



New Buddhism for New Aspirations

Navayana Buddhism of Ambedkar and His Followers

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This article begins with an overview of Navayana Buddhism from two perspectives, that of Ambedkar himself, based on his “Buddhist gospel” The Buddha and His Dhamma, and that of practitioners in Maharashtra, based available academic scholarship. In the case of Ambedkar’s understanding of Buddhism, I will focus mostly on the changes he made to more traditional presentations of Buddhism.

In the case of Maharashtran practitioners, I will attempt to draw some broad conclusions about their relationship to this relatively new religion. The centrality of the figure of Ambedkar in Navayana Buddhism, as well as Navayana Buddhist’s lack of conformity with Ambedkar’s understanding of Buddhist principles as articulated in The Buddha and His Dhamma, will guide me in my conclusions about the ways outside observers might want to move forward in the study of this relatively new religion.

Ambedkar wrote *The Buddha and His Dhamma* with the intent of creating a single text for new Buddhists to read and follow. His introduction outlines four ways in which previous understandings of Buddhist doctrine are lacking:

- The Buddha could not have had his first great realization simply because he encountered an old man, a sick man, and a dying man. It is unreasonable and therefore false to assume that the Buddha did not have previous knowledge of something so common.
- The Four Noble truths “make the gospel of the Buddha a gospel of pessimism.” If life is composed



entirely of suffering then there is no incentive for change.

- The doctrines of no-soul, *karma*, and rebirth are incongruous. It is illogical to believe that there can be *karma* and rebirth without a soul.
- The monk’s purpose has not been presented clearly. Is he supposed to be a “perfect man” or a “social servant”?

As these rather sweeping critiques of Buddhism suggest, Ambedkar was comfortable in the role of consciously restructuring his chosen religion to meet the needs of the Dalit community he spoke for.¹ Several scholars have remarked upon and analyzed this aspect of



N a v a y a n a Buddhism. For example, Adele Fiske and Christopher Emmrich undertook a detailed analysis

of Ambedkar’s use of the traditional Buddhists texts in Pali in writing *The Buddha and His Dhamma*.² Fiske and Emmrich examined Ambedkar’s references in the original version of *The Buddha and His Dhamma* and describe patterns of alteration from the presentation of Buddhism in the Pali canon that they characterize as omission, change in emphasis and changed meaning through interpolation or interpretation.³

Following are examples of the type of changes Ambedkar made to traditional presentations of the Buddha’s teachings and the way in which these changes might support Dalit activism.

Ambedkar’s first major reinterpretation involves the Buddha’s renunciation of worldly life. Whereas traditional biographies of the Buddha emphasize the empathy the young prince felt when he first encountered human suffering, Ambedkar highlights the strength of the Buddha’s social conscience during a conflict over water rights. According to Ambedkar, the Buddha advocated a rational and peaceful resolution of an inter-tribe water conflict but was unable to gain the necessary political leverage because he lacked majority vote. He then went into exile and became a renunciant because it was the only way to prevent his tribe from going to war with their neighbors. Ambedkar omits any mention of old age, sickness, and death (the forms of suffering the Buddha is usually understood to

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have encountered). In this way the Buddha’s renunciation is motivated more by political exigencies rather than a desire to find the ultimate truth, and he becomes a figure not unlike a minority politician in contemporary India. The discussion of water rights was also a familiar topic after the Mahad Satyagraha. These changes, though unorthodox, create a character for the Buddha that might be easily understood by oppressed communities, specifically Dalits.

The Four Noble Truths

Ambedkar interprets the Four Noble truths similarly. His description of the first sermon at Deer Park follows:

“The centre of his *Dhamma* is man and the relation of man to man in his life on earth. This [the Buddha] said was his first postulate. His second postulate was that men are living in sorrow, in misery and

(Ambedkar’s) Eightfold Path, for example, is to remove injustice and inhumanity that man does to man...there is a distinct element of anti-Brahmanism in Ambedkar’s rendering of the Four Noble Truths.

poverty. The world is full of suffering and how to remove this suffering from the world is the only purpose of Dhamma. Nothing else is Dhamma. The recognition of the existence of suffering and to show the way to remove suffering is the foundation and basis of his Dhamma...A religion which fails to recognise this is no religion at all...The Buddha then told them that according to his Dhamma if every person followed (1) the Path of Purity; (2) the Path of Righteousness; and (3) the Path of virtue, it would bring about the end of all suffering.”⁴

Ambedkar makes several obvious changes to early Buddhist doctrine. The first Noble Truth that life is suffering becomes the “second postulate,” and the most important characteristic of Buddhism becomes its concern for human relationships. The second Noble Truth, that suffering arises from mental craving, is also described in social terms as “sorrow, misery and poverty.” In turn he refers to the third Noble Truth regarding the cessation of suffering as the “removal of suffering.” Christopher Queen’s detailed analysis of Ambedkar’s presentation of the Four Noble Truths reveals still more ways in which they have been altered to create a message of social activism. Queen notes that as the Buddha’s teachings continue it becomes clear that the Path of Purity is the Five Precepts, the Path of Righteousness is the Eightfold Path, and the Path of Virtue is the Ten *Paramitas*, or perfections.⁵ Yet Ambedkar does not present any of these concepts in their traditional format. The goal of the Eightfold Path, for example, is “to remove injustice and inhumanity that man does to man,” rather than *nirvana*.⁶ *Nirvana* itself is then described as: (1) a fundamental understanding



“that there was suffering in the world, and (2) a proactive knowledge of “how to remove this suffering and make

happy.”⁷

Buddhism and the Caste System

These changes speak specifically to Dalits in a number of ways. First, there is a distinct element of anti-Brahmanism in Ambedkar’s rendering of the Four Noble Truths. “Nothing else is *Dhamma*,” he states, and “a religion which fails to recognize this is no religion at all.” Although Ambedkar does not criticize other religions in this section—as he does in other chapters of the book—this and other statements bear close resemblance to his earlier attack on Hinduism. Here, Ambedkar again legitimizes the use of Buddhism to oppose traditions that are unsatisfactory. Second, as Queen notes, Ambedkar seems to believe that the traditional presentation of suffering—which places the “blame” on the cravings of each individual—would alienate Buddhism from the socially and politically oppressed.⁸ Thus suffering is described in

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transitory, but more graphic, terms as “sorrow”, “misery”, and “poverty.” These largely social conditions are remedied quite differently from the traditional Buddhist understanding of suffering as an intricate network of mental cravings. This change also speaks of the fact that the traditional focus on craving might have lent itself to manipulation by people in power, who could advocate renunciation instead of response to the materially based claims of the dispossessed. Third, by placing the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the Ten Perfections in a social context he provides religious justification for peoples’ social movements. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, his definition of nirvana is not only easily understandable but also theoretically attainable within a single lifetime.

Concept of Rebirth and the Role of the Monk

Ambedkar’s explanation of *karma* and rebirth further legitimizes both the source and the goal of social action. He defends the concept of rebirth but changes the concept of the soul. Each time a person is reborn his or her soul is divided and recombined with parts of many other peoples’ souls. There is thus no single soul that is reborn over and over again.⁹ In this way Ambedkar establishes that there is no inheritance of traits from one lifetime to the next—a direct rebuttal to the widespread views of caste. This in turn negates the idea that current social injustices are a result of past misdeeds and assures Dalit converts that their new framework does not contain the possibility for religiously sanctioned hierarchy. He also explains that *karma* works only within one lifetime and cannot affect future lives.¹⁰ A this-worldly

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emphasis on *karma* gives added significance to societal changes, as each life is now a unique and unrepeatable opportunity for change and growth. Whereas traditional conceptions of *karma* and rebirth render material changes insignificant on a cosmological scale, Ambedkar’s reinterpretation implies that such changes actually have ultimate importance. In this way oppressed peoples are vindicated in their sense of social outrage and are informed once again of the importance of political or social struggle.

Ambedkar’s reinterpretation of the role of the monk provides a final illustration that Buddhism takes a proactive stance towards radical change. Monks should not be content merely to serve society—they are instead the active participants and creators of history. He writes that the *bhikkhu*’s duties are to proselytize for Buddhism and serve the laity. The *bhikkhu* is commanded specifically to “fight to spread *Dhamma*.”¹¹ “We wage war, O disciples, therefore we are called warriors.” Ambedkar’s Buddha tells his disciples, “Where virtue is in danger do not avoid fighting, do not be mealy-mouthed.”¹² Monks are not hermetic ascetics who are focused on the attainment of otherworldly states. Rather they constitute the driving force behind a revolution in mind and body.

Ambedkar's Buddhism in Practice



The Buddhism one finds in daily life and practice can differ significantly from the principles described in *The Buddha and his Dhamma*.¹³ These differences vary according to location and socioeconomic situation and range from minute reinterpretations to fundamental contradictions. Polarizing concepts include *karma*, rebirth, *dharma*, meditation, spirituality, materialism, politics, individuality and social action. Varying social categories include the urban, rural, educated, uneducated, and in many cases, old and young. Thus, on the one hand forms of Navayana Buddhist practice can differ from each other quite significantly in terms of both form and content. This will be illustrated through a simple comparison between certain studies of rural Buddhists and members of the TBMSG. On the other hand, the figure of Ambedkar provides a clear and unifying link between different Buddhist practitioners.

Buddhism in Two Rural Villages

Two studies of rural villages in Maharashtra show that differences between Navayana Buddhism and Ambedkar's understanding of Buddhism can stem more from the inevitable overlap of religion and culture than from the type of conscious religious reconstruction that Ambedkar engaged in. One must not extrapolate their conclusions onto the rest of the Navayana Buddhist community; however the picture presented is useful in gaining a sense

of the range of Navayana Buddhist practice.

For example, Timothy Fitzgerald concludes that although rural Mahars have begun to refuse to perform traditional duties such as scavenging and have given up the practice of eating beef, their recognition and practice of sub-caste hierarchy and untouchability, lack of intercaste marriage, and worship of Hindu gods and goddesses is evidence that they practice "the kind of Buddhism which has not really changed anybody or anything very radically."¹⁴

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Neera Burra's study of village life provides different detail. She notes that although 70 out of the 102 respondents to her research questionnaire classified themselves as Buddhist, none of them had taken Ambedkar's 22 vows.¹⁵ She argues that this reflects both a lack of knowledge about the vows and a general hesitancy to take oaths that characterizes rural society.¹⁶ Additionally, there were statues of Hindu gods and goddesses—alongside pictures of Ambedkar and the Buddha—in every household she visited.¹⁷ Over half of the people she interviewed said that they prayed to all gods, including Hindu deities, and

she documents the persistence of traditional Hindu concepts of *karma*, *dharma*, and the transmigration of the soul.¹⁸

Burra characterizes the religious practice of rural Mahars as fundamentally Hindu with a Buddhist exterior. For example, she describes how the premarriage activities of the Mahars are still Hindu (one example is matching horoscopes), yet the marriage ceremony itself consists of placing garlands over the bride and groom as they stand in front of pictures of Ambedkar and the Buddha.¹⁹ This dichotomy between private Hindu practice and public Buddhist practice marks other rituals as well.

At the same time, Burra notes that Navayana Buddhists now participate with great enthusiasm in Hindu festivals and ceremonies that were previously forbidden to them.²⁰ This and other positive changes leave her with the conclusion that the Dalit Buddhist movement is a "symbol of identity transformation" rather than a true religious conversion.²¹ "The Buddhist identity is important mainly for the outside world," she writes, "There is an attempt to emphasize one's distinctiveness and this is achieved by different methods. The inner core may remain Hindu but this in no way reflects a betrayal of the cause."²² Thus rural Dalit Buddhist practice is distinguished from other forms of Buddhism primarily by its continued reliance on Hindu themes and rituals.²³

This seems to suggest that the many radical departures from Ambedkar's message are caused by a blurred distinction between Hindu culture and Indian culture. Even the beginning of Ambedkar's political career was marked by ambivalence about what constitutes Hinduism



and what constitutes Indian culture.²⁴ For example he participated, albeit marginally, in a temple entry

campaign—even as he denounced Brahmins and traditional Hindu religiosity in writings such as *Annihilation of Caste*. It should therefore come as no surprise that some rural Buddhists have used their newfound self-confidence to engage in traditionally Hindu forms of worship, as many societal roles that are available for reclamation are also related to Hinduism in some way.

International Linkages

The TBMSG is the Indian branch of the international Buddhist organization named the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), founded in London by Sangharakshita in 1967. The FWBO describes its purpose as “return[ing] to the basic principles of Buddhism and find[ing] ways of living them out in the context of the modern West.”²⁵ The FWBO became involved in the Indian Buddhist movement, particularly in Maharashtra, when several members of its order came to India to teach Buddhism in the late 1970’s. The TBMSG now has twenty centres located throughout India and runs a network of social services organizations.

Fitzgerald goes so far as to assert that Buddhists who are associated with the TBMSG represent the more “spiritual” side of Navayana Buddhism.²⁶ Their interpretation of Buddhism is compatible with Ambedkar’s because it emphasizes rationality, moral action, and social

reform. However, the TBMSG strives for total political nonpartisanship and many of its members view *nirvana* not in materialist terms but as a transcendent state of awareness.

Johannes Beltz’ study of the TBMSG in Maharashtra provides more information on the type of Buddhism that Fitzgerald seems to be describing. He interviewed several members of the TBMSG at a retreat center outside Pune, many of who described a Buddhist message of increased spirituality. For example, one practitioner explained:

“I was born Buddhist. But in reality, no one can be Buddhist without practicing the *dhamma*. To be Buddhist from birth is not possible...I took refuge in the Buddha, the *dhamma*, and the *sangha*. I think that I am on the path of the Buddha. I want to become a *dhammamitra* (a lay leader in the TBMSG). A Buddhist is more than a physical man. He is spiritual...I would like to become 100% Buddhist.”²⁷

Another told him:

“I consider myself Buddhist because I believe not in God but in humanity. I practice Buddhism. I want to positively develop my personality and help others...Through meditation, we augment our state of consciousness to become better men.”²⁸

These statements embody the spirituality and humanism of Buddhism as envisioned by Sangharakshita, the founder of the FWBO. Meditation lies at the center of individual practice, and only through knowing oneself does one enter a state where he or she truly begins to help others. In addition, these practitioners negate a materialistic understanding of the world. “A Buddhist is more than a physical man,” one states, “He is

spiritual.” This explains why “no one can be Buddhist without practicing the *dhamma*”: meditation and action are two aspects of the same teaching, and to engage in one without the other is, according to the TBMSG, to ignore the meaning of Buddhism.

Several of the individuals Beltz interviewed also made a distinction between “Dalit Buddhists” who do not practice and “real Buddhists” who do. “The Dalit movement results in bad social conditions for untouchables,” one *dhammachari* asserts, “It is for politics. The Dalit movement does not have a positive approach to Buddhism...My personal experience is different. I have developed my personality. I do not call myself Dalit. I consider myself Buddhist.”²⁹ An employee at the University of Pune went so far as to state, “The leaders of the Dalit movement are selfish and corrupt. They are demagogues and want to suppress other currents of Buddhist thought. They waste a lot of energy, time, and money...The TBMSG serenely runs the Buddhist movement and continues the work of Dr. Ambedkar with respect....There is no love between the activists.”³⁰

Victory over Caste

The disparate practices of some Maharashtran Buddhists offer a cautionary statement for those who may be eager to equate Ambedkar’s thinking about Buddhism directly with that of Dalit communities. Ambedkar, Ambedkar’s Buddhism, and Buddhist communities are merely the loci for numerous personal and communal interactions that comprise the forms of Navayana Buddhism. In theory, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* would serve as the philosophical, ideological, and religious template for Buddhists, and my own experiences with Navayana



Buddhists in New Delhi would suggest that this is indeed possible. As D. C. Ahir states, “*The Buddha and His*

Dhamma is a true guide for all the Buddhists. It is the best basis for propagating the *Dhamma*, at least in India”.³¹ There are plausible models that would explain how a narrative text such as *The Buddha and His Dhamma* could become the “just governance” for society that Ambedkar holds a good religion should be.³² However, the above review of scholarship suggests that *The Buddha and His Dhamma* does not occupy a central place in all Navayana Buddhists’ lives.

Given the differences in Navayana Buddhist practice, how are we to understand the religion as a whole? The element of Navayana Buddhism that seeks to separate itself from Hinduism provides one link between an uninformed adoption of Buddhism and an almost instantaneous increase in self-esteem and perception of self-worth. Even if converts do not remember each of Ambedkar’s twenty-two vows, for example, they are bound to remember the central theme of rejection of Hinduism. Thus many Dalit Buddhists understand what Buddhism *is not* before they focus on what it *is*. The

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conversion experience can be powerful because the ideological victory over caste is expressed in concrete actions on the part of the convert.

At the same time, however, the shift away from the Hindu caste system is highly nuanced. As Burra’s study shows, the Mahar rejection of caste does not always entail rejection of Hindusim. When the rural Buddhist she studied align themselves with Buddhism they

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adopt a new social and psychological paradigm that can often be characterized foremost by the victory of equality over caste; only secondary is the victory of Buddhist practice over Hindu practice.

As another possibility, Owen Lynch has applied an academic understanding of myth to the development of Navayana Buddhism. He uses it to explain the way that Ambedkar became a cultural hero and icon of Buddhism for the Jatavs in Agra, a group that has significant linguistic and cultural differences from the Mahars. He suggests that there is a “Neo-Buddhist” myth that provides motivation and strategy for the community it serves.

An Exemplary Prophet

Lynch’s interest lies in investigating why and how Ambedkar, a Mahar, was so fully accepted and integrated into Jatav culture. To this end, he provides several comparisons between Jatav myths of origin and a new “myth of origin” that was presented by Ambedkar. He views Ambedkar as a Weberian “exemplary prophet” who has now become the “chief hero” of the myth that he himself created.³³ Lynch seems to imply that the entire “Neo-Buddhist myth” is encapsulated by Ambedkar’s explanation of the origins of the caste system and the way in which Dalits ended up at its bottom. This would not hold true for other Buddhist communities such as the TBMSG, however.

Alternatively, what if the figure of Ambedkar is the defining element of Navayana Buddhism? Even such differing communities as the rural Buddhists examined and the TBMSG share their veneration for him. A public debate between Gopal Guru, a Buddhist and professor at the University of Pune, and *Dhammacari* Lokamitra, a member of the TBMSG, supports this hypothesis. Though these men articulated very different opinions about the relative weight of the “spiritual” versus the “political” aspects of Buddhism, they both returned to Ambedkar for justification of their arguments. Lokamitra wrote, “I am afraid the project Gopal Guru is talking about is not that of Ambedkar but of those who have attempted to use Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism to serve their own political ends”.³⁴ Guru offered the following rejoinder: “Lokamitra and his TBMSG are free to sell their package of spiritual Buddhism and synthesise it with



anything but not with Ambedkar's Buddhism. Because it does not allow such synthesis."³⁵ Both judged the other's

reasoning as flawed specifically on the grounds that it represents a misinterpretation of Ambedkar's message. As Guru acknowledged, he was bothered not so much by the TBMSG's false Buddhist doctrine as he is by the fact that it has been associated with Ambedkar.

Ambedkar's figure fills in the gaps that are left by the explanations of origin and anti-Brahmanism. He is the inspiration, motivation, and justification for the Dalit Buddhist movement. His life illustrates the possibilities of the future, and since his death those possibilities have become the center of much of contemporary Navayana Buddhism. Ambedkar is in this view both founder and standard-bearer of contemporary Navayana Buddhism.

Evaluation and Conclusions

In 1956 Dr. B. R. Ambedkar led over 50,000 Dalits in a mass conversion to Buddhism. This act was the first of many mass conversions of low cast Hindus to Buddhism. Today estimates range from between three million and ten million Buddhists in India, most of whom are Dalit.³⁶

For years there was little scholarly material on Buddhism and the Ambedkarite movement, save a few examples such as the pioneering work of the American historian Eleanor Zelliot.³⁷ Contrast this with a recent conference on Indic Religions in New Delhi held by the International Association of the History of Religions, where there

were two entire panels composed of academics prepared to speak of their research on the subject "Dalits and Buddhism." "Navayana", "Dalit", or "Ambedkarite" Buddhism (depending on who is speaking) is also actively discussed by the worldwide "engaged Buddhist" community. The intellectual discourse surrounding Ambedkar's understanding of Buddhism and those who follow in his footsteps has now grown to the point where it is able to have a fruitful dialogue even within itself.³⁸

In turn, at this point it may be useful for outside observers of Navayana Buddhism to begin to consider not only *what* Navayana Buddhism is but also *how* and *why* we should examine it.

First, a discussion of Navayana Buddhist texts or canon must include all of Ambedkar's writing, not just *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, as a starting point. As the above examples highlight, Ambedkar's life is usually viewed as the embodiment, rather than the vehicle, of the Buddha's teachings. In theory, Ambedkar's significance leads to the logical conclusion that, just as most Buddhists' veneration of Ambedkar is not limited to the events surrounding his conversion, so too the texts which are understood as contributing to Navayana Buddhism should not be limited to *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. In practice, many Buddhists already impart religious significance to Ambedkar's other political and sociological works. This is readily apparent in D.C. Ahir's commentary on the Round Table Conference, for example, which views Ambedkar's comments as the embodiments of the principle of Right Speech.³⁹

Clearly this inclusive approach may have its limits. Are we to view

Ambedkar's doctoral dissertation at Columbia as religious texts? Likely not. Nor do I propose to delineate here between those texts that should be included in a Navayana Buddhist canon and those that should not. Rather this should be understood as an idea to generate discussion and a helpful approach to the study of Ambedkar's Navayana Buddhism. I believe, however, that Buddhist practitioners will ultimately be the final arbiters in this matter.

Second, where are the studies of urban, often professional, Navayana Buddhists and the corresponding surge in online Navayana Buddhist communities? In New Delhi, for example, I came to know several Buddhists whose meditation practice and highly informed understanding of Ambedkar and Buddhism bears little resemblance to the conversions described in some studies of rural Buddhists. There is a need for scholarship of these thriving Navayana Buddhist communities among those who do research in Marathi and Hindi. There are also online forums for Navayana Buddhists and websites on Dalit rights that would provide valuable material for those doing work in English.⁴⁰

Third, an attempt to describe Navayana Buddhism through appeal to the "essential" elements of Buddhism that may exist in early texts must be considered carefully. Surely there are continuities between traditional understandings of Buddhism and Ambedkar's reinterpretation, but whether or not these constitute some "essential" Buddhism to be passed down from movement to movement is unclear. Furthermore, stressing this aspect of Ambedkar's writing when analyzing it in the context of other Buddhist traditions may be overly limiting. This



is not to deny the importance of showing that Ambedkar's interpretation is, in many ways, legitimate from the standpoint

of the Buddha's teachings. Such a project is a necessary part of religious dialogue and reinterpretation. However, one must not lose sight of the "essential" Navayana when determining its relationship to "essential" Buddhism. In this sense it would be a shame if we fail to capitalize on its most salient characteristic: a confident and rational departure from inherited patterns of thought.

Finally, the study of Navayana Buddhism needs to be as interdisciplinary as possible. Why limit the study of Navayana Buddhism to certain disciplines when Ambedkar himself was unencumbered by the traditional boundaries between political, personal, and spiritual empowerment? The modern Buddhist movement in India may be as fundamentally related to economics and development as it is to politics and religion. Take, for example, Amartya Sen's well-known *Development as Freedom*. Seen in

this light, Ambedkar's project might be understood as a project of human development through religious conversion.

Focusing for a moment on the subject of religion and development, two additional suggestions can be made. First, those who wish to study development in India might take the impact of Navayana Buddhism into account. Has conversion had a significant material impact on practitioners' lives and if so, how? Given the fact that Ambedkar's view of religious conversion is integrally tied to his goals of social

identity as Dalit and the past and present connotations that are associated with this. Although thus far the body of writing that examines Ambedkar and Navayana Buddhism has been a positive development with respect to Navayana Buddhism, perhaps now is a good time to remind ourselves that we must be careful not to intellectualize Navayana Buddhism to the extent that we lose sight of the fact that it is fundamentally a religion by and for the politically and socially oppressed.

This paper was presented at the First Conference on Religions in the Indic Civilisation organised in Delhi by CSDS and IAHR from December 18-21, 2003

Endnotes

- 1 See Christopher Queen, "Dr. Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation," in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, Ed. Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. (State University of New York Press 1996), 45 for a useful analysis of Ambedkar as a modern or postmodern man.
- 2 See Adele Fiske and Christoph Emmrich, "The use of Buddhist Scriptures in B. R. Ambedkar's *The Buddha and His Dhamma*", in Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz, eds., *Reconstructing the World: B. R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India* (Oxford University Press 2004). See also Queen 48, and Richard Taylor, "The Ambedkarite Buddhists," in *Ambedkar and the Neo-Buddhist Movement*, Ed. T.S. Wilkinson and M. M. Thomas (Christian Literature Society 1972), 148.
- 3 Fiske and Emmrich, 10.
- 4 B. R. Ambedkar, "The Buddha and His Dhamma," in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. XXI*, Comp. Vasant Moon (Education Department of Maharashtra 1992), at 121-122.
- 5 Queen, 56.
- 6 See Queen, at 57.
- 7 Ibid.

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empowerment for Dalits, it seems like a missed opportunity not to consider this religious movement within the greater scheme of Indian development. This may be true despite the oft-prevailing view of religion as an anathema to progressive societal transformation.

Second, the context in which Navayana Buddhist practice takes place must not be forgotten by outside observers. The picture of human development for Dalits in India is stark. Although I would hesitate before projecting bleak contours on the lives of all Navayana Buddhist communities, it does seem safe to assert that this is at least the general context in which they live, and that even if many Navayana Buddhists who are Dalits have gained upward social mobility they are still aware of their distinct

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- 8 Queen, 59.
- 9 Ambedkar, 333.
- 10 Ambedkar, 340.
- 11 Ambedkar, 447.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Note that the bulk of the research for this paper was completed between May 2000 and May 2001. Although I think the main conclusions still hold, there may be scholarship that is not included here and which would add additional nuance to the picture portrayed.
- 14 Timothy Fitzgerald, "Buddhism in Maharashtra: a Tri-Partite Analysis—A Research Report," in *Dr. Ambedkar, Buddhism, and Social Change*, Ed. A.K. Narain and D. C. Ahir (B. R. Publishing Corporation 1994), 20.
- 15 Neera Burra, "Buddhism, Conversion and Identity: A Case Study of Village Mahars", in *Caste: Its 20th Century Avatar*, ed. M.N. Srinivas (Penguin India 1997), 160.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid., 161.
- 18 Ibid., 161-62.
- 19 Ibid., 165.
- 20 Ibid., 166.
- 21 Ibid., 168.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Fitzgerald, 20.
- 24 See Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Religion, Modernity and Belief* (Princeton University Press 1998), 235.
- 25 Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, "The FWBO and the Buddhist Tradition", available at <http://www.fwbo.org/tradition.html>.
- 26 Ibid., 23.
- 27 Johanez Beltz, "Spiritualiser le Dhamma? L'implantation Contestee du Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha en Inde," *Asiatische Studien Etudes Asiatiques* 4 (1997),1055-1072.
- 28 Ibid., 1063.
- 29 Ibid., 1065.
- 30 Ibid., 1066.
- 31 D. C. Ahir, *Buddhism and Ambedkar*, (Dalit Sahitya Prakashan 1990), 110.
- 32 Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen, for example, provide a useful framework for understanding the inner moral transformation that result from repeated exposure to the Jataka tales. They hold that narrative has the unique ability to "prefigure," "configure", and eventually "transfigure" moral life. See Charles Hallisey and Anne Hansen, "Narrative, Sub-Ethics, and the Moral Life," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24.2 (Fall 1996), 323.
- 33 Owen Lynch, "Dr. B. R. Ambedkar—Myth and Charisma," *The Untouchables in Contemporary India*, Ed. J. Michael Mahar (The University of Arizona Press 1972), 110.
- 34 Dharmachari Lokamitra, "Ambedkar and Buddhism," *Economic and Political Weekly* May 18, 1991, 1304.
- 35 Gopal Guru, "Appropriating Ambedkar", *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 6-13, 1991, 1699.
- 36 See Friends of the Western Buddhist Order, "Reviving Buddhism in India", available at <http://www.fwbo.org/india.html>.
- 37 See Eleanor Zelliott, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement*, 3rd edition 2001, Manohar, New Delhi. I also would like to thank Professor Zelliott for her invaluable contributions to this article, particularly through her understanding of the weaknesses and future strengths of scholarship on Navayana Buddhism.
- 38 See, e.g., Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz, *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, (Oxford University Press 2004) and Gail Omvedt, *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste* (Sage Publications 2004).
- 39 See D. C. Ahir, *Buddhism and Ambedkar* (Dalit Sahitya Prakashan 1990).
- 40 An example of an online forum is The Buddhist Circle, at Yahoo! Groups. Websites include www.ambedkar.org, www.navayana.org, and www.ambedkar.net. I would also like to thank Mangesh Dahiwalé and the other members of The Buddhist Circle who were a tremendous help and inspiration to me while I was living in New Delhi. □

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