



Ambedkar's Vision

The Buddhist revival in India ignited by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar more than fifty years ago has brought millions of the country's most impoverished and marginalized people to the Buddhist path. There is much we can learn from them, says **Alan Senauke**.

(Facing page) Dr. B.R. Ambedkar painted on a wall in Bangalore, India



With justice on our side, I do not see how we can lose our battle. The battle to me is a matter of joy... For ours is a battle not for wealth or for power. It is a battle for freedom. It is a battle for the reclamation of the human personality.

— Dr. B.R. Ambedkar,
All-India Depressed Classes Conference, 1942

HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT, a modern Buddhist revolution is gaining ground in the homeland of Shakyamuni. It's being led by Indian Buddhists from the untouchable castes, the poorest of the poor, who go by various names: neo-Buddhists, Dalit Buddhists, Navayanists, Ambedkarites. But like so much in their lives, these names carry a subtle odor of condescension that suggests their kind of Buddhism is something less than the real thing.

In the children's hostels and schools of Nagpur or modest *viharas* in Mumbai's Bandra East slums and the impoverished Dapodi neighborhood in Pune, one finds people singing simple

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Dalit children at a nursery school run by the Indian wing of Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (now called Triratna Buddhist Community)

Pali chants, studying dharma, and meditating—with an image of the Buddha and a photo of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar adorned with garlands of fresh flowers. During a two-week visit to India, even in the grimmest of circumstances I could feel their joy in the dharma and their hunger for deeper practice and understanding. The Buddha was clear: “I teach about suffering and the end of suffering.” For those who suffer day after day, year after year, this message is hope itself.

The 2001 census puts India’s Buddhist population at eight million, more than 90 percent from the untouchable communities; some scholars suggest that the number of uncounted or undeclared Buddhists is around thirty million. Buddhist communities are scattered across the nation, with the largest concentration in the state of Maharashtra.

“*Jai Bhim!*” is how Indian Buddhists greet each other. It means “Victory to Bhim”—the founder of their movement, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar.

Ambedkar was born in 1891 to a poor but educated family of Mahars, the largest untouchable caste in Maharashtra. Untouchables were excluded from many aspects of ordinary Hindu life, usually barred from entering temples, going to school, or even living within the boundaries of rural villages. Today, the numerous Dalit communities—differentiated by region, ethnicity, and subcaste—remain largely confined to occupations such as butchering, leatherwork, sweeping, and the removal of rubbish, human waste or dead animals. These jobs are seen as impure activities that are “polluting” to



higher castes, and that pollution is viewed as somehow contagious.

Fortunately for the young Ambedkar, his father served in the colonial Indian Army, and he became one of the first untouchables to attend an Indian university. By his early thirties he had earned doctorates from Columbia

University and the London School of Economics, and a place at the bar in Gray’s Inn, a cornerstone of the British legal establishment. The extreme prejudice that Ambedkar experienced not only as boy, but later, despite his academic achievements, is hard for many of us in the West to imagine, even in light of our own history of racism. When he returned to India to practice law in Baroda, he was one of the best-educated men in the country, but, as an untouchable, he was unable to find housing and prohibited from dining with his colleagues. Clerks tossed files onto his desk for fear of his “polluting” touch.

Caste means hereditary bondage passed from generation to generation under a dominant Brahmanic society. Contrary to the Buddhist meaning of these same words, in this Hindu system “karma” means fate or the caste one is born into, and “dharma” means the duty to live out one’s life within



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PHOTO: ROSHI JOAN HALIFAX



Walking Buddha statue, nearly sixty feet tall, at Nagarjuna Training Institute, also known as Nagaloka, in Nagpur

the confines of caste responsibilities. This duty includes strict endogamy, or marriage only within one's caste.

It was Ambedkar who dubbed the untouchables Dalits—meaning people who are “broken to pieces.” Other names have been suggested, each problematic, seen as demeaning by one group or another: Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes—accounting for some 300 million people, or 25 percent of India's population—are the sanitized terms used in the Indian constitution; untouchable is a legally proscribed status; ex-untouchable is euphemism. Mahatma Gandhi's term *harijan*, which means “children of god,” is dismissed as patronizing by adults who hardly feel themselves blessed by any divine presence.

While Gandhi was forging a nonviolent anticolonial movement, Ambedkar—who often clashed with Gandhi—worked for human rights and the annihilation of caste as essential to what many saw as an otherwise elite-driven nationalism. After years of attempted collaboration with reformist Hindus, including Gandhi, Ambedkar, a member of the Bombay legislature and a leader of the Mahar conference, organized a

1927 *satyagraha* (meaning, roughly, “truth force”) of thousands to draw water and drink from the Chowdar Tank, a reservoir closed to untouchables despite a 1923 resolution of the Bombay Council. That same year, Ambedkar took the radical symbolic step of publicly burning the *Manusmṛti*, the Brahmanic code of caste duty, which he and other Dalit leaders saw as key to the social, economic, religious, and political oppression of the untouchables.

Though untouchability was legally abolished under India's secular constitution in 1950, the reality is not much improved today. Consider Hillary Maxwell's report in a June 2003 edition of the online “National Geographic News”:

India's untouchables are relegated to the lowest jobs, and live in constant fear of being publicly humiliated, paraded naked, beaten, and raped with impunity by upper-caste Hindus seeking to keep them in their place. Merely walking through an upper-caste neighborhood is a life-threatening offense.

Human rights abuses against these people, known as Dalits, are legion. A random sampling of headlines in mainstream Indian newspapers tells their story: “Dalit boy beaten to death for plucking flowers;” “Dalit tortured by cops for three days;” “Dalit ‘witch’ paraded naked in Bihar;” “Dalit killed in lock-up at Kurnool;” “7 Dalits burnt alive in caste clash;” “5 Dalits lynched in Haryana;” “Dalit woman gang-raped, paraded naked;” “Police egged on mob to lynch Dalits.”

By 1935, Ambedkar had concluded that the Brahmanic caste system could not be reformed even with support from most liberal-minded Hindus. Caste oppression was not an artifact of Brahmanism, but rather its essence. Ambedkar urged the untouchables to give up the idea of attaining Hindu religious rights. He prepared to leave Hinduism and adopt another religion. He saw caste as a “system of graded inequality” in which each subcaste measured itself above some castes and below others, creating an almost infinite factionalism that divided each exploited community against another and making unity of social or political purpose almost impossible. “I was born a Hindu,” Ambedkar said, “but I solemnly assure you that I will not die as a Hindu.” He investigated Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism—and was courted by each of these

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groups, who were well aware that Ambedkar's conversion would bring along millions of untouchables and the promise of wide political power.

In the late forties, he decided that Buddhism—which was indigenous to India and had been the defining religious tradition for nearly 1,500 years before being virtually eradicated—was the logical home for his people. “The teachings of Buddha are eternal, but even then Buddha did not proclaim them to be infallible,” Ambedkar wrote. “The religion of Buddha has the capacity to change according to times, a quality which no other religion can claim to have... Now what is the basis of Buddhism? If you study carefully, you will see that Buddhism is based on reason. There is an element of flexibility inherent in it, which is not found in any other religion.”

Ambedkar's plans for conversion were postponed while he served as India's first law minister and leader of the constitutional drafting committee. Then, in the early fifties, setting aside his political career, he plunged into the study of Buddhism and its application to the shaping of a new Dalit identity. After long consideration and consultation, and in ill health, feeling the shadow of mortality, he converted in a public ceremony in Nagpur on October 14, 1956, taking the three refuges of the Buddha, dharma, and sangha, and receiving the *pancasila*, or five ethical precepts, from the most senior Buddhist monk in India, U Chandramani. He then did something unprecedented. Turning to the 400,000 of his followers who were present, he offered them the three refuges and his own twenty-two vows, which included the five precepts and the renunciation

of specific articles of Hindu practice and belief. This signaled a momentous renewal of Buddhism in India. A number of mass conversions followed within weeks.

Not quite two months later, Ambedkar was dead, felled by complications from diabetes and heart disease.

THE NEW BUDDHIST MOVEMENT AND TBMSG

The death of Ambedkar, or Babasaheb, as his devotees call him, left the nascent Dalit spiritual and political movement without unified leadership. It was not surprising to see the rapid rise of factionalism, given the entrenched system of graded inequality. No one else on the scene had the intellect and strength of character with which to unify the many out-cast communities.

“People looked at Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar as a kind of guide or guru or philosopher who would lead them after conversion,” says Mangesh Dahiwale of the Manuski Center, an Ambedkarite hub in Pune. (*Manuski* is the Marathi word Ambedkar used for “humanity” or “humanness.”)

Ambedkar's book *The Buddha and His Dhamma* came out a year after his death. “It became a source to which people turned in order to understand Buddhism,” Dahiwale says. “It was published in English first, and soon translated into



Mangesh Dahiwale, a young leader of the Manuski Project in Pune

Dalit woman and son outside a shop in Pune





Students attending a ten-month leadership program in basic Buddhism and social action at Nagaloka

Marathi and Hindi. That book was a guide, and people began to read it and study it in groups.”

In Ambedkar’s day there were virtually no Buddhist teachers in India, but “people flocked around the Sri Lankan and Burmese Buddhists—anyone who could offer Buddhist teachings,” Dahiwale says. “If they found a bhikkhu, they would gather around and try to understand what Buddhism is. In fact some of the people from the Ambedkarite movement, in the 1950s, became monks in India, ordained in a Sri Lankan tradition.”

Still, the process that Ambedkar set in motion was incomplete. From 1956 until the early eighties, there was little continuing education or practice available to millions who had converted. But the right seeds had been planted.

“Babasaheb Ambedkar had created the Bhartiya Bauddha Mahasabha, or the Buddhist Society of India, in 1955,” Dahiwale says. “The first mass conversions were held under their auspices. But for the most part, these were local initiatives. The start of this movement was grassroots and Indian-led. There were no teachers or prominent leaders; ordinary people took the initiative. Even though Dr. Ambedkar was not there, his inspiration was there. People tried to do what they could.

Mainly they were very poor, facing discrimination, but they tried to keep the flame alive.”

This network of local *viharas* and practitioners, scattered across Maharashtra state and other parts of India, allowed the young English monk Ven. Sangharakshita to connect with the Dalit Buddhist movement. Sangharakshita met with Ambedkar several times, and when he happened to be in Nagpur on the evening that Ambedkar died in Delhi, he was asked to be a speaker at a meeting of condolence.

“By the time I rose to speak—standing on the seat of a rickshaw, and with someone holding a microphone in front of me—about 100,000 people had gathered,” Sangharakshita says. “By rights, I should have been the last speaker, but as things turned out I was the first. In fact, I was the only speaker. Not that there weren’t others who wanted to pay tribute to the memory of the departed leader. One by one, some five or six of Ambedkar’s most prominent local supporters attempted to speak, and one by one they were forced to sit down again as, overcome by emotion, they burst into tears after uttering only a few words.”

From this moment, Sangharakshita says his sense of personal responsibility was clear. “During the decade that



Dalit children in rural Kondhanpur, near the Pune-Bangalore highway

followed, I spent much of my time with the ex-untouchable Buddhists of Nagpur, Bombay [Mumbai], Poona [Pune], Jabalpur, and Ahmedabad, as well as with those who lived in the small towns and villages of central and western India. I learned to admire their cheerfulness, their friendliness, their intelligence, and their loyalty to the memory of their great emancipator.”

Returning to Britain, where he founded the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO), now called the Triratna Buddhist Community, Sangharakshita kept thinking about the Dalit Buddhists and his friends in India. He encouraged a young disciple, Dhammachari Lokamitra, to visit India and work with the Ambedkarite Buddhists.

Lokamitra is a tall, solid, and youthful-looking Englishman with an easy laugh and a quick mind. His energy at sixty-two hints at a kind of wildness tempered by years of dharma practice. He lives with his family in a modest house in the Ambedkar Colony settlement in

Pune. Since 1978, he has helped to build a movement, Trailokya Buddha Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana (TBMSG), the Indian wing of FWBO, and a variety of related social organizations, all of which aimed to develop a new Indian or Ambedkarite Buddhism, fusing dharma practice and social action.

Lokamitra came to India in 1977 to study yoga with B.S. Iyengar in Pune. He decided to break up the long train trip from Kolkata by stopping over in Nagpur, and arrived by chance on the twenty-first anniversary of the day Ambedkar led the Dalits into Buddhism. As an FWBO *angarika*, wearing robes, he found himself on a large stage facing thousands of devotees.

“In the thirty-six hours we spent in Nagpur, I entered a new world, a world of millions of the most oppressed people,



Dhammachari Lokamitra, a founding teacher of TBMSG, at home in Pune



New Buddhist students attending class at Nagaloka

I was inspired by the students at Nagaloka. Despite having been involved in engaged Buddhism for more than twenty years, nowhere else have I met young people with the kind of intuitive grasp of Buddhist practice and social action arising together.

all desperate to transform their lives and their society through Buddhism, but with little living teaching to guide them,” Lokamitra recalls. “I had stumbled blindly into a situation in which the two-fold transformation seemed a real possibility, and on the most auspicious of days. I did not consciously decide to live and work in India then but I have no doubt that my future was decided on that day.”

Lokamitra moved to India the following year, and with help of local Indian Buddhists he organized retreats and meditation groups. “Our friends,” he says, “organized these where they could—an abandoned disused railway carriage, the veranda of an unfinished police station, a small garage when its car went to church on Sundays.”

More than thirty years have passed since those rough and ready days. TBMSG now includes more than five hundred ordained dharma teachers—*dharmacharis* and *dharmacharinis*—and many thousands of practitioners. With the support of the Karuna Trust and other donors in Asia and the West, two related organizations—Jambudvipa Trust and Bahujan Hitay (meaning “for the welfare of many”)—evolved to do outreach

and social work among the Dalits. As well, Maitreyanath Dhammakirti, Mangesh Dahiwalé, Priyadarshi Telang and other TBMSG leaders established the Manuski Center (also known as the Manuski Project) in Pune. The center is quiet and cool, with a good library, meeting rooms, offices, basic but comfortable guest rooms, and a large meditation hall.

During my visit to India, I stayed at Manuski and gave workshops on engaged Buddhism. I also met with students at the Nagaloka education center, took part in a study retreat in Kondhanpur, and offered dharma talks in Nagpur and Mumbai. Each activity included melodic Pali chanting and meditation.

The Dalit Buddhist meditation practices are straightforward and familiar to me: *anapanasati*, or mindfulness of breathing, and *metta bhavana*, or cultivation of loving-kindness. I sense a quality of concentration and settledness. City sounds rise within the silence of meditation—children’s shouts, panting rickshaw drivers, barking dogs, the crack of a cricket bat, a street vendor’s cry. The peace of meditation at once includes all of this and goes beyond it. Half a

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world away from California, I feel completely at home. The ordinariness is amazing: sitting with friends in the middle of an urban jungle.

LIBERTY, EQUALITY, FRATERNITY

In 1991, when I came to work at Buddhist Peace Fellowship in Berkeley, engaged Buddhism was outside the mainstream. Twenty years later, countless centers and groups are involved in prison work, chaplaincy, feeding the poor, and organizing against war. We have come to see this as a responsibility that flows from the bodhisattva vow to save all beings. But from the start, Ambedkar's Buddhism incorporated a vision of a compassionate society and social liberation, far beyond the introspective caricature that some have of Buddhism. So it is natural that an Indian Buddhist movement, rooted in the most oppressed segment of society, would see the oneness of personal development and social transformation.

In an All-India Radio broadcast two years before his conversion, Ambedkar said: "Positively, my social philosophy may be said to be enshrined in three words: liberty, equality, and fraternity. Let no one, however, say that I have borrowed my philosophy from the French Revolution. I have not. My philosophy has its roots in religion and not in political science. I have derived them from the teachings of my master, the Buddha."

Fraternity is the cutting edge of Ambedkar's Buddhism and the new Buddhist movement. Fraternity is sangha, the community of practitioners, and the wider community of all beings, and as such, it is linked to equality. However, fraternity is a challenge for the Dalit community. It challenges them just like race, class, and diversity challenge Western Buddhists. The social realities of India draw clear lines between all the religions—Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, and Buddhist; between caste and noncaste; and, most critically, between the many Dalit groups themselves within the system of "graded inequality," each group scrambling for the tiniest privileges of social position, economic opportunity, and political power. Fraternity is what connects us. And we know this is hard work.

The Manuski Project is "action central" for Dalit social work. Its mission has four main aspects: transcending caste barriers; fighting social discrimination; developing Dalit women leadership; and building solidarity. A network of related organizations has developed in Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu. Projects include education for both children and adults, civil rights work, and earthquake and tsunami relief.

Free inquiry and gender equality are points that Ambedkar identified as the essence of Buddhism—"I measure the progress of a community," he said, "by the degree of progress which women have achieved"—and women now lead many of the social projects. In slums and poor villages, Ambedkarite

Buddhist women are leading schools, hostels, social work, and dharma communities as teachers or *dharmacharinis* in their own right. There are more than ninety women teachers in TBMSG. But the movement still needs to have more women in visible leadership, which means participating equally in public events and internal organizational structures.

Nagaloka, or the Nagarjuna Training Institute, is TBMSG's flagship educational project, the largest of its centers. The institute has a fifteen-acre campus on the outskirts of Nagpur. At night, from a distance, one can see the tall golden image of a walking Buddha that smiles down on the students.

The institute offers a ten-month leadership training program in basic Buddhism and social action for young Dalits from all religious communities. About five hundred young people from twenty Indian states have graduated from the program over the last eight years. Most of these students have gone back to their villages to work on campaigns against social oppression, offer dharma teachings, and support other young people so that they too can live and train in Nagaloka. These students come from caste-based villages where life is still marked by discrimination and violence. Even as I write, CNN reports the murder of an Indian politician in Uttar Pradesh, shot as he attended a ceremony marking Ambedkar's birth.

For many of these students, leaving home for the first time is unsettling and difficult. Each one arrives with a common yearning to see the world and to be of use, but growing up within oppressive traditional cultures leaves them unprepared for the cultural shock of a new life at Nagaloka. Some of them are overwhelmed, but most find their way into student life, buoyed by new friends and teachers and practicing dharma.

One young student recounted: "In my childhood I observed this caste system all the time. My grandmother had to take water from the village well. But when she put her bucket in, other community people saw that and would not take water until the well was purified by rituals. If someone asked you to their home for food, if you were Dalit, you had to wash your own plate. My father often used to do that. Once I was invited for dinner, but I refused to wash my plate. They asked why I wouldn't wash it. I said, if you invite me to eat with you, it is not right to force me to wash my own plate. In that case, I can give up your food and go. So I just left."

A woman of twenty said: "I am from Orissa. Where I live there is still a very strong caste system. They don't allow Dalit children to get any kind of education. If a girl tries to get an education, their parents become afraid and get them married quickly. Neighborhood people will not allow the girls to learn as they wish to. We are here at Nagaloka now, but my family doesn't know we are learning Buddhism. When we go back to the village we will share with them what we have learned about the dharma. We came with the help of former students, and when we go back we will help find other students. I really

believe that our training at Nagaloka will benefit our community.”

The school explains its mission this way: “The different Scheduled Caste communities in India do not usually cooperate with each other, even after they have become Buddhists. At the Nagarjuna Training Institute, they relate to each other just as Buddhists and not in terms of the caste they have come from. This in itself is an enormous contribution to a truly democratic society. The intensive practice for a year with other Buddhists from all over India means they cease to identify with the old untouchable caste but just as Buddhists.”

I was inspired by the students at Nagaloka. Meeting them over several days, their stories touched me. Their way-seeking minds glow with the spirit of inquiry. Despite having been involved with engaged Buddhism for twenty years, nowhere else have I met young people with their kind of intuitive grasp of Buddhist practice and social action arising together. Nowhere else have I had deeper discussion that never slipped into abstraction, but focused on the conditions of oppression these students know only too well. Nowhere else have I encountered anything like their determination to remake the world in peace. My heart is with them.

There is much in this new Indian Buddhism that we share in the West. On both sides we have turned to the dharma in response to the Buddha’s central message about suffering and the end of suffering. Knowingly or not, many of us in the West come to Buddhism to deal with suffering, often alienated from the religious traditions we were born into. For Dalits, whose material circumstances may be so different from ours, the motivation is the same: to learn about suffering and to reach its end, in each person’s life and in society. As well, what I call the “three marks” of Western Buddhism—a largely lay movement, feminization, and social

action—are shared by Ambedkarites. With all that we have in common, it is painful that Indian Buddhism is almost invisible to other Buddhists around the world. The time has come for us to see that a vast engaged movement in India promises to change the way Buddhism is seen by all the world’s religions. 