

## **Buddhism's Revival in India in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

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The disappearance of Buddhism from the land of its birth, a gradual process that extended from the latter part of the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium AD until about 1200-1300 AD, is a phenomenon that has been commented upon quite often. [See the related article on this web site.] Another part of this story is surely the revival of Buddhism, a reawakening with which the name of B. R. Ambedkar is indelibly linked. Indeed, the story of modern-day Indian Buddhism generally commences with Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956, a mere couple of months before his death. By the early 1990s, there were an estimated 7 - 10 million Buddhists in India, the bulk of them in the western state of Maharashtra.

However, the narrative of Buddhism's revival in India can more accurately be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and a more complex account of it would have to take stock of various Dravidian, anti-Brahminical, and self-respect movements that, in various ways, impinged on the fortunes of Buddhism in India from the late nineteenth century onwards. The names of reformers such as Jotiba Phule (1826-1890) and much later E. V. Ramaswami 'Periyar' (1879-1973) are, of course, well-known, but one can also point to other tendencies. Mahima Dharma, or the "religion" founded by Mahima Gosain [previously known as Mukunda Das] in Orissa in 1862, stood for the rejection of caste and idol worship, and Gosain embraced such Buddhist practices as begging for cooked food. Gosain's teachings were spread through many followers, none as famous as the blind adivasi poet, Bhima Bhoi, whose bhajans popularized Mahima Gosain's teachings. Ambedkar's closest forerunner may well have been Pandit Iyothee Thaas, a Tamil Siddha physician (1845-1914) who not only urged the Untouchables (as they were then known) to view themselves as non-Hindus, as casteless Dravidians, but also set another example for them by taking *diksha* at the hands of a Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka. Thaas went on to found the Sakya Buddhist Society in Madras.

Various other trajectories fed into Buddhism's revival, among them the arrival in India in 1891 of David Hewavitarne, more well-known as Angarika Dharmapala. The restoration of Bodh Gaya, the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, was undertaken at his behest, and Dharmapala also founded the Maha Bodhi Society. Before Ambedkar's conversion in 1956 and the advent of what we might call Dalit Buddhism, the Maha Bodhi Society, which also wrested control of Bodh Gaya from the hands of its Hindu managers, would become the custodian of Buddhism's fortunes. Dharmapala's visit to India coincided with a spurt of scholarly interest in Buddhism among Indologists, including such famous ones as the Sanskritist R. G. Bhandarkar, and something of what might be called an antiquarian and spiritual interest in Buddhism among intellectuals and truth seekers in the West. In 1881, the Pali Text Society had been founded, and authoritative versions of Buddhist texts soon came to be published and disseminated under its auspices. One convert to Buddhism in India who was to acquire considerable fame in later years was Dharmanand Kosambi, who was born in Goa in 1876 and was ordained as a Buddhist monk in 1902. Though his fame has been eclipsed by that of his son, D. D. Kosambi, the most eminent Indian Marxist historian of his generation, Dharmanand Kosambi authored

one of the most popular biographies of Buddha, *Bhagwan Buddha* (1940, and still in print from Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan).

Ultimately, however, Buddhism's revival owes the most to Ambedkar's alienation from Hinduism and his embrace of Buddhism, which by no means seemed inevitable to him even when he had emphatically denounced Hinduism, in October 1956. That story has been taken up in great detail by Ambedkar's biographers and is now part of Dalit lore; and consequently it will not be rehearsed now at any length. It is worth recalling that as late as 1929, when a group of Dalits threatened to convert to Islam or Christianity, Ambedkar did not really see Buddhism as a viable alternative for low-caste Hindus. As he then wrote, "No particular effect will be felt on the bullying of the so-called upper castes by becoming Buddhist or Arya Samajist, so we see no meaning in following this path. To successfully confront the domination of Hindus, we should become Christians or Muslims and win the support of a powerful community and with this erase the mark of Untouchability." Ambedkar was fully conversant with the problem that in India the tendency to view Buddhism as an off-shoot of Hinduism meant that converts to Buddhism would be treated with something like indifference, and that they would not be able to escape the liabilities of low-caste Hinduism. Upper-caste Hindus were not likely to perceive conversion to Buddhism as anything of a threat. By the mid-1930s, however, Ambedkar had certainly come around to the view that he could not remain within the fold of Hinduism. As he was to declare on 13 October 1935, "Unfortunately, I was born a Hindu. It was beyond my power to prevent that, but I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu." He only took the final plunge in October 1956. Perhaps not coincidentally, or not without its own symbolic politics, Ambedkar's conversion, accompanied by the conversion of thousands of his followers, took place at a large field in the city of Nagpur, a place associated with the rise of Hindu nationalist sentiments. The field where Ambedkar converted would be sanctified as "Diksha Bhoomi", the field or earth of vow-taking.

Though Buddhism has gained adherents over the last five decades, Indian Buddhists are still relatively miniscule in numbers. Buddhism's presence in India is, of course, another matter, with the landscape in many parts of the country still dotted with remains of Buddhist monasteries, Buddhist sculptural art, and other reminders of the supreme presence that Buddhism once occupied in Indian life. The hill regions of north-east India, Uttaraanchal, and Himachal Pradesh, as well as Ladakh in Jammu & Kashmir are other areas where sizable Buddhist communities are found. Japanese tourists arriving in India to take the Buddhist pilgrimage route are writing yet another chapter of the history of Indian Buddhism, as are, in more profound ways, Tibetan Buddhists. There is a sizable population of Tibetan Buddhists, over 150,000 people, in India; and the Dalai Lama heads the Tibetan government in exile at the hill station of Dharmashala. In the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, as Buddhism was pushed further east and north, it eventually made its way to Tibet and found refuge in the mountainous retreats of that country. It is, thus, perfectly apposite that Buddhism should now have come back to India from Tibet to nourish the soil on which it once grew.

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