



A Review of - 'The Buddha and His Dhamma'

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Abstract

This book is different in many ways. In this Dr. Ambedkar isn't trying to tell us about what buddhism is, rather he's presenting us what the indian buddhism is and what buddha in reality might have said and not what his discipals claimed what he said (as from which different sects spurted out). Its the book of "Neo-buddhism" which in real sense can able to present the real buddhism or proto buddhism.

This book offers the most significant works on Buddhist writings, Ambedkar's "The Buddha and His Dhamma" originally published posthumously, the original lacked citations, bibliographies, and other scholarly apparatus. The current edition meticulously annotates the text, adding references to Buddhist scriptures and other texts that served as sources for Ambedkar. It also provides explanations of these scriptures, critiques of Ambedkar's interpretations, and highlights modifications he made to his sources.

Within this volume, the focus is on Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism, particularly how it offered the potential for the liberation and upliftment of the Dalits. The book delves into Ambedkar's reflections and insights regarding the life of Siddharth Gautama, the Buddha, his teachings, and the historical spread of Buddhism in India. This is achieved through a series of anecdotes and narratives that vividly portray the life of Buddha and the propagation of his Dhamma.



Through this research one would guess, if someone wants to study buddhism then this one is recommended. Please do read the preface or introduction given by ambedkar himself so that you can easily understand the purpose of this whole book which will help you distinguish between the content of this book and the other content which will eventually come in your way as you'll go through some other books of buddhism written by various authors and that will might throw you down into little bit confusion.

Keywords: The Buddha and His Dhamma, Dr. Ambedkar, Buddhism

1. Introduction

B.R. Ambedkar's monumental work, "The Buddha and his Dhamma," was only completed shortly before his passing and was posthumously published in 1957. This book is renowned for Ambedkar's in-depth examination and analysis of the extensive Buddhist canon and literature. This marks the debut of the first critical edition of "The Buddha and his Dhamma." Alongside a new introductory section, it features footnotes that reference sources and annotations which elucidate various subjects under discussion. These annotations offer valuable insights into canons such as Suttas and Dhammapada, underscoring their significance within the Buddhist tradition, and they delve into the adjustments made by Ambedkar when using source material. To facilitate navigation through the original text, an analytical index is included, aiding in the location of specific passages and themes.

2. Dr. Ambedkar and Writings

Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, a staunch advocate for the abolition of the Caste System, was born into a low-caste Mahar family on April 14, 1891, in Mhow cantonment, where his father served in the Army. Despite his humble background, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar went on to play a pivotal role in framing the Constitution of India. His life was characterized by relentless struggles, as his bold initiatives to address the Caste System faced strong opposition from the upper castes.

Dr. Ambedkar's journey was marked by perseverance, as he overcame caste-based discrimination to pursue his education. In a remarkable feat, he earned a Doctorate in Economics from Columbia University in 1917.



The young boy who endured the harsh indignities of caste discrimination later became the first Minister for Law in independent India and played a significant role in shaping the country's Constitution. His tireless efforts extended beyond his fight against the Brahmanical Patriarchy. His radical proposals, such as the Hindu Code Bill and the restructuring of property relations, challenged the established norms. He emerged as one of India's most radical thinkers, transforming the social and political landscape during the struggle against British Colonialism. Dr. Ambedkar played a crucial role in raising awareness among the oppressed communities about their situation, encapsulating his message to Dalits as "Educate, Agitate, and Organize."

Dr. Ambedkar placed a strong emphasis on education, particularly where it had traditionally been denied. He once stated that education held more significance for the downtrodden than mere temple entry. He viewed education as a potent tool that could empower every citizen to contribute to building an egalitarian society and dismantling the long-standing barriers of discriminatory social practices. In honoring his legacy, our college, bearing his name, strives to emulate his vision, fostering the empowerment of future generations to create a holistic, inclusive, and progressive modern India.

Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, a prominent figure in Indian history, is renowned for his multifaceted contributions. He was not only a distinguished lawyer but also a prominent Dalit political leader and the principal architect of the Indian Constitution. In addition to his legal and political career, Dr. Ambedkar is widely celebrated as an acclaimed author. This article compiles some of his famous literary works, which continue to enjoy significant readership. He possessed a remarkable linguistic aptitude, being proficient in approximately nine languages, including Hindi, Pali, Sanskrit, English, French, German, Marathi, Persian, and Gujarati. His linguistic prowess allowed him to explore a wide range of subjects and express his thoughts in various languages.

Dr. Ambedkar's literary creations have gained immense popularity, with his books remaining among the top-selling titles in India. His enduring legacy as an author, lawyer, and social reformer continues to influence and inspire countless individuals to this day.



3. Famous books written by Dr. Ambedkar

Dr. Ambedkar was the author of a distinguished collection of 20 well-known books, with his first publication dating back to 1916. Notably, in 1948, he released three books, and in both 1943 and 1945, he published two books each. The culmination of his literary work came in 1957 when he published "The Buddha and His Dhamma."

S.N.	Books	Publication date
1.	Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis, and Development	1916
2.	Mook Nayak (weekly)	1920
3.	The Problem of the Rupee: its origin and its solution	1923
4.	Bahishkrut Bharat (India Ostracized)	1927
5.	Janta (weekly)	1930
6.	The Annihilation of Caste	1936
7.	Federation Versus Freedom	1939
8.	Thoughts on Pakistan	1940
9.	Ranade, Gandhi and Jinnah	1943
10.	Mr. Gandhi and Emancipation of Untouchables	1943
11.	What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables	1945
12.	Pakistan Or Partition of India	1945
13.	State and Minorities	1947
14.	Who were the Shudras	1948



15.	Maharashtra as a Linguistic Province	1948
16.	The Untouchables	1948
17.	Buddha Or Karl Marx	1956
18.	The Buddha and his Dhamma	1957
19.	Riddles in Hinduism	2008
20.	Manu and the Shudras	--

"The Buddha and His Dhamma" was initially published in 1957, one year after the passing of B.R. Ambedkar on December 6, 1956. The book was originally written in English and has since been translated into several languages, including Hindi, Gujarati, Telugu, Tamil, Marathi, Malayalam, Bengali, and Kannada. In 1979, it was republished as the eleventh volume of Ambedkar's collected writings and speeches, accompanied by a comprehensive list of sources and an index.

Notably, B.R. Ambedkar regarded "The Buddha and His Dhamma" as one of three essential texts he believed constituted a set for a comprehensive understanding of Buddhism. The other two books integral to this set are:

- Buddha and Karl Marx.
- Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India.

4. Historical Context

In the year 588 B.C., on the auspicious occasion of Vaishakha Purnima, the historical Buddha, after achieving the state of omniscient enlightenment, embarked on a profound journey of teaching that spanned 45 years. His teachings were centered on elucidating the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, the truth of the origin of suffering, the truth of the cessation of suffering, and the truth of the path leading to the cessation of suffering.



The dissemination of Buddhism began with the Buddha's first discourse, known as the Dhamma Chakka Pavattan Sutta, to a group of five Parivrajakas. It was during this pivotal moment that the foundation of Buddhist teaching was laid. The propagation continued as the Buddha extended his teachings to Yasa and his 54 companions at Sarnath in Isipatana, all of whom ultimately attained the exalted state of Arahats.

This transformative mission of the Buddha persisted for four and a half decades, ultimately culminating on another Vaishakha Purnima, this time in Kusinara. The concluding chapter of the Buddha's life witnessed the profound conversion of the Malla Princes of Kusinara and Subhadda, both of whom achieved the revered status of Arahats.

During the Buddha's lifetime, the scope of Buddhism was predominantly confined to the Ganges Valley, radiating outward from its origins. Following the Buddha's passing, his relics played a significant role in the expansion of Buddhism. These sacred remnants were distributed among the kings of Northern and Central India, each of whom constructed Stupas to enshrine them. These Stupas, in turn, became focal points for reverence and pilgrimage, further fueling the spread of Buddhism to other regions of India and, subsequently, to distant lands such as Ceylon, Burma, Southeast Asia, and beyond.

The posthumous influence of the Buddha's teachings and his relics reverberated across centuries, fostering the global dissemination of Buddhism, an enduring legacy that continues to shape the spiritual and cultural landscape of diverse regions.

5. Social and Political Implications

During the historical period in which the Buddha lived, there were three prevailing religious viewpoints in the region. These viewpoints were as follows:

- **Karma and Reincarnation:** The belief that different life conditions were the outcomes of one's past actions (karma) in previous existences.
- **Theistic Perspective:** The notion that all aspects of creation and existence were the products of an eternal, unchanging God's will, a deity who never experiences death.
- **Atheistic or Non-Causal Perspective:** The belief that there is no discernible cause for existence, and that all beings exist spontaneously.



It's important to note that these views were influenced by evolving interpretations of the term "religion," and they underwent transitions as the concept of religion itself evolved over time.

According to Dr. Ambedkar, the term "religion" is a fluid and ever-evolving concept, devoid of a fixed meaning. This variability is a consequence of religion's progression through various stages of human understanding. Each stage has been characterized by what Dr. Ambedkar referred to as "religious thought," and the significance of this concept has transformed from one stage to the next. This continuous evolution has led to divergent interpretations of religion over time.

In the earliest stages of human history, primitive man grappled with the inability to comprehend natural phenomena such as lightning, rain, and floods. Consequently, any arcane practices performed in an attempt to control these inexplicable events were referred to as "magic." Religion, in this context, became intertwined with magical practices. However, as human understanding advanced, the concept of religion progressed to the second stage, where it became associated with beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, prayers, and sacrifices.

The ancient Vedas, for example, consist of a collection of Mantras or invocations to deities like Indra, Varuna, Agni, and Soma. These texts contained prayers, often accompanied by rituals, to seek divine assistance and blessings, as well as to secure the acceptance of offerings. Some sages also ventured into philosophical speculations regarding the origin of the world and the divine beings responsible for its creation. This stage of religious thought was characterized by the belief that an incomprehensible force, which primitive man could not fully understand, was responsible for these phenomena. Magic, with its earlier connotations, gradually lost its significance as this force began to be perceived as benevolent. Consequently, beliefs, rites, ceremonies, and sacrifices became integral to both venerating this benevolent force and appeasing any potentially wrathful aspects of it. This evolving force was eventually referred to as God or the Creator.

Subsequently, a third stage emerged, emphasizing the belief that it was this God who had fashioned the world and created mankind. Within this framework, it was postulated that each individual possessed an eternal soul, which would be held accountable to God for their



actions in the world. This encapsulated the religious concept prevalent at the time of Buddha's birth.

In summary, the concept of religion, as it evolved over time, involved belief in God, belief in the eternal soul, acts of worship directed towards God, the redemption of erring souls, and the act of appeasing God through prayers, ceremonies, and sacrifices. The Vedas and other religious scriptures of the time contemplated these philosophical aspects and were produced by individuals who were influenced by the prevailing doctrines of their era. These doctrines had taken root and flourished in the historical context preceding their own time.

6. Ambedkar's Contribution to Buddhism

After authoring a series of books and articles advocating that Buddhism offered the sole path to equality for the Untouchables, B.R. Ambedkar publicly embraced the faith on October 14, 1956, in a significant ceremony at Deekshabhoomi in Nagpur. This event marked the culmination of over two decades of his intent to convert. An astounding 365,000 of his followers also embraced Buddhism during this monumental ceremony. Notably, this occasion saw participation from some upper caste Hindus who also adopted Buddhism. Subsequently, on October 16, 1956, Ambedkar conducted another mass conversion event, with over 300,000 of his followers converting to Buddhism at Chandrapur, which is also known as Deekshabhoomi.

Inspired by Ambedkar's conversion, around 5,000 Tamils from Myanmar embraced Buddhism in Rangoon on October 28, 1956, under the leadership of Chan Htoon, who was a justice of the Supreme Court of the Union of Burma.

During the conversion ceremony, Ambedkar was accompanied by his principal disciple Bhoj Dev Mudit, Medharathi, and Bhante Pragyanand, the Sri Lankan successor to Mahastvir Bodhanand. In his address, Ambedkar advised Dalits not to become entangled in the existing branches of Buddhism such as Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. Instead, he promoted his interpretation, which he called Navayana or 'Neo-Buddhism.' Remarkably, Ambedkar passed away less than two months later, shortly after completing his definitive work on Buddhism.



Many Dalits now use the term "Ambedkar(ite) Buddhism" to describe the Buddhist movement that began with Ambedkar's conversion. Those who converted often refer to themselves as "-Bauddha," signifying their affiliation with Buddhism.

The Twenty-two vows, or the 22 Buddhist pledges, are the guidelines instituted by B.R. Ambedkar upon his conversion to Buddhism. He encouraged his 400,000 supporters to adopt these vows as well. Following their lay ordination, Ambedkar administered dhamma diksha to his followers. This significant ceremony took place on October 14, 1956, in Nagpur, and it included the administration of 22 vows to all new converts following the Three Jewels and Five Precepts. Another mass religious conversion ceremony was held on October 16, 1956, in Chandrapur.

Ambedkarite Buddhists believe that these vows serve as a roadmap for the social revolution that harnesses human instincts. These vows exemplify the social movement aspect of Navayana Buddhism and illustrate its fundamental departure from earlier Buddhist sects. In India, individuals or groups often take these vows as a solemn oath when converting to Buddhism.

7. Conclusion

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's "The Buddha and His Dhamma" has garnered limited recognition among scholars, falling into one of three distinct categories. Its reception has been notably ambivalent, underscoring the book's undeniable importance. The unpublished preface penned by the author opens with two recurring questions he encounters: the first regarding his extensive academic qualifications, and the second pertaining to his fascination with Buddhism. This preface effectively establishes the thematic undercurrents of the book, delving into a critical examination of the prevailing ideas surrounding access to knowledge and religion.

At a young age, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's journey towards Buddhism began when he challenged his father's insistence that he immerse himself in the teachings of the Ramayana and Mahabharata. His father's intention was to shield him from feeling inferior due to his Dalit identity and to inspire him with the stories of how even individuals traditionally considered "small" like Drona and Karna could rise to great heights. However, Ambedkar held a



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contrasting perspective, finding these stories and their characters to be rife with hypocrisy, misogyny, and deception. He vocalized his criticisms, asserting that Buddha's Dhamma offered a more suitable religious framework for the modern, scientific world. His aim was to provide a concise and reflective account of Buddhism, breaking away from the didactic and unengaging nature of existing books, which, in his view, failed to actively engage readers in critical thought.



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