

Buddhisms in India Today: Problems and Possibilities of a Pluralistic Paradigm

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Overview

Mention “Buddhism in India” and the words conjure up a vision of Ancient glory followed by a period of decline in the Medieval period, followed perhaps by a nod towards Dalit-Buddhist leader Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the arrival of His Holiness the Dalai Lama. It is a decline which is a fact universally acknowledged, lamented, and then forgotten in the consoling knowledge that Buddha Dharma, while it effectively died in the land of its birth, never quite to recover its lost glory, found new and fertile ground-eastwards and westwards. Such narratives of Buddhism’s history in India fail to take note of various mini-histories, yet to be written in a coherent, continuous narrative, of Buddhism’s continued survival in India’s remoter reaches, and its relatively recent mass-resurgence in the heart of India. This paper attempts to address these histories, tracing the major curves of this trajectory via the lives and personalities of some key protagonists and the institutions they built. It is primarily in the nature of a survey of the field, aiming at a holistic yet nuanced approach to defining the nature, scope, and challenges, of Buddhism in India today, especially in the context of claims to ‘authenticity’ and the claims of ‘modernity.’

Theoretically, the paper also attempts to problematize the issue in terms of methodology. It considers the difficulties of periodization (when, exactly, is ‘the Modern’?) and questions of definition and enumeration, especially the limitations of techniques such as census surveys, a methodology that suited the administrative requirements, first of the British Empire in India, and then of the independent Indian nation-state post 1947. It considers the complexities and contradictory twists and turns in Modern India’s tryst with Buddhism, marked by the *simultaneous* presence of multiple forms of Buddhism, and the emergence of new forms that have been mediated via Buddhisms in the west and the east.

Figures as varied as the Singhala monk Anagarika Dharmapala who arrived in India and set up the Mahabodhi Society; India’s first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, his contemporary scholar Mahapandit Rahula Sankrityayan, and charismatic leader and framer of Modern India’s Constitution, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, are significant in this narrative, as well as His Holiness the Dalai Lama, whose arrival in 1959 initiated a new phase of Buddhist visibility. The paper takes into account how traditional Vajrayana Buddhism survives in the remote rural recesses of the border states of Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim, Himachal Pradesh, and Ladakh and the Theravada versions of which survives in the Chittagong Hills. The dynamic twentieth century figure of Ven. Kushok Bakula Rinpoche of Ladakh, a monk-politician, is brought into focus as a neglected and little understood figure in the tapestry. Finally, the paper attempts to delineate the contested terrain of recent attempts to initiate dialogue between Buddhists of different schools and persuasions, from the urban educated Indian elite that practices various forms of ‘New Age’ Dharma to the followers of Baba Saheb Ambedkar.

Apart from standard scholarly works, this paper draws upon my sense of a fast changing reality which comes from a decade long association with Tibet House, New Delhi, as well as fresh materials such as the yet unpublished complete version of

Autobiography of Kushok Bakula Rinpoche, on which I am currently working. Recent personal conversations and interviews with Buddhist activists and followers of different sects active in India today have helped me ground my observations in 'objectivity'. The attempt is to grasp the complex, layered, and of often contradictory meanings of the label 'Buddhism' as they obtain in the Indian scenario today. More hopefully, it is to understand the creative interventions - in the form of dialogues - that are being attempted in quiet corners towards forging a more coherent sense of a shared identity amongst Buddhists today. The challenges of these attempts highlight issues of caste, class and ethnicity in a manner unique to the Indian experience.

The Colonial Legacy: a double-edged sword?

Speaking of "Buddhist modernism", roughly placed at the end of the 19th century, Prof. Heinz Bechert argues:

"Scholars and modern Buddhists rediscovered 'original' Buddhism as a system of philosophical thought with the sole aim of showing a way to salvation from suffering and rebirth. Traditional cosmology, the belief in miracles, and other elements which were unacceptable to a modern thinker were now identified as inessential accretions and modifications of Buddhism accumulated during its long historical development. ...Therefore modernists describe Buddhism as 'the religion of reason'... In addition, Buddhist modernism in the countries of south Asia, particularly Ceylon and Burma, was linked to political and social issues from the very beginning... Anagarika Dharmapala and other Asian Buddhist leaders...described how the colonial administration had tried to destroy Buddhism, and their efforts for the revival of Buddhism were closely related to their participation in the struggle to regain national independence for their countries."¹

In a more recent work, *The Buddha and the Sahibs*, Charles Allen delineates the crucial role of British archeologists/Orientalists in the rediscovery of Buddhism in India.² It is one of the ironies of colonialism that the lost glories of an aspect of the Indian past, to be later celebrated by nationalist leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, should owe their origin to the work of the British. Putting aside Edward Said's sweeping denunciation of all European intervention in knowledge formation in the colonized lands as evidence of a will to power, a strategy for domination and control, one notices that the intrepid work of these amateur archeologists literally unearthed the lost glories of India's Buddhist past hidden under centuries of neglect and downright destruction at the hands not only of invading Turks but also of the indigenous Brahmins whose supremacy was threatened by this heterodox belief system. Allen's work is therefore seminal in shifting attention away from Islam as the foremost enemy of Buddhism in India. It also upturns some of the assumptions about the role of colonial powers vis-à-vis Buddhism in India.

While Prof. Bechert's formulation may need to be modified in the light of the above, it is undeniable that the appeal of the Buddha, to Asians, lay in the modernity of his beliefs. It also manifested itself in a desire to restore the materiality of the Buddhist heritage, in effect, introducing an identity politics. When the Sinhala monk Anagarika Dharmapala visited India in 1891, he took it upon himself, via the Mahabodhi Society, to free the Bodhi Gaya Temple from the control of the Hindus. But his voice is essentially a

¹ "Buddhist Revival in East and West", *The World of Buddhism*, Eds. Heinz Bechert and Richard Gombrich, London: Thames and Hudson, 1984, pp.275-276.

² Charles Allen, *The Buddha and the Sahibs*, London: John Murray, 2002.

voice of modernity in that Sinhala nationalism drew its energies from his life and work. To the extent that discourses of nationalism and historicity are fed by 'modernity', these attempts may be seen to be deeply invested in a modernist paradigm of *being* Buddhist.

So what are implications of this paradoxical colonial legacy? That the 19th century revival of Buddhism in India should be facilitated via a combination of British Orientalist interest and the missionary zeal of a Sinhala who was opposing British colonialism in his own land, is a piquant paradox. This revival, in India, stood at odds with the hegemonic religious group, i.e., the Hindus, unlike in Sri Lanka, where the perceived threat was from Protestantism. Buddhist revival in India then had to contend with forces that were internal: the long historical legacy of Brahmanical opposition to, and subsequent assimilation of, Buddha Dharma.³

The Twentieth century: Early Efforts

Rahula Sankrityayan: The Buddhist-Marxist Dialogue

In the twentieth century, this 'western' legacy took new forms, many of which carry the burden of this past: a fierce engagement with India's social system and its history and historiography. Mahapandit Rahula Sankrityayan's enormous contribution deserves a recall here, not least because his work is so woefully unavailable in English. Combining a commitment to the anti-imperial struggle with a socially revolutionary mission which culminated in the final embrace of Marxism, Sankrityayan's life exemplifies the contradictory pulls and pressures of Buddhist revival in India. Born a Brahmin, Kedarnath Pandey's itinerant life took him from being an orthodox Hindu *sadhu* to an Arya Samaji proselytizer, to becoming a Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka where he acquired the name he was to be known by. Returning to India, he continued to don the ochre robes even as he plunged into the nationalist movement, first with the Gandhi-led Congress, and then with the Bihar Socialist Party. This polymath managed (in disguise) to travel to Tibet thrice, bringing back with him precious manuscripts preserved there, and translating many of them en route. Increasingly drawn to Socialism, he straddled the two words - of Buddhist scholarship, having given up the robes, and of Socialist commitment - with rare skill.

His writings bear testimony to an early 20th century attempt to resurrect the Buddhist legacy as an emancipator path, which however, failed in its present manifestations to attain the goals of social justice. Space does not permit a longer deliberation on his thought, but the issues are clear: Buddhism as a rational modern system of thought that offers freedom from moribund custom and a progressive agenda, but does not quite suffice, thanks to its failure to completely address issues of deep socio-economic inequality. Buddhism for him remains status-quo-ist in character, despite its enormously emancipatory philosophical foundations.⁴ That Buddhist philosophy was being ultimately tested against the touchstone of a 'progressive' personal move towards Marxism is evident. Speaking on Buddhist ontology, he writes: "The criterion of being objectively active is an infallible test of reality, and there is no doubt that in it one gets an inkling of *modern* ideas...Reason is not absolute, only the objective action or experiment is the touchstone of reality. This was a big weapon but it was not used, and there was a

³For detailed discussions on these, see, Lal Mani Joshi, *Brahminism, Buddhism, Hinduism*, Kandy: Buddhist Publications Society, 1969 and Lal Mani Joshi, *Discerning the Buddha*, Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1982.

⁴ "For the eradication of *economic* inequality Buddha confined his efforts to the monastic communes alone, but the abolition of *social* inequality he attempted on a universal scale...Buddhism fervently advocated the brotherhood of man without any distinction of race, country or caste." (italics mine) Rahul Sankrityayan, "Buddhist Dialectics", in *Buddhism: The Marxist Approach*, New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1970, pp.2-3

reason for it.”⁵ Buddhism, despite its sophisticated dialectics and social progressivism, remains for Sankrityayan a system that was uncomfortably a “religion”, due to “belief in rebirth, yogic mysticism and some other views” to which he could not reconcile himself.

In his engagement with Buddhism, Sankrityayan represents a key aspect of modern India’s tryst with the Buddha. He began with the initial hostility that the Arya Samaj propaganda instilled in him, but ironically enough, it was while studying Buddhism as an Arya Samajist proselytizer (with the intention of debunking this arch rival) that he was instead drawn to its rationality. However, it was this focus on ‘rationality’, along with a concern with seeing visible social and economic transformation in a deeply iniquitous social order, which ultimately also marked the limits of his Buddhist journey. It is instructive to note that the quieter, *inner* dimensions to Buddhist practice - meditation and *sadhana* - do not figure high in Sankrityayan’s own life, given as it was to academic/scholarly/intellectual analysis of Buddhist ideas and their socio-political implications. Quite apart from the element of personal choice, for this remarkable and little understood polymath, who was moving towards materialism, the outer/collective *had* to be set right, before the inner/personal could be altered. It is in this context of praxis that he deserves to be read in conjunction with Ambedkar.

B.R.Ambedkar and the Dalit Converts: Past, Present and Future

Though Sankrityayan and Ambedkar were contemporaries, there are no records of any significant interaction between them. The conversation would have been fascinating, had it taken place, and recorded. One a Brahmin-Buddhist-Marxist; the other a Dalit-Buddhist. Both seriously considered Marxism along with Buddhism as an analytical tool for understanding and overcoming the problem of suffering, especially as it unfolded in the social and political scenario in India in the formative stages of the nation’s modern coming into being.⁶

While Sankrityayan saw nothing wrong with supporting the Soviet experiment, keeping a studied silence on the issue of violence, the essence of their different perspectives can be gleaned from Ambedkar’s concern that “The Russians do not seem to be paying any attention to Buddhism as an ultimate aid to sustain Communism when force is withdrawn... The Russians are proud of their Communism. But they forget that the wonder of all wonders is that the Buddha established Communism so far as the Sangha was concerned *without* dictatorship... The Buddha’s method was different. His method was to change the mind of man: to alter his disposition...”⁷

By thus giving primacy to change in *the mind* over change in merely material conditions, one could argue that Ambedkar was perhaps closer to the essence of Buddha Dharma. This is often forgotten in contemporarily visible forms of Ambedkarite Buddhism, where an aggressive anti-Brahminism or anti-Hinduism, combined with a singular focus on cultivating a political anger based on identity politics, appear to be the overwhelming impression conveyed to the world at large. It is worthwhile, however, to see the rehearse Ambedkar’s steps here. As he writes in *The Buddha and his Dharma*: “The first distinguishing feature of his [the Buddha’s] teachings lay in the recognition of the mind as the center of everything.... The first thing to attend to is the culture of the mind.... The second distinguishing feature of his teachings is that mind is the fount of all the good and evil that arises within and befalls us from without... The third distinguishing feature of his teachings is the avoidance of all sinful acts... The fourth distinguishing

⁵ Ibid, p.7 (italics mine)

⁶ B.R. Ambedkar, *Buddha or Karl Marx* (1945), Delhi: Siddharth Books, 2009.

⁷ Ibid, pp.38-9 (italics mine).

feature of his teaching is that real religion lies not in the books of religion but in the observance of the tenets of the religion.”⁸

While mass conversion of Dalits to Buddha Dhamma was the most dramatic manifestation of Dr. Ambedkar’s embracing of it, it is important to distinguish the outward ritual and demographic fact from the deeper practice of the faith.

It is true that numbers determine identity. One way of examining the question of the status of Buddhism in India today would be via the Census survey but there are two dangers in this approach. One, the numerical mode is reductive in itself as a measure of true numbers. Many Buddhists do not get counted as Buddhist because of the social stigma that still attaches to the name and often they are listed as Hindus by the census survey officials who continue to labor under the hegemonic belief that Buddhism is a branch of Hinduism. Besides, there are communities in India where multiple religious identities flourish. In the Kinnaur region of Himachal Pradesh, for instance, where ethnic Buddhists who practice Vajrayana exist, the Hindu and local animistic faiths have a residual presence in their lives. The census survey then becomes an inaccurate measure of the understanding of Buddhism’s presence in India. Mass Dalit conversions also suffer from a public image of being mere gimmickry, political assertiveness and even in some cases opportunism not backed by any understanding of what Buddhism means, let alone any practice of it. Dalit intellectuals have been long lamenting the ‘Hinduization’ or even ‘Brahminisation’ as markers of upward social mobility,⁹ making even converts engage in religious practices that any sociologist would describe as mixed or hybrid. The clarity that Dr. Ambedkar sought to impose upon the *distinctness* of Buddhism (as quoted above) is the first casualty of these reductive and hasty conversions. That this is not a recent ‘degeneration’ is testified to by an email conversation I had with Dhammachari Jeevak Gaekwad from Pune who shared the schizophrenia of his father’s experience who had “embraced Buddhism a few months after” the first mass conversion: “My father threw Hindu idols into the river at that time but I remember him worshipping Ganesha, fasting on Thursdays and celebrating Hindu festivals....It was only when I read *Buddha and His Dhamma* at the age of nineteen that I realised what it meant to be a Buddhist...”¹⁰ Dh. Jeevak was also one of the few who acknowledged the influence of Rahula Sankrityayan, though the group to which he belongs, The Triratna Bauddha Mahasangh, steers clear of the “Marxist” in favor of a socially ameliorative model of social intervention. They run schools, hospitals and pay special attention to holding meditation camps in an effort to disseminate the finer mind-training aspects of Buddha Dharma. A center such as Nagaloka in Nagpur, Maharashtra, follows the same principle and a quiet but resolute revolution is currently going on that works at a twin level: seeking to redress the deep economic and social inequalities that beset the poorest of the poor and for the more well heeled and educated Dalit–Buddhist community, an awareness and education campaign that works on the praxis of Buddhism in the form of study of key texts and meditation classes. This is a new development and bodes well for the arrival of a new form of self-aware Indian Buddhist who is worthy of best in the legacy that Ambedkar bequeathed to his community.

An even better recent development is an initiative is the beginning of a *process of dialogue* between the Ambedkarite Buddhists and the Tibetans in India, a process that has

⁸ B.R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Book I, part VII, Delhi: 1956.

⁹ Kancha Ilaiah’s thesis is that the Hinduization of Buddhism, whereby the Buddha is becoming deified, and Dalits need to recover the radical Buddha who challenged private property, caste, and gender hierarchies and believed in republics. See *God as Political Philosopher: Buddha’s Challenge to Brahminism*, Kolkata: Samya, 2000.)

¹⁰ Email interview with Dhammachari Jeevak, July 4, 2011. Dhammachari Jeevak is part of one of the group that works under the guidance of Dh Subhuti, Dh Sangharakshita’s disciple and ‘heir’ to the FWBO, that now has an Indian presence that goes beyond the traditional Dalit-Buddhist state of Maharashtra.

the support of Dharamsala and which some intrepid individuals like Ven. Kabir Saxena/Sumati have attempted, first in Bodh Gaya, and now from his new base in Mumbai, Maharashtra. Earlier, Dharamsala had played host to group of Dalit Buddhists in an attempt to discuss the Ambedkarite community learning from Tibetan lamas. These are exciting and challenging experiments in bridging deep divides amongst the two claimants to the Buddhist tradition. Sociologically, the divide manifest itself in terms not simply of India's traditional caste system (from which the Dalits excluded) but also in terms of class. Ideologically, then, given Ambedkar's framing of the Buddhist question in terms of discourse of justice and modernity, this is a huge challenge since the Mahayana/Vajrayana tradition, as we all know, exists in a pre-modern discursive space where the power of ritual, mantra, secret transmissions, and deity yoga are de riguer.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama's persistent interest in reinterpreting his tradition in ways that would accord with modern scientific reason certainly prepares the ground for these conversations to take place at all. However, time will tell where this conversation goes, since questions of identity politics, and orthodoxies of various kinds, within the Buddhist communities continue to pose real challenges.

Lama Kushok Bakula: The Ladakhi Experience

But His Holiness the Dalai Lama, thought the most visible, is not the only figure in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition who has initiated dialogues across sectarian lines. It is extremely significant to share the work of the Late Lama Kushok Bakula of Ladakh, who combined in his unique and relatively unsung life many avatars. He was a member of Ladakh's royal family, an incarnate lama who was sent to Tibet to get his Geshe degree, who fought elections and became a Member of Parliament representing the extremely backward region of Ladakh, and served as India's Ambassador to Mongolia for a decade. In each of these capacities, a bodhisattva ideal was his guide. Laying great emphasis on monastic discipline and shila, he encouraged young Ladakhis to go and study Pali and Sanskrit and the Theravada tradition at institutions in central India, such as the CIHTS. He continued the practice in Mongolia, apart from spearheading a Buddhist revival in a Mongolia that saw its independence from the USSR soon upon his arrival there.¹¹

Other attempts at breaking of fixed molds are represented by new phenomena like a Ladakhi choosing to embrace Theravada. Bhante Sanghasena runs an extremely dynamic institution in Ladakh that combines educational and health initiatives with teaching Vipassana as an essential component of a wholesome schooling. Ladakh, it should be pointed out, has never had any tradition of Theravada. These interdenominational mixings (I know of several Ladakhis who are keenly attending vipassana meditation classes) represents some of the more creative new alignments in the shifting space that Buddhism is occupying in India today.

Focus on the likes of Kushok Bakula and Bhante Sanghasena or the Nagpur group is significant because these are attempts at reworking a historical legacy in new light. They are all also sensitive to the social dimension of compassion, active compassion that is visible in a secular framework as well, rather than the language of interiority within which compassion often gets articulated in highly esoteric or meditative traditions.

'Elite' Urban Buddhisms

Both of the above, however, are also significantly different from some other forms of urban Buddhisms that are prevalent today in India amongst the upper middle classes. I

¹¹ For details, see *My Life, My Times: The Autobiography of Kushok Bakula* (a condensed version) Ed. Maya Joshi, New Delhi: World Buddhist Culture Trust, 2006 and *Kushok Bakula Rinpoche: Saint and Statesman*, Eds Nawang Tsering Shakspo and Henry M. Vyner, New Delhi: World Buddhist Culture Trust, 2006.

will touch upon this with the help of two recent entries in the media. One newspaper article describes a tryst that the journalist has at the Tushita Centre in McLeodganj, Dharamshala as “Buddhism with Peanut Butter” the subtitle of which was “A seven-day course in silent meditation is buttered bliss.”¹² While this speaks an imitative language of New Age ‘stress buster’ version of Buddhism, Vipassana meditation has acquired a wider reach. From Tihar Jail inmates to CEOs, from students to housewives, Vipassana seems to be offering a therapeutic self-help form of compassionate intervention that steers clear of identifying itself as specifically Buddhist.

A recent wave has been the Japanese Nichiren sect’s Soka Gakkai International which has an India chapter called Bharat Soka Gakkai, an organization that has grown from a mere 1000 members in 1992 to its present estimated strength of 50,000 Indian members today. Registered as an educational society in 1986, it is a branch of an international formation. The primary activity consists of chanting the mantra “Om Na Mo Ho Renge Kyo”, or the name of the Lotus Sutra. Embarrassingly for some Buddhists, this numerically negligible but socially powerful and visible community has increasingly come to be synonymous with being a Buddhist in metropolitan India. Members share unabashedly, in meetings and in online sites, grand stories of material success derived from the chanting.¹³ I have heard it dismissed as a variety Buddhism for corporate climbers and housewives praying for upward social mobility.

While Tibet House, Delhi (the Cultural Centre for the Dalai Lama) has been holding educational classes in Buddhist philosophy at its Delhi center and deeper interdisciplinary dialogues between monastics and mainstream academics at the diasporic universities in the Southern Indian state of Karnataka on topics as varied as ‘Pramana’ and ‘Santarakshita’ institutions like the Foundation for Universal Responsibility for His Holiness the Dalai Lama has been organizing what may best be called interactions between Buddhist masters, including the Dalai Lama, and select educated Indians on Buddhist themes, especially in ‘mind sciences’. These largely have an educated constituency, as can be imagined. Institutes such as the CIHTS, in Sarnath has gone a long way in promoting a world class culture of academic discourse, encouraging especially translation between Sanskrit and Tibetan texts. But the greater sociological impact is that their very presence in the highly Brahminical academic scene in Varanasi over the last few decades has created a new face of Buddhism in India.

More recently a new paradigm has emerged. The Deer Park Institute in Bir, not far from Dharamshala, has seen some fascinating dialogues not narrowly on Buddhism but on the wisdom traditions of Ancient India. A fascinating example of partnerships crossing all kinds of divides, this was the initiative of a group of Indians who are interrogating colonial modernity and its destruction of a long and deep indigenous tradition of study/wisdom came together and were given the space by the *Bhutanese* monk, Dzongsar Jamyang Khyenste. Deer Park has ambitions of reviving the Nalanda tradition of interdisciplinary knowledge. Even as I write this, partnerships are being sought with scholars of Chinese (from Beijing!) to revive the pre-communist Indian dialogue with China and classes at the institute can range from calligraphy to Kashmir Shaivism, from traditional teachings by eminent lamas to understanding the dynamics of Sanskrit chanting. Ecological awareness/action is part of their mandate as is an active community presence that translates compassion into recognizably benign social action. Of such stuff

¹² Shefalee Vasudev, “Buddhism with Peanut Butter,” Eye: Sunday Magazine of *The Indian Express*, September 4-10, 2011

¹³ One online success story cited “an all time high in securing advertisements” for the agency the participant works with and end the list of ten ‘successes’ with “ a lavish hike in salary”! (“My First Four Weeks with SGI India” by Nipen Patel, Copyright, 2002, Gokkai Experiences Online.)

is the future made. Deeply Buddhist, yet curiously open, this space represents a new wave that makes Buddhists integrate in new ways with each other and the world at large.

Conclusion:

Buddhism in India today is that proverbial elephant that different blind men seek to understand on the basis of their limited exposure. “Seeing” the full glory of the noble creature requires a critical vision that rises above sectarian interests and prejudices, while acknowledging respectfully the value of tradition and lineage for each group. The space of dialogue that has opened up—between different denominations and groups within Buddhism and between Buddhist and non-Buddhists—needs to be nurtured in the best traditions of Buddhism. The future holds possibilities and challenges but one thing is clear: India is rediscovering Buddhism through pathways that take unexpected turns and detours.