

Buddhism in Modern India

T Vijayendra

[This article questions the normal understanding that Buddhism died in India around 8th c. and was brought back to India from Sri Lanka in the 20th c. The fact is that a major trend of Buddhism, the Mahayana, got absorbed in India in the Nirguna Sampradaya of the medieval saints tradition. This tradition was mainly taken up by the artisan castes in India. Ambedkar's revival of ancient Buddhism has not helped the Dalits. It only helped some middle-class Dalits as it did in Sri Lanka. This was similar to Hindu revivalism, harking back to Vedas, which ultimately only helped the Hindu middle class to inherit power from the British as well created the Hindu-Muslim divide with tragic consequences.

The point of choosing from a tradition is not between rationalism and irrationalism, theism and atheism or materialism and idealism. The real choice is between authoritarian and anti-authoritarian traditions. And that is what people choose. As a thumb rule any tradition that is sectarian or ignores the multicultural/multi-religious composite identity of present India is likely to be harmful. More specifically, any tradition that ignores the medieval period, ignores Islam, the Saint tradition of this period including the Islamic tradition of Sufism, the Sikh tradition and Lingayat tradition of South, and harks back to ancient India, is likely to be of no use or harmful to the people. Finally, it is the antiauthoritarian tradition that leads to secular themes in literature, philosophy and organizations.]

Why do statues of Ambedkar have his index finger pointing outward? Because he restarted the Wheel of Dharma of Buddhism (with his finger in its spokes) which had stopped in India for centuries! So the story goes. The mythology of resurgence of Buddhism in modern India is very charming and romantic.

It begins with a boy working in a field in Konkan (Goa) who reads life of Buddha in a torn Marathi newspaper. He is so charged that he travels to Nepal (via Pune, Banaras, studying Sanskrit and Pali) which is the birth place of Buddha, in search of Buddhism, only to find that he has to go to Ceylon (Sri Lanka today) to look for it. Undaunted, he travels to Ceylon, becomes Buddhist, becomes a scholar. Back in India, teaches Pali at Calcutta University, goes to Baroda, meets James Wood of Harvard University and ends up editing and translating a Buddhist tome at Harvard which was published as one of the volumes in the Harvard Oriental Series. He came back to India and taught at Gujarat University. Then the Salt Satyagraha, six years of jail and then to Banaras Hindu University. Towards the end of his life he decides to end his life in the Jain way only to be persuaded by Gandhi to come and live in Sevagram where he breathed his last. Acharya Dharmanand Kosambi (1876-1947) remains one of the greatest scholars of Buddhism and Jainism that India has ever produced. He was also father of an equally illustrious son, Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi!

BUDDHISM IN SRI LANKA

What did Kosambi find in Sri Lanka? How come Buddhism was flourishing there? There lies another romance. On May 18, 1880 two very colourful persons arrived in Sri Lanka. One was a New England puritan called Col. Henry Steele Olcott (1832-1907) and the other was an Occultist called Mme Helena Petrovna

Blavatsky (1831-1891). They identified themselves as Buddhists but not 'with the sorry state of Buddhist community' that was there. They created an 'esoteric' variety of Buddhism that was in essence same as Vedanta, because they already had founded the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875. In fact, within a month, on June 17, 1880, they created the Buddhist Theosophical Society.

Olcott had a missionary zeal in education. He had already created agriculture education in the USA. Here he campaigned for the Buddhist children to have access to English medium education, which was a privilege enjoyed by the Christians only. In 1881 he wrote the Buddhist Catechism and also created the Buddhist Educational Association. He founded the Ananda College at Colombo (1886), Mahinda College at Galle (1892) and Dharmaraja College at Kandy (1887). In 1889 he went to Japan and brought together 12 Buddhist sects together and organised a convention of Southern Buddhists of Burma, Siam and Ceylon. This was the Buddhism that young Kosambi found flourishing in Sri Lanka. The modern Sinhala bourgeoisie/middle class is largely a product of this English medium education.

In 1880 a young Sinhala boy came under the influence of Olcott. Son of a furniture merchant, the boy was impressed by the simplicity of Buddhist monks. Olcott took the boy to Adyar in 1884 and brought him back in 1886 to collect funds for the Buddhist Educational Association. The young Bhikku Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) was moved by the plight of rural people. He became a great Buddhist scholar and propagandist. It was he who brought Buddhism to India.

BUDDHISM COMES BACK TO INDIA

In the year 1891 Maha Bodhi Society was established by Anagarika Dharmapala, the great Buddhist Missionary who pioneered the Buddhist Revival Movement in India at enormous personal sacrifice.

Before the formation of Maha Bodhi Society, the Buddhism in India was in a chaotic condition. Holy places connected with the life of the Buddha were in a dilapidated condition. The neglected Buddhist shrines were considered as show pieces and were under the control of non-Buddhists. Dharmapala's heart broke when he saw the lamentable condition of Bodhagaya Temple. It was then in the possession of a Hindu Mahant. He made a firm resolution to recover Bodhagaya Temple and other places of Buddhism and spread Buddha Dharma in the land of its birth. And with this determination he founded the Maha Bodhi Society.

The movement of Buddhist revival initiated by Dharmapala spread in many parts of India and the branches of the society were established in Sarnath, Bodhagaya, Calcutta, Madras and Sanchi. He influenced many scholars, among them, were Maha Pandit Rahula Sankritya-yama, Bhadant Anand Kausala-yayan, Jagdish Kasyap and Dharma-rakshita, all trained in Sri Lanka and who

propagated Buddhism in India by translating Buddhist religious books which were lost in India for centuries.

Dharmapala established Upasana centres, libraries, schools, colleges, orphanages & hospitals etc. in India and Sri Lanka for the general public. He was a great patriot and unflinching advocate of independence both in India and Sri Lanka. He helped India to rediscover Buddha and took pride in Buddhism and Buddhist culture. The present flourishing condition of Bodhagaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar & Sanchi and many other sacred places of Buddhism in India are the direct result of Dharmapala's untiring and selfless efforts.

He died on 29th April 1933 at Sarnath. His last words were: "Let me die soon. Let me be reborn. I can no longer prolong my agony, I would like to be bom again 25 times to spread Lord Buddhadhamma."

BHIMRAO RAMJI AMBEDKAR (1891-1956)

Ever since the 1935 Depressed Classes Conference, when he had shocked Hindu India with the declaration that though he had been born a Hindu he did not intend to die one, Ambedkar had been giving earnest consideration to the question of conversion. Further consideration made him increasingly convinced that there was no future for the Untouchables within Hinduism, that they would have to adopt another religion, and that the best religion for them to adopt was Buddhism. Some scholars think that he was influenced by John Dewey, the American philosopher who was his teacher. In 1950 he visited Sri Lanka at the invitation of the Young Men's Buddhist Association, Colombo, where he addressed a meeting of the World Fellowship of Buddhists in Kandy and appealed to the Untouchables of Sri Lanka to embrace Buddhism. In 1951, he wrote an article defending the Buddha against the charge that he had been responsible for the decrease in women's status in ancient India. The same year, he compiled the Bauddha Upasana Patha, a small collection of Buddhist devotional texts.

In 1955, he founded the Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha or Buddhist Society of India. Addressing the thousands of Untouchables who had assembled for the occasion, he declared that henceforth he would devote himself to the propagation of Buddhism in India. He also announced that he was writing a book, *'The Buddha and His Dhamma'*, explaining the tenets of Buddhism in simple language for the benefit of the common man. *The Buddha and His Dhamma* was published after his death in November 1957. It has been described as his magnum opus.

On 14 October 1956, Ambedkar took the 'Three Refuges and Five Precepts' from a Buddhist monk in the traditional manner and then, in turn, administered them to the 3,80,000 men, women, and children who had come to Nagpur in response to his call. Ambedkar died on 6 December 1956.

Although Ambedkar had been a Buddhist for only seven weeks, during that period he probably did more for the promotion of Buddhism than any other Indian since Ashoka. At the time of his death three quarters of a million Untouchables had become Buddhists, and in the months that followed hundreds of thousands more took the same step despite the uncertainty and confusion that had been created by the sudden loss of their leader.

WHY DID REVIVAL OF BUDDHISM FAIL TO HELP THE DALITS?

Ambedkar's contribution to the cause of Dalits has undoubtedly been the most significant event in 20th c. India. His conversion to Buddhism shook India and gave an enormous sense of pride to the Dalits. It also strengthened the liberals among caste Hindus who were uncomfortable/ashamed of the practice of untouchability in India and oppressions of the Dalits. The socialist and the communist trends in India were also strengthened. It should also be remembered that Ambedkar played a big role in drafting the Indian Constitution with affirmative justice(reservation) clauses in it.

While Ambedkar is still a very important name in Dalit's struggle, Buddhism has not played any significant role in it. Certainly not the kind of role it played for the Sinhala middle classes. Among the lower- income, rural neo- Buddhists there is practically no change in the world view. Their village Buddhism tends to make new gods out of Buddha and Ambedkar and fit them into Hindu pantheon. Even the ideas of purity and pollution directed at castes 'lower' than themselves remain widespread. The fault is not entirely theirs. Buddhist Viharas in poor Dalit areas are neglected and priest/Buddhist Bhikkus never go there. Dalits have repeatedly demanded that they be taught at least some Buddhist prayers. But no one comes. It is only the more educated, politically mobilised minority among the neo-Buddhists who take the scientific temper of the Buddhist teaching into their lives. In simpler words it means it helped them acquire middle-class status.

HINDU REVIVALISM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The revival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and later in India bears a marked resemblance to Hindu revivalism in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Like in Sri Lanka, they, the middle classes, faced the criticism and threat of Christianity. They faced two contrary pulls. On one hand they wanted the colonial jobs and to socialise with the colonial masters, on the other they did not want to become Christians as some of their more daring countrymen did. The way out was Hindu reform in the form of *Brahmo Samaj* and *Arya Samaj*. Undoubtedly these reforms also served the cause of anti-colonial struggles. Similar mix of the reforms took place all over the country. Most of these reforms were aimed at educated middle classes though they did talk in the name of the country as a whole. The important fact is that they all harked back to ancient India, back to the authority of the Vedas, ignored the medieval period of saints and remained authoritarian and sectarian. They also implied that the plight of the Hindu society

was due to Muslim invasion. This led to, even in the 19th century, Hindu-Muslim divide in Western UP.

Both Gandhi and Tagore were aware of this problem. So while Gandhi called himself a Sanatan Hindu, he was very much influenced by Tolstoy and anti-authoritarian Christians such as Quakers. So he sought and found out such traditions in Hinduism and used them effectively both in South Africa and later in India. He was, therefore, able to work and inspire people from a wider section of Indian society. Tagore had Acharya Kshiti Mohan Sen with him at Shantiniketan, who was probably the greatest scholar of his time on medieval religious movement in India. His great work, '*Madhyayuger Sadhana*' influenced Tagore. Tagore, himself, with his sense of music, was interested and learnt a large range of Indian folk music ranging from boatmen's song in Bengal to Panjabi Tappa. Most of it was from rebel, anti-authoritarian religious tradition of Indian society. The important thing to note is that it was relatively less sectarian and often cut across the Hindu-Muslim divide.

However, in as much as the leadership of the movement was largely middle class it remained culturally revivalist, authoritarian and sectarian. As independence began to loom over the horizon, particularly after the 1937 assembly election when only propertied classes voted, the sectarianism articulated vigourously, fighting for inheriting the rule from the British and led to well known tragic consequences.

Ambedkar found that his community was losing out and he was desperately looking for cultural rejuvenation of the community. For a variety of personal and historical reasons, some of which, has been outlined above, he chose Buddhism. He died within months of the conversion and all he could contribute was his book, '*Buddha and his Dharma*'. It remains marginal to the Dalit movement. Like the Hindu reform movement, Ambedkar also harked back to ancient India. He too, having been exposed to Western education had no respect for the culture of his people. Thus, addressing his people, 'tolerance of insults and tyranny...has killed the sense of retort and revolt. Vigour and ambition have completely vanished from you...all of you have become helpless, unenergetic and pale. Everywhere there is an atmosphere of defeatism and pessimism...'. His response to medieval saints was that they did not oppose caste system, completely ignoring the cultural tradition of his own people. He was not unaware of it. His own father was a follower of Kabir. Thus his Buddhism, a product of the New England puritanism of Olcott and Deweyan rationalism could only help a Dalit middle class to rise but could not help the Dalit poor. Because, one must not forget, *Buddhism too is an authoritarian religion!*

WHAT HAPPENED TO BUDDHISM IN INDIA?

The Chinese traveller Heiun Tsang gives evidence, that in the 7th century, Buddhism, particularly its *Mahayana* sect was flourishing in North India. What

happened to Buddhism after that? There is no clear picture about it, but it could not have vanished without a trace.

It is said that Buddhism left India due to Vedantic and Mimamsak Acharyas like Shankaracharya, Kumaril and Udayan. While it is historically untrue, what it means is that the world of Pandits and intellectuals lost faith in it. But ordinary people were never interested in its theology. So when Buddhism lost its patronage, many Buddhist Mathas got converted to Shaiva Mathas and even today millions of people worship there.

Buddhism itself turned to attract people through Tantra, magic etc. During 9th and 10th centuries in the Nepal terai region a mixture of Shaiva and Buddhist Sadhana gave rise to Nath Panthi yogis. In Nepal even today Buddha and Shiva are respected equally. The founder of *Nathpanthis* was Gorakhnath. There is a tradition that Gorakhnath had a meeting with Allamprabhu, the founder of the Lingayat tradition in south at the Srishailam hill in the present day Andhra Pradesh. Thus, the winds of change was flowing across land.

There was a continuous pressure for religions to turn towards people and people's language. In the *Apabhramsh* (pre-modern language) literature one finds Buddhist songs and couplets. Later the metaphors keep on reappearing in many saints' writings. The culmination of this trend came with Kabir and Nirguna tradition. Kabir and many of his successors like Dadu and Jayasi grew in Islamic social atmosphere. Sufis had spread in many parts of India and most of these saints were familiar with their ideas. Later in Guru Nanak's travelogues there are scores of encounters with Sufis. Sikhism also created the Granth Sahib - a collection of all the important Saints' songs and poems till then in the Nirgun tradition. This tradition did not accept the authority of the vedas and Gita. Majority of the saints in this tradition came from the artisan castes.

There was also the tradition of Krishna Kavya, written mainly in *Braj*. This too had an all India spread. For instance Krishna Kavya in *Braj* was written in Kerala! Bengal and Orissa had also a very big *Braj* tradition. The tradition of Ram Bhakti was equally widespread. These accepted the authority of the vedas and Gita. Many saints in this tradition were Brahmins like Surdas and Tulsidas.

Scholars often use the term Bhakti Movement for the medieval saints movement. The Indian tradition tends to call it saints movement. The reason is that there were many trends in it. One way to look at is to differentiate between trends that accept the authority of the Vedas and Gita. The others the 'Ved Bahya' tradition does not. Maybe, it is the latter, the anti-authoritarian tradition that represents the continuation of the Buddhism in India.

An important element in anti-authoritarian traditions is the use of secular themes. In the Sufi tradition love among different caste and communities was used to establish that all are equal in the kingdom of God and that one does not need intermediaries like Mulla or Pandit to reach the God. Kabir repeatedly made

fun of Brahmins and Mullas and of Sanskrit. These saints constantly used images from daily life of ordinary peasants, and artisans. This attitude gets reflected in relatively recent poets like Ghalib. If anything these traditions are the more important precursors of secular literature, ideology and organisations.

Today, the working people, both rural and urban, particularly those from artisan castes have inherited these traditions. Most workers do not distinguish between different traditions. In general they respect all (the Hindu pantheon!). But many stick to the main tradition of their caste and generally speaking the artisan castes belong to the Nirgun tradition. In any working-class district, groups of workers gather and sing these songs. Weekly market pavement bookshops often carry 'chap' literature of these saints. These traditions articulate themselves in various festivals and day-to-day cultural life of the ordinary people. These traditions are also found among the wives and parents of many of these 'modern' westernised middle-class people who reject them, and who swear by the esoteric ancient India or atheistic/materialistic modernism.

The Hindu revivalist movement harked back to ancient India because the middle classes, being exposed to English education, facing the criticism of Christianity felt ashamed and had contempt towards their 'illiterate' countrymen. They also blamed the Muslim invasion for the loss of power of Hindus. Such revivalism was thus sectarian and led to the Hindu-Muslim divide on one hand and on the other it looked down people's tradition of a multi-religious composite culture. ✍✍✍✍