

## **Ambedkar and Re-Emergence of Buddhism in India**

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### **Abstract**

Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar is known as the pioneer of re-emergence of Buddhism in India. He has provided a strong force in giving momentum to this movement. It was because of Ambedkar's efforts that the movement for the Buddhism gained momentum in India. Moreover, Ambedkar deserve special credit for the re-emergence of Buddhism in India because he was the main force to provide a particular direction to Buddhism.

### **Paper**

Buddhism was once dominant through much of India; it had, however, declined in India due to a number of reasons. The Buddhist revival began in India in 1891, when the Sri Lankan Buddhist leader Anagarika Dharmapala founded the Maha Bodhi Society. The Maha Bodhi Society mainly attracted upper-caste people.

In the early 20th century, the Barua Buddhists of Bengal under the leadership of Kripasaran Mahasthvir (1865–1926),

founder of the Bengal Buddhist Association in Calcutta (1892), established viharas in cities such as Lucknow, Hyderabad, Shillong and Jamshedpur.<sup>[4]</sup> The number of Buddhists in the Lucknow district was 73 in 1951.<sup>[5]</sup> These Buddhists were mainly Barua families who came to Lucknow from Chittagong after the partition of Bengal in 1905.

In Lucknow, Bodhanand Mahastvir (1874–1952) advocated Buddhism for Dalits. Born Mukund Prakash in a Bengali Brahmi

family, he was orphaned at a young age, and was raised in Varanasi by an aunt. He was initially attracted to Christianity, but became a Buddhist after a meeting with Buddhist monks from Ceylon at a Theosophical Conference in Varanasi. He later lived in Lucknow where he came in contact with the Barua, many of whom were employed as cooks by the British.

In 1914, Prakash was ordained Bodhanand Mahastavir in Calcutta in the presence of Kripasaran Mahastvir. He began preaching Buddhism in Lucknow. He founded the *Bharatiye Buddh Samiti* in 1916, and set up a vihara in 1928. In his book *Mula Bharatavasi Aur Arya* ("Original Inhabitants and Aryans"), Mahastavir stated that the shudras were the original inhabitants of India who were enslaved by the Indo-Aryan peoples.

Bodhanand Mahastavir wrote another book on Buddhist rituals called *Baudha Dvicharya*. His associate, Chandrika Prasad

Jigyasu, founded the *Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan*. The two co-authored a book on the life and teaching of the Buddha.

Acharya Ishvardatt Medharthi (1900–1971) of Kanpur also supported the cause of the Dalits. He studied Pali at Gurukul Kangri and Buddhist texts were well known to him. He was initiated into Buddhism by Gyan Keto and the Lokanatha in 1937. Gyan Keto (1906–1984), born Peter Schoenfeldt, was a German who arrived in Ceylon in 1936 and became a Buddhist. Medharthi strongly criticised the caste system in India. He claimed that the Dalits ("Adi Hindus") were the ancient rulers of India and had been trapped into slavery by Aryan invaders.

In 1890, Iyothee Thass founded the Sakya Buddhist Society (also known as the Indian Buddhist Association). The first president of the Indian Buddhist Association was the German-born American Paul Carus, the author of *The Gospel of Buddha* (1894).

Thass, a Tamil Siddha physician, was the pioneer of the Dalit movement. He argued that Tamil Dalits were originally Buddhists. He led a delegation of prominent Dalits to Henry Steel Olcott and asked for his help in the reestablishment of Tamil Buddhism. Olcott helped Thass to visit Sri Lanka, where he received diksha from Bhikkhu Sumangala Nayake. After returning to India, Thass established the *Sakya Buddhist Society* in Chennai with branches in many places, including Karnataka. Thass established a weekly magazine called *Oru Paisa Tamilan* ("One Paisa Tamilian") in Chennai in 1907, which served as a newsletter linking all the new branches of the Sakya Buddhist Society. The magazine discussed traditions and practices of Tamil Buddhism, new developments in the Buddhist world, and the Indian subcontinent's history from the Buddhist point of view.

B.R. Ambedkar's first acquaintance with Buddha's life, teachings and philosophy was

through Dada Keluskar's book on the life of the Buddha. Dada Keluskar, a leading litterateur of his time, had presented the book to Ambedkar at a public meeting held to felicitate Ambedkar on his passing the English fourth standard examination. Ambedkar was the first in his community to do so.

After a "close study of all religions" for 35 years, Ambedkar was convinced that the novelty of teachings, leadership qualities, scientific temper, logical arguments make "Religion of the Buddha", the ideal religion for the "modern man who knows science". He was convinced that "Buddhism was the only religion" which could save society "awakened by science" and "without which the society would perish".

One of the reasons for the "slow advance of Buddhism", according to Ambedkar, is its vast literature, and the other hurdle in its growth is that "it has no such thing as a Bible, as the Christians have". It was to fill

this gap that he undertook the task of writing *The Buddha and His Dhamma* in a lucid and clear way. He based his book on Ashvaghosha's *Buddhavitta* (*Buddhacharita*). The manuscript was completed just three days before his death. Eleanor Zelliot says in this connection that B.R. Ambedkar thought that with the advancement of Buddhism there will be "a realization of the value of the figure of the Buddha as focus of the new Buddhism. Within this framework let us briefly look into the history of the great icon and constitutionalist Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar."1

Though in all humility, Ambedkar does not claim any originality and says that his book is a product of "compilation and assembly plant", his treatment of the issues relating to Buddhism is quite novel, logical and clear. He does not brush aside the vexing questions relating to Buddhism but takes them head on. For example, he rejects the popular theory that Buddha became a recluse after seeing a sick, an old and a dead

body and advocates a more authentic version of it. He also refutes the commonly held view that Buddhism is a pessimistic religion, and shows how the Buddha is able to reconcile between his doctrine of *Anatamvada* — no soul theory, and the doctrine of Karma. Finally, he also dwells on the need, necessity and role of Bhikkus — monks in Buddhism. Dhanajay Dheer says in this regard, Ambedkar wanted a kind of reconciliation between the religion and humanity"2

He not only explains the expressions used by the Buddha but also uses current terminology to give it a constructive, critical and modern interpretation. For instance, while explaining the notion of conversion, he makes a distinction between the "conversion to the order of Bhikkus called Sangha" and "conversion of a householder as an Upaska or lay follower of the Buddha's Dhamma". The norms for the two are different. While Bhikkus can be punished for violation of the norms, for the

Upaska they are just precepts. *Pokka* (*Upeksha*), one of the virtues taught by Buddha, is interpreted by Ambedkar not as indifference as is usually done but as detachment. This interpretation gives a new dimension to the virtue *Upeksha*.

The center of Ambedkar's life was his devotion to the liberation of the backward classes and he struggled to find a satisfactory ideological expression for that liberation. He talked a great deal about religion but went beyond that concept. Ambedkar believed that in the modern world the priority must be institutional liberation. The struggle for liberation, traditionally symbolized by the solitary renouncer in the forest, or by Gautama Buddha sitting alone beneath the bodhi tree, had to be transformed into a struggle against institutionalized bondage. For Ambedkar, those were not only those karmic hindrances that conditioned the individual's consciousness from one lifetime to another. They were also institutionalized realities that required a political solution. For this, as M.M.Thomas says: "Ambedkar announced his intention to convert to a different religion and exhorted his followers to leave Hinduism. He would repeat his message at numerous public meetings across India.<sup>3</sup>

After publishing a series of books and articles arguing that Buddhism was the only way for the Untouchables to gain equality, Ambedkar publicly converted on 14 October 1956, at Deekshabhoomi, Nagpur. He took the three

refuges and Five Precepts from a Buddhist monk, Bhadant U Chandramani, in the traditional manner, and in his turn administered them to the 600,000 of his followers who were present. The conversion ceremony was attended by Medharathi, his main disciple Bhoj Dev Mudit, and Mahastvir Bodhanand's Sri Lankan successor, Bhante Pragyanand. Ambedkar asked Dalits not to get entangled in the existing branches of Buddhism, and called his version Navayana or 'Neo-Buddhism'. Ambedkar would die less than two months later, just after finishing his definitive work on Buddhism.

Many Dalits employ the term "Ambedkar(ite) Buddhism" to designate the Buddhist movement, which started with Ambedkar's conversion.<sup>[6]</sup> Many converted people call themselves "-Bauddha" i.e. Buddhists.

After receiving ordination, Ambedkar gave *dhamma diksha* to his followers. The ceremony included 22 vows given to all new

converts after Three Jewels and Five Precepts. On 14 October 1956 at Nagpur, Ambedkar performed another mass religious conversion ceremony at Chandrapur.

These are some vows which were prescribed by Ambedkar

1. I shall have no faith in Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara, nor shall I worship them.
2. I shall have no faith in Rama and Krishna, who are believed to be incarnation of God, nor shall I worship them.
3. I shall have no faith in Gauri, Ganapati and other gods and goddesses of Hindus, nor shall I worship them.
4. I do not believe in the incarnation of God.
5. I do not and shall not believe that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this to be sheer madness and false propaganda.
6. I shall not perform *Shraddha* nor shall I give *pind*.
7. I shall not act in a manner violating the principles and teachings of the Buddha.
8. I shall not allow any ceremonies to be performed by Brahmins.
9. I shall believe in the equality of man.
10. I shall endeavour to establish equality.
11. I shall follow the Noble Eightfold Path of the Buddha.
12. I shall follow the ten *paramitas* prescribed by the Buddha.
13. I shall have compassion and loving-kindness for all living beings and protect them.
14. I shall not steal.
15. I shall not tell lies.
16. I shall not commit carnal sins.
17. I shall not take intoxicants like liquor, drugs, etc.
18. I shall endeavour to follow the Noble Eightfold Path and practice

compassion and loving-kindness in everyday life.

19. I renounce Hinduism, which disfavors humanity and impedes the advancement and development of humanity because it is based on inequality, and adopt Buddhism as my religion.

20. I firmly believe the Dhamma of the Buddha is the only true religion.

21. I consider that I have taken a new birth.

22. I solemnly declare and affirm that I shall hereafter lead my life according to the teachings of Buddha's Dhamma.

The Buddhist movement was somewhat hindered by Dr. Ambedkar's death so shortly after his conversion. It did not receive the immediate mass support from the Untouchable population that Ambedkar had hoped for. Division and lack of direction among the leaders of the Ambedkarite movement have been an additional

impediment. According to the 2001 census, there are currently 7.95 million Buddhists in India, at least 5.83 million of whom are Buddhists in Maharashtra.<sup>[13]</sup> This makes Buddhism the fifth-largest religion in India and 6% of the population of Maharashtra, but less than 1% of the overall population of India.

The Buddhist revival remains concentrated in two [states](#): Ambedkar's native Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh — the land of Bodhanand Mahastavir, Acharya Medharthi and their associates.

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