relation to questions of equity, equality and distribution. The connection is seen most clearly through narrative constructions - the stories we tell do not construct either simply our identity or our sense of justice - they simultaneously do both!

Take for example the stories of striking sanitation workers in 1968 Memphis during the last days of Martin Luther King's life. Denied the right to organize as public employees and fed up with dangerous and unsanitary working conditions, these men overcame threats and the psychology of marginalization to organize a nonviolent strike in which they held signs that simply read "I am a Man." What better example could be found of the critical connection between identity and justice? The recognition Memphis sanitation workers desired was twofold - - recognition that they were human and the desire to be treated like any other fair-minded human would expect to be treated. Having respect and recognition as productive humans became inseparable

from a sense of justice as fairness. For Memphis sanitation workers aspirations for better working conditions could not be separated from aspirations for recognition - in their minds these aspirations were intricately interconnected. As the city soon realized, attempts to separate these aspirations proved counterproductive; reconciliation involved recognition as much as fairness.

A more recent example of the connection between identity and justice comes from the late 20th Century creation of the identity of 'dalit Buddhist.' Striving for a stronger identity than Bahujan (commonly understood as the oppressed majority in India, and therefore inclusive of many non-dalits as well as dalits) some dalits, as early as the 1920s, began looking to religion to provide a new framework for achieving justice. While this example, more pertinent to my discussion of TBMSG as a NVSM, invokes a set of Western assumptions about both the labels 'Buddhist' and 'nonviolent,' it is important to note that Buddhist values were relatively unknown to early dalit converts. We must, therefore, resist the common assumption that TBMSG is 'nonviolent' simply because they are 'Buddhist' - - far too many examples of Buddhist violence exist in the world to make such a generalized assumption and initial conversion of dalits to Buddhism for many was an expression of identity politics as much as an expression of normative commitments. Too often Buddhism and nonviolence are thoughtlessly equated with no evidence of their congruence or, even, comparative analysis of similar antecedent doctrines, such as ahimsa (the ancient Jain/Buddhist concept of principled nonviolence). While defining either Buddhism or nonviolence is notoriously limiting and fret with complexity, some basic outlines of comparative analysis are possible and must be interrogated to truly understand what it means to be a 'dalit Buddhist.' This identity itself is an expression of justice in the sense that those who use it are accessing a revivalist belief in the historic Buddha as a social reformer. TBMSG dalit Buddhist activists argue that the historical Gautama Buddha was an anti-caste activist organizing the 'dalits' (downtrodden) of his society, which, like today's 'dalit,' had a distinctive identity tied to the fact that they lived on the outskirts of the village. While this historicity is strongly contested in Buddhist Studies scholarship (Williams, 2000), among others, who argue that there is little evidence to suggest that during the time of the historical Buddha there yet existed caste divisions in India] it nonetheless tells one a great deal about the modern identity of 'dalit Buddhists.' Continually aware of the historic oppression that they have faced as dalits, these Buddhists have consciously and actively connected their Buddhist identity with their identity as victims in calls for justice. The narrative structure of these 'dalit Buddhists' makes the actualization of justice inseparable from the identity of Buddhist (Rinker, 2013).

The TBMSG, a nonviolent social movement advocating for dalit rights in India through religious teachings (dharma) of the Buddha, provides an ideal research context for understanding collective construction and maintenance of value-based identity positions. The unique reality of modern dalit awakening, and relatively recent focus on a particular form of modern Buddhism that has been variously labeled 'Ambedkar Buddhism' or 'neo-Buddhism' (Queen, 1996), provides a window into both the process of collective value construction and the difficulties of the collective maintenance of values such as principled nonviolence. These organizational, mobilizing, and framing constraints not only highlight the complexities of consistently narrating identity justice, but also mark TBMSG as a social movement struggling to produce effective modern forms of nonviolent activism. The next section explains why I have chosen to categorize TBMSG as nonviolent social movement and identifies the TBMSG movement as a unique expression of shared values and worldview commitments.

**Who are the TBMSG and why are they representative of a nonviolent social movement (NVSM)?**

The concept of a nonviolent social movement (NVSM) aims to blend knowledge about social movement and nonviolence in such a way that attention is focused on strategic opportunity for, and framing of, effective nonviolent social change. While all social movements can be said to be involved in conflict or struggle with a clearly identifiable opponent, the degree of definition given to that opponent, as well as, the distinctive identity and social networks that the movement creates and fosters make classification of social movements an extremely complicated task (Della Porta and Diana, 2000). The concept of a social movement, as a collection of individuals organized for collective action with some common threads of collective identity, overlap in important ways with the ideas of civil society and non-governmental organizations (and this is particularly evident in the India context). All have varying degrees of organization, collective constraints, and resource potentials as well as palpable dissatisfaction with the status quo. When coupled with nonviolence as a strategy, social movements are presented with an expanded potential. Both principled and strategic commitment to eschew violence or force provides social movement's political opportunities unavailable to movements that advocate violence. NVSM's repertoire for collective contention is not limited by the structural legacy of violence and force and their identity is malleable and frame-able in ways which those who advocate, or use, violence is not. Further, as purveyors of subordinate (i.e. non-

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dominant) ideologies and discourses grass-root social movements routinely find themselves on the bottom of complex power asymmetries. Such a persistent low power position provides the ideal conditions (or opportunity structures) for the effective application of nonviolent strategies. Still, while the shared values and experiences often privilege a nonviolent response, not all social movements choose nonviolent action as their overarching strategy. So what makes a social movement a NVSM? Why do some movements choose nonviolence as a strategy or tactic?

The commitment to nonviolence as an organizing principle is more than just pragmatic or short-term strategic. Long-term maintenance of a nonviolent approach does require shared worldview commitments, values, and experiences - - otherwise reverting to revolutionary violence is too tempting. Looking at TBMSG as a case study, the importance of shared worldview commitment for the maintenance of nonviolent action against injustice becomes evident. Movements choose nonviolence strategically, but maintenance of nonviolence requires shared commitments and shared narrative identity creation. TBMSG is a NVSM because beyond strategy they have crafted a narrative identity that foregrounds a shared commitment to nonviolent resolution of problems.

Professing to be the vanguard of a dalit Buddhist population of nearly 10 million strong (Kantowsky, 2003) the Triratna Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana (TBMSG - literally 'The Association of Friends of the Buddhist Order of the Three Jewels' ) is a diverse spiritual and activist family of organizations and projects aimed at empowering both Buddhism and marginalized dalit communities throughout India. If judged by their strength in places like Pune and Nagpur, Maharashtra the TBMSG movement has accomplished a great deal in the nearly 35 years that it has been in existence as a formal Social Movement Organization. TBMSG's work is both aimed at developing Buddhist awareness and creating civil society opportunities for the most marginalized of Indian society. I have argued elsewhere (Rinker, 2009) that TBMSG represents a distinct form of social movement organization in that it combines a world affirming and a world rejecting worldview aimed at constructing both an engaged Buddhist, and marginalized victim, identity. These, at times, competing identities often obfuscate TBMSG movement goals, but as shared collective commitments and experiences both Buddhist conversion and victimization as dalits act to maintain strategic commitment to change. TBMSG's strength and unique narrative identity as a religious movement provides a principled foundation and narrative identity that sustains commitment to nonviolent action.

TBMSG places itself on the forefront of the wider Ambedkar Buddhist movement by focusing on educating new-Buddhists on how to practice Buddhism. No other Ambedkar Buddhist movement is currently filling this opportunity space and TBMSG clearly attempts to exploit this niche. TBMSG's is a Buddhism that although sensitive to the political organizing mantle of Ambedkar's legacy, in fact, stresses dharma education as B.R. Ambedkar's greatest bequest. For TBMSG, learning the practice of Buddhism (the Dharma) cannot be divorced from actively organizing for dalit rights. This principled engagement with injustice is what separates TBMSG from other 'secular' dalit organizations and human rights advocacy groups. Meaning for TBMSG activists comes through spreading the dharma; all else will be achieved as a result of this first goal.

Specifically the TBMSG seeks to put the Dharma into practice in three ways: 1.) by giving Dharma course lectures, 2.) through retreats of intensive Buddhist practice, and 3.) through the creation of Dharma communities in which members work together for the common good of that community. The first two of these institutional goals were pursued by the TBMSG from the beginning of the movements' 1979 creation, while the third goal was a bit more problematic for an organization focused mainly on Buddhist teaching and practice. In order overcome obstacles of translating Buddhist dharma into social practice (as well as finding donors to support such socially engaged programming) to achieve their third institutional goal the TBM trust (the official ordinal body of the TBMSG movement) decided in 1980 that the creation of a social work arm of the organization was needed. Thus, the Bahujan Hitay, literally meaning "for the welfare of the many," was created, and the first public health project was started in Pune only a year after the TBMSG was itself inaugurated as an Indian organization. Together with the work of the Bahujan Hitay, TBMSG uses its limited administrative and capital resources to press forward in the sphere of community development, by finding new means of livelihood for the Dharma communities that they help to establish and strengthen. With twenty Dharma Centers situated throughout India (mostly in Maharashtra State), the TBMSG movement is the setting for the community-based social work of Bahujan Hitay. These activities include health projects, educational hostels, kindergartens, and vocational training instruction. All these activities are fore-grounded by an emphasis on teaching dharma practice.

In 1999, Lokamitra (TBMSG's original founder and current leader), frustrated by both the organization's lack of diversified funding streams and the magnitude of the 'work,' founded a new Indian trust that he called the Jambudvipa Trust. "Jambudvipa,

the ancient Buddhist name for the Indian sub-continent, represents for us the transformation of society and culture through the ethical and spiritual values" (Padmapani, 2008). Working on parallel tracts as the TBMSG and Bahujan Hitay, the Jambudvipa Trust runs a number of inter-related programs that are aimed at two areas of societal transformation: the support of "disadvantaged sections" of Indian society and "bringing people together through spiritual practice to transcend barriers" (Padmapani, 2008). These two rather broad aims find life in the work of the Manuski Center, the Pune-based home of Jambudvipa's largest and most fully staffed project. Manuski, like Jambudvipa, has historical and symbolic significance. As "one of the most significant words used by Dr. Ambedkar, [Manuski] has connotations of humanity, compassion, and respect" (Front Cover of "Manuski" Movement Flyer, 2008). Run by local members of various scheduled castes, the Manuski Center embodies Dr. Ambedkar's famous call for dalits to organize, educate, and agitate.

The network of activists and social workers that the Jambudvipa Trust's Manuski Center has cultivated has, over the last decade, helped to foster an enhanced dalit Buddhist presence among even secular Ambedkar followers. By working to expose atrocities against scheduled castes and providing professional training to partner organizations, TBMSG's Manuski Center has fostered low-caste communication, coordination, and expertise in the hopes of developing a strongly unified network of the marginalized to fight caste oppression. While the commitment to nonviolent activism is not publically discussed, in part due to a desire to distance themselves from Gandhian rhetoric that they see as complicit with their oppression, the collective will of TBMSG movement members to actively engage is primarily informed by Buddhist conceptions of nonviolence. Of particular importance to TBMSG activists is a conception of Buddhist practice as a philosophy of life - a way to lead one's life. Adherence to the eightfold path (right action in particular) acts as a normative roadmap to social change and the core of this roadmap lies in principled nonviolence (ahimsa). While this core affects the periphery of action the line between principled and strategic nonviolence, right livelihood, and right action is not always clear. The following section attempts to develop a clearer sketch of the dichotomy between principled and strategic approaches to nonviolence.

### **The Poverty of the Principled/Strategic Dichotomy**

Although Sharp (2005) and Zunes, Kurtz, and Asher (1999), among others, have pragmatically argued that normative commitments to nonviolence are not a necessary prerequisite for successful strategic nonviolent activism, the separation of nonviolent activism into strategic and principled types is, itself, problematic. The

creation of a binary dichotomy between principled and strategic forms of nonviolence furthers the assumption that shared normative commitments, though informing pragmatic movement strategy, are formed and fermented devoid of processes of strategic consideration. Zunes, Kurtz, and Asher (1999), in fact, state in the introduction to their geographical reader on Non-violent Social Movements that "nonviolence became more a deliberate tool for social change moving from being an ad hoc strategy growing naturally out of religious or ethical principles to a reflective, and in many ways institutionalized, method of struggle." While such statements give an a priori importance to the normative commitments of principled nonviolence, they also perpetuate the assumption that shared values are somehow forged outside of the processes of social action. In fact, shared values are formed alongside action; collective commitment is forged in collective action. The view of principled nonviolence as forming the seedbed of nonviolent strategies that are later proven to work through practice, arbitrarily separates theory from practice - something that I believe in the construction and maintenance of social movements does not, in reality, occur and further obscures transformative practice. Social movements, as public expressions of collective grievance, are constantly involved in testing theory through practice and activism and adapting based on reflecting on that practice. This hypothesis testing of modes of action is critical to not only the development, but also maintenance of nonviolent action. Separating strategic practice from normative assumptions and commitments about practice is, beyond problematic, it is impossible.

While some scholars of NVSMs admittedly focus on strategic over principled nonviolence because they feel it will be a more effective means of convincing people of the power and usefulness of nonviolent action (nonviolence scholar Steven Zunes in fact made this argument in a public talk at Guilford College in September 2011), the limited emphasis on principled nonviolence has largely been focused on looking at principled nonviolence as foundational, aspirational, and/or the theoretical expression of strategic responses to political opportunity structures. Most commentators attempting to address the role of normative commitments in nonviolent action see such commitments as helpful to develop a shared justification for nonviolent commitment, but mention little about the role of these shared values in maintaining identity groups and opening new political opportunities over time. Principled nonviolence is a resource that effective social movements use to sustain strategic commitment, yet it is seen as secondary to political power and nonviolent tactics as strategic variables. While this should not be surprising, given the dominant paradigm of political realism operating in the world today, there is a sense in which

we can say that principled nonviolence in practice becomes inseparable from strategic nonviolence. If principled nonviolence is an ideal, then strategy becomes the means to reach toward the unachievable ideal. Gandhi articulated this same sense of the connection between the ideal and the real in his lifelong striving for *aparigraha* (non-possession). The ideal, though impossible to reach, was nonetheless worthy of strategic attempt to reach it, as in Gandhi's conception the mere work of striving for non-possession brought one closer to the real. The principle (or ideal) only lives through the strategic practice of striving to achieve the ideal. Without the principle (ideal) there would be no direction for strategic practice. Principled commitment to a normative set of positions against violence does not only develop nonviolent action, but, indeed, sustains it. Mere strategic success of nonviolence is fickle; shared commitment of norms binds justice activism to identity and change.

The inseparable and interconnected aspect of binary conceptions of nonviolence as either practical or principled can best be articulated through an analysis of activist narratives. Though normative intentions are often very difficult to infer from narrative, the narrative deployment and structure of utterance can provide clues to social actor's sense of meaning. Indeed, narratives, as ever evolving and never constant tropes of lived experience, are the manner in which humans convey meaning. As Polletta (2006:34) says, "Stories assimilate confusing events into familiar frameworks." Therefore, the ambiguity of social movement stories and the "narrative ellipsis" (Polletta, 2006) they engender act to solidify the underlying connections between actors' norms and behaviors. Social movement actors tell stories to attempt to figure out the moral that they themselves are struggling to fully understand. This is clearly evident in the way that Americans have told stories of 9-11 after the events of that tragic day. In the case of TBMSG/Manuski Centre activists by looking at narratives one can uncover how the underlying principles of nonviolence enforce an important hegemonic control on strategic planning that is critical to sustain nonviolent commitment. The story of Khairlanji and TBMSG/Manuski response to this event provides an excellent illustration of the inseparable connection between principled and strategic approaches to nonviolence. TBMSG's narrative of this atrocity also illustrates under what conditions shared commitments to principled nonviolence can break down.

**Reportage on the Strategic Difficulties of Maintaining Principled Nonviolence:  
The Story of Khairlanji and TBMSG's Response**

The events that have become known as the Khairlanji massacre have been contested since the moment they occurred in September 2006. On the evening of September

29th, 2006 a mob of about fifty angry caste Hindus, converged on the Bhotmange's family home and attacked and killed all but one member of the family (mother, daughter, and two sons were all killed). Portrayed as a "revenge killing" and a "Naxalite effort" by local authorities, dalit communities in Maharashtra quickly mobilized to force the state to adequately investigate the murders and bring the perpetrators to justice. In local dalits' view there was a clear caste angle to the attack. The Bhotmanges were one of only two dalit (Mahar) families among approximately 150 families living in the non-descript village of Khairlanji in Bhandara district of Maharashtra [the other families were made up of Powars and Kalars which are classified as Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in Indian parlance]. While the mother and daughter of the family had recently testified to the local authorities by identifying one of the attackers in a September 13 altercation in the village, dalit activists believe that the caste dynamics of Khairlanji played a more important role than revenge in the mobilization that eventually ended in this atrocity of mob violence. In the words of Anand Teltumbde (2010:42):

Khairlanji represents the breakdown of the wicked equilibrium that has held the subcontinent historically frozen for thousands of years - and that has carried India through centuries of utterly undeserved self-attribution with qualities such as 'tolerant,' 'nonviolent,' and peace-loving.

Despite initial sensational media accounts of love interest and revenge as the cause of this 'communal' violence in Khairlanji, the caste angle of the events became more and more evident as pressure was put on the authorities to more thoroughly investigate the incident.

Soon after the attack Mr. Bhotmange, who was not home at the time of the brutal attack, began publicly arguing that the 1989 Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act should be invoked to investigate both the murders and the lack of local police response to the incident. Within days of this event dalits in Maharashtra began to organize and support Mr. Bhotmange's, until then, futile pleas. Dalit Buddhists mobilized through social media sites and social networks and took a lead role in this contention to get the authorities to invoke the Prevention of Atrocities Act (hereafter POA) by mobilizing networks of dalit activists and framing dalit sentiment. TBMSG/Manuski activists circulated blogs, e-mail chains, and newsletters describing the event across the state, the sub-continent, and the world in order to raise awareness of the oppressive conditions under which modern-day dalits live. The 2006 events in the village of Khairlanji in Bhandara district of

Maharashtra (reactions to which are developed in more detail below) became the spark for a mass dalit campaign to persuade local authorities to invoke POA against the crime's perpetrators and expose the realities of caste marginalization in rural India. Seizing the political opportunity space that these horrific events created TBMSG/Manuski activists soon faced the paradox of binary conceptions of a strategic-principled approach to nonviolence. Not only did the event expose the brutality of the Indian caste mentality, it exposed the seeming difficulties of nonviolent activists to respond strategically to that brutality. While the 1989 POA act has become an important vector for dalits' claims of social justice, the draconian punishments the act condones seem to be at cross-purposes with important dalit Buddhist value commitments such as nonviolence and interdependence. Activists did not seem to focus on these value paradoxes, but rather seemed constrained by their practical stance on POA and dedication to structural policy change. It is not only this paradox that a closer look at TBMSG/Manuski's Khairlanji response deftly unmasks, but also an opening up of important questions about the interplay between local caste identity commitment and the micro-politics of local belief and practice. What if nonviolent advocacy and activism leads to perpetuating unjust, or structurally violent, legal policy mechanisms? What does 'nonviolence' really mean in such a case of protest against horrific violence? These are the difficult questions that TBMSG/Manuski activists faced as they organized for social change, but their inability to frame their activism on their principled identity as nonviolent Buddhists had profound implications for their strategic practice of nonviolent victims of caste marginalization. Without stressing the principled foundation of their contention TBMSG activists overlook potential opportunities for lasting change.

Once the Nagpur Bench of the Bombay High Court ruled that there was no caste angle to the crime, and therefore no legal standing to convene a special court to try the case under POA, dalit contention across Maharashtra escalated. While dalits were joyous when the same court reversed their initial ruling and said that POA could be invoked, dalits were again deflated when in July 2010 the court again reversed itself and failed to confirm the death penalty as appropriate punishment for the six convicted (the POA statute requires that the maximum penalty be, at least, considered). The roller-coaster of cycles of contention between the state and the state's marginalized subjects over the initial Khairlanji event and its legal aftermath resonate with the complexities inherent in the paradoxes of dalit Buddhist identity formation. That Dalit Buddhists would forego their principled beliefs in interdependence and support structural change is quite understandable given the history of structural violence they have faced. As the same time, such foregoing disinvests the movement of its strongest grounding and social position. In being

simultaneously victim and fully capable engaged Buddhist activist, TBMSG/Manuski leaders were faced with balancing the identities of aggrieved victim with that of committed Buddhist. Once protest began over the need to invoke POA, dalit identity as victims had framed the contention and the identity of Buddhist was to take a back seat. When later the court agreed to invoke POA, but did not enforce its ultimate punishment, dalits of the TBMSG held onto an identity justice based on the narrative structure of a victim and not as Buddhist. Attempts to re-frame the contention around a Buddhist identity were not forthcoming among activists of the TBMSG and, thus, normative commitments to nonviolence were pushed to the side almost unconsciously (or at least semi-consciously). Forging a nonviolent response to the state sponsored structural violence, while simultaneously privileging both these competing identities proved extremely difficult for TBMSG activists. The questions that the event and its aftermath raise (particularly dalit reaction to it) go to the core of attempting to understand dalit Buddhist identity and how it interfaces with shared values commitments to Buddhist nonviolence. By looking at the lived experience of dalit protesters of the Khairlanji verdict handed down in the summer of 2010 we have one window into not only dalit Buddhist identity, but how that identity understands the role of principled nonviolence in their strategic activism, as well as Buddhism as a core construct of identity. Why was principled nonviolence not more influential in the framing of dalit Buddhist response to Khairlanji? Given the notoriously backlogged India court system, appellate reviews of the accused are still being actively pursued almost seven years after the precipitating crime event. But, armed with a basic understanding of the situated history of this ethnographic moment, one can explore the dalit reactions as means of struggling with their own identity paradoxes and normative commitments. IN this way the tragedy of Khairlanji still holds the promise of opportunity.

### **Paradoxes, Complications and Disjuncture: The Analysis of Nonviolent Commitment**

When I talked to TBMSG/Manuski activist Priya in July 2010 as the protests against the Nagpur Bench were in full swing, he told me that there was much anger in the dalit community over the decision. I asked him how TBMSG/Manuski members were reacting and he said "the same as all dalits," meaning that non-Buddhists and Buddhists were one in their response. Immediately I was drawn to the paradox of this statement. Why were dalit Buddhists not taking a moral high-ground, but instead focused on identity justice and structural change. While it was certainly justified that dalits would feel that a government structure that had consistently overlooked the Khairlanji incident to begin with, would invariable and consistently seek to circumvent

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justice at every turn, the fact that the court had ruled against violent retribution for the perpetrators of the Khairlanji massacre, I assumed would be accepted by nonviolent dalit Buddhists with some relief. Yet, Priya himself (along with others from TBMSG/Manuski) were on the organizational front lines of the fight to force the government (in this case the courts) to impose the ultimate punishment on the Khairlanji perpetrators. I asked Priya: "Isn't there an implicit contradiction in dalit Buddhists protesting for the death penalty?" His response was telling - - he simply stated: "Not really. This is about justice." When I protested by asking "since when have Buddhists been concerned with justice?" Priya responded by re-iterating this was a Dalit issue. In effect the Buddhist identity and any examples of Buddhist historical calls for social justice seem to have faded away. Despite the fact that research shows the paucity of the deterrent effect of the death penalty as well as its dubious record of providing 'justice' for victims' families, Priya simply said he knew these ideas to be true theoretically, but that this was different. What made it different? What identity markers superseded Buddhist? For many TBMSG activists clearly Ambedkar dalit identity was primary to other identities. This reminded me of something that Susan Hirsch writes in her gripping account of losing her husband in the terrorist attacks on the U.S. Embassy in Tanzania. "In pursuing one's unilateral interests, including legitimate self-defense, it is easy to put aside even strongly felt values, such as the need to treat others with humanity." Though paradoxical, the dalit Buddhist response to the Nagpur bench's decision to take the death penalty off the table doesn't completely defy explanation, it does point to how commitment to principled nonviolence can break down in the face of victims' collective sense of strategic justice in a punitive sense. Victim identities can overpower normative commitments to nonviolence and stop potentially nonviolent social movements' from engaging in principled nonviolent action. Still, I would argue that in cases of paradoxical commitments to justice and nonviolence, deeply embedded shared value systems remain a requirement for the maintenance of nonviolent action. One could argue that the core social values of Buddhism have not penetrated the dalit Buddhist identity deeply enough, but such argument is fraught with interpretive claims that are too much for the present work.

The story of dalit Buddhists protesting for the implementation of the death penalty, certainly raises paradoxes, disjunctures, and complications for understanding their commitment to nonviolent action. But such paradoxes can be seen as a resource that provides a window into a dalit Buddhist sense of identity justice and draws attention to the need for the collective education on the role of shared norms and

responsibilities. The fact that dalit Buddhists could protest in favor of the implementation of the death penalty signals an uneasy tension between their identity as victim and their identity as Buddhist, but it also points to a lack of collective understanding of, or agreement on, the shared value of nonviolence. Does dalit Buddhism stand for principled nonviolent activism or is dalit the more important signifier? Surely most TBMSG/Manuski activists and leaders would answer that dalit Buddhism stands for principled nonviolence, but the fact that they have themselves never had opportunity to critically engage with this question underscores the reasoning of their fully-strategic response to Khairlanji. While TBMSG/Manuski's foundation of principled nonviolence failed to impose a completely nonviolent strategic commitment in this particular case, continued expression of similar paradox and contradiction in future cases of protest may act to break down the movement's core strength - - an ability to recreate Buddhists with a sense of self-esteem. Long-term the commitment to principled nonviolence is critical to the successful sustenance of dalit Buddhist identity and activism. Nonviolent values not only develop the activism, but they are critical to maintaining activist commitment - the story of Khairlanji exposes the paradoxes of nonviolence while also pointing to the role critical attention to shared values plays in successful activism for change.

### **Conclusions**

Rather than accepting the traditional conflict resolution assumption that needs or values are somehow non-negotiable [see Burton (1993)], this research on nonviolent social movements has argued that values are mediated through discursive processes and that these values are critical to the maintenance of sustained nonviolent action. Narrative storytelling is the point-of-access for both realizing the importance of shared values or norms, and presents the lowest common denominator for accessing the complex processes of social construction. In other words, stories provide access to social change in ways that other forms of discourse do not. While this approach to the field nonviolence might not seem radical, it is. Principled nonviolence has too long been understood as just a precursor, or foundation for, the development of nonviolent action - my case study of TBMSG/Manuski and the events in Khairlanji attempts to open understandings of nonviolence to the critical importance of principled commitments as a ongoing resource for social movement actors actively engage in nonviolent social change.

TBMSG's narrative identity of both newly converted dalit Buddhist and victim of injustice provide untapped opportunities to understand the movement's social justice

ideal and prospects to engage in principled nonviolence to make that ideal real. Despite the many difficulties inherent in focusing on the normative commitments of social actors in conflict situations, such focus has long been lacking in the conflict studies and social movement literatures and, indeed, requires further committed and sustained attention. Nonviolent activism is an important vector for this further research. Narrative constructions, as inseparable from value commitments, are ripe fruit hanging on the tree of social life. As research in peace and conflict studies we must pick this fruit! By understanding the narrative constructions of actors engaged in social conflict those studying them can mediate multiple identities, better explain power asymmetries, and help to realize sustained nonviolent forms of collective action. TBMSG's choice of nonviolent tactics of protest is strategic, but the normative commitments activists in the movement collectively share provide a critical resource to not only develop, but maintain, effective nonviolent engagement with unjust structures. Modern forms of knowledge creation demand both scholarly and activist attention to nonviolent social movements' on-going processes of worldview construction. The pragmatics of strategic choice do not diminish the importance of the attention to norms, rather attention to norms empowers the pragmatic dimensions of strategic choice. This dynamic is mutually enforcing.

## **Notes**

1. The word 'Dalit' means 'broken' or 'downtrodden' in Sanskrit and was "used as far back as 1931 in journalistic writing." Michael, S.M., ed. 1999, 99. Teltumbde credits nineteenth century social reformer Jotirao Phule (1827-1890) with coining the term [see Teltumbde (2010) footnote number 2, 35]. Throughout this paper the term 'dalit' will be used instead of the assumption-laden 'ex-untouchable' as per the preference of this marginalized community.
2. By 'violent' here I am referring to not just direct violence, but cultural and structural violence as well (see Galtung 1969 for further explanation of this important peace studies typology).
3. Docherty (2001) defines the process of worldview formation with this active verb, which, as critical symbolic representation, those outside movements often misunderstand. 'Worldviewing' for Docherty is "a process that defies the contemporary separation of individual and social phenomena" (50). As a "reality-defining processes [that] occur[s] prior to and outside of the issue specific negotiation process" (55) worldviewing is of critical importance to effective conflict resolution and I would argue, principled nonviolent commitment.
4. I believe that the recent events in Egypt (referred to be many as the Arab Spring and its counter-revolutions) bare this fact out quite clearly in practice.
5. See Sponberg. A., 1996, 76. Kantowsky (2003) translates TBMSG slightly differently as the "Union of the Helpers of the Buddhist Great Order of the Three Worlds." Kantowsky,

- op. cit., 135. In 2010, the worldwide movement changed the beginning of its name, upon the request of English leadership, from the Trailokya to Triratna; this not insignificant change established the focus of the community on the three jewels (Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha) as opposed to a more numinous conception of the three realms or Worlds.
6. Ambedkar Buddhism arose in India after the October 1956 conversion of social reformer and first law minister of India, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956). Since much has been written on Dr. Ambedkar and the many political and social movements he spawned, I, here, limit discussion of Dr. Ambedkar to his legacy and influence on the TBMSG movement. For more on Dr. B.R. Ambedkar see Jaffrelot (2005), Queen (1996), Keer (1992), and Zelliott (1969, 1992).
  7. Zunes, Kurtz, and Asher (1999), 1 - emphasis added.
  8. Bondurant (1958), 154.
  9. see Polletta (2006) for a nice discussion of this
  10. The term 'caste Hindu' is used here to denote those Hindus (of both high and low caste) that benefit in social, economic, and/or political ways from the current caste-based status quo in Indian society and as a consequence consider themselves within the Hindu fold.
  11. The Hindu Opinion Online, "Khairlanji : the crime and punishment" (August 23, 2010) - <http://www.hindu.com/2010/08/23/stories/2010082355871100.htm> - accessed 2/25/11.
  12. How quickly this dalit response happened is a matter of some contestation. Teltumbde (2010) in detailing the events of Khairlanji argues that the Jubilee celebrations of Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, as well as, initial assumptions on the part of dalits about the caste elements of the family effected (Bhotmange is not a typical Mahar dalit name) highlights that "caste identity becomes more important than human identity in India, even for Ambedkarite dalits" (107).
  13. <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article4101> - accessed 2/11/11.
  14. Hirsch (2006), 262.

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