THE THREE JEWELS OF DR. B.R. AMBEDKAR:
BUDDHISM FROM THE MARGINS

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ABSTRACT

As a South Asian iteration of “modern Buddhism,” Ambedkarite Buddhism’s place in the modern Euro-American Religious Studies academy has been under-articulated and, considering the profile of its founding figure, this absence is conspicuous. By providing a detailed exposition of the unique and defining features of Ambedkarite Buddhism this project aims to address this gap in the literature. B.R. Ambedkar’s position as a Dalit, activist, Columbia University-trained scholar, pragmatist, and Buddhist offers a unique point of departure to re-examine some of the core assumptions about Buddhist approaches to ethics and action in the world. This dissertation aims to articulate a theological (or dharmalogical) framework at work in Ambedkar’s American Pragmatist-inspired, social justice-oriented Buddhism. Inside India, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar is perhaps the single most well-known and revered social justice figure for the oppressed classes of all time, with numerous universities, neighborhoods, roads, foundations, and airports named in his honor. And yet, his profile has remained largely provincial. As a major religious leader in India, Dr. Ambedkar is almost completely obscured by Gandhi’s shadow in the Euro-American mind, yet it was his deep interest in religion and his famous public conversion to Buddhism, along with millions of his followers, that animated so much of his action and continues to inspire his followers today.

In his introduction to The Buddha and His Dhamma Ambedkar identified four main problems that, in his view, hindered the Buddhist tradition in its ability to reach its potential as the religion most adapted to modernity. This dissertation is organized around those questions, as Ambedkar framed them. First, Ambedkar was dissatisfied with
traditional explanations for the Siddhārtha’s decision to leave his comfortable palace life in pursuit of the life of a renunciate. In place of the psycho-spiritual angst that drives the Siddhārtha found in most traditional source texts, Ambedkar presents Siddhārtha as a socially-motivated renunciate in his Buddha narrative. The second problem relates to the set of teachings commonly known as the “four noble truths.” He sees these teachings as problematic for various reasons, including that, in his view, they lead to nihilism, and he seeks to undermine their authority while offering an alternative frame. The third problem relates to the Buddhist teachings on *karma* and rebirth. He argues that Brahminical readings of these terms have inflected Buddhist understandings of them and consequently rendered them incompatible with the Buddha’s intended meaning. He seeks to clarify the Buddha’s original intent regarding these terms. The fourth and final problem relates to the community of monks and nuns. Specifically, Ambedkar seeks to rectify an inconsistency he identifies between the social message of the Buddha as he understands it and the inward orientation of the monastic *saṅgha* as he sees it around the Buddhist world.

Ambedkar succeeded in the creation of a pan-Indian anti-caste movement, the likes of which had never before been seen. Instead of rejecting religion completely, as perhaps may be expected of a Western educated, liberal-minded thinker whose disaffection with Hinduism was near total, he instead moved toward it. His enchantment with the Buddha from a young age as the first and most effective anti-Brahminical champion of equality coupled with his sense of the need for a social consciousness to morally orient not only Dalits but all of Indian society inspired him to pragmatically carve out a Buddhism that he found fit for the job.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

What I wish to emphasize is that Buddha taught many other things besides Ahimsa. He taught as part of his religion, social freedom, intellectual freedom, economic freedom and political freedom. He taught equality, equality not between man and man only, but between man and woman. It would be difficult to find a religious teacher to compare with Buddha, whose teachings embrace so many aspects of the social life of people, whose doctrines are so modern and with main concern to give salvation to man in his life on earth and not to promise it in heaven after he is dead! -B.R. Ambedkar, “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion.”

On October 14, 1956, in the central Indian city of Nagpur, at what is now called in Hindi the Dīkshabhūmi (“ordination ground”), Dr. B.R. Ambedkar formally converted to Buddhism. He then presided over one of the largest mass conversion moments of the twentieth century and added some 500,000 people to the Buddhist fold in one act. The reverberations from this act of conversion are still felt in India today, though perhaps curiously, those effects seem mostly limited to the area inside its borders. Currently there are an estimated seven million Ambedkarite Buddhists in India. While Ambedkar’s accomplishments in the fields of law, economics, philosophy, and social movement

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3 The most recent Indian census data available (2011) reports approximately 8.4 million Buddhists in India total, with approximately 7 million in Mahārāṣṭra and Uttar Pradesh. Sizable traditional Buddhist populations exist in the northeast and Himalayan states. The 2011 Indian census data sorted for religion can be accessed here: https://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/Religion_PCA.html.
building have been well documented by social scientists, a comprehensive treatment of Ambedkar’s unique approach to the Buddhist tradition has yet to be fully articulated. This dissertation aims to fill at least some of the gap that exists in religious studies scholarly literature by offering a descriptive treatment of Ambedkar’s Buddhism through unpacking and presenting some of the core dharmalogical content at work in Ambedkar’s unique approach to Buddhism. It offers a new perspective from which to approach his dharmalogical thought; one that allows for a shift in emphasis due to social position, without a subsequent crisis of authenticity. This fresh perspective, that takes Ambedkar’s Buddhism seriously from its own social position and explains how he arrives at some of his core Buddhist ideas, can be used by scholars to explore similarities and dissimilarities between Buddhist modernist movements positioned from the center or from the margins. Doing Religious Studies from the margins is important because it allows for the inclusion of historically absent voices. By virtue of a change of perspective, the inclusion of such voices can shed new light on old problems and enrich and deepen our understanding of existing categories. As such it lays the ground for future critique and comparison between Buddhism as a category co-constructed and received by elites across transmission lines, and as a category from margin to center.

Ambedkar’s efforts toward the creation of a democratic Indian society and his influence in the emerging Indian nation were matched by few, if any, twentieth-century

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5 Thanks to Upayadhi Savana Jo Luraschi for this term.
Indian actors. As an organizer, elected official, cabinet minister, economist, legal theorist, and chief architect of the Indian constitution, his work to fashion the Indian state as secular and egalitarian continue to exert influence into the present. The fate of Dalits in an emerging nation state was a major concern not only for Ambedkar, whose stake in that question was deeply personal, but for other major independence-era Indian actors, including and especially for Gandhi, whose fast to the death to keep the Dalit community (along with their vote) within the Hindu fold during the Poona Pact negotiations continues to haunt Indian political tensions to this day. For Ambedkar, the agency of Dalit actors in India was paramount. It was his view that Dalits needed to be allowed to direct their own future, not have it decided paternalistically by caste-Hindus, for whom Dalit struggles were necessarily abstract and of secondary concern.

In his attempts to carve out an identity apart from caste, Ambedkar’s efforts to tear down the Hindu scaffolding that support it have garnered the most attention by scholars. One consequence of this framing-in-the-negative is that Ambedkar has often been defined by what he rejects, namely Hinduism and the caste system, and he is consequently remembered most often as India’s most well-known anti-caste leader. But Ambedkar’s efforts to annihilate caste and unsettle the theological ground for the practice of caste is only one part of his legacy. Ambedkar was also profoundly creative. The

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6 The Poona Pact was a 1932 agreement reached between B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi over a dispute about the creation of a separate electorate for the “depressed classes” in India. Ambedkar advocated for a separate electorate while Gandhi insisted on a single one, vowing to fast to his own death to achieve his goal. Gandhi’s fast ultimately forced Ambedkar to compromise, agreeing that the depressed classes would have reserved seats in a single electorate. Ambedkar cites this confrontation with Gandhi as the beginning of the life-long discord between the two men. See Dhananjay Keer, Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission (Popular Prakashan, 2018), 162–92.

7 The term “caste-Hindu,” or “savarna”, refers to a Hindu “with caste,” namely one of the three upper dvīja, or “twice born,” castes (brāhmin, kṣatriya, vaśya).
seventeen volumes now available on the Ministry of External Affairs website\textsuperscript{8} are a testament to his incredible scholarly output and include the work he considered to be his most important and what was perhaps his most ambitious and broadminded of creative enterprises: the development of a unique expression of the Buddhist tradition. While Gandhi’s personal religious commitments and traditionalism have cast him in a “spiritual” light in the West, where “eastern religions” and “Indian mysticism” are in consonance with, to borrow King’s term, the imagined “mystic East,” Ambedkar’s religious significance, by contrast, is often overlooked. In this regard, it stands to reason that a Columbia University-trained, suit-wearing, modernist Indian figure would be received primarily as a liberal secular actor, one who whole-heartedly adopted and championed the French revolution’s tripartite motto “liberty, equality, and fraternity,” and that this association with Western liberal modernity would render his views on religion lackluster and familiar in comparison to an exotic Vedānta-inspired brand of Hinduism. While Ambedkar’s perspective \textit{vis-à-vis} his subscription to the discourses of liberalism, inspired by the tripartite principles of the French Third Republic (liberty, equality, fraternity) but given full voice through his subscription to American Deweyan pragmatism, his commitment to religion, in particular the idea that any just society must have a religious ground for moral action, often places him at odds with Euro-American\textsuperscript{9} biases toward secularization.\textsuperscript{10} Ambedkar’s voice from the margins, marginal with

\textsuperscript{8} https://www.mea.gov.in/ambedkar.html.

\textsuperscript{9} I use the term “Euro-American” with caution. While it avoids the traps of essentializing a “West” and an “East,” it perhaps inadvertently erases other important distinctions, such as the contributions of Anglo-Australian Buddhist Studies in the construction of Buddhist modernism.

\textsuperscript{10} In some ways, Ambedkar’s identification of the central moral meaning-making role of religion in modern society and his resistance to Western forms of secularization \textit{vis-à-vis} the privatization of the
respect to his colonized and caste-dominated positions, renders his modernist approach to these intertwined concepts, the secular and the religious, alternate to dominant Euro-American conceptualizations of them. He is both thoroughly modern and simultaneously subaltern and it is this dual perspective that allows for his use of religion as a site for creative power reclamation. As Richard King has noted, “indeed, since the nineteenth century, and particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, the category of “religion” has provided the main site for the framing and articulation of alternatives to Euro-American models of modernity.”

In this dissertation I offer an explication of Ambedkar’s thought on the key Buddhist principles at work in his conceptualization of Buddhism. This reading is necessary to make room for Ambedkar’s unique, pragmatist-inspired reading of Buddhism in the larger discipline of Buddhist Studies, where his Buddhist thought has historically been left to the margins. As King, Cabezon, Lopez, and others have noted, the early history of Buddhist Studies was generally characterized by a strong reliance on literal texts in terms of both objects of study as well as in philological methodologies while contemporary Buddhist studies has adopted new questions and approaches to the religious sphere anticipates the work of the “postsecular” turn in the current moment. In recognition of the failure of many of the dominant theories of secularization in the late twentieth century to explain the persistence of religiosity in modernity, José Casanova provides post-facto “postsecular” support to Ambedkar’s respect for the role of religion in modernity: “The fact is religions are here to stay, thus putting to rest one of the cherished dreams of the Enlightenment. The second and more important lesson is that religions are likely to continue playing important public roles in the ongoing construction of the modern world. This second lesson in particular compels us to rethink systematically the relationship of religion and modernity and, more important, the possible roles religion may play in the public sphere of modern societies.” José Casanova, Public Religions in the Modern World (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 6.

study of Buddhist modernism. My intervention offers a way of thinking about Ambedkar as a religious actor, one who should be required reading in any course on Buddhist modernism. I hope to convince the reader that this thinker is not only a social justice activist, but also a religious figure. His millions of Buddhist followers in India already treat him as such, praying in front of altars built around his photo, using his name as a greeting, and marking important events in his life as part of a new sacred practice. As such, my project is informed by and in consonance with Critical Religion scholars, such as Richard King, who have argued for a new Religious Studies, one that argues for adopting a cultural studies approach to the category and takes seriously the contingent nature of the category of religion as a particular product of Enlightenment thought. This project also offers a contrast to those efforts that seek to situate Ambedkar’s Buddhism within an orthodox/heterodox discourse. King has noted that

The category of religion, in fact, is simply the production of the cognitive ‘filtering out’ or abstraction of certain aspects of a much broader cultural dynamic. This process of abstraction is founded upon the presuppositions of the Enlightenment. Other cultures and pre-Enlightenment Western culture did not view the human social world in this manner – they simply did not carve up the world in the way that we do. Religious phenomena were always seen as part and parcel of the political, social and other cultural forms.¹²

“Religion” for King, as noted above, is a relatively recent invention, one that reflects a particular way of seeing the world. To be sure, Ambedkar’s Buddhism is a product of modernity, and he is not shy about using the category of “religion” in the construction of his Buddhism. But as a Buddhist modernist movement from the margins, it is distinct from so many other iterations, both in Asia where varying degrees of state

¹² Richard King, Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and “the Mystic East” (New York: Routledge, 1999), 10.
sponsorship and deep cultural history are at work in its construction (such as in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Japan etc.) and in Euro-America where Buddhism has been largely received through literate and educated elites. Ambedkar also displays an awareness of the ways in which the category of religion, and Buddhism by extension, have been constructed and modulated by those at the center (non-marginal). As explored further in this dissertation, he rejects phenomenological, privatized conceptualizations of the category and re-politicizes it in service of his larger project. By including this Buddhism from the margins, a missing voice in the construction of the category can be included and the category can hopefully be complicated in potentially fruitful ways.

Ambedkar’s twentieth-century interpretation of the Buddhist tradition represents a unique iteration of Buddhism. His seminal work, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, which has become a central religious text for Ambedkarite Buddhist communities, orients the core teachings of the Buddhist tradition toward social action. While not eliminating the role of individual religious experience and psychospiritual contemplative practice, they are de-emphasized in his work with respect many other modernist iterations of the Buddhist tradition, and he frames many of the core Buddhist teachings as critiques of casteism, sexism, social injustice, materialism, and structural violence. Ambedkar views the Buddhist tradition as a nontheistic, rational, scientifically-compatible tradition at its core, and he argues that these principal qualities have become obscured by centuries of Brahminical influence in India and by elite monastic interference both in the classical Indian Buddhist context and in the spread of Buddhism outside of India. In his Buddhist

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writing and mobilization, his goal is reformation: to return Buddhism to this rational tradition and to provide the moral ground for the establishment of a religion that advances the tripartite principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. In short, he seeks to install Buddhism as the religion most suitable to modernity. For Ambedkar, as will be explored in more detail in the following chapters, religion is necessary for moral order. He seeks to draw a distinction between religion as a buttressing force for domination, or a “religion of rules,” and religion as a moral ground for the construction of a just society, or a “religion of principles.” He states in *Annihilation of Caste*:

> While I condemn a religion of rules, I must not be misunderstood to hold the opinion that there is no necessity for a religion. On the contrary, I agree with Burke when he says that ‘True religion is the foundation of society, the basis on which all true Civil Government rests, and both their sanction.’ Consequently, when I urge that these ancient rules of life be annulled, I am anxious that their place shall be taken by a religion of principles, which alone can lay claim to being a true religion.  

In what follows in this chapter, I first will review of some of the relevant and current literature in Ambedkarite Buddhist Studies. I then contextualize Ambedkar’s Buddhism by surveying some of the major influences on Ambedkar’s Buddhist thought, including the Buddha himself as Ambedkar meets him through the suttas and through his secondary sources, as through the work of Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule, Dharmanad Kosambi, Karl Marx, and John Dewey. Finally, I present a summary of the chapters to follow.

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Ambedkar Studies and Buddhism

There is a wide range in discipline and approach to Ambedkar’s Buddhism. Some scholars cast his conversion as instrumental and politically expedient, while others advance a normative, often apologetic stance regarding Ambedkar’s Buddhism. The majority of approaches to Ambedkar’s Buddhism assume some kind of essential or naturalized Buddhism, frequently defined in terms of the reception of Buddhism in “the West” where scientific compatibility, individuality, contemplative spirituality, textualism, and romanticism are some of the discourses that characterize a basic “Buddhism.” Trevor Ling’s *Buddhist Revival in India*, one of the earliest Euro-American Religious Studies treatments of Ambedkar’s Buddhism, represents a clear example of the above.\(^\text{15}\) Ling, a scholar of religion, who specialized in Theravāda and early Buddhist texts, is markedly critical of Ambedkar’s Buddhism and his critique is one that is echoed in many later approaches (as well as some of Ambedkar’s contemporary Buddhist Studies receptions of his work\(^\text{16}\)). In Ling’s normative typology of Buddhism, where a degraded and encultured Buddhism is contrasted with a lighter and closer-to-the-source modern psychophysical Buddhism, Ambedkar’s reforms are viewed as clumsy and regressive. Ling suggests that Ambedkar’s attempts to fashion Buddhism into a “religion” renders it off


the mark, as Buddhism’s strengths lie in its appeal to those capable of engaging in it as a therapeutic process, a decidedly non-religious enterprise for Ling. He states plainly,

Ambedkar’s insistence on regarding Buddhism, even in a modernised form, as necessarily a religion, is also unsupportable. The evidence of the Ambedkarite movement suggests that Buddhism would be more clearly perceived in its essential nature, and would have greater intellectual relevance to citizens of modern India if its non-religious character as a psycho-social philosophy were to be unambiguously set forth. And if in India, most traditionally religious of countries, then everywhere.¹⁷ [italics in original]

The “evidence” that Ling is pointing to in the above quote is the failure of the Ambedkarite movement to keep politics separate from their nascent Buddhist movement. Ling argues that early Buddhist actors were non-political and political forms of Buddhism that have arisen in the Buddhist world since the early movement are less pure for it. He states, “the early Buddhists did not attempt to politicise their movement, as for example, the early Muslims of Arabia did.”¹⁸ Ling’s attribution of “politics” to Muslims and to forms of Buddhism, like Ambedkarite Buddhism, that have become overly enmeshed in culture and his denial of “politics” to early Buddhists reflects some of the early orientalist reception biases toward disengagement identified by scholars like King, Hallisey, Carrette, McMahan, Lopez, Tweed, and others. As they have argued, this dominant reception of Buddhism, inflected with the discourses of liberalism, gave rise to the creation of the category of Buddhism in Europe and America. Echoes of the

¹⁷ Ling, Buddhist Revival in India, 129.

¹⁸ Ling, 128.
subscription to this modernist Buddhism, as can be heard in Ling’s critique above, underlie much of both the critical and apologetic approaches to Ambedkar’s Buddhism.\(^{19}\)

Christoph Jaffrelot, a political scientist and a more recent major commentator on Ambedkar’s work, reflects a similar subscription to an essential Buddhism in a chapter toward the end of his book, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability*, titled “The ‘Solution’ of Conversion.” In it Jaffrelot details the process by which Ambedkar rationally and pragmatically selected the religion most suited to Dalit conversion and suggests that Ambedkar’s conversion movement was a “strategy of social emancipation.”\(^{20}\) He suggests that Ambedkar chose Buddhism over other religions in the end because it offered him the most flexibility to fashion his new religious movement. Throughout the chapter, Jaffrelot describes Ambedkar’s interest in conversion and in Buddhism solely in instrumental terms and at times contrasts Ambedkar’s motivation with a genuine religious one, a term that Jaffrelot does not define but appears inflected by phenomenological approaches to the category. He states of Ambedkar’s approach to Buddhism,

He legitimately highlights the egalitarian meaning of Buddhism, but he undoubtedly goes too far when deducing from it a message of social justice. The egalitarianism of the Buddha comes from a religious and

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spiritual logic – above all it is the equality of human beings before God. But the fact that Buddhism was perceived by Ambedkar as an alternative to Hindu social hierarchy is clearly reflected in the practical details of his conversion.\footnote{Jaffrelot, 133.}

On display here in Jaffrelot’s characterization of Ambedkar’s conversion is a sense that there is some natural category “religion”, and that “Buddhism” naturally falls taxonomically into that category. Where Ling sees too much “religion”, Jaffrelot sees not enough and critically frames Ambedkar’s approach to Buddhism here as problematically non-religious and merely politically expedient. While Jaffrelot does not take a normative stance regarding Ambedkar’s decision to use religious conversion as a means to social emancipation \textit{per se}, he does maintain a particular position regarding the nature of these operative categories without regard to their historical and social embeddedness. In other words, Jaffrelot’s presentation of Ambedkar’s conversion as merely politically expedient precludes iterations of “religion” that fall outside of its conventional usage. For Jaffrelot, Ambedkar’s appeal to the Buddha is “practical” but not “religious” and as such, marks it as religiously inauthentic; lacking in a sincerity that a true religious motivation would evince. Historian Eleanor Zelliot, who has perhaps published more on Ambedkar and the Dalit movement than anyone in North America,\footnote{Zelliot’s scholarly articles on topics such as Dalit social movements, untouchability, Ambedkar and Ambedkarite Buddhism, women in Ambedkarite Buddhism number at least seventy. See https://www.carleton.edu/history/faculty/in-memoriam/zelliot/publications/ for a full list of her publications.} likewise frames Ambedkar’s interest in and conversion to Buddhism in terms that suggest his motivations for religious conversion may not have been totally sincere. While allowing for Ambedkar’s attraction
to Buddhism to be heartfelt, of his tendency to present it in reference to Hinduism, Zelliot states,

While he was able to give a talk on parliamentary democracy with little reference to the caste system or the disabilities of the Untouchables, he seemed incapable of speaking of religion without criticizing the Hinduism into which he had been born, exhibiting a degree of bitterness that might be termed not insincerity but a profound disappointment in something that touched his emotions.\(^{23}\)

Like Jaffrelot, Zelliot’s characterization of Ambedkar’s interest in Buddhism as being reactionary marks it as something less than authentically religiously motivated, where “religious” is necessarily non-political.

This framing of Ambedkar’s interest in and conversion to Buddhism as primarily instrumental and based on an essential “Buddhism” or a bias toward phenomenological conceptions of religion can also be seen in Sallie King’s approach to Ambedkar’s Buddhism in her work *Socially Engaged Buddhism*. King, a scholar of religion, offers a sympathetic reading of Ambedkar’s Buddhism that is characterized primarily by his desire to provide Dalits in India with a religious framework for their upliftment. While her apologetic approach makes room for Ambedkar’s use of Buddhist scripture to justify his caste critique,\(^ {24}\) she suggests that this project of upliftment may lead Ambedkar too far afield of a traditional, real Buddhism. Of Ambedkar’s efforts to re-work some of the familiar, core teachings of the Buddhist tradition as it is understood in other forms of Buddhist modernism she states,

…Ambedkar’s “solution” was one of the more problematic attempts by an Engaged Buddhist to resolve a genuine dilemma in the traditional teachings. Ambedkar redefined the cause of suffering, or *duḥkha* (the


\(^{24}\) Sallie B. King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009), 146.
Second Noble Truth), as external social factors such as poverty, rather than as the usual psycho-spiritual causes, craving and ignorance. While this “solution” avoided the problems of blaming the victims of poverty for their own suffering, as traditional Buddhism could be accused of doing (that is, implying that the poor have only themselves to blame for their poverty), it was at the cost of weakening the traditional strength of Buddhism, its insight into the psycho-spiritual nature of the human condition and the psycho-spiritual dynamics of the way in which we create our own experience.\(^{25}\)

Again, as in Jaffrelot’s and Ling’s work, King reveals an uncritical subscription to a received, or in her words “traditional Buddhism;” one that centers on individual psycho-spiritual concern with the human condition. King, like many other commentators on Ambedkar’s Buddhism, seeks to characterize Ambedkar’s chief undertaking as the creation of a “Dalit Buddhism” of sorts where he, as a leader of the Dalits, is principally concerned with creating a new, Dalit-adjusted politicized form of a standard, non-inflected, non-political Buddhism.

One of the strongest defenses of Ambedkar’s Buddhism is offered by sociologist Gail Omvedt, who along with Zelliot is one of the most well-known commentators on Ambedkar’s Buddhism. Omvedt’s work on the non-Brahmin movement in Mahārāṣtra and on Dalit social movements has been hugely influential\(^{26}\) and her book *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahminism and Caste* is perhaps her most thorough treatment of Ambedkar’s Buddhism.\(^{27}\) In it, she is more generous in her assessment of Ambedkar’s

\(^{25}\) King, 161.


approach to Buddhism than many others and argues that it should have wider acceptance by Buddhist Studies scholars despite ostensible novelty. Importantly, Omvedt argues that Ambedkar’s innovativeness is not without historical precedent and suggests that each iteration of Buddhism, despite the seeming timelessness of its contemporary iteration, was novel at one time and also arose as the product of interpretation and re-interpretation. She states,

There is enough uncertainty in what the words of the Buddha really were, in terms of standards of historical scholarship, to make various interpretations possible. Quite likely these first interpretations which gave birth to Theravada Buddhism depended much on the ‘common-sense’ religious-philosophical thinking of the time, including the karma/rebirth framework, which Gotama himself may have been attempting to transcend. Reinterpretation was done again, perhaps more ‘consciously,’ by many followers of the Mahayana, with brilliant thinkers such as Nagarjuna taking the lead themselves, to deconstruct and displace the ‘four noble truths’ from their position of centrality, while parallel trends developed that transformed the Buddha into a cosmological and transcendent central figure more important than any divinity. Tantric or Vajrayana Buddhism represented a further reinterpretation.28

For support in her argument that Ambedkar’s Buddhism, while novel in the current moment, is not without ground in the textual tradition, Omvedt points to recent scholarship in Buddhist Studies that complicates the psycho-spiritual approach to Buddhism. While her attempt to rescue Ambedkar’s Buddhism from charges of heterodoxy from those who subscribe to a narrowly defined modernist, literary-based version of Buddhism, her strategy is not so much to widen the concept of Buddhism beyond the literary, but to argue for Ambedkar’s inclusion within that scope. The crux of her work is an establishment or redefinition of an “essential” Buddhism that can allow

28 Omvedt, 8.
room for Ambedkar’s *navayāna*. She states, “the issue of ‘Navayana Buddhism’
provokes us to ask certain questions about Buddhism: what is its essential core, without
which we would no longer be able to call it ‘Buddhism’ or ‘the Dhamma taught by the
Buddha’?” and she seeks to answer this question by highlighting the ways in which the
early Buddhist tradition can indeed provide the ground for Ambedkar’s “radical”
rethinking of the Buddhist tradition.

A similar argument in defense of Ambedkar has been advanced by philosopher
Pradeep Gokhale, who in his work at the intersections of Ambedkar, Buddhist
modernism, and classical Indian philosophy has argued that Ambedkar’s use of
innovative framing in his work is not unlike the novel moves made by many classical
Indian Buddhist philosophical figures such as Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu. Placing
Ambedkar in this context of ongoing innovation, he states,

Ascertaining the nature of true or original Buddhism so as to distinguish it
from later additions or admixtures is a difficult historical issue. But one
thing seems to be clear. There are some apparent inconsistencies or
contradictions in classical Buddhism itself. Attempts to resolve these
inconsistencies may lead to different reformulations or reconstructions of
Buddhism. These reconstructions could be mutually incompatible, but
each one of them could be internally consistent. And still they could be
called different versions of Buddhism. This can be said with regard to
Buddhist schools such as Sautrāntika, Vaibhāṣika, Yogācāra and
Mādhyamika. Ambedkar’s *Navayāna* could be regarded as a version of
Buddhism in this very sense. Like other schools of Buddhism *Navayāna*
can be appreciated as an attempt to remove certain apparent contradictions
in traditional Buddhism and to present an internally consistent
reconstruction of its elements.  

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29 Omvedt, 15.

Like Omvedt, Gokahle is prepared to grant the novelty of Ambedkar’s Buddhism against some nebulous referent “Buddhism,” but suggests that given that a fundamental feature of Buddhism is its diversity of thought and history of innovation, Ambedkar’s apparent novelty with regard to his presentation of *karma* and rebirth and his rethinking of the four noble truths is not a fatal problem and the practice of this type of innovation has, in fact, ample historical precedent. Philosopher Aakash Singh Rathore’s recent work on Ambedkar, including his critical edition of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, co-authored with Ajay Verma, and his recent edited five-volume set *B.R. Ambedkar: The Quest for Justice*, has similarly argued that Ambedkar’s Buddhism should be taken seriously despite its ostensible novelty due to Ambedkar’s positionality and the biases inherent in South Asian caste-Hindu tendencies to sideline and ignore Ambedkar’s contributions to the intellectual heritage of India across disciplines.  

Ambedkar’s advocacy on behalf of the rights of women was a central aspect of much of his work, from his Buddhist and anti-Brahminical writing to his policy work as Law Minister. He is often advanced as an intellectual heir to Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule in regard to his work on gender equity. Recent feminist scholarship on Ambedkar’s conversion movement includes the work of Pawar and Moon, whose efforts to situate Ambedkar’s thought on gender equity within the a framework of non-savarna feminist discourse includes work to record first-hand accounts of women’s efforts in the original

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31 Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*.

conversion movement and Sharmila Rege’s work to elevate Dalit feminist voices and to compile Ambedkar’s work on gender and Brahminical patriarchy. Additional significant contributions to the field have been recently made by Wandana Sonalkar, Shaijala Pak, Uma Chakravarti, and Gopal Guru in *Dalit Feminist Theory* and Pratima Pardeshi’s work in *Classical Buddhism, Neo-Buddhism and the Question of Caste*. Eleanor Zelliot’s work, though, is one of the few feminist perspectives to explicitly explore the intersection of Ambedkar’s Buddhism with gender equity. Her work “Religious Leadership among Maharashtrian Buddhist Women” in the 2000 volume *Women’s Buddhism; Buddhism’s Women* and “Buddhist Women of the Contemporary Maharashtrian Conversion Movement,” in the 1992 volume *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*, are some of the few works that explicitly explore the implications of Ambedkar’s gender equity concerns for his Buddhism.

Christopher Queen, a scholar of religion, has done more scholarly work to articulate Ambedkar’s Buddhism than perhaps anyone. His 1996 chapter “Dr. Ambedkar

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33 Urmi Pawar and Meenakshi Moon, *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement* (New Delhi, India: Zubaan, 2008).


and the Hermeneutics of Liberation” in the volume *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* conceptualized Ambedkar’s Buddhism through the lenses of Buddhist hermeneutics, liberation theology, and the cultural categories of modernity and post modernity. In his later work in the volume *Reconstructing the World*, Queen argues for the inclusion of Ambedkar in the field of Buddhist Studies as,

Ambedkar represents, along with Henry Steel Olcott, Anagarika Dharmapala, and a generation of writers and activists today, a new kind of Buddhism, one essentially unprecedented in any of the great cultures of mutual transformation Buddhism has entered, but one that nevertheless retains the central elements of the Buddhist vision – a vision of human self-cultivation, social awareness and sensitivity, and, above all, a commitment to wisdom and compassion in a world of increasing oppression and interdependence.

In the editor’s preface to their critical edition to *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Singh Rathore and Verma raise questions about Queen’s position regarding the orthodox/heterodox status of Ambedkar’s Buddhism and draw attention to the ambiguity that Buddhist Studies scholars have displayed in their approach to Ambedkarite Buddhism’s place in the academy.

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38 Queen, “Ambedkar’s Dhamma: Source and Method in the Construction of Engaged Buddhism,” 146.

39 Rathore and Verma state of Queen’s position, “While in 1996, Queen saw Ambedkar as ‘authentically Buddhist’ and in conformity with the Buddhist heritage, as a ‘bona fide re-former’ and not a ‘heretic’ (Queen 1996b: 48), in his 2000 publication, he reread Ambedkar as far less orthodox: ‘the general pattern of belief and practice that has come to be called “engaged Buddhism” is unprecedented, and thus tantamount to a new chapter in the history of the tradition’ (Queen 2000). Queen now uses the key expression ‘heterodoxy from the classical Indian conceptions’, which serves to bring a new, third alternative, *heterodoxy*, to his 1996 disjunction of *heritage* versus *heresy*. By importing this third term, Queen flips his focus from the reformist reading of Ambedkar, authentically in line with the Buddhist heritage, to a heterodox one, discontinuous with the heritage, a new *yana* in the evolution of dharma …” Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, xvi–xvii.
Philosopher Scott Stroud, another major active North American commentator on Ambedkar’s Buddhism, has largely steered clear of the heterodox vs. orthodox issue and focused on the influence of American Pragmatism, specifically Dewey, on Ambedkar’s approach to religion and politics. In avoiding the trap of essentializing Buddhism, Stroud’s work positions Ambedkar as the progenitor of a new, Deweyan branch of South Asian pragmatism with his Buddhism filling a role unique to that context and to his position. He states,

Like Dewey, Ambedkar was firmly committed to achieving equality, liberty, and fraternity; unlike Dewey, he had the traditional materials and imaginative resources to see Buddhism as the religious means that could be reconstructed and used for these meliorative ends. It is in acknowledging this debt and foundation that we can start to appreciate what Ambedkar does with American pragmatism when he adapts it to the Indian context.40

Stroud also gives pragmatist ground to Ambedkar’s well-known distinction between “rules” and “principles,” an important distinction that he returns to repeatedly in The Buddha and His Dhamma. Stroud again traces the influence of Dewey in Ambedkar’s thought in this regard and notes the work that Dewey’s pragmatism does in the construction of Ambedkar’s Buddhist frame. In particular Stroud frames Ambedkar’s flexible approach to ahimsa as heavily informed by his pragmatist roots and in contradistinction to the more rigid rule-bound orthodox Hindu approach articulated by Gandhi.41

Two other major commentators on Ambedkar’s Buddhism stand out for their reflexive, or subject/scholar directed, treatments of Ambedkar’s work. First, in his 2005 book *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit: Religious Conversion and Socio-Political Emancipation*, anthropologist Johannes Beltz argues that Ambedkar “cannot be identified with modernist Buddhism as his methods go beyond modernism, even transgressing it.” Instead, he argues that Ambedkar should “be seen as man guided by the vision of a better, modern, reformed Indian society, a society that is more just and egalitarian.” After careful consideration of whether Ambedkar should be considered modernist in his orientation to Buddhism, Beltz underscores that Ambedkar’s decision to mold Buddhism into a secular religion represents a sort of modernist contradiction, one that Ambedkar was comfortable with tolerating, but also marked his modern project as transgressive and external with respect to the Protestant Buddhism described by scholars like Gombrich and Obeysekere. Beltz recognizes that Ambedkar’s sin with respect to the reception of


43 Ibid.

44 Beltz states, “As a Buddhist, Ambedkar asked for independence and more autonomy in relation to all Buddhist traditions. On 14 October 1956 he gave the Twenty-two Vows to his ‘disciples’ and initiated them into Buddhism, acting as an authority comparable to that of the Bhikkhu Chandramani, the monk who had initiated Ambedkar. Despite his lay status, Ambedkar claimed the same legitimacy as an ordained monk. Was this not an exceptional case in Buddhism? Ambedkar faced fierce accusations of having falsified the religion, and of having preached a ‘personal’ Buddhism without respecting the tradition (cf. Jivaka 1959a and 1959b). Ambedkar thus cannot be identified with modernist Buddhism as his methods go beyond modernism, even transgressing it…In my opinion, Ambedkar should rather be seen as a man guided by the vision of a better, modern, reformed Indian society, a society that is more just and egalitarian. After all, he developed his idea of a new Buddhism (*navayana*) by interpreting the *dhamma* as a social and sacred phenomenon. It seems as if he sensed a contradiction in the idea of a morality that was rationalist and sacred at the same time. On the one hand, he imagined Buddhism as a secular and civil religion and as the fundament of a free society (Ambedkar 1987c: 442; M. Fuchs 2001). On the other hand; he edited a manual of rituals (1998b), and wrote a Buddhist ‘Bible’ which ends with a prayer to the Tathagatha (Ambedkar 1992: 599). In fact he repeated several times that the principles of secularism do not mean abandoning religion.” Ibid, 74.
his Buddhism is offending Buddhist modernists and not a corruption of some “traditional Buddhism” *per se*. Beltz’s edited volume *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India* assembled recent multi-disciplinary scholarship that treat Ambedkarite Buddhism generally, including important chapters by Zelliot, Omvedt, Fiske and Emmerich, Gokhale, Queen, Chakravarti, Fitzgerald, and others.\(^{45}\)

The second scholar particularly noteworthy for a reflexive focus is literary scholar Gauri Viswanathan, one of the few scholars who has explicitly noted the ways in which most specialists of Ambedkar’s Buddhism have maintained a hard separation between the “political” and the “religious” in their thinking about his conversion. Of recent critical approaches to Ambedkar’s conversion she states,

> By and large, the split is straight down the line, dividing the private from the public, the spiritual from the political. Critics like Gail Omvedt see Ambedkar’s religious conversion as purely reactive, a mode of mass mobilization of Dalits to retrieve them from the hostility of caste Hindus on the one hand, and on the other, the refusal of political groups like the Communist party to regard caste and religious oppression as distinctly separate from class factors. In this reading, Ambedkar’s conversion is a political stunt, albeit a highly successful one, which altered forever the demographic equation between religious groups.\(^{46}\)

Viswanathan is highlighting the tendency of Ambedkar’s commentators to reject his appeals to religion out of hand on grounds that the political and religious represent fundamentally separate spheres. She notes that for Ambedkar, as a function of his marginal position in Indian society, these spheres are mutually imbricated:

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For Ambedkar, on the other hand, religious experience is constitutively political. The advent of the Buddha and the conversions of women, outcastes, and the rich alike to Buddhism in classical Indian history occur during a period of crisis brought on by corruption, material disparities, and widespread neglect of collective responsibilities. The spiritual impoverishment of brahminical Hinduism produced not metaphysical despair but a profound sense of injustice, which Ambedkar clearly saw as the heart of the Buddhist conversion experience.\(^{47}\)

Where Viswanathan chooses to read Ambedkar’s motivations as religious because he explicitly claims that they are religious, most other commentators read his religious commitments as politics disguised as religion.

Finally, it should be noted that for Ambedkar’s followers, his motivations with regard to Buddhist conversion are regarded as supremely religious. Ambedkar has, in a literal sense and through a process of apotheosis, been elevated to a divine status by many followers of Ambedkarite Buddhism. Emic literature represents Ambedkar’s conversion as an act of liberation and he is regarded as a bodhisattva with the power to positively affect people’s lives through supplication. D.C. Ahir’s short biography of Ambedkar at times veers into this hagiographic mode when discussing Ambedkar’s early life,

As in the case of Lord Buddha, a prophecy had also been made prior to the birth of Ambedkar that he would be a great man. It is said that one of the uncles Ramji Sakpal, who turned a Sanyasi, once came to Mhow, along with some other hermits...he conferred on Ramji Sakpal a boon that a boy would be born in the family who would leave his mark on history. This boon took effect at Mhow on 14 April 1891.\(^{48}\)

Keer’s biography, the most comprehensive biography of Ambedkar currently available, likewise at times leans toward hagiography. He recounts a similar and more detailed story

\(^{47}\) Viswanathan, 230.

of the prophecy of Ambedkar’s birth, compares Ambedkar to Moses, and frequently writes in a personal and flattering style. ⁴⁹

In summary, while Ambedkar’s Buddhism receives explicit treatment by humanists, such as Zelliot, King, Sponberg, Queen, Stroud, Ling, Singh Rathore, and Gokhale; and by social scientists such as Omvedt, Rege, Jaffrelot, Pawar and Moon; a shared feature across this body of work seems to be a subscription to a rigid category variously called “Buddhism,” or “traditional Buddhism” against which Ambedkar’s Buddhism is measured with varying degrees of harmony. Implicit in this category are certain discourses of liberalism - such as individualism, rationality, and scientific compatibility - against which Ambedkar’s Buddhism compares favorably; and romanticism, and contemplative spirituality, with which Ambedkar’s modernist Buddhism appears incongruent. Few, if any, scholastic projects on Ambedkarite Buddhism have deployed methods of critical analysis that interrogate the category of Buddhism itself as it is constructed in consonance with Western liberal modernity.

Key Influences

The conditions that gave rise to Ambedkar’s ultimate conversion to Buddhism are numerous. Certainly, Ambedkar’s intelligence and charismatic personality played a huge

⁴⁹ Keer states, “Moses wanted to relieve the Israelites from forced labor and their unending servitude. Moses was brought up and educated by a Princess. Ambedkar was provided with educational facilities by a Prince. Moses learnt at the University Temple of On, then a famous centre of learning. Ambedkar received his education at three world famous universities with an inquiring, searching, and acquisitive mind. Like Moses, he was strong, determined and courageous. But Moses was humbled by his respect for and worship of God. Ambedkar was learning this attribute at the feet of his man-god, the Buddha. Both led their people out of bondage, gave them their religion and law and brought them to the doorsteps of the Promised Land. Moses was eighty when he liberated his people, and Ambedkar was sixty-five. Like Moses, Ambedkar catalogued, expanded and interpreted the code of the laws of a nation.” Keer, 493.
role, as well as his gender and position as the youngest in a home with a supportive father. His position as a Dalit in pre-independence Mahārāṣṭra as well as his Western education at Columbia University provided the historical moment for his conversion. His exposure to Kabir through his father and subsequently to the Buddha through Kelsukar (more below) inspired an appreciation for the meliorative power of religion. Ambedkar’s love of reading and his expansive personal library are a testament to the range of ideas that steered him into the Buddhist fold. In what follows below, I present a brief contextualization of Ambedkar’s Buddhist thought through some of the key figures whose intellectual influence led, ultimately, to his choice for Buddhist conversion.

**The Buddha**

Along with Mahatma Phule and John Dewey, Ambedkar, perhaps unsurprisingly, listed the Buddha as one of the primary influences on his thought. Ambedkar first encountered the Buddha through a Marāṭhī language publication called *Life of Gautama Buddha* by Krishna Arjun Kelsukar. ⁵⁰ Keer credits Ambedkar’s fateful encounter with Kelsukar during days spent studying in a park with planting the initial seeds for Ambedkar’s attraction to the Buddha. ⁵¹ Kelsukar was a figure of ongoing support and a connection to Buddhism for Ambedkar that appears sporadically in his early biography and exerts influence to continue Ambedkar’s educational journey more than once. ⁵²

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⁵² Ibid, 19-20; 35; 66.
Ambedkar’s Buddha is an anti-caste, socially-engaged figure who sought to address the inequality and domination associated with the corrupted Brahminical order of his day. The Buddha that Ambedkar depicts in his work is the progenitor of a centuries-long battle against ritualism and oppression and the original voice of a “religion of principles” in South Asia. He views Siddhārtha Gautama as the original pan-South Asian proponent of justice and equality and as such he builds his project of a modern religion on him. In the construction of this Buddha figure, Ambedkar’s sources included many of the early Western receivers of the Buddhist tradition, including Max Müller’s famous *Sacred Books of the East*, Rhys Davids Pāli Text Society’s translation series of the Theravāda scriptures, and bound volumes of *The Maha Bodhi*. Queen notes that Ambedkar’s personal library contained, in addition to the above, approximately 250 volumes treating Buddhist history and literature. He notes,

Among the standard works on the life and teachings of the Buddha and the institutionalization and cultural diffusion of Buddhism in Asa – most by European and North American authors – are those of Beal, the two Rhys Davids, Glasenapp, Oldenberg, Pratt, Stcherbatsky, Humphries, and Conze. All of the classic “bestsellers” of Western Buddhology were there as well: Arnold’s *Light of Asia*, Carus’s *Gospel of Buddha*, Warren’s *Buddhism in Translations*, Goddard’s *A Buddhist Bible*, Thomas’s *The Life of the Buddha as Legend and History*, and Burtt’s *Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*. Non-Western contributors to the critical-historical study of Buddhism were also represented: Suzuki, Takakusu, Murti, G.B. Gokhale, and Lakshmi Narasu.

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What is clear from the above is that Ambedkar was well-read and deeply engaged in the study of Buddhism. It is also clear that his perspective on Buddhism was heavily modulated by Euro-American English-language Buddhology and that the questions that most animated Ambedkar’s approach to Buddhism colored his reading of these primary and secondary sources. What is perhaps most interesting about Ambedkar’s use of these sources is the way in which he utilizes them in service of a Buddhist modernism that best fits the needs of the moment in his South Asian, Dalit context. Where Conze, Rhys Davids, Stcherbatsky and others are simultaneously being used by scholars in the West to construct the Buddhist modernism familiar to Western receivers of the Buddhist tradition, characterized by its compatibility with the discourses of liberalism that suit its receivers, Ambedkar’s construction of a “navayāna” or “new vehicle,” of Buddhism in India from these sources represents an alternate modernity that required an emphasis on the ethical and social dimensions of the Buddhist tradition as found in these primary and secondary sources.

Of particular importance to Ambedkar was P. Lakshmi Narasu’s book *The Essence of Buddhism*, originally published in 1907 with an introduction by Anagarika Dharmapala. Narasu was an associate of Iyothee Thass, the well-known Tamilian reviver of Buddhism in South India in the late nineteenth century. Narasu’s humanistic Buddhism deeply resonated with Ambedkar and his commitment to Buddhist revival as a source for an anti-Brahminical movement inspired Ambedkar write a preface for a reprint


of *The Essence of Buddhism* in 1948. In his preface, Ambedkar praises Narasu for his efforts toward egalitarianism and his commitment to Indian (read non-Christian/European) solutions to that end. He notes that Narasu’s approach to Buddhism was to be an example for anyone interested in the study of Buddhism.

Aakash Singh Rathore and Ajay Verma’s recent critical edition of *The Buddha and His Dhamma* reveals a fairly diverse and wide-ranging engagement with primary sources in Ambedkar’s work, with both Pāli and Sanskrit sources represented. Ambedkar relies quite heavily on Aśvaghoṣa’s *Buddhacarita* and the Mahāyāna *Lalitavistara Sūtra* in the biographical sections of the text and calls on Asaṅga for support when he presents the concept of śūnyatā while also extensively drawing on material from across the *Nikāyas* for support throughout the text, with particular attention paid to the *Dhammapada*. Queen, Fiske, and Emmrich have noted that Ambedkar’s engagement with primary source material was often selective.

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58 Ambedkar states, “Prof. Narasu was the stalwart of the 19th century who had fought against European arrogance with patriotic fervor, orthodox Hinduism with iconoclastic zeal, heterodox Brahmins with nationalistic vision and aggressive Christianity with a rationalistic outlook – all under the inspiring banner of his unflagging faith in the teachings of the Great Buddha. In recent times many people from different parts of India have been asking me to recommend a good book on Buddhism. In responding to their wishes, I felt no hesitation in suggesting Prof. Narau’s book. For, I think it is the best book on Buddhism that has appeared so far…” B. R. Ambedkar, “Preface to ‘The Essence of Buddhism’—Third Edition,” in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches*, ed. Hari Narake et al., vol. 17.2 (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), 86–88.

59 Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*.

60 Adele Fiske and Christoph Emmrich, “The Use of Scriptures in B.R. Ambedkar’s The Buddha and His Dhamma,” in *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, ed. Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), 97–119; It is worth noting here that this charge of selective reference to primary sources could be made against other iterations of Buddhist modernism as well. The desire to find a contemplative, rational Buddha drove the early receivers to emphasize those texts that confirmed the Buddha as such, while deemphasizing others. See Donald S. Lopez, ed., *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
argues that Ambedkar showed a preference for material found in such *suttas* as the *Mahaparinibbāna Sutta* and the *Kālāma Sutta* that could more easily help him build his case for a rational and pragmatic Buddha, such as the Buddha’s emphasis on testing the teachings against one’s own reason and searching for the truth oneself. As Jaffrelot and Rodrigues have noted, it is in many ways, often Ambedkar’s own voice we hear through the figure of Siddharth in *The Buddha and His Dhamma.*

**Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule**

The non-Brahmin movement of mid to late nineteenth-century Mahārāṣtra created the ground from which Ambedkar’s pan-Indian anti-caste movement would grow. A particularly important influence from this period of this can be seen in the rise of the mid to late 19th century lower-caste leaders Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule, whom Ambedkar would later cite as primary influences on his thought and mobilization activity. Jyotirao Phule came from the non-Brahmin Māli caste of gardeners. He, like Ambedkar, cited his

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61 Queen, “Ambedkar’s Dhamma: Source and Method in the Construction of Engaged Buddhism,” 144.

62 Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability*, 133.

63 Ambedkar’s home state, Mahārāṣtra, lies on the border between the North and the South. It has a caste structure that more closely resembles that of its southern neighbors, where a threefold breakdown of Brahmin, non-Brahmin and Untouchable (Dalit) is common. As Eleanor Zelliot notes of Mahārāṣtrian caste structure, “...As in the South, the chief divisions of caste groups are in three tiers – Brahman, non-Brahman, and Untouchable – rather than in the traditional four-fold varṇa divisions of Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra, with Untouchables forming a fifth or avarṇa group.” This difference in caste system structure is important for an understanding of the how and why of caste consciousness in the Mahārs in general and in Ambedkar’s family in particular. See Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement*, 20–64; For a more detailed breakdown of the unique three-fold caste features of Mahārāṣtra, see Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2001), 20–36.

64 See Omvedt, “Jotirao Phule and the Ideology of Social Revolution in India”; see also Omvedt, *Seeking Begumpura*. 


exposure to Western ideas, in particular the American anti-slavery movement thinkers, with influencing his anti-Brahminical thought. The dedication of Phule’s book *Slavery*, which reads, “to the good people of the United States as a token of admiration for their sublime and selfless dedication and their sense of sacrifice with regard to the cause of slavery of the Negroes; and with the fervent desire that my fellow countrymen follow the noble example in the emancipation of their Shudra brothers from the fetters of Brahminical slavery” in some ways foreshadows Ambedkar’s future connection to the US.

Phule, like Ambedkar would do after him, also turned to religion to bolster his case against Brahminism, citing Thomas Paine’s anti-Catholic writing as a source for Brahminical criticism and encouraging Untouchables to convert to Christianity via missionary activity in India. Phule held Jesus Christ up as a religious model of action on behalf of the poor and dominated. He was initially attracted to the Arya Samaj but eventually was turned off by what he perceived to be their caste-blindness and instead he and his wife, Savitribai Phule, founded the Satyashodhak Samaj, which organized women, Śūdra and Untouchables in Mahārāṣtra. It focused primarily on education and was actively anti-caste in its political orientation. Notably, the movement found some Marāṭha support in their anti-Brahmin activity in that it allowed room for critique of a

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66 Jaffrelot, 15.
67 Jaffrelot, 15.
shared opponent. Blom-Hansen highlights the way in which Phule was able to appeal to
a larger non-Brahmin sentiment across the non-Brahmin castes and Untouchables and to
capitalize on the anti-Brahminical sentiment championed by Shivaji to garner pan-non-
Brahmin support in his anti-caste efforts. He and his wife, Savitribai Phule, were
remarkably successful in much of their mobilization activity and certainly laid the
groundwork for Ambedkar’s later work in mobilization. They continue to strongly
influence anti-caste actors in India today and images of both Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule
are still commonly seen at Dalit rallies across India today.

In addition to Phule’s emphasis on religion, another important thread that
Ambedkar picked up from Phule’s work is his re-narration of the Aryan invasion theory.
Phule suggested that the non-Brahmin people were in fact the original people of India and
the Aryan invaders were actually the Brahmins who forcefully imposed their Vedic
religion and casteism on the indigenous population. This re-narration of Aryan history in

69 Charles Herman Heimsath, Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform (Princeton, N.J: Princeton
University press, 2016), 249.

70 As a non-Brahmin Marathi icon, Shivaji is a major state-wide figure of Maharastraian pride and is
celebrated all over Maharastra for his military successes against the Mughals and the British. He is perhaps
the single most celebrated figure across the state and as such, the political movement associated with him
has inculcated a strong undercurrent of anti-Brahminical sentiment in Maharastra. This sentiment is
certainly one of the critical conditions that allowed for the rise, reception and success of Ambedkar’s
movement in Maharastra. To get a sense of the ongoing and pervasive influence of Shivaji, in Mumbai, the
international airport, the largest train station, and the largest public park are all currently named after
Shivaji and often feature prominent images of his hyper-masculinized form, while the state and central
government, both run by right-wing nationalist parties, are planning to complete the building a 696-foot
statue of Shivaji 1.5km off the coast of Maharastra in October of 2022. It will be one of the largest statues
in the world, complete with helipad, conference center, gardens, a museum and more. Such is the status of
Shivaji in Maharastra and the importance his image has in appealing to the non-Brahmin vote in both the
state and central governments. For more on Shivaji’s broad influence and appeal in Maharastra, see See
Hansen, Wages of Violence, 26–27.

71 For example, Pune University, a major Indian graduate institution, recently changed its name to
Savitribai Phule University in honor of Phule’s work for the upliftment of the lower castes.
the subcontinent appears in Ambedkar’s work *Who Were the Shudras?* where he argues that the Śūdras were once Kṣatriyas but were marginalized by Brahmins and in *The Untouchables* where Ambedkar argues that the practice of untouchability has its roots in Brahminical opposition to early Buddhists.\(^72\)

Phule’s advocacy on behalf of women also had an impact on Ambedkar. As Wandana Sonalkar notes in her introduction to *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement*,

In the middle of the nineteenth century Jyotiba Phule…started a school for girls in Pune which offered shelter and education to Brahmin widows who became pregnant, and also admitted girls of the lower castes, including untouchables… In his writings, Phule analysed the causes of poverty of the low-caste farmers, and bitterly criticised the Brahmins who tied them up in complicated religious rituals and encouraged superstition… He also wrote about the burden of work borne by women of low-caste farming communities, in contrast with high-caste women who had servants to attend to their needs… The strong feminist current in his writings strikes the reader even today. He taught his wife Savitri to read and write, and later she trained as a teacher and worked with him in running schools. Savitribai Phule is revered in Maharashtra for her pioneering work in women’s education, and is becoming an icon for anti-caste groups and dalit-bahujan feminist organisations all over India.\(^73\)

Gail Omvedt similarly notes Phule’s early feminist impulses and the work that his wife Savitribai accomplished through the Satyashodhak Samaj,

Phule’s ‘feminist’ leanings had expressed themselves earlier; in his educating his own wife and refusing to divorce her even though they had no children. Savitribai was the first, in many ways, of the nineteenth century Maharashtrian feminists, taking up with enthusiasm the teaching of dalit boys and girls in the schools that Phule had founded, enduring the abuse and dung-throwing of brahman women as she went to her work. After his death also, she carried on, dying finally of the plague which she


\(^73\) Pawar and Moon, *We Also Made History*, 21.
had caught because of her nursing activity. She thus remains one of the earliest role models of happily married feminist women.\textsuperscript{74}

Ambedkar, citing Phule as a primary influence on his life and work, picked up on this emphasis on women’s empowerment. He forcefully and in his characteristically colorful style, presents the problem of women’s rights to his \textit{savarna} (“with caste”) Hindu audience in \textit{Annihilation of Caste}, asking them to logically consider the place of women in Hinduism and the implications for considering them at all. Clear echoes of Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule’s work can be heard. He states,

\begin{quote}
Are they [women] also to be divided into four classes, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra? Or are they to be allowed to take the status of their husbands. If the status of the woman is to be the consequence of marriage what becomes of the underlying principle of Chaturvarnya, namely, that the status of a person should be based upon the worth of that person? If they are to be classified according to their worth is their classification to be nominal or real? If it is to be nominal then it is useless and then the protagonists of Chaturvarnya must admit that their system does not apply to women. If it is real, are the protagonists of Chaturvarnya prepared to follow the logical consequences of applying it to women? They must be prepared to have women priests and women soldiers…that will be the logical outcome of applying Chaturvarnya to women. Given these difficulties, I think no one except a congenital idiot could hope and believe in a successful regeneration of the Chaturvarnya.\textsuperscript{75}
\end{quote}

Resonances with Savitribai and Jyotiba’s work for the advancement of women can be heard in Ambedkar’s writing against \textit{sati} (widow self-immolation), his advocacy for women’s education and property rights, and in particular in the language of the Hindu Code Bill, where, in 1948, Ambedkar, in his role as the first Law Minister of India, introduced sweeping legislation that sought to provide broad civil rights to women which

\textsuperscript{74} Omvedt, \textit{Understanding Caste}, 31.

\textsuperscript{75} Ambedkar, \textit{Annihilation of Caste}, 2014, 271.
traditional Hindu law, based on the orthodox textual tradition, denied them. This resonance with Phule’s thought has given rise to the hyphenated term “Phule-Ambedkar” in reference to their shared proto-feminist tradition.77

**Dharmanand Kosambi**

Several parts of Ambedkar’s Buddha narrative as well as his reading of the Buddhist tradition as socially-oriented are hugely indebted to the earlier work of Dharmanand Kosambi, another late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Mahārāṣtrian. Kosambi, born a Saraswat Brahmin in Goa in 1876, spent most of his life traveling around South Asia learning Sanskrit and Pāli and in Southeast Asia studying the Buddhist tradition. Kosambi’s path parallels Ambedkar’s to a striking degree. Both Mahārāṣtrians credit childhood exposure to Marāṭhī Buddhist literature as having first aroused their inspiration for pursuing Buddhist study. Both men secured patronage from the Mahārāja Sayajirao Gaekwad of Baroda that led to study in the United States at elite universities, Ambedkar at Columbia University and for Kosambi at Harvard University where he worked alongside renowned Sanskritist Charles Lanman on a translation of Buddhaghosa’s *Visuddhimagga* and later a professorship in Pāli at Lenningrad University.

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76 A more detailed treatment of Ambedkar’s writing against Brahminical patriarchy can be found in Ambedkar and Rege, *Against the Madness of Manu*.

in Russia.\textsuperscript{78} Both men viewed Buddhism as a path toward equality in India and advocated for its widespread adoption.

Where they differed significantly is in their position in society. Kosambi’s Brahmin background more easily opened doors that were closed to Ambedkar, such as his access to education and Sanskrit language study, and this situated his teachings on Buddhism differently. Where the “untouchable” Ambedkar was forced to work from the margins, the Brahmin Kosambi was working from the center. This positionality is perhaps on display in the reception of Kosambi’s Buddhism by other caste-Hindus, as Kosambi was not charged by his close friend M.K. Gandhi with changing his religion like he was changing his clothes, as Ambedkar was.\textsuperscript{79} While Ambedkar’s work is almost constantly and explicitly at odds with caste-Hindu approaches to Hinduism, Kosambi’s affinity for Gandhi can be seen throughout his work. His play \textit{Bodhisattva} opens with a Gandhi quote on religion and Meera Kosambi notes his significant role in some of Gandhi’s \textit{satyāgraha} efforts.\textsuperscript{80}

While Kosambi’s efforts to make Buddhism understandable and accessible compelled him to publish primarily in Marāṭhī,\textsuperscript{81} echoes of Kosambi’s reason-driven Buddha, presented in a South Asian idiom and stripped of magical displays can be heard throughout Ambedkar’s work on the Buddha.\textsuperscript{82} Kosambi’s influence is most significantly

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\textsuperscript{79} Queen, “Ambedkar’s Dhamma: Source and Method in the Construction of Engaged Buddhism,” 134.

\textsuperscript{80} Kosambi, \textit{Dharmamand Kosambi}, 30-31.

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid, 37-40.
\end{flushright}
on display, though, in Ambedkar’s section of *The Buddha and His Dhamma* where Siddhārtha decides to leave home, which will be explored in more detail in chapter two, and in Ambedkar’s characterization the relationship between Siddhārtha and his wife, Yaśodharā, as explored here in chapter four.

Ambedkar’s attempt to settle a question regarding Siddhārtha’s decision to leave the palace and become a renunciate forces him to look outside much of the available commentary on the Buddha’s life story. Ambedkar rejects the standard explanations for Siddhārtha’s motivations, that the Buddha was motivated a psycho-personal disquiet regarding aging, sickness, and death (and, though Ambedkar doesn’t mention it, an encounter with a mendicant)\(^{83}\) because, as will be explored in more detail in chapter two, Ambedkar suggests this motivation is self-interested and incompatible with a Buddha figure who is motivated by compassion. Ambedkar sees this as the principal “problem” related to understanding who the Buddha was and he suggests that answering it properly is critical to his efforts to present a coherent exposition of the life of the Buddha. In his words, he sees the Buddha’s decision to take *parivrāja*, or renunciation, as the “main event in the life of the Buddha.”\(^{84}\)

Influenced by Kosambi’s Marāṭhī play *Bodhisattva*,\(^{85}\) Ambedkar answers this question by placing the young Siddhārtha in a difficult political situation in the Sakya

\(^{83}\) See Ambedkar’s introduction to The Buddha and His Dhamma Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, xxiv.

\(^{84}\) Ibid.

Sangh that requires him to use his diplomatic skill and tests his commitment to
democratic principles. When the Sakya Sangh, the assembly of leaders in his
community, decide they must wage war on their neighbors, the Koliyas, Siddhārtha
strongly objects. In front of the assembly, he appeals to their sense of kinship with their
neighbors and despite his status as a Kṣatriya for whom duty demands his participation in
battle, he argues that it is against their long-term interests to wage war as it will destroy
relationships and plant the seeds for further violence. He implores his fellow Sakyas to
consider the ways in which they may also be at fault for the escalation toward violence.
Finally, he proposes and outlines an arbitration process to settle the dispute peacefully.
These arguments against violence land him in hot water in the community and eventually
lead to him being exiled by his own choice. It is his commitment to justice and
nonviolence that instigates his renunciation, not a personal quest for spiritual liberation.
This account of Siddhārtha’s renunciation taking the form of a voluntary exile from his
community due to his unflagging commitment to the principle of ahiṁsa, in contrast to
Arjuna’s response in the Bhagavad Gīta, is directly inspired by the narrative of

86 The following narrative is a summarization of the events described in The Buddha and His Dhamma, see Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, The Buddha and His Dhamma, 17–21.

87 Ambedkar advanced a thesis in “Krishna and his Gita” that the Bhagavad Gīta was essentially an attempt by Brahminical religionists to rescue Vedic ritual religion from a very successful Buddhist “revolution.” He identifies it as the key text of the “counter-revolution.” He states, “Why did the Bhagv Gīta feel it necessary to defend the dogmas of counter-revolution? To my mind the answer is very clear. It was to save them from the attack of Buddhism that the Bhagvat Gīta came into being. Buddha preached non-violence. He not only preached it but the people at large—except the Brahmins—had accepted it as the way of life. They had acquired a repugnance to violence. Buddha preached against Chaturvarya. He used some of the most offensive similes in attacking the theory of Chaturvarya. The framework of Chaturvarya had been broken. The order of Chaturvarya had been turned upside down. Shudras and women could become sannyasis, a status which counter-revolution had denied them. Buddha had condemned the Karma kanda and the Yajnas. He condemned them on the ground of Himsa or violence. He condemned them also on the ground that the motive behind them was a selfish desire to obtain bonus. What was the reply of the counterrevolutionaries to this attack? Only this. These things were ordained by the Vedas, the Vedas were infallible, therefore the dogmas were not to be questioned. In the Buddhist age, which was the most enlightened and the most rationalistic age India has known, dogmas resting on such
Kosambi’s play.\textsuperscript{88} It is worth noting that in Kosambi’s 1910 work *The Buddha, Dhamma, and the Sangha*, he also questions the “four sights.” While not going as far as Ambedkar’s charge of absurdity, he does explicitly argue that Siddhārtha’s decision to leave the palace was not motivated by a sudden experience of the four sights outside the palace. Instead, he suggests, based on *sutta* references, that Siddhārtha’s decision to leave home, while still motivated by personal disquiet about existence, would have been the result of a natural and gradual internal awakening to the realities of birth, aging, sickness, and death.\textsuperscript{89}

Ambedkar’s depiction of Yaśodharā as a strong female character in his narrative also bears the marks of Kosambi. In Kosambi’s play *Bodhisattva*, Yaśodharā plays a key role. In fact, Kosambi’s note for Act II explicitly names Yaśodharā the “heroine of the play”\textsuperscript{90} and her interactions with the Bodhisattva (Siddhārtha is named only “Bodhisattva” in the play or referred to as “Aryaputra,” meaning “noble son” in Sanskrit) occur at eye-level, as equals. Her conversations with him are frank and she openly

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\textsuperscript{88} See Kosambi, *Dharmanand Kosambi*, 383–88.

\textsuperscript{89} See Kosambi, *Dharmanand Kosambi*, 256–248.

\textsuperscript{90} Ibid.
discusses the double-standards applied to her and all women in their society. The Bodhisattva, for his part, is depicted throughout the play relating to his wife as a confidant and someone worthy of basic respect. These qualities, explored in more detail in chapter three, are on display in Ambedkar’s depiction of Siddharth and Yeshodhara [Ambedkar’s transliteration] in his narrative as well.

Aakash Singh Rathore and Ajay Verma attribute the inspiration for Ambedkar’s Buddha narrative explicitly to Kosambi, which does indeed show clear inspiration from him. But the question about just how much contact, if any, these two Mahārāṣtrian Buddhist actors had remains open. Zelliot asks about Ambedkar’s contact with Kosambi, “Did Ambedkar meet him? Did he know of the Parel vihāra? Did he read Bhagwan Buddha?” Gail Omvedt has noted that Ambedkar did meet with Kosambi but provides little detail about their contact. She speculates that Kosambi’s proximity to Gandhi perhaps compelled Ambedkar to keep him at arm’s length. She states:

Kosambi met Ambedkar in October 1935, and immediately afterwards went to discuss the issue of conversion with Gandhi. Ambedkar, he told Gandhi, was close to Buddhism, and asked for funds to build a Buddhist vihar in Parel. Gandhi immediately turned to Jugalkishor Birla, sitting nearby, who presented Kosambi with a cheque for Rs 17,500. Out of this came plans for a ‘Bahujan Buddhist Bihar’ in Parel. But an initial meeting was broken up primarily out of rivalry between two Chambhar leaders, Sitaram Shivtarkar, who was taking part in the meeting, and his opponent Balkrishna Deorukhkar. In any event, nothing came of the Bahujan vihar, perhaps because Ambedkar was not ready to throw his support to anything financed by Gandhian money.

What is certain, though, is that Kosambi’s work significantly influenced Ambedkar’s Buddha narrative.

91 Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, The Buddha and His Dhamma, 16–24; 31; 32; 40.

Ambedkar held Marx in high esteem. Given his project of uplifting the oppressed classes of India, this affinity is perhaps not surprising. He draws on Marx’s diagnosis of the problems associated with private property and class conflict to animate much of his anti-caste work, though, he considered Hinduism and caste to present particularly thorny problems for Marxist thought. For this reason, despite his attraction to Marxism, Ambedkar ultimately regards Marxism as ill-equipped to handle caste. Ambedkar draws on Marx for support throughout his work, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, but in his Buddhist writing in particular he is keen to note the ways in which Marxism is not totally fit for the job of annihilating caste. Gopal Guru, in his recent work “Neo-Buddhism, Marxism and the Question of Caste,” pointing to Ambedkar’s own experience of the persistence of casteism despite ostensible “caste mobility” has noted that Ambedkar’s sense that caste is both foundational and pervasive throughout Indian society, across the varṇas, renders a Marxist class-oriented approach ineffective.

In non-Buddhist work, such as Annihilation of Caste, Ambedkar appeals to Marx to highlight the ways in which caste in Hinduism is so fundamentally entrenched and foundational to Hindu society that not even Marxist means can provide an avenue for liberation. His criticism of Marxism is not that it is ineffective or ideologically wrong-headed. It is instead that caste is too insidious. He states,

To excite the proletariat to bring about an economic revolution, Karl Marx told them: “You have nothing to lose except your chains.” But the artful way in which the social and religious rights are distributed among the different castes whereby some have more and some have less, makes the
slogan of Karl Marx quite useless to excite the Hindus against the Caste System.  

And again, in his unpublished essay titled “Touchables vs Untouchables,” he argues, 

There would not be the slightest exaggeration to say that the social history of the Hindus is a history not merely of class struggle but class war fought with such bitterness that even the Marxist will find it difficult to cite parallel cases to match. 

At the same time, he appeals to Marx for support when debating caste-Hindus about the path the new nation should take. He invokes Marx in a 1943 speech entitled “Labour and Democracy,” delivered at the concluding session of the All India Trade Union Workers’ Study Camp held in Delhi: 

The common retort to Marx that man does not live by bread alone is unfortunately a fact. I agree with Carlyle that the aim of civilization can not be merely to fatten men as we do pigs. But we are far off from that stage. The labouring class far from being fat like pigs are starving, and one wishes that they thought of bread first and everything else afterwards. 

At the time of his death, Ambedkar was working on a book to be titled India and Communism. In the limited chapter drafts available he makes several appeals to classical Indian history to make the case that caste violence and warfare represent a more severe form of class conflict then even Marx could have conceived and that Marxism, as an ideology that advances the principle of egalitarianism, is antithetical to orthodox Hindu thought. 


96 A note from the Vasant Moon and editorial staff of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar’s Writing and Speeches, “From the contents on the first page of the typed script, we find that Dr. Ambedkar had divided the whole
In Ambedkar’s Buddhist writing, the Buddha is offered as the alternative to Marx and as the appropriate and best corrective to the problems that Marxism is not quite up to handling, namely caste and Hinduism. In his 1950 essay “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion,” Ambedkar acknowledges that modernity has presented challenges to the value of traditional religion and praises the rational choice available for individuals to step outside of the religion of their birth. He gestures toward Marx, noting that some people, “as a result of the Marxian teaching, have come to the conclusion that religion is opium which induces the poor people to submit to the domination of the rich and should be discarded.” Instead of offering a counter argument in favor of traditional religion though, he suggests that Buddhism can instead offer a new religion, one better suited to the modern moment and one in consonance with Marxist insights about religious domination.

Ambedkar’s most thorough and well-known treatment of Marxist thought appears in his work *The Buddha and Karl Marx*. This unpublished work forms one part of what book “India and Communism” into three parts. The first part was captioned as ‘The Prerequisites of Communism’. This part was to have three Chapters but we could not find any of these Chapters in Dr. Ambedkar’s papers. So far as the part Two is concerned which is titled “India and the Pre-requisites of Communism”, only Chapter Four entitled, “Hindu Social Order” has been found in a well bound register.” See B. R Ambedkar, “Part II: India and the Prerequisites of Communism,” in *Dr. Babasaheb Writings and Speeches*, ed. Vasant Moon, vol. 3, 17 vols. (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), 95–149.


The title of this work is unclear. It is variously titled “The Buddha or Karl Marx,” “The Buddha and Karl Marx,” and presented in some places as an essay and in others as a book. Ambedkar himself refers to the title on the first page of the work, stating, “The heading of this essay, ‘Buddha or Karl Marx,’…” but he also refers to it as a book in the preface to *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, using the title “The Buddha and Karl Marx.” (see note 97). Valerian Rodrigues, in his *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, uses “Buddha and Karl Marx” in the introduction (23) but “Buddha or Karl Marx” (173) in his chapter title. Aakash Singh Rathore uses *Buddha or Karl Marx*, in italics, in his work “What Can a Buddha Teach a Marxist?” (97-108). Keer refers to the work both as “Buddha and Karl Marx,” and *Buddha and Karl Marx* (488). Vasant Moon, first edition editor of the seventeen volume *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, uses both “Buddha or Karl Marx” and “Buddha and Karl Marx” and describes it both as an “essay” and a “book” in volume three. An editor’s note from Moon states: “‘The Buddha and Karl Marx’ was also said to have been completed by Dr. Ambedkar, but we have not come across such a book among
Ambedkar himself labeled a key piece of his writing on Buddhism.\textsuperscript{99} In it, and as explored in more detail here in chapter four, Ambedkar considers at length what he sees as the similarities and differences between Marxist and Buddhist thought. While affirming that Marxism and Buddhism, as he reads them, have similar end-goals, the methods by which they achieve those goals represents the key determining difference.

After a lengthy discussion of the five precepts, the eight-fold path and the \textit{pāramitās} in the \textit{The Buddha and Karl Marx}, Ambedkar states,

> It is clear that the means adopted by the Buddha were to convert a man by changing his moral disposition to follow the path voluntarily. The means adopted by the Communists are equally clear, short and swift. They are (1) Violence and (2) Dictatorship of the Proletariat. The Communists say that there are the only two means of establishing communism. The first is violence. Nothing short of it will suffice to break up the existing system. The other is dictatorship of the proletariat. Nothing short of it will suffice to continue the new system. It is now clear what are the similarities and differences between Buddha and Karl Marx. The differences are about the means. The end is common to both.\textsuperscript{100}

For Ambedkar, the Buddhist tradition provides a therapeutic technology, as described in the quote above, that aims to cultivate moral and dispositional change in the

\textsuperscript{99} “I may mention that this is one of the three books which will form a set for the proper understanding of Buddhism. The other books are: (i) \textit{Buddha and Karl Marx}; and (ii) \textit{Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India}. They are written out in parts. I hope to publish them soon.”

individual, where Marxism supplies only a critical ideology and a crude path defined by violent revolution. Interestingly, Ambedkar is not opposed to the use of violence if violence is the only path available to achieve just ends.¹⁰¹ Where he sees an absolutist stance regarding the necessity of violence for the Marxist, his Buddha is pragmatic and leaves all doors open in the pursuit of justice and egalitarianism. He states in The Buddha and Karl Marx,

Buddha would have probably admitted that it is only the end which would justify the means. What else could? And he would have said that if the end justified violence, violence was a legitimate means for the end in view. He certainly would not have exempted property owners from force if force was the only means for that end. As we shall see his means for the end were different. As prof. Dewey has pointed out that violence is only another name for the use of force and although force must be used for creative purposes a distinction between use of force as energy and use of force as violence needs to be made. The achievement of an end involves the destruction of many other ends which are integral with the one that is sought to be, destroyed. Use of force must be so regulated that it should save as many ends as possible in destroying the evil one. Buddha’s Ahimsa was not as absolute as the Ahimsa preached by Mahavira the founder of Jainism. He would have allowed force only as energy. The Communists preach Ahimsa as an absolute principle. To this the Buddha was deadly opposed.¹⁰²

Similarly, in The Buddha and His Dhamma, Ambedkar explicitly compares Buddhist and Marxist thought and concludes that while noble, the Marxist path is inferior.¹⁰³


¹⁰³ See Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, The Buddha and His Dhamma, 122; Cosimo Zene has begun the work of putting Ambedkar into dialogue with Gramsci. This comparative project seems particularly appropriate given Ambedkar’s affinity and difficulty with traditional Marxist thought. See Zene, The Political Philosophies of Antonio Gramsci and B.R. Ambedkar.
In some sense, Ambedkar’s approach to religion is decidedly Durkheimian.\textsuperscript{104}

While his desire to secure fundamental rights and dignity for the oppressed classes of India pushes him towards Marxist tools for the attainment of those needs, he is keen to maintain a space for the sacred, which for Ambedkar, takes a Durkheim form in his respect for the social. As Singh Rathore has noted,

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, though not a trained philosopher, was well enough aware of the consequences of an ideology like Marxism that suffered no limiting principle in terms of a sacred sphere, or ironically, even natural human rights. Maintaining room for the sacred, Dr. Ambedkar hoped to ensure that a revolutionary socially-oriented ideology (in this case whether Ambedkarian Buddhism or Marxism) would have a limit beyond which it could not cross in the logic of its realization.\textsuperscript{105}

In \textit{The Buddha and Karl Marx}, he returns to the “fattened pigs” theme from his 1943 Labour speech referenced above and notes that ultimately, Marx’s desire to ensure for the material needs of the proletariat comes at the expense of higher order human needs. He states,

The aim of their philosophy seems to be fatten pigs as though men are no better than pigs. Man must grow materially as well as spiritually. Society has been aiming to lay a new foundation was summarised by the French Revolution in three words, Fraternity, Liberty and Equality. The French Revolution was welcomed because of this slogan. It failed to produce equality. We welcome the Russian Revolution because it aims to produce equality. But it cannot be too much emphasized that in producing equality society cannot afford to sacrifice fraternity or liberty. Equality will be of no value without fraternity or liberty. It seems that the three can coexist only if one follows the way of the Buddha. Communism can give one but not all.\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{104} Omvedt, \textit{Buddhism in India}, 19.


\textsuperscript{106} Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, \textit{Buddha and Karl Marx} (Delhi: Siddharth Books, 2009).
When he is directing his work toward orthodox Hindus, such as Gandhi, he appeals to Marx to make his case, but when he is addressing his followers, he appeals to the Buddha.

*John Dewey*

Ambedkar’s years in the United States, 1913-1916, were spent in New York City at Columbia University. There he encountered, amongst other significant early twentieth-century scholars, John Dewey. Eleanor Zelliot notes that while not his direct dissertation advisor, Dewey appears to have had made a significant impact on Ambedkar and that Ambedkar explicitly lists Dewey as one of his key influences. Zelliot notes,

Ambedkar’s second wife, Mrs. Savita Ambedkar tells a touching story of Ambedkar happily imitating John Dewey's distinctive classroom mannerisms – thirty years after Ambedkar sat in Dewey's classes. It is impossible to find in Ambedkar's life story any hint of a guru or a personality which dominated him, but here at least is a suggestion that he was fond of both Dewey the philosopher and Dewey the man.

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107 Chapter eleven, "Gandhism: The Doom of the Untouchables," in Ambedkar’s 1945 work *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, represents a kind of “Gandhism and Karl Marx,” where Ambedkar’s conclusion is the opposite of that in his Buddhist writing on Marx. Namely, that Marxism compares favorably to Gandhism. He presents Gandhism as upholding caste inequality while paying lip service to egalitarianism. He notes “There have been quite a number of books with the title of Gandhism without any protest from Mr. Gandhi. It has already caught the imagination of some people both inside and outside India. Some have so much faith in it that they do not hesitate to offer it as an alternative to Marxism.” See B. R. (Bhimrao Ramji) Ambedkar 1891-1956, *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* (Bombay: Thacker, 1946).

Zelliot has noted that Ambedkar’s time in America seems to have impressed several key principles on him. Amongst these was an unflagging belief in the ability of democratic processes and institutions to bring out positive social change. Dewey’s brand of pragmatism with its emphasis on a politically aware and engaged populous and the key role of education in that meliorative process seems to have stuck with Ambedkar. His lifelong emphasis on education and the ways in which he prioritized access to education through construction of things like “morning colleges,” as Zelliot notes, were in line with Dewey’s approach to education.109 Zelliot sees Dewey’s fingerprints in Ambedkar’s belief that “people could be educated into change, that total participation of all elements of society in the political process was essential, that parliamentary democracy was the only conceivable way for India to progress, seems to have been unshakable.”110 Indeed, in Ambedkar’s Buddhist writing, these echoes of Dewey can be heard when he explicitly calls the Buddha a democrat111 and resolves the problem of the Buddha’s renunciation though a narrative that focuses on Siddhārtha’s active participation in the parliamentary Sangh.112

Christopher Queen, Scott Stroud, and Arun Mukherjee have perhaps explored Dewey’s influence on Ambedkar more than anyone.113 After a survey of Ambedkar’s

109 Ibid.
110 Ibid.
112 Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, The Buddha and His Dhamma, 15–35.
personal library contained at Siddharth College in Mumbai and Symbiosis Institute in Pune, Stroud notes that “no author in any tradition or culture is represented in his personal library as much as John Dewey,” and adds that the text that Ambedkar most seriously engaged with is Dewey’s *Democracy and Education*. It contains evidence of heavy personal annotation by Ambedkar’s own hand, sustained engagement across time and the entire text in full, cover to cover, shows signs of marked engagement. Stroud and Queen both also note the way in which echoes of *Democracy and Education* appear across the body of Ambedkar’s work, often unattributed, speaking to the deep level of influence on his own thought.

Queen has traced the resonances with Dewey’s thought, particularly as found in *Democracy and Education*, in Ambedkar’s later work and has paid particular attention to how Dewey’s pragmatism influenced Ambedkar’s approach to Buddhism, arguing that Ambedkar worked through the soteriological and ethical dimensions of his Buddhism through deep engagement with Dewey’s texts. Queen suggests that Ambedkar’s hermeneutic question regarding the authenticity of the Buddha’s words, a pragmatic approach that appeals to rationality and melioration, can be understood through

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115 Ibid.

116 Ibid.
Ambedkar’s close reading of Dewey. What seems clear is that Ambedkar’s emphasis on a politics of the present, on flexible archeological approaches and on pragmatic appeals to history, as well as his unflagging belief in the power of democratic processes and institutions to effect social change are all influenced by Dewey. Martin Fuchs has noted the ways in which Ambedkar’s conceptualization and construction of his Buddhism as a true religion or dhamma or a “religion of principles” is in some ways parallel to Dewey’s concept of a “secular religion” while at the same time noting how Ambedkar’s appeal to an ancient tradition and his construction of overt forms of ritualized religiosity marks a departure from Dewey’s implicit secular religion, which lacks those external religious features. Both Dewey and Ambedkar imagine a rational, ethically-oriented religion that utilizes democratic principles to effect positive social change. Ambedkar finds in Dewey the perfect perspective for addressing the fragmentation and stratification of caste-bound Indian society and deploys Dewey’s prescription for universal education and political democracy in service of his aim to annihilate caste. In this regard, Ambedkar sees Gandhi and the Congress Party as appealing to the past to conserve a tradition that privileges certain groups at the expense of others; where Gandhi wants to create Ram Rajya, Ambedkar, inspired by Dewey, seeks to create a radical popular democracy with an educated and diverse electorate. In his most famous speech, The Annihilation of Caste, he quotes Dewey’s Democracy and Education,

…the Hindus must consider whether they should conserve the whole of their social heritage or select what is helpful and transmit to future


generations only that much and no more. Prof. John Dewey, who was my teacher and to whom I owe so much, has said: “Every society gets encumbered with what is trivial, with dead wood from the past, and with what is positively perverse... As a society becomes more enlightened, it realizes that it is responsible not to conserve and transmit the whole of its existing achievements, but only such as make for a better future society.”

Ambedkar’s debt to Dewey and his commitment to a pragmatic politics of the present is evident in the above. In his battle against caste Ambedkar recognized that there were virtually no South Asian avenues toward for redress or liberation available to him, an Untouchable. His status as a literal outcaste created the conditions to receive Dewey’s pragmatism without reservation and to use it constructively in service of a democratically-informed, meliorative, South Asian religion.

Chapter Summary

In his preface to The Buddha and His Dhamma Ambedkar identified four main problems that, in his view, hindered the Buddhist tradition in its ability to reach its potential as the religion most adapted to modernity. This dissertation is organized around those questions, as Ambedkar framed them. First, Ambedkar was dissatisfied

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122 Gail Omvedt has termed these four points Ambedkar’s “four denials.” Omvedt, Buddhism in India, 4.
with traditional explanations for the Buddha’s decision to leave his comfortable life at home and become a renunciate. In Ambedkar’s view, the teachings on “the three sights,” or the Buddha’s encounter with aging, sickness, and death, outside the palace are insufficient to explain Siddhārtha’s decision to leave the palace. The second problem relates to the set of teachings known as the “four noble truths,” which are emphasized around the Buddhist world. He sees these teachings as problematic for various reasons, including that, in his view, they lead to nihilism, and he seeks to undermine their authority and offer an alternative frame. The third problem relates to the Buddhist teachings on karma and rebirth. He argues that Brahminical readings of these terms have inflected Buddhist understandings of them and consequently rendered them incompatible with the Buddha’s intended meaning and he seeks to clarify the Buddha’s original intent regarding these terms. The fourth and final problem relates to the community of monks and nuns. Specifically, Ambedkar seeks to rectify an inconsistency he identifies between the social message of the Buddha as he understands it and the inward orientation of the monastic saṅgha as he sees it around the Buddhist world. As the first problem relates to the Buddha, problems two and three relate to the dharma, or the teachings of the Buddha, and problem four relates to the saṅgha, this dissertation will largely follow this tidy “triple gem” organizational approach. Briefly, chapters two and three address the Buddha principle in the form of Ambedkar himself, who has been apotheosized by his many of his followers, and Siddhārtha Gautama as found in Ambedkar’s work and in the

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123 Ambedkar refers to these as the “three sights,” sickness, aging, and death, while most accounts refer to “four sights” and include Siddhārtha’s encounter with a medicant in this list. This is discussed further in chapter 3.

124 “Triple gem” or the “three jewels” from the Sanskrit triratna are the principal objects of veneration by Buddhist practitioners around the world.
lives of his followers in contemporary India respectively. Chapter four addresses Ambedkar’s concerns with the dharma in the form of the “four Aryan Truths,” karma, and rebirth and considers what he offers in their place. And chapter five addresses his unique vision for the Buddhist saṅgha. Together, these chapters offer a more comprehensive approach to Ambedkar’s Buddhism than has thus far been available.

The biographical sketch of Ambedkar presented in chapter two also expands on some of the key influences that can be heard in his thought, including American Pragmatism, early modernist accounts of the Buddhist tradition, Phule’s thought, and Marxism, as briefly introduced here. It presents Ambedkar’s experience of his caste location and historically contextualizes his work in early 20th century India. It outlines Ambedkar’s thought regarding religion, conversion, caste and Dalit empowerment, and Buddhism and locates Ambedkar and his Buddhism in South Asia as well as indirectly, North America, as influenced by the tradition of American Pragmatism.

Chapter three is a deeper dive into the Buddha, as Ambedkar finds him in the source material. It focuses mainly on Ambedkar’s presentation of the Buddha as he presents him in the biographical sections of The Buddha and His Dhamma and explores the way in which Ambedkar seeks to address the problem of the Buddha’s motivation for renunciation. In particular, it identifies some of the key qualities of the Buddha found in Ambedkar’s writing, including Siddhārtha’s humanness, his rationality, and his role as a social reformer. It considers how this constellation of qualities answers Ambedkar’s larger question about the Buddha’s decision to follow the path of the renunciant.

Chapter four is a presentation of some of the unique features of Ambedkar’s approach to the Buddha’s teachings, otherwise known as the buddhadharma or simply
*dharma* (Sanskrit), or *dhamma* (Pāli). In this chapter, Ambedkar’s concerns about “the four Aryan Truths” are taken up and explored in more detail as well as what he offers in their place. In short, Ambedkar harbors apprehension that these teachings, foundational as they are to so much of Buddhist modernism, represent a move away from an original meliorative intention of the Buddha. He suggests that these teachings are a later addition by elite monastics, and he chooses not to include them in his narrative of the Buddha’s life. In their place, he offers a dichotomous frame, oriented toward social reform to form the ground for his larger project: the creation of socially-oriented new religious movement. This chapter also takes up Ambedkar’s third problem, that of the proper Buddhist understanding of *karma* and rebirth. Here Ambedkar argues that Brahmins and elite Buddhists have misrepresented the Buddha’s original use of these terms. Instead, he offers a reading of them based on qualities consistent with the Buddha as established in chapter two, namely care, rationality, and social reform.

Chapter five takes up Ambedkar’s final problem, that of the *saṅgha*. In particular, Ambedkar argues that the original Buddhist *saṅgha* was concerned with social engagement and with acting as a model for the larger community of Buddhist laity. He seeks to invert the idea that Buddhist monasticism represents an elite, inner-oriented community of individual seekers and instead presents it as caretaker and moral exemplar of how to live the good life for all followers of the Buddha. Finally, the conclusion considers the significance of this project for Buddhist Studies more generally and considers areas of further exploration implied by this project.
Technical Note on Language:

Although Ambedkar primarily wrote in English, he possessed a command of Marāṭhī, Hindī, English, Gujarātī, Persian, Sanskrit, and Pāli. Ambedkar composed a Pāli grammar as well as two Pāli dictionaries, one Pāli to English, and the other Pāli to Marāṭhī, Hindī, and Gujarātī. Although initially denied access to Sanskrit study in school due to his caste, he eventually mastered the language with the help of sympathetic pandits. Where necessary, Ambedkar’s own translations of Pāli and Sanskrit terms are noted in this project as well as his English transliterations which, at times, reflect his intention to reach his primarily Indian audience. In this project, usage of Pāli versus Sanskrit terminology largely follows Ambedkar’s usage. Where he uses Pāli, Pāli is used here and vice versa with Sanskrit. Otherwise, the default is to render Buddhist concepts in the Sanskrit. The use of diacritics and italicization for South Asian language terms in this dissertation is intended to aid with pronunciation and for those terms that have fully entered the English lexicon they are omitted for ease of reading.

A note on terminology: the term “untouchable” is presented and used here in the context that Ambedkar used it. When Ambedkar used the term as a proper noun, describing a group of people, it is capitalized, following Ambedkar’s practice. When it is used as an adjective, as in the context of Brahminical religion, it is uncapitalized. In all

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126 Keer, Dr. Ambedkar, 18–19.

127 Examples of this can be seen in the “schwa deletion” that is characteristic of some South Asian languages, such as Hindī and Gujarātī, and is on display in Ambedkar’s rendering of terms like “Siddhārtha” as “Siddharth” or “saṅgha” as “saṅgh” etc.
cases, this term is presented with caution, as it’s charge understandably continues to be felt by Indians today. Where appropriate, the term “Dalit” is used here, though it is noted that, while in common usage in the press and current literature, this term is itself not without charge. From the Hindī and Marāṭhī via Sanskrit for “oppressed” or “broken,” the origins of “Dalit” can be traced back to at least Jyotiba Phule’s usage in the late 19th century and was advanced by Ambedkar in his work The Untouchables, where he offers a speculative history of Dalits in India.128

The ethnographic work that informs this project was conducted in India from 2019-2020 on a Fulbright-Nehru Research Grant. It is based on fieldwork conducted primarily in Mahārāṣtra (Mumbai, Pune, and Nagpur), Bihār, and Uttar Pradesh. Fieldwork was conducted primarily in Hindī, though at times through Marāṭhī translation provided by others present at the time.

As for my sources for Ambedkar’s own scholarly material on Buddhism, I pay particular attention to Ambedkar’s later, post-independence Buddhist-period writing, which coincided with his monumental effort to pass the Hindu Code Bill in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s.129 These texts, all published posthumously shortly after

128 B.R. Ambedkar, The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables (New Delhi: Maven Books, 2018); On the term “Dalit,” Rawat and Satyanarayana note, “In descriptions of struggles for dignity and against caste inequality, the term ‘Dalit’ is today widely used to describe India’s former untouchables. Beginning with the Dalit Panthers’ movement in the 1970s, the term acquired a radical new meaning of self-identification and signified a new oppositional consciousness. The Congress Party and several other organizations, following Gandhi, adopted the term ‘Harijan’ (children of god), a term that continues to be used by members of these groups even today. But from the 1970s onward the term ‘Dalit’ has been widely used in academic writings following its adoption by Dalit activists and writers – especially in the vernacular literary sphere.” Ramnarayan S. Rawat and K. Satyanarayana, eds., Dalit Studies (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

129 Keer, Dr. Ambedkar, 420–21. Keer characterizes the beginning of Ambedkar’s turn toward Buddhism as occurring in 1950 specifically. He notes that Ambedkar gave “a stormy speech in New Delhi” where he “attacked Godmen in Hinduism” and said that “the Buddha’s religion was based on morality,” and then shortly after published the article “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion,” in the Mahabodhi Society Journal in May 1950, which outlined his vision for a new Buddhist movement.
Ambedkar’s death, include *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, *The Buddha and Karl Marx*,\(^{130}\) the incomplete book-length work known as *Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India*, the book *The Untouchables: Who They Were and Why They Became Untouchables*, and the 1950 *Mahabodhi Society Journal* article “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion,” mentioned above.\(^ {131}\) Ambedkar, in his own words, identified *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, *The Buddha and Karl Marx*, and *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India* as forming “a set for the proper understanding of Buddhism” for his readers.\(^ {132}\)

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\(^{130}\) See note 98 for a discussion of this title.

\(^{131}\) “Buddha and Karl Marx” in Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, *The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar*, ed. Valerian Rodrigues, first edition (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), chapter 14; Ambedkar, *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables*; B.R. Ambedkar, “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion,” in *Mahabodhi Society of India Journal*, May, 1950; https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/attach/amb/Volume_17_02.pdf; B.R. Ambedkar, “Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India,” (unpublished manuscript) https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/CPV/Volume3.pdf. The editors of Ambedkar’s work at the Ministry of External Affairs in India note “Dr. B. R. Ambedkar had proposed to write a treatise, i.e., ‘Revolution and Counter’ Revolution in Ancient India’. The table of contents has been printed in the chapter of schemes. He had originally planned to write seven books to be included under this broad title. The Committee was able to find some pages and few chapters in his collection. The chapters are also incomplete. After scrutiny, the Committee came to a decision that ‘Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India’ is to be presented in this volume with the available material though incomplete. Dr. Ambedkar considered the rise of Buddhism as revolution. The Counter-Revolution pioneered by Brahmins resulted in the decline and fall of Buddhism...”

\(^{132}\) Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, xxviii.
CHAPTER 2
B.R. AMBEDKAR: LIFE AND INFLUENCES

Foreigners of course know of the existence of untouchability. But not being next door to it, so to say, they are unable to realise how oppressive it is in its actuality. It is difficult for them to understand how it is possible for a few untouchables to live on the edge of a village consisting of a large number of Hindus; go through the village daily to free it from the most disagreeable of its filth and to carry the errands of all and sundry; collect food at the doors of the Hindus; buy spices and oil at the shops of the Hindu Bania from a distance; regard the village in every way as their home—and yet never touch or be touched by any one belonging to the village.

B.R. Ambedkar – *Waiting for a Visa*¹³³

It is impossible to overstate Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s influence on modern India. His tenure as the first law minister and chair of the constitution’s drafting committee massively shaped the legal and political direction that the emerging Indian nation would take in its development in the 20th century.¹³⁴ His erudition as both a legal scholar and a political economist of the subcontinent alone would mark him as worthy of the many statues, schools, universities, neighborhoods, airports and roads named in his honor.¹³⁵


¹³⁵ Airports named after Ambedkar include: Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar International Airport, Nagpur, Mahāraśṭra, https://www.nagpurairport.com; Dr. Bheem Rao Ambedkar Airstrip, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India, Bheem Rao Airstrip.

Rail stations: Ambedkar Nagar Monorail Station, Mumbai, Dr. Ambedkar Nagar Railway Station, Mhow, Madhya Pradesh; Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Station, Vidhana Soudha, Bengaluru, Karnataka.

National Holidays: Ambedkar Jayanti, April 14
But those contributions are really only a fraction of his influence. As a mobilizer of Dalits, or former “untouchables,” he instigated and championed the modern anti-caste movement in India and is easily the most well-known and beloved advocate for the rights of Dalits.

Universities in India: Ambedkar University, Delhi; Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar Bihar University, Muzaffarpur,Bihar; Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh; Dr. B.R. Ambedkar National Law University, Sonipat, Haryana; Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Open University, Hyderabad, Telangana; Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University, Srikakulam, Etcherla, Andhra Pradesh; Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University of the Social Sciences Dongargaon, Madhya Pradesh; Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University, Aurangabad, Mahārāshtra; Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Open University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat; Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Technical University, Lonere, Mahārāshtra; Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar Law University, Jaipur, Rajasthan; Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Agra, Uttar Pradesh; Tamil Nadu Dr. Ambedkar Law University, Chennai, Tamil Nadu.

Colleges and Institutes: Dr. Ambedkar College, Nagpur, Mahārāshtra; Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar College of Arts, Commerce and Science, Chandrapur, Mahārāshtra; Dr. Ambedkar College of Commerce and Economics, Wadala, Mumbai; Ambedkar Institute of Advanced Communication Technologies and Research, Geeta Colony, Delhi; Bhim Rao Ambedkar College, Delhi; Dr. Ambedkar Institute of Technology, Bangalore, Karnataka; Dr. B.R. Ambedkar National Institute of Technology Jalandhar, Punjab; Dr. Ambedkar Government Law College, Chennai, Tamil Nadu; Ambedkar College, Unakoti, Tripura; Tripura Medical College and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Memorial Teaching Hospital, Agartala, Tripura; Baba Saheb Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar College of Agricultural Engineering and Technology; Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Satabarshiki Mahavidyalaya, Helencha, West Bengal; Dr. B.R.Ambedkar College, Betai, West Bengal; Kultali Dr. B.R. Ambedkar College, Kultali, West Bengal; Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Institute of Technology, Port Blair, Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Political Parties: Ambedkar Makaal Iyakkam; Ambedkar National Congress; Ambedkar Samaj Party; Ambedkar Students’ Association; Ambedkarite Party of India; Bahujan Samaj Party (Ambedkar); Birsa Ambedkar Phule Students’ Association, JNU, Delhi; Bhim Army.

Stadiums: Bharat Ratna Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Stadium, Mahārāshtra; Dr. Ambedkar Stadium, New Delhi; Dr. Ambedkar Stadium, Karnataka; Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar International Sports Stadium, Uttar Pradesh.

Gail Omvedt discusses the importance and prevalence of Ambedkar statues in rural India, “There are undoubtedly more statues of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar in India than of any other historical person of the last millennium. They have been raised in every village, on crossroads, in every Dalit urban residential area and in front of educational and governmental institutions throughout the country. They show a stocky man, usually dressed in a western suit and tie, holding a book under his arm. The book represents the Constitution of India. Following the overthrow of the socialist regime in Russia, which brought with it the upsetting of statues of Lenin, and the downgrading of Mao in China, the number of these statues throughout India and elsewhere represents the major monumental memorial today to a leader of the downtrodden. Such statues have played a major role in political assertion in recent India. Their raising has represented a claim to pride and public space. Their opponents also take them as such and express their hostility to Dalit assertion by putting ‘garlands’ of chappals around such statues—actions which have often led to severe rioting and police firing. With all of this, it is clear that in the ‘politics of flags and statues’, Dalits have placed Ambedkar at the top of the world”, Omvedt, Ambedkar. See also regarding the importance of statues for Dalit activism: https://theprint.in/opinion/unlike-in-the-west-dalits-have-built-statues-to-resist-historical-oppression/457264/ .
of all minorities in India. Inside the subcontinent he is dearly regarded by many as a social reformer, a founding father, a philosopher, an economist, a women’s rights activist and perhaps most incredibly, a religious icon. Despite his outsized influence in the world’s largest democracy, awareness of his incredible story remains shockingly provincial. In this chapter I present some of the biographical details of B.R. Ambedkar’s life and locate him in his Indian social milieu to get a better sense of who he was and how his Buddhism emerged in the mid-20th-century.

**Early Life**

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was born on April 14, 1891 to a Mahār family in the village of Mhow, in what is now the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. His family was originally from a village on the Konkan coast called Ambavade in Western

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Mahāraṣhtra, which is where his original surname, Ambavadekar, comes from.\textsuperscript{139} The family relocated to Mhow, a garrison town, as his father was an officer in the British Indian Army and his surname was only later changed to Ambedkar by a schoolteacher-mentor in an effort to help him avoid some of the stigma associated with his low-caste birth.\textsuperscript{140}

The term Mahār refers to his family’s caste, or in the Mahār case, their lack of caste.\textsuperscript{141} Caste is, in many ways, a prime operating category in Hindu social life, at times perhaps more so than religion or national identity. As Wendy Doniger points out “most people in India would still define themselves by allegiances other than their religion.”\textsuperscript{142} Caste is certainly one of those persisting allegiances.\textsuperscript{143} As a primary category of Indian identity formation, it forms a central thread through all of Ambedkar’s 20\textsuperscript{th}-century mobilization work in India. The Mahārs were and still are the most numerous of the Mahārāṣtrian Dalit communities and at the time of Ambedkar’s birth, the range of their caste duties was extensive. They were responsible for, among other things, guarding the village, clearing the carcasses of dead cattle, sending messages between villages, tracking thieves, sweeping village roads, repairing buildings, bringing fuel to the burial grounds, 

\textsuperscript{139} Keer, \textit{Dr. Ambedkar}, 14.

\textsuperscript{140} Keer, 14.

\textsuperscript{141} “The Mahar Background” Zelliot, \textit{Ambedkar’s World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement}, 21–64.


Interestingly, they also acted as arbiters in boundary disputes between landowners, serving as guides and messengers for government servants and playing a limited role in some Brahminical religious rituals. Their role in the village was indispensable and consequently a defining feature of a Mahārāṣtrian village can be said to be the presence of Mahārs. Keer notes that a well-known joke amongst Mahārs is that the very name of the state itself, “Mahāraṣṭra,” means not “great nation” but “the Mahar’s nation.”

In terms of religion, Dhananjay Keer notes that Ramji Sakpal, Ambedkar’s father, was particularly devoted to the 15th century Indian mystic Kabir and the bhakti movement associated with him. He compelled his children to recite daily hymns and devotional lyrics to Kabir each morning and evening and imparted Kabir’s anti-caste ideas into his children. He also read the great Hindu epics, the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa to his children as well as Marāṭhī poet-saints such as Tukaram and Moropant. In the preface of The Buddha and His Dhamma, Ambedkar himself identifies his father’s religiosity as one of the formative influences that ultimately lead to his adoption of Buddhism. Roy notes that as a young boy, Ambedkar was “skeptical about the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and their capricious lessons in morality. He was particularly distressed by

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146 Ibid, 25.
147 Mahāraṣṭra comes from the Sanskrit words mahān, “great” and rāṣṭra, “nation.” See Keer, Dr. Ambedkar, 8.
148 Keer, 10–11.
149 Keer, 11.
150 Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, The Buddha and His Dhamma, xxv–xxvi.
the story of the killing and dismembering of the ‘low-born’ Karna.”\footnote{151} Along with Mahatma Phule and the Buddha, Keer identifies Kabir as one of the primary influences on Ambedkar’s thought.\footnote{152}

D.C. Ahir’s hagiographic account of Ambedkar’s life reports a prophetic vision by a sannyāsin, or Hindu renunciate, akin to that issued for the Buddha’s birth, being offered to Ambedkar’s father, Ramji Sakpal, before Ambedkar’s birth. As in the prophecy for Siddhārtha, the sage predicted that his Sakpal’s son would grow up to become “a great man of India.”\footnote{153} Ambedkar was the youngest of 14 children, of whom only five survived infancy and, as such, he was the object of particular attention and care from his parents. His mother died when he was only about 6 years old and in addition to help from his siblings, his father’s sister, Mirabai stepped in to look after the children, giving special care to Bhimrao, the youngest of the lot.

Caste was always operating in the background. In the short autobiographical piece Waiting for a Visa Ambedkar recounts the story of when he first truly realized, experientially, that for caste-Hindus, he was literally untouchable.\footnote{154} He states that in some ways he was already aware of his untouchability because of his treatment at school where he was often denied access to water and the teachers refused to touch his papers or allow him to recite verses or write on the blackboard. But it was only when, at nine years old, he went to stay with his father for the summer that he understood, in a deep sense,

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152 Keer, Dr. Ambedkar, 475.

153 Ahir, The Pioneers of Buddhist Revival in India, 125.

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just who his society considered him to be. His father was stationed in Koregaon at the
time, some distance away from their home. Bhimrao, his brother, and two cousins had
been staying with their aunt in Sātārā but because of old age and disability, she was not
up to the task of caring for them. Their father instructed them to join him, which caused
great excitement as they had never traveled by train before. New clothes and shoes were
purchased for the journey and a big deal was made of the upcoming trip. Their father told
them to send a letter before leaving and he would be sure to have a worker come to meet
them at the station. While they did indeed send the letter, it did not reach their father in
time and when they arrived at their destination, there was no one there to receive them.
They went to the station master for help and, upon seeing their nice clothing, he assumed
they were brahmin children. But as any conscientious caste-Hindu of the time would do,
he asked them what their names were. Upon discovering their untouchability, Ambedkar
recounts that the station master became visibility disgusted and angry and left them to
fend for themselves. They finally convinced an initially resistant bullock cart driver to
allow them to drive his cart while he walked beside them in exchange for double his
usual fair, as he refused to be in the same cart as them for fear of pollution. It soon
became clear that the bullock cart driver had not been honest with them about the length
of the journey and as they were without drinking water and no way to obtain it, they
became frightened. The bullock cart driver refused to share any water and directed them
to some dirty standing water by the roadside, unfit even for animals. As night fell and
they were clearly still not close to their destination, the thought that this bullock cart
driver was perhaps taking these well-dressed Untouchables somewhere to rob and kill
them began to haunt them. When they stopped for the night alongside some other bullock
carts, the young Ambedkar tried to use Urdu to convince a toll collector that he was a Muslim in the hopes that he would share some water with them. The Hindu man’s refusal is telling, asking them “who has kept water from you?” implying that their present need for water was evidence enough that they were untouchable. He denied them help since, it would seem, if they weren’t untouchable, someone would have given them water already and it wasn’t worth the risk of pollution for him. Again, they were directed to the stagnant puddles by the roadside, which stank with cow urine and excreta.\textsuperscript{155}

On reading Ambedkar’s account of this story, the horror of the scene is brought into full relief. He is nine years old and is stranded in an unknown place, desperately thirsty and scared, surrounded by adults who are not only refusing to help him and his brother and cousins, but are actually disgusted by them. The children come to a realization that these adults are not going to help them and that they need to stick together to survive, as their murder is a very real possibility. They learned that their worth is lower than that of the bullocks pulling the cart, whose need for food and water were attended to by the caste-Hindu men. Their desperation to simply get to their destination as quickly as possible is almost palpable. In recounting this story, Ambedkar later states,

\begin{quote}
This incident has a very important place in my life. I was a boy of nine when it happened. But it has left an indelible impression on my mind. Before this incident occurred, I knew that I was an untouchable, and that untouchables were subjected to certain indignities and discriminations… but this incident gave me a shock such as I had never received before, and it made me think about untouchability--which, before this incident happened, was with me a matter of course…\textsuperscript{156}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{155} Ambedkar, 668.

\textsuperscript{156} Ambedkar, 671.
They eventually made it to their father’s house, who was surprised to see them.

Ambedkar states that his father chastised them for not sending a letter, though it was later discovered that the letter had indeed reached his father’s servant, but his servant forgot to deliver the letter.\(^{157}\) Ambedkar’s father, who was quite vocal in his anti-caste sentiments, certainly knew the realities of what could happen to “untouchable” children traveling alone through unfamiliar rural villages. Keer recounts a similar story of a young Ambedkar being severely beaten for the crime of sneaking water from a public watercourse.\(^{158}\)

**Education**

Education was important to Ambedkar’s father and he pushed his two sons to pursue it despite the pushback they received from the culture at large.\(^{159}\) Ambedkar attended primary school in Sātārā where he was reminded daily of his low-born status. He was forced to sit in the back of the class on a gunny sack, was often denied water all day in school and, as Roy notes, not even the barbers who sheared goats and buffaloes in the town would touch his hair.\(^{160}\) His ability to persevere and simply graduate from primary school was an achievement in itself.

\(^{157}\) In imagining his father’s chastisement, one can perhaps hear echoes of “the talk” that black mothers in the US report that they need to have with their sons about dealing with police and white supremacy in America. For a discussion on “the talk” see Kenya Young, "A Black Mother Reflects on Giving Her 3 Sons 'The Talk'... Again And Again," interview by Sam Sanders, National Public Radio Broadcast, June 28, 2020, https://www.npr.org/2020/06/28/882383372/a-black-mother-reflects-on-giving-her-3-sons-the-talk-again-and-again.

\(^{158}\) Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar*, 13.

\(^{159}\) Keer, 11.

It was in high school, after moving to Bombay with his father, that Bhimrao was identified as a special student. First, as the story goes, by a brahmin teacher who took such a liking to Bhimrao that he changed the boy’s surname in the school records from Ambavadekar to his own similar but Deshastha Brahmin surname, Ambedkar. Keer notes that Ambedkar later cited this teacher’s kindness as a formative influence on him. After a couple of years of study, Ambedkar transferred from the Maratha High School to the highly regarded Elphinstone High School as the first recorded Dalit student. An interesting footnote in his biography is that upon his graduation Ambedkar’s highest marks were in Persian. Both he and his brother had applied to study Sanskrit but were denied by the Brahmin teachers. This rejection stayed with him, as Keer notes, as he recalled it with aversion throughout the rest of his life. The boys, along with 70 percent of the population of India at the time, were not only unfit to engage in the study of the sacred language of the Vedas but those sacred texts were not to be heard or read by Śūdras and Dalits at all. He later, in the 1920’s, took up the study of Sanskrit along

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161 Ahir, *The Pioneers of Buddhist Revival in India*, 126.


164 Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar*, 18–19.

165 *Manusmriti* chapter 4, verse 99 states, na vispaṣṭamadhiyita na śūdrajanasannidhau na niśānte pariśṛānto brahmādhītya punaḥ svapet | “He must never recite indistinctly or in the presence of Śūdras. After reciting the Veda during the last part of the night, he must not go back to sleep even if he is worn out.” Patrick Olivelle, and Suman Olivelle, *Manu's Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Manava-Dharmasastra*, South Asia Research (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 129.
with the help of sympathetic pandits who were willing to work with him despite his “untouchability.”

The other significant relationship Ambedkar developed in high school was with the Marathi activist, author and teacher from Wilson College High School named Krishanji Keshav Kelsukar. The two originally met in a garden where Ambedkar spent his evenings studying and Kelsukar took a liking to him. In 1907 a community celebration was held in Bombay to mark Ambedkar’s graduation from high school and at the event Kelsukar gifted Ambedkar a copy of the book *Life of Gautama Buddha.* Ambedkar would later note that this gift had a profound impact on his life as it implanted the seeds of his turn to the Buddhist tradition at the end of his life.

Keer notes that Kelsukar also met with Ramji Sakpal, Ambedkar’s father, to encourage him to allow Ambedkar to pursue higher education, which Sakpal agreed was important. Ambedkar then completed one year of study at Elphinstone College before he ran out of funds. Learning of this, Kelsukar went to the Mahārāja of Baroda and secured an interview with him for Ambedkar. The Mahārāja was impressed with Ambedkar and agreed to supply the necessary funding for his continued education. This meeting between the Mahārāja of Baroda and Ambedkar would prove to be fortuitous as shortly after his graduation from college with a BA in English and Persian Languages, the Mahārāja advertised that he was sending some students to America to study at Columbia University. With encouragement from Kelsukar, Bhimrao went back to the Mahārāja’s

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168 Ahir, 127.
palace in Bombay and made a case for himself. Again impressed with Ambedkar, the Mahārāja advised him to apply for a spot and Ambedkar and three other students were selected on the condition that they agree to work for Baroda State for ten years after the completion of their studies in America. In July of 1913, Ambedkar arrived in New York.

Ambedkar’s time outside of India, particularly while in the United States, was critically formative, both in the explicit development of his intellectual thought and also in the interruption of his experience of untouchability. It was inside the walls of Columbia University that he encountered American pragmatism via John Dewey and the political-economic thought of his primary advisor Edwin Seligman; it was the Harlem Renaissance unfolding outside his upper West Side residence that provided fuel for his developing anti-caste sentiment and work.

Eleanor Zelliot, Christophe Jaffrelot, Christopher Queen and, in particular, Scott Stroud have all argued that of all the major academic figures he encountered while at Columbia, it was the American Pragmatist John Dewey who had the biggest and most lasting influence on Ambedkar’s thought. Although his academic work was most directly influenced by his primary advisor Edwin Seilgman, who guided his two masters theses while at Columbia and then ultimately his PhD dissertation, Dewey’s pragmatist influence can be heard echoing throughout much of Ambedkar’s later works, such as in

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169 Keer, Dr. Ambedkar, 19–25.

The Annihilation of Caste where the influence of Dewey’s Ethics can be heard in Ambedkar’s distinction between “principles” and “rules” and in The Buddha and His Dhamma, where Ambedkar deploys that same distinction to create a new Buddhist ethical frame.

Dewey’s Democracy and Education is the text that perhaps most profoundly influenced Ambedkar’s thought. Stroud notes that after perusing Ambedkar’s personal library and comparing the copies of all of his works on Dewey, Democracy and Education is unique in that it is extensively annotated in multiple colors and styles, indicating engagement over time, perhaps over decades and those multiple layers of personal annotation span the entire length of the book, not select chapters as found in most others.\(^{171}\) This discovery is hardly surprising given that Dewey’s influence is heard in much of Ambedkar’s later work but it also adds weight to the speculation by others, such as Queen, Jaffrelot, and Roy about the centrality of Dewey’s thought to Ambedkar’s later work on social justice and religion.\(^{172}\)

It seems the origins of Ambedkar’s conceptualization of caste as “a state of mind” found in individual Hindus, as first presented in the Annihilation of Caste, arguably finds it origins in the distinction between habits and dispositions in Dewey. As Stroud points out, Ambedkar’s subscription to Dewey’s frame leads him to view religious conversion as therapeutic for what he sees as that aspect of a diseased mind known as caste.\(^{173}\) For

\(^{171}\) Ibid.


\(^{173}\) Stroud, “The Like-Mindedness of Dewey and Ambedkar.”
Ambedkar, Buddhist conversion is primarily a project of rehabilitation of the individual who can then morally participate in society with the good of others as a primary concern. Where Dewey sees education as the primary meliorative institution, Ambedkar sees religious conversion out of the Hindu fold and into a new democratically compatible religion. He sees the caste problem as fundamentally religious in nature and perhaps due to his early exposure to the Kabir bhakti movement by his father or his socialization in a more heavily religiously inflected South Asian milieu, that his solution of religious conversion reflects that diagnosis is not surprising. While the influence of Dewey on Ambedkar’s thought is clear, the brand of pragmatism that he develops is certainly his own. As Stroud concludes,

In a sense, Dewey’s Democracy and Education served as a starting point for much of what Ambedkar knew of pragmatism; it enabled what he was to do later in his writings and speeches through its provision of phrases, quotations, and ideas that Ambedkar would take and adapt to his own Indian context. Democracy and Education taught Ambedkar about reconstruction, and he in turn reconstructed its message for the Indian context through his selective engagement with its passages and his appropriative use of it in later persuasive appeals. In this sense, Ambedkar can be classed as an original Indian pragmatist, and not simply as an unimaginative mechanical follower of his beloved teacher from Columbia, John Dewey.174

While Zelliot does not emphasize the cross pollination of ideas between his contemporary African American rights movement in New York, scholars more recently have begun to take seriously the possibility that more active engagement may have influenced Ambedkar’s later work. It is certainly the case that DuBois was on Ambedkar’s radar as his mobilization efforts were underway in India and he reached out

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174 Stroud, “What Did Bhimrao Ambedkar Learn from John Dewey’s Democracy and Education?”
to him for guidance on how to proceed. In a letter written to DuBois in 1946, Ambedkar states,

> Although I have not met you personally I know you by name as every one does who is working in the case [sic] of securing liberty to the oppressed people. I belong to the Untouchables of India and perhaps you might have heard my name. I have been a student of the Negro problem and have read your writings throughout. There is so much similarity between the position of the Untouchables in India and of the position of the Negroes in America that the study of the latter is not only natural but necessary.\(^{175}\)

Ambedkar then goes on to request assistance from Dubois on petitioning the UN in support of the Dalit cause. Meena Krishnamurthy has pointed to the correspondence between Ambedkar and DuBois and has argued that DuBois’s writing on race in America may have had more of an impact on Ambedkar than has hitherto been appreciated.\(^{176}\) In particular, she argues that both Ambedkar and Dubois adopted a pragmatist approach to both the race and caste problems respectively in which echoes of American Pragmatic meliorism can be heard, and that it may be useful for scholars to view both caste in India (and in the global diaspora) and race in America as essentially the same problem. She notes they both ultimately became convinced of the necessity of a total restructuring for the achievement of progress for the oppressed. In Dubois case this is articulated as “abolition” while Ambedkar similarly calls for the “annihilation” of caste.\(^{177}\)

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\(^{177}\) Ibid.
Unfortunately, connecting the dots between Ambedkar’s influences while in America has had to be speculatively reconstructed via references in his later work and the echoes of the influences that can be heard in his writing since much of Ambedkar’s writing and personal library from his time in America and the UK were lost to the depths of the Mediterranean Sea after the ship carrying them was torpedoed by a German submarine in 1917.\textsuperscript{178} What is clear though is that Dewey is likely the primary intellectual influence on Ambedkar’s later work from this period, while his experience of Black liberation movements in America had some impact on his conceptualization of how best to mobilize Dalits in India. Of his time in America, Ambedkar states in *Waiting for a Visa*, “my five years of staying in Europe and America had completely wiped out of my mind any consciousness that I was an untouchable, and that an untouchable wherever he went in India was a problem to himself and to others.”\textsuperscript{179}

In 1915, Ambedkar successfully passed his MA exams and submitted a thesis titled “Ancient Indian Commerce.” He was simultaneously working on another thesis, titled “National Dividend of India – A Historic and Analytical Study” which would subsequently be published in 1923 as *The Evolution of Provincial Finance in British India* and for which Columbia University would award him a PhD.\textsuperscript{180} After completing his thesis at Columbia, Ambedkar traveled to London with the permission of the Mahārāja.\textsuperscript{181} There he gained admission to both Grays Inn for Law and to the London

\textsuperscript{178} Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar*, 32.

\textsuperscript{179} Ambedkar, “Waiting for a Visa,” 663.

\textsuperscript{180} Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar*, 28–29.

\textsuperscript{181} Ibid.
School of Economics for the study of Economics and Political Science, where he was allowed to pursue a D.Sc degree due to his study at Columbia University. He was called back to India in 1917 due to his funding having run out but secured an agreement to be allowed to return to London at a later date to finish his studies, which he eventually did in 1920.  

Return to India

Upon his return to India, his required period of employment for the state of Baroda was set to begin. It was marked by caste trouble from the start. Despite the Mahārāja of Baroda ordering his men to meet Ambedkar at the train station upon his arrival, no one wanted to receive a Mahār. As Keer notes, news of his arrival spread quickly and no inn or hostel would allow him to rent a room. Ambedkar was forced to lie about his lack of caste to a Parsi inn-keeper in order to secure a room, although, eventually his identity was discovered at the inn and he was driven from it by an angry mob of Parsi men. Even though the Mahārāja was grooming him for the future role of state Finance Minister, office workers would roll up the carpets before Ambedkar entered or left the office for fear of pollution, they refused to handle his papers and, just as in his school days, drinking water was not available to him.

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182 Ibid, 26-50.

183 Keer, Dr. Ambedkar, 33.


185 Keer, Dr. Ambedkar, 33–35.
Unable to find lodging anywhere else, including amongst more friendly acquaintances from his office, he was forced to leave Baroda for Bombay. In Bombay he started a tutoring service and a financial advising business, but both quickly failed when his identity as a Dalit became widely known. When a professorship opened at Sydenham College of Commerce and Economics in Bombay in 1918, Ambedkar, thanks to his connections from his time in London, was able to contact Lord Sydenham directly for a recommendation. He got the position with the provision that he would be allowed to return to London to finish his studies when he had the funds to do so. Despite experiencing caste prejudice from other professors, Ambedkar demonstrated his erudition and took advantage of the opportunity to begin his work of mobilization. During this period, he began to argue in print for the creation of a separate electorate for the “depressed classes.” His pieces appeared in the Times of India and in Mook Nayak (“leader of the voiceless”), a bi-monthly Marāṭhī newsletter that he created for Dalits. In these publications, Ambedkar made the case that the deep inequality present in India due to caste must be addressed before serious conversations about swarāj, or self-rule, could happen. As Keer notes, Ambedkar’s view in Mook Nayak was that

…if the Brahmins were justified in their attack upon and opposition to the unjust power of the British Government, the Depressed Classes were justified a hundred times more so in their opposition to the rulership of the Brahmins in case the transfer of power took place… The Swaraj wherein there were no fundamental rights guaranteed for the Depressed Classes, would not be a Swaraj to them. It would be a new slavery for them.

This is a recurring theme in Ambedkar’s writing. It is his position that caste-Hindus’ privilege has blinded them to the horrible realities of caste and the urgent need to

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187 Keer, 41–42.
address it. He repeatedly makes the case that the invisibility of the Dalit renders their position particularly precarious in the looming transition of power. While notable major Indian independence figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawharlal Nehru were primarily concentrated on the oppression caused by the British colonial authorities, Ambedkar was keen to keep the focus domestic and call attention to the oppression caused by caste-Hindus in their subscription to caste-based ideologies. This placed Ambedkar outside the fold of major Indian independence period actors, though he was able to make his presence from the margins strongly felt. As such, he was often framed as an agitator who was at times working actively against the nationalist movement, as was the case in his famous clash with M.K. Gandhi over the Poona Pact.

**Ambedkar and Gandhi**

Ambedkar and Gandhi originally met in 1931 at Gandhi’s request. Gandhi wanted to address Ambedkar’s efforts at the first Round Table Conference, held the previous year in London and which dealt with proposed constitutional reforms in India. At the Round Table Conference, Ambedkar argued forcefully for the creation of a separate electorate for the depressed classes on the basis that they did not have universal franchise. Ambedkar’s position put the Congress party leadership, and Gandhi in particular, in a bind, as it was advocating for a splitting of the Hindu electorate at a time of growing influence of the All-India Muslim League, who were also agitating for separate electorates. The story of their initial meeting describes a charged encounter.

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where Gandhi took issue with Ambedkar’s position regarding the place of Dalits in the larger Hindu fold. In their meeting, Gandhi initially chastised Ambedkar for taking up the mantle of “leader of the Untouchables,” telling him, “I have been thinking over the problem of Untouchables ever since my school days – when you were not even born,” and went on castigate him for his opposition, despite the Congress Party’s programs and efforts to help so-called untouchable people. Ambedkar surprised Gandhi by coming back at him forcefully, telling him directly that the efforts made by Gandhi and the Congress Party to alleviate the oppression of Untouchables were insincere, nothing more than political gamesmanship and not at all serious. He stated:

> This is my charge against you and the Congress. You say the British Government does not show a change of heart. I also say that the Hindus have not shown a change of heart in regard to our problem, and so long as they remain adamant we would believe neither the Congress nor the Hindus… Let me be brutally frank about it. History tells that Mahatmas, like fleeting phantoms, raise dust, but raise no level. Why should the Congress oppose our movement and dub me a traitor?

Famously, Ambedkar then went on tell “Gandhiji” that he, Ambedkar had “no homeland,” to which Gandhi confusedly pointed to Ambedkar’s work in the first Round Table Conference on behalf of the nation as evidence to the contrary. Ambedkar explained to him that actually all of his effort was aimed at the upliftment of the Untouchables and not motivated by any sense of patriotism. He explained: “How can I

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189 Keer 162–170.

190 Ibid.

call this land my own homeland and this religion my own wherein we are treated worse than cats and dogs, wherein we cannot get water to drink? No self-respecting Untouchable worth the name will be proud of this land.”

In this exchange Gandhi was blindsided both by the force with which Ambedkar attacked him and with the skill. Zelliot notes that Gandhi at this point assumed Ambedkar was a highly Western-educated caste-Hindu who was simply interested in the eradication of untouchability, not a Dalit himself. It ended with Gandhi telling Ambedkar “I am against the political separation of the Untouchables from the Hindus. That would be absolutely suicidal.”

Gandhi’s own efforts to fashion himself leader of the Untouchables came into frequent and direct conflict with Ambedkar. In particular, Gandhi’s moniker for the Dalits of his time, harijans, or “people of god,” was poorly received by Ambedkar and Dalits as a patronizing term and continues to be experienced as a term that most Dalits associate with caste-Hindu attempts at placation and attempts to win votes. It is often described as a slur by Dalits themselves. When Congress officially adopted Gandhi’s term “harijan” in 1938, Ambedkar and his party protested in the Bombay Legislative Assembly by getting up and walking out.

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192 Keer, 167.

193 In Gandhi’s words, “Till I went to England, I did not know that he was a Harjian. I thought he was some Brahman who took deep interest in Harijans and therefore talked intemperately.” Zelliot, Ambedkar’s World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement, 131.

194 Keer, 168.


Going forward, this initial meeting set the tone for the interactions between the two. Gandhi so objected to the awarding of separate electorates for the “depressed classes” that he vowed to fast until his death to see it overturned. Faced with the prospect of massive outbreaks of communal violence against the Untouchables upon Gandhi’s death, Ambedkar eventually backed down and agreed to a joint electorate with reserved seats for depressed classes. Of this experience with Gandhi during this period, Ambedkar would later say,

But I always say, that as I met Mr. Gandhi in the capacity of an opponent I have a feeling that I know him better than most other people, because he had opened his real fangs to me, I could see the inside of the man, you see, while others who generally went there as devotees, saw nothing of him, except the external appearance, which he had put as Mahatma. But I saw him in his human capacity, the bare man in him, and so I say that I understand him better than most of the people who have associated themselves with him, you can say.

Ambedkar’s anger with Gandhi often comes as a surprise by readers in the West. In part this is probably because, alongside Mother Theresa, Gandhi has been received as the exemplar of religiously motivated social action in South Asia. His image as an icon of an Eastern “spirituality” fits nicely with an orientalist narrative about the wisdom of Asia. The reality of caste representation in the Indian diaspora, where high-caste Hindus continue to be over-represented, also contributes to the stainless projection of the Mahatma’s image as an example of a good Hindu.

197 Jaffrelot, Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability, 59–71.
But Ambedkar’s objection with Gandhi and the Congress Party is perhaps not unsurprising when examined from Ambedkar’s point of view, that is from the margins since, as Ambedkar argued, if Gandhi, the Congress Party, and liberal Hindus in general were serious about helping the Untouchables of India, they could take steps to eradicate untouchability entirely, not simply treat its symptoms. Ambedkar remarked to Gandhi directly that it was within his power to mandate that membership in the Congress Party could require that Congress Party members’ domestic workers be from the Untouchable communities or that Congress Party members could be required to tutor an Untouchable student or eat at home with an Untouchable family at least once a week.\textsuperscript{200} But even these simple acts which would reflect a sincere commitment and affect some real positive social and cultural change were not taken, but instead, according to Ambedkar, money was simply thrown at the problem to no good effect.\textsuperscript{201} Ambedkar wanted to uproot caste discrimination from its base while, from his point of view, Gandhi was not serious enough about the problem, but even angry at Ambedkar for not saying “thank you” properly. Clear resonance can be heard here with Dr. Martin Luther King’s Jr.’s struggle with white Northern liberals’ “polite racism,” where King decries the fact that he is welcomed by Northern white politicians with plenty of pomp and circumstance, but when

\textsuperscript{200} Keer, \textit{Dr. Ambedkar}, 166.

\textsuperscript{201} In this same initial meeting, Gandhi objects to Ambedkar “The Congress has spent not less than 20 lakhs on the uplift of the Untouchables. And it is really surprising that men like you should offer opposition to me and to the Congress.” (1 lakh = 100,000) to which Ambedkar responded, “You say Congress spent more than rupees twenty lakhs on the uplift of the Untouchables. I say it was all a waste. With such a backing I could have effected an astounding change in the outlook and economic conditions of my people. And in that event it would have been imperative for you to see me long before. But I tell you that the Congress is not sincere about its professions…” Keer, 165.
the conversation turns to questions about real policy change, the answer is invariably “no.”

This antagonism between Ambedkar and liberal caste-Hindus, and Gandhi in particular, would later become a more pointed religious issue in 1935 when Ambedkar was invited to give a speech at the Jat-Pak-Todak Mandal of Lahore. The Mandal was an organization of reform-minded liberal Hindus who were sympathetic to the plight of the Untouchables. Their invitation to Ambedkar was already in itself an unconventional act, as not only was he an Untouchable but the drama of the Poona Pact had marked him as the de facto leader of the Untouchables and a potential agitator. In particular, Ambedkar had given a talk in Yeola in October of 1935 in front of some 10,000 Untouchables where he turned his criticism toward Hinduism as a religion and his attention to religious conversion as perhaps the only solution. In the now famous speech he identified his contemporary Hinduism as “degraded” and branded it Brahminism “because it benefitted only the Brahmin hierarchy as a class.”

In a long and impassioned speech, Ambedkar urged his followers to give up strategies aimed at policy change, specifically efforts to gain rights to enter Hindu temples, as they had largely failed to affect any real positive social change. Instead, he proclaimed that the root of the problem was that they remained on the inside of the Hindu tradition and it was only by placing themselves outside of the Hindu fold through religious conversion that they could gain dignity and power. With his

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203 Keer, Dr. Ambedkar, 252.
characteristic impassioned rhetorical style building to a crescendo, Ambedkar exhorted his audience, “If you want to gain equality, change your religion. If you want independence, change your religion. If you want to make the world in which you live happy, change your religion.”\(^{204}\) He stated that while he was born a Hindu “untouchable” he had no intention of dying as one. “I solemnly assure you that I will not die a Hindu” has become something of a war cry for Ambedkarites in India even today.

This admonition was of course met with stiff resistance from caste-Hindus in India, including Gandhi, who’s charge that Ambedkar was attempting to change his religion like he was changing his clothing reflected his view that Untouchables were in essence Hindu.\(^{205}\) The road to conversion for Ambedkar originates in his direct experience of caste oppression and his sharp critique of caste Hindus’ unwillingness to do anything about that oppression. And it is in Yeola that his resistance movement begins to turn toward a religious solution to the problem. It was with this Yeola speech as a background that Ambedkar’s hosts at the Jat-Pak-Todal Mandal tentatively received him and how what would become perhaps the most well-known and radical of his texts, the *Annihilation of Caste*, was born. In the opening remarks of the original speech, Ambedkar praises the courage of the Mandal hosts for inviting him. He names out loud that he is in many ways unfit to be presiding over such a gathering. First and foremost he is a non-Brahmin. He backhandedly compliments them,

I am sure they [the Mandal] will be asked questions for having selected me…I have criticised the Hindus. I have questioned the authority of the


\(^{205}\) Ibid.
Mahatma whom they revere. They hate me. To them I am a snake in their garden… According to the Shastras the Brahmin is appointed to be the Guru for the three Varnas. वर्णनाम ब्रह्मणो मुक्तः is a direction from the Shastras… The Shastras do not permit a Hindu to accept any one as his Guru merely because he is well-versed.

In a style characteristic of Ambedkar, he does not mince words and flirts with insult to his Hindu audience. The rest of the speech goes on to advocate for the total annihilation of caste, not a reformation of the caste system as was being advocated for at the time by the Mandal. He argued that caste is part and parcel of modern Hinduism and as such it represents a fundamental disease that must be excised in full. He addressed reformist movements directly by name, such as the Arya Samaj, and indeed his audience, and charged them with essentially trying to reform a tradition that simply cannot be reformed.

He first implores his caste-Hindu audience to consider that it is in the interest of the survival of the nation that Hindus should address the moral failure that is Hindu caste. It is not simply a marginal matter but something that everyone has a stake in and will determine the success or failure of the national project. Second, citing Dewey, he suggests that there is a moral imperative to accept those things from history that deserve to be transmitted to future generations and reject those things that do not and he points

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206 वर्णनाम ब्रह्मणो मुक्तः - “The brahmin is the teacher of all the castes” (my translation). Here Ambedkar seems to be referencing Manusmṛti Chapter 10 verses 1-3.

207 Annihilation of Caste, 1-2.

208 Ambedkar states, “…the Hindus must consider whether they should conserve the whole of their social heritage or select what is helpful and transmit to future generations only that much and not more. Professor John Dewey, who was my teacher and to whom I owe so much, said: ‘Every society gets encumbered with what is trivial, with dead wood from the past, and with what is positively perverse… As a society becomes more enlightened, it realizes that it is responsible not to conserve and transmit the whole of its existing achievements, but only such as make for a better future society.’” Ambedkar, The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar, 303.
to Burke in his identification of change as a necessary function of a healthy society.²⁰⁹

Third, again turning to Dewey, he urges them to cease “worshipping the past as supplying the present’s ideals.”²¹⁰ Instead, if they value progress, they should look primarily to the present. And finally, that change is all pervasive and that the concept sanātana dharma (“eternal dharma”) is incompatible with the reality of an ever-changing world. He states, “in a changing society, there must be a constant revolution of old values and the Hindus must realize that if there must be standards to measure the acts of men there must also be readiness to revise those standards.”²¹¹

In this text he makes a distinction between the “religion of rules” which he identifies with Brahminism and a “religion of principles” which is “true religion” and represents a civic religion that is in complement with the values of “liberty, equality and fraternity.”²¹² This distinction and emphasis on the creation of a “religion of principles” is something he returns to repeatedly and eventually equates with the term dhamma in The Buddha and His Dhamma. He implores his audience,

… you must give a new doctrinal basis to your Religion – a basis that will be in consonance with Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, in short, with Democracy… it may not be necessary for you to borrow from foreign sources and that you could draw for such principles on the Upanishads. Whether you could do so without a complete remoulding, a considerable scraping and chipping off the ore they contain, is more than I can say. This means a complete change in the fundamental notions of life. It means a complete change in the values of life. It means a complete change in

²⁰⁹ Ambedkar states, “Even Burke, in spite of the vehemence with which he opposed the principle of change embodied in the French Revolution, was compelled to admit that ‘A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation. Without such means it might even risk the loss of that part of the constitution which it wished the most religiously to preserve.’” Ambedkar, 303.

²¹⁰ Ambedkar, 303–4.

²¹¹ Ambedkar, 304.

outlook and in attitude towards men and things. It means conversion; but if you do not like the word, I will say, it means a new life. But a new life cannot enter a body that is dead… the old body must die before a new body can come into existence and a new life can enter into it… this is what I meant when I said you must discard the authority of the Shastras and destroy the religion of the Shastras.\textsuperscript{213}

On display here, first, is Ambedkar’s criticism that Brahminism, or the “religion of rules,” precludes its adherents from thinking in terms of the welfare of others because the primary focus of the adherents of such a religion is necessarily in the past and is legalistic in nature. It fundamentally impedes progress. As a religion of rules, Hinduism “as contained in the Vedas and Smritis, is nothing but a mass of sacrificial, societal, political and sanitary rules and regulations, all mixed up. What is called Religion by the Hindus is nothing but a multitude of commands and prohibitions.”\textsuperscript{214} Second, he turns to the Upanishads as a potential source for this revolutionary project. In some sense, Ambedkar’s later move toward Buddhism is foreshadowed in his reference to the Upanishads here as the śramaṇa movement to which he will eventually turn in his Buddhist conversion has its philosophical roots in the Upanishadic tradition.

Of particular note in the above quote is Ambedkar’s use of the word “conversion.” While his impassioned speech at Yeola implored his Dalit audience to leave the Hindu religion, here he is using the term “conversion” to advocate for radical reform, on par with a total transformation, and his hedging after using the term suggests that his focus is firmly on the creation of the “religion of principles” that he maintains will bring about progressive change for the depressed classes as well as free caste-Hindus to become more fully human-oriented in their moral outlook. We can see here

\textsuperscript{213} Ambedkar, 311.

\textsuperscript{214} B.R. Ambedkar, \textit{Annihilation of Caste}, 57-58.
Ambedkar’s unrelenting and single-pointed effort to create a democratic society that is politically, legally, religiously, and morally consonant. If his audience, to his pleasant surprise, took up his challenge, it seems that Ambedkar would “convert” to this religion of principles. That they do not, requires him to ultimately search for and construct this “true religion” in Buddhism. Of course, this message was not well received by the Mandal, who did not ultimately take up his charge. Having their requests to edit his speech to omit the radical demand for the total annihilation of caste rejected by him, they finally rescinded their invitation. Ambedkar later published the speech in full as the Annihilation of Caste and received a pointed response from Gandhi himself. The full text of their exchange, in which Gandhi accuses Ambedkar of making light of a serious thing like religion and Ambedkar responds by taking Gandhi to task for missing the horrors of caste as only a caste-Hindu could, is now included as an appendix to the published text.  

During my time in India amongst Ambedkarite Buddhists, I was somewhat surprised to find that repeatedly, amongst both lay and monastic followers, the Annihilation of Caste was one of the three Ambedkar texts, along with Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India and The Buddha and His Dhamma that was recommended for me to read. This was surprising because while I expected that his later Buddhist work would feature prominently in people’s recommendations, Annihilation of Caste is an early text, written well before he decided on his conversion to Buddhism. But it is in this early text that Ambedkar’s emphasis on the necessity of religion and his full-throated challenge to Brahminical religion is first and most fully on display. In

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encountering Ambedkar’s impassioned defense of the necessity and centrality of religion in a progressive, democratic society and his echoes of the early renunciate tradition, his eventual turn to Buddhism can be anticipated.

The Turn Toward Buddhism

Ambedkar’s explicit treatment of religion in the *Annihilation of Caste* anticipates the critical reception of his reading of the Buddhist tradition, which primarily accused him of the sin of novelty.\(^{216}\) A close reading of the *Annihilation of Caste*, though, reveals that no matter what religion Ambedkar would have eventually settled on in his quest for conversion, he would have necessarily “reformed” it. In the same way he is imploring his Jat-Pak-Todak Mandal audience to reform their Hinduism he ultimately “reforms” Buddhism. In this sense, his religious conversion project is born not out of a sense of political expediency but instead from a deeply held view, inspired by Deweyan pragmatism, that a religion of principles is both possible and necessary for a morally moored democratic society to flourish. He maintains that a “religion of principles” is a necessary component of any progressive democracy.

In an exhaustive research project characteristic of his personal style, Ambedkar spent the two decades after the publication of the seminal *Annihilation of Caste*

\(^{216}\) Christopher Queen describes the initial reception of Ambedkar’s work in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, “One of the first reviews of *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1984), Ambedkar’s last work, appeared in the December 1959 issue of *The Maha Bodhi*, India’s leading Buddhist journal. The reviewer, an English monk and member of the Kolkata-based Maha Bodhi Society, writing under the pen-name Jivaka, found Ambedkar’s version of the tradition ‘enough to shock a real Buddhist.’” Queen, “Ambedkar’s Dhamma: Source and Method in the Construction of Engaged Buddhism,” 135–36.
researching various religious traditions. He met with leaders from several Christian
denominations in India and seriously considered conversion to Sikhism. So serious was
his interest in Sikhism that he, along with Sikh leadership in Bombay, founded Khals
College, a Sikh center of higher learning in central Mumbai and several of his principal
followers converted to Sikhism, bringing a number of Dalit followers along with them.
Eventually though, Ambedkar became convinced that Buddhism offered the best home
for Dalits in India. While Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism offered a long-established and
extant caste-critical infrastructure inside India, as well as badly needed resources, that
same existing institutional structure allowed for a certain amount of problematic empty
religiosity, or “religion of rules,” to infect their practice. He noted that Dalits who
converted to Sikhism, Christianity, and Islam were often still marginalized by their caste
in their new religious homes despite the overt rejection of caste-based discrimination by
their theological teachings.

217 Keer, Dr. Ambedkar, 276–81.

218 On Ambedkar’s affinity for Sikhism see Sangharakshita, Ambedkar and Buddhism (Glasgow,
Omvedt notes in her book Ambedkar: Toward an Enlightened India: “The interest in Sikhism continued for
some time. Ambedkar developed associations with activists at the Sikh Mission and a khalsa college was
planned in Bombay. In 1935 Ambedkar went on a trip to Europe financed by the Sikhs. He spent time in
London consulting experts about the effects of conversion on reservations, and in Rome he got a design
prepared by architects along neoclassical lines for the college…As part of the interest in Sikhism, a ‘team’
of sixteen was sent to Amritsar on 25 September 1936 for religious training. Of these their leader, Barve,
and a couple of others converted on their return and began to wander propagating the religion. However,
differences of opinion developed between Ambedkar and his Sikh friends, possibly over the issue of
control of the conversion process and the institutions being created, and he broke his connections with
them.” Omvedt, Ambedkar, 100.

219 Keer notes, “Ambedkar, however, warned his people against the erroneous view that conversion would
relieve them from hell and would lead them to the paradise of equality. He further told them that under any
new religion they would be required to fight for liberty and equality. ‘We are fully conscious of the fact,’
he observed, ‘that go anywhere we will, we would have to fight for our welfare if we took to Christianity,
Islam or Sikhism…’” Keer, Dr. Ambedkar, 262.
Kelsukar in that garden in Bombay, was grounded in its doctrinal prescriptions against caste and in the clean slate that it offered Dalits by not having a large institutional representation currently present in India.

The Buddhist period of Ambedkar’s life, 1948-1956, or the period when he more seriously turned toward Buddhist conversion, coincided with his time as chair of the constitution drafting committee for the emerging Indian nation and with his work to pass the Hindu Code Bill. It was widely acknowledged, even by his detractors, that his impressive legal training and erudition made him an obvious and unparalleled choice for the role of India’s first Law Minister. In his efforts to frame the constitution, he drew on those of Western democracies as well as the republican period of early Buddhist expansion in India, in places like Vaishali, to create a document that would enshrine the principles of democracy and protect the most vulnerable members of society. It was at his suggestion that the dharmacakra of the great Buddhist Mauryan dynasty monarch Ashoka be placed at the center of the Indian flag and that the official state emblem be the four Ashokan lions.221 Ambedkar’s efforts to pass the Hindu Code Bill, a huge effort to enshrine rights for women to own property, to receive inheritance, and to be protected in divorce and widowhood, forced national dialogue around the rightful role of religion in the civic and legal spheres of the new nation and the state’s responsibilities to its most vulnerable citizens.

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221 Jaffrelot, Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability, 132.
During this period, Ambedkar began speaking more forcefully in favor of Buddhism in his speeches against the practice of caste. In a speech in Delhi in 1950 he identified the Buddha as a model of religious action *par excellence* and credited him with redefining the term *karma* to refer to one’s social and moral duty in contradistinction to the Brahminical usage which referred only to *yajña*, or ritual sacrifices. This is a point he elaborated in “The Buddha and the Future and His Religion,” in the *Mahabodhi Society Journal* in May of that year and forms the basis for his justification for a turn towards Buddhism specifically.  

He enumerates four main reasons for his ultimate decision to turn to Buddhism. First he argues that law can provide guardrails for human social behavior but cannot provide the depth required for moral meaning making. For that, he argues, religion is necessary. Where law can play a disciplining role, it is impotent to form the ground for a moral life. He states,

> In all societies, law plays a very small part. It is intended to keep the minority within the range of social discipline. The majority is left and has to be left to sustain its social life by the postulates and sanction of morality. Religion in the sense of morality, must therefore, remain the governing principle in every society.  

Second, he argues that this religion, as described above, must necessarily be rational and in consonance with science. Here his commitment to a wide-tent, pragmatic and civic religion can clearly be heard. His reasoning is that for a religion to survive and remain relevant in modernity, it must not shun science in favor of traditionalist commitments to ritual and belief. He states,

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Religion is bound to lose its respect and therefore becomes the subject of ridicule and thereby not merely loses its force as a governing principle of life, but might in course of time disintegrate and lapse, if it is not in accord with science.\textsuperscript{224}

Third, Ambedkar argues that the religion described in the first and second points must build its moral orientation around the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Ambedkar’s subscription to liberalism and commitment to fashioning a religious ground for a moral imperative in order to strengthen the practice of democracy can be heard here.

It is not enough for religion to consist of a moral code, but its moral code must recognise the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity. Unless a religion recognises these three fundamental principles of social life, religion will be doomed.\textsuperscript{225}

And finally, he argues that properly conceived, a religion should not fetishize poverty. Ambedkar has his eye on both Christianity, to which he more favorably compares Buddhism earlier in the article, and Hinduism, which he argues romanticizes poverty through \textit{ashrama dharma}. This is also a point he returns to in \textit{The Buddha and Karl Marx} when he argues against Marxism in favor of the \textit{bhikkhu’s} rejection of private property.

He states in “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion,”

That religion must not sanctify or ennoble poverty. Renunciation of riches by those who have it, may be a blessed state, but poverty can never be. To declare poverty to be a blessed state is to pervert religion, to perpetuate vice and crime, to consent to make earth a living hell.\textsuperscript{226}

Ambedkar argues that the only religion available that fulfills all of the criteria set out in the four points listed above is Buddhism. He states

\textsuperscript{224} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{225} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{226} Ibid.
If the new world—which be it realised is very different from the old-must have a religion—and the new world needs religion far more than the old world did—then it can only be religion of the Buddha.227

In order to create the conditions necessary for the spread of Buddhism in accord with the points listed above he outlines three critical tasks. First, he argues that a new Buddhist “gospel” must be produced. In Ambedkar’s opinion, the closest thing the Buddhist tradition has to a portable root text akin to the Christian gospel is the Dhammapada, which suffers by comparison primarily due to it lacking a narrative. His efforts in The Buddha and His Dhamma were clearly an attempt to realize this goal. Its narrative of the Buddha story, its aphoristic sections organized in verse and chapter style check the boxes that he outlined as essential for this new gospel in “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion.” Second, he suggests that the ordained Buddhist saṅgha must take a more engaged role in the propagation of Buddhism and they must act as models for the laity. This is further outlined in the section on the saṅgha in The Buddha and His Dhamma. Finally, he advocated for the creation of a “mission” for the advancement of Buddhism in India and around the world and for the connection of his new movement to the larger Buddhist world. He states,

Without a Mission Buddhism can hardly spread. As education requires to be given, religion requires to be propagated. Propagation cannot be undertaken without men and money. Who can supply these? Obviously the countries where Buddhism is a living religion.228

227 Ibid, 105.

228 Ibid, 107.
In 1955, a year before the conversion, Ambedkar incorporated “The Buddhist Society of India,” to fill this role, currently headed by his grandson, Rajratna Ambedkar. He served as the first president of the organization and outlined the mission of the organization along the lines argued in “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion.” In some ways, it seems that the failure of Ambedkar to advance the Hindu Code Bill and his defeat in the Lok Sabha election of 1952 freed him to turn his attention more fully to Buddhist conversion. During this period of the early 1950’s Ambedkar gave numerous speeches and interviews about his preference for Buddhism and he worked industriously on multiple future Buddhist publications, including The Buddha and His Dhamma, The Buddha and Karl Marx, Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India, The Untouchables, and Riddles in Hinduism. In the early 1950’s he traveled to Sri Lanka and Burma multiple times to attend Buddhist conferences and to meet with and learn from Buddhists there. As his health was quickly deteriorating due to advanced diabetes, Ambedkar recognized the need to conduct the conversion ceremony was becoming urgent and finally, in May of 1956, he formally announced his intention to convert to Buddhism later that year.

On October 14, 1956 in Nagpur, chosen for its association with the ancient mythical Nagas and their connection with the propagation of Buddhism, Ambedkar

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230 Sangharakshita, Ambedkar and Buddhism, 57–60.

231 Keer, Dr. Ambedkar, 492.

232 Sangharakshita, Ambedkar and Buddhism, 94–96; Keer, Dr. Ambedkar, 495.
and his wife, Savita Ambedkar, in front of approximately 500,000 followers in a ceremony presided over by eighty-three-year-old Burmese monk Mahasthaveer Chandramani, took refuge in the three jewels and the five precepts of the Buddhist tradition and, in so doing, formally converted to Buddhism.\textsuperscript{233} A deeply emotional Ambedkar then added a subsequent set of vows to the traditional refuge formula. Keer narrates,

Dr. Ambedkar then declared: ‘By discarding my ancient religion which stood for inequality and oppression today I am reborn. I have no faith in the philosophy of incarnation; and it is wrong and mischievous to say that Buddha was an incarnation of Vishnu. I am no more a devotee of any Hindu god or goddess. I will not perform Shraddha. I will strictly follow the eightfold path of Buddha. Buddhism is a true religion and I will lead a life guided by the three principles of knowledge, right path and compassion.’

Once or twice, when he repeated the pledges to renounce the worship of the Hindu god and when he declared ‘I renounce Hinduism,’ the great leader seemed deeply moved; his voice choked visibly as he spoke. These pledges, framed by himself, were twenty-two in number…\textsuperscript{234}

Ambedkar then broke with tradition and turned to his mass of followers and, as an \textit{upāsaka}, or non-monastic follower, administered the refuge vows, precepts, and additional twenty-two vows noted above, to his followers. Ambedkar was keen to ensure that this ceremony, or \textit{dhamma diksha}, marked a hard religious transition for his followers out the Hindu fold and into a new Buddhist identity. In the days and weeks that followed an inspired but weakened Ambedkar traveled to Katmandu, Nepal to participate in the Fourth Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists where he was received in the inaugural session, as Keer notes, with a “tremendous ovation” from the attendees. He

\textsuperscript{233} Keer, \textit{Dr. Ambedkar}, 500.

\textsuperscript{234} Keer, 500.
spoke on the greatness of Buddhist social doctrine and, per request from the delegates of the conference, on Buddha and Marx.²³⁵

Ambedkar died only shortly after his conversion ceremony, on December 6, 1956 in his home in Delhi. His body was flown back to Mumbai and received by thousands of his followers. His cremated remains have been memorialized with a stūpa in Dadar, Mumbai at a location referred to as the Chaitya Bhūmī, now a major pilgrimage site for Ambedkarite Buddhists.

²³⁵ Keer, 508.
CHAPTER 3
THE BUDDHA AND AMBEDKAR

What I wish to emphasize is that Buddha taught many other things besides Ahimsa. He taught as part of his religion, social freedom, intellectual freedom, economic freedom and political freedom. He taught equality, equality not between man and man only, but between man and woman. It would be difficult to find a religious teacher to compare with Buddha, whose teachings embrace so many aspects of the social life of people, whose doctrines are so modern and with main concern to give salvation to man in his life on earth and not to promise it in heaven after he is dead!


In this chapter I explore the Buddha as Ambedkar found him. I use the term “found” here deliberately. Much of the extant scholarship on Ambedkar’s Buddhism has focused on his construction of a “new” Buddhism and the degree to which that reading is a departure from a “traditional” Buddhism.²³⁶ I suggest that his position as a Dalit, as an American-educated pragmatist, and as an historically-embedded Indian independence figure all color his perspective in such a way that when he looks for the Buddha in source texts, he finds the Buddha that his social position allows him to see. By the same process,

²³⁶ In his work Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia, Christopher Queen takes up this issue of authenticity directly. Queen and King, Engaged Buddhism, 45–67; Likewise, Sallie King, in her book Socially Engaged Buddhism concludes that Buddhism as Ambedkar presents it suffers from “problems” that weaken its ability to speak to suffering from a traditional, psycho-spiritually oriented perspective. King, Socially Engaged Buddhism, 161; In his introduction to Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India, Johannes Beltz asks explicitly, “can such a radical reinterpretation be accommodated by any Buddhist tradition? Does Ambedkar quit what one could label as Buddhist philosophy? And, even more categorically, is Ambedkar a Buddhist at all?” Jondhale and Beltz, Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India, 8.
when Thoreau translated the “The White Lotus of the Good Law”\(^{237}\) into English from Eugene Brunoff’s famous French translation of the *Lotus Sūtra*, his social and historical position directed him to find a contemplative Buddha who points out the way of meditation. Because Thoreau wanted to read the “White Lotus of the Good Law” as supporting his larger project of infusing contemplative, meditation-based orientalist wisdom into the Euro-American religious mind, he finds those elements in the *Lotus Sūtra* and imprints those motivations onto the Buddha. He very much views the *sūtra* as, in his words, “the excellent way which conducts to the state of Buddha” and as Fields points out, “the way, that is, of contemplation and practice.”\(^{238}\) Similarly, when Ambedkar turns to Buddhist sources, he sees a very different but equally conditioned Buddha, an anti-Brahminic figure who is chiefly concerned with ameliorating the suffering of people living under the burden of a degraded and corrupt legalistic religious structure. In Ambedkar’s work *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India*, where he rails against the practice of *yajña*,\(^{239}\) the authority of the Vedas, as well as the caste system, he makes his case that the Buddha’s religion is fundamentally a revolution against Brahminism by turning to various Buddhist *suttas* where he finds the Buddha that

\(^{237}\) The *Lotus Sūtra* first entered the English-speaking world in 1844 in an article written by Henry David Thoreau titled “The Preaching of the Buddha.” The article appeared in the journal *Dial*, founded and edited by Ralph Waldo Emerson, and included a section of the *Lotus Sūtra* or, as Thoreau translated the title, the “White Lotus of the Good Law.” It was translated by Thoreau himself from Eugene Burnouf’s then newly completed and now famous French translation. Inspired chiefly by Sir William Jones’ translation of the *Laws of Manu* and the essays in Jones’ *Asiatick Research*, the *Dial*’s vision of the Buddhism of the “White Lotus of the Good Law,” as well as its presentations of the sayings of Confucius and other assorted wisdom from India, was characteristic of Transcendentalist thought on “the Orient” in general.


\(^{239}\) *yajña* – Sanskrit - ritual sacrifice as prescribed in the Vedas.
he is looking for. Where Thoreau and other Euro-American receivers found a contemplative Buddha, Ambedkar finds, in the same source texts, a social reformer. The question about whether or to what degree either Ambedkar or Thoreau consciously knew what they were looking for when they found their respective Buddhas is perhaps an open one insofar as any social and historical embeddedness is available to reflexive interrogation at any time.

Ambedkar’s initial exposure to the Buddha was occasioned by his chance meeting with Marāthī author and social reformer K.A. Kelsukar, who after taking a liking to the high school-aged Ambedkar, gifted him a copy of his new book, *The Life of Gautama Buddha*. Ambedkar would later cite this influence from Kelsukar as a formative influence in his later movement toward Buddhist conversion. In the originally unpublished preface to *The Buddha and His Dhamma* Ambedkar recounts turning away from the stories of the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyana* as told to him by his father in his youth and toward Buddhism. He states,

> I told my father that I did not like any of the figures in [the] Mahabharata. I said ‘I do not like Bhishma and Drona, nor Krishna. [...] Equal dislike I have for Rama. Examine his conduct in the Sarupnakha [Shurpanakha] episode [and] in the Vali Sugriva episode, and his [...] behaviour towards Sita.’ My father was silent, and made no reply. He knew that there was a revolt. This is how I turned to the Buddha, with the help of the book given to me by Dada Kelsukar. It was not with an empty mind that I went to the Buddha at that early age. I had a background, and in reading the Buddhist Lore I could always compare and contrast. This is the origin of my interest in the Buddha and His Dhamma.

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Ambedkar’s reading on Buddhism was broad. Christopher Queen notes that Ambedkar’s personal library held nearly all of the early Western classics of Buddhist studies including but not limited to Arnold’s *Light of Asia*, the forty volumes of Max Müller’s *Sacred Books of the East*, a complete set of Rhys David’s Pāli Text Society translation series, and bound volumes of the journal of *The Maha Bodhi Society*.²⁴³ He notes that among the European and North American authors, which make up the bulk of his collection, are Beal, Glasenapp, Oldenberg, Pratt, Stcherbatsky, Humphries, and Conze. Also included are non-Western authors including Suzuki, Murti, G.B. Gokhale and Lakshmi Narasu.²⁴⁴ This picture of the Buddha through these sources was augmented through his exposure to European and American Transcendentalists, Buddhologists and philologists, was one that was heavily inflected by modernity. As noted by scholars such as Richard King, Thomas Tweed, Rick Fields and others, the initial English language reception of Buddhism was marked by perennialist and Transcendentalist concerns for the spiritual reanimation of a perceived bankrupt Protestant Christianity and by orientalist interests driven largely by the need to administer vast colonial enterprises in Asia.²⁴⁵ Ambedkar’s sources reflect this early Anglo reception of the Buddhist tradition and can be heard in the presentation of the Buddha found in his writing.


²⁴⁴ Ibid.

Despite lingering questions around his fealty to the received traditional Buddhism familiar to Western readers, Ambedkar relies quite heavily on canonical source material in his presentation of the life of the Buddha. In particular, his account presents a narrative that hews rather closely to those presented primarily in Āśvaghoṣa’s *Buddhacarita*, the various fragments of the life story found in the *Nikāya* and *Vinaya* literature, and the Sarvāstivādin biographical text *Lalitavistara*. Ambedkar notes that the *Buddhacarita* is particularly important to his work in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, as he states in his preface, “I would like to make it clear that I claim no originality for the book. It is a compilation and assembly plant. The material has been gathered from various books. I would particularly like to mention Āśvaghoṣa’s *Buddhavita (Buddhacarita)*, whose

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246 *Buddhacarita* is an early Sanskrit chronological life story of the Buddha composed in the first or second centuries by the poet-philosopher Āśvaghoṣa. It is of great importance in the Buddhist tradition because it represents an early narrative composed by a Brahmin-convert in Sanskrit. It is written in the style of kāvya, or high Sanskrit poetic verse. As such it contains flowery and ornate descriptions of the life of the Buddha. For more on Āśvaghoṣa’s *Buddhacarita* see Olivelle’s introduction in Āśvaghoṣa and Patrick Olivelle, *Life of the Buddha*, 1st ed, The Clay Sanskrit Library 33 (New York: New York University Press : JJC Foundation, 2008).

*Lalitavistara*. lit. “Extensive Play,” As Lopez and Buswell note of the sūtra, “in Sanskrit [it] is a relatively late treatment of the Buddha’s life, in mixed prose and verse, probably dating from the third or fourth century CE. The work treats the current Buddha’s last lifetime, from his time waiting in the Tuṣita heaven to take his final rebirth to the ‘first turning of the wheel of the dharma’... The frame of the Buddha’s life story is enhanced with exuberantly told tales of his thaumaturgic abilities and his numinous essence. For example, the infant Buddha, after emerging from his mother’s right side, takes seven steps and then gives an extended discourse to Ānanda, predicting that there will be fools who will not believe the miracles surrounding his birth and will reject the *Lalitavistara*, and as a consequence, will be reborn in the Avīci hell. Some scholars have suggested the text’s supernal portrayal of the Buddha may have influenced the development of the Mahāyāna conception of the multiple bodies of a buddha...The work is attributed to the Sarvāstivāda school, but it has been extensively reworked along Mahāyāna lines (including allusions to such emblematic Mahāyāna terms as Tathāgatagarbha), suggesting that it went through continued, even radical, embellishment after its initial composition.” Robert E. Buswell and Donald S. Lopez, eds., *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 454.

*Nikāya* and *Vinaya* literature – Sections of the life story of the Buddha are found in various early suttas. Ambedkar relies on suttas found in all five of the Nikāyas (Dīgha Nikāya, Majjhima Nikāya, Anguttara Nikāya, Samyutta Nikāya, and the Khuddaka Nikāya), as well as the Māhavagga and Cullavagga from the Vinaya Pitaka. See Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*; Adele Fiske and Christoph Emmrich, “The Use of Buddhist Scripture in B.R.Ambedkar’s The Buddha and His Dhamma,” in *Reconstructing the World : B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, 97 – 119.
poetry no one can excel. In the narrative of certain events I have even borrowed his language.” As noted in the introduction, parts of Ambedkar’s narrative are also indebted to the work of another Mahārāṣtrian Buddhist convert of the twentieth century, Dharmanand Kosambi. Kosambi’s influence can be heard in various places in Ambedkar’s work on the Buddha, but most significantly in his section on the Buddha’s decision to leave home, which will be explored in more detail below.

Ambedkar’s narration of the Buddha’s life is motivated by one overarching main concern, which when settled, can provide the ground the construction of the rest of his approach to the buddhadharma, that is why did the Buddha take parivrāja? Ambedkar must resolve an apparent dilemma in the life story of the Buddha. How could a man who, for Ambedkar, is undoubtedly motivated by alleviating the suffering of others and for whom the establishment of a just social order is paramount, renounce the world and enter the wilderness as a sādhu? Ambedkar sees this as the principal “problem” related to understanding who the Buddha was and settling it is critical to his project. In his words, he sees the Buddha’s decision to take parivrāja as the “main event in the life of the Buddha.” As noted in the introduction, in the Buddhacarita, the Buddha takes parivrāja because he sees the four “sights,” namely an old person, a sick person, a dead

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248 parivrāja - from Sanskrit - “wandering mendicant.”


250 Ibid.
body and a renunciate. Ambedkar flatly rejects this explanation. In his introduction to

*The Buddha and His Dhamma* he states in his characteristically rational and direct style,

> The answer is absurd on the face of it. The Buddha took Parivraja at the age of twenty-nine. If he took Parivraja as a result of these three sights, how is it he did not see these three sights earlier? These are common events occurring by hundreds, and the Buddha could not have failed to come across them earlier. It is impossible to accept the traditional explanation that this was the first time he saw them. The explanation is not plausible and does not appeal to reason. But if this is not the answer to the question, what is the real answer?

For Ambedkar, this answer is impossible because old age, sickness, and death are unavoidable. He holds that no socially conscious human could simply abandon their relationships in search of personal spiritual liberation. Ambedkar’s Buddha wants to change the world, not renounce it. It is perhaps more than coincidence that Ambedkar only refers to “three sights” here. Where most accounts of the Siddhārtha’s motivation for leaving the palace refer to the “four sights” (aging, sickness, death, and a mendicant), Ambedkar only states, “he saw a dead person, a sick person and an old person…” In Aśvaghoṣa’s *Buddhacarita*, these first three “sights” appear together in Canto III while the medicant is not seen until Canto V while in the *Lalita Vistara* all four are presented together in Chapter 14, Dreams. It certainly serves Ambedkar’s end to remove the *sannyāsin* as the model figure for Siddhārtha’s parivraja here because, as we will see in chapter five below, Ambedkar’s conceptualization of renunciation differs significantly from that of the wandering sādhu tradition.

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253 Ibid, xxix.
Inspired by Kosambi’s Marathi play *Bodhisatta*, Ambedkar offers a very different scenario to explain Siddhārta’s decision to leave his community. Instead of being motivated by a psychospiritual angst, Siddhārtha leaves the palace because his commitment to the principles of non-violence and his desire to spare his kinsmen from suffering force him to. In Ambedkar’s telling, Siddhārtha must marshal his exceptional diplomatic skills in the Sakya Sangh, the assembly of leaders in his community, and he must test his commitment to democratic principles in a political confrontation that defines the course of his life thereafter. When the Sakya Sangh decide that they must wage war on their neighbors, the Koliyas, Siddhārtha strongly objects. In front of the assembly, he appeals to their sense of kinship with their neighbors and despite his status as a Kṣatriya for whom duty demands his participation in battle, he argues that it is against their long-term interests to wage war as it will destroy relationships and plant the seeds for further violence. He implores his fellow Sakyas to consider the ways in which they may also be at fault for the escalation toward violence. Finally, he proposes and outlines an arbitration process to settle the dispute peacefully.

Siddhārtha’s argument for action without regard to caste is central in this section of the narrative and is presented as an oblique reference to dharmic action as presented in the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Siddhārtha pleads with the Sangh to refrain from violence with their

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255 The following narrative is a summarization of the events described in Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, 15–31.

256 Siddhārtha states, “I therefore propose that we elect two men from us, and the Koliyas should be asked to elect two from them, and the four should elect a fifth person, and these should settle the dispute.” Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, 18.
neighbors stating, “I beg the Sangh… not to accept the resolution. The Sakyas and the Koliyas are close relations. It is unwise that they should destroy each other.” He is met with an orthodox reply that echoes the Gīta’s prescription for caste determined karmic duty:

The Senapati encountered the plea urged by Siddharth Gautama. He stressed that in war the Kshatriyas cannot make a distinction between relations and strangers. They must fight even against brothers for the sake of their kingdom. Performing sacrifices is the duty of the Brahmins, fighting is the duty of the Kshatriyas, trading is the duty of the Vaishyas, and service is the duty of the Shudras. There is merit in each class performing its duty. Such is the injunction of our Shastras.257

In this narrative though, Siddhārtha, not the Senapati, has the final word. He states, “Dharma, as I understand it, consists in recognizing that enmity does not disappear by enmity. It can be conquered by love only.”258 Where the Gīta depicts Arjuna as karmically bound by his caste duty to slay his kin, Siddhārtha is depicted here as stepping out of the Vedic fold and redefining dharma pragmatically to allow for compassion in the moment. Siddhārtha here becomes his model for the pragmatic reevaluation of the “religion of rules” that he implored his Jat-Pak-Todal Mandal audience to undertake in the Annihilation of Caste speech written two decades earlier.

While Siddhārtha earns some support amongst the assembly with these arguments, their faction remains a minority and they are ultimately outvoted. Despite this loss and because of his commitment to the principle of ahiṃsa (nonviolence) Siddhārtha refuses to join with the majority’s decision to wage war. His continued objections to the war as well as his refusal to participate personally in the fighting place him in jeopardy of

257 Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, 18.

258 Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, 18.
retribution from the majority. The assembly members remind him of the vows he took to defend the community and to abide by the voting process when he was admitted to the Sangh and they demand that he concede or be punished according to the law. When he still objects and refuses to join, they offer him three choices. He can, first, join the armed forces and participate in the war, second, be hanged or exiled according to the law, or third, allow the members of his family to be condemned to a social boycott and confiscation of property. He chooses the second option and, to save face for the community, he offers to exile himself as a parivrājika. The Sangh accepts his proposal on the condition that he can obtain the permission of his family to become a wandering mendicant. It is his commitment to the principle of ahmisa, his respect for democratic processes, and his concern for the well-being of his family and his community that drives him to abandon his home and seek the life of the renunciate, not an internal sense of disquiet about birth, aging, sickness and death as found in traditional accounts of the narrative.

In the following I explore in more depth the framing that Ambedkar provides around the Buddha in order to make sense of his decision to take parivrāja in this way, as a conscientious objector. Specifically, I suggest that it is useful to approach Ambedkar’s Buddha as an ordinary human, as a thoroughly rational actor, and as a social reformer. Taken together, these three features paint a picture of a Siddhārtha whose decision to take parivrāja lines up with Ambedkar’s pragmatist-inspired meliorative project and whose rejection of the palace life can inspire Ambedkar’s intended audience to follow in the Buddha’s footsteps. I suggest that Ambedkar’s followers today continue to relate to the Buddha and indeed to Ambedkar himself through this frame. In the following analysis I
draw from *The Buddha and Karl Marx, Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India* and *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. Books one and two of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, “How a Bodhisatta became the Buddha” and “Campaign of Conversion,” which deal with the birth and early life of the Buddha through his post-enlightenment activity, contain the bulk of Ambedkar’s treatment of the life story of the Buddha. I will also draw on the article “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion,” which he wrote for the *Maha Bodhi Society* in 1950, as it demonstrates some of Ambedkar’s thoughts on the Buddha at the beginning of his Buddhist period in the early 1950’s.

**The Buddha as an Ordinary Human**

*As Way-Finder*

In the article “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion” written six years before his conversion, Ambedkar presents a picture of the Buddha in stark contrast to the central figures of other world religions, as he understands them.\(^\text{259}\) In it he makes the case for a new life story of the Buddha; one that can simply and concisely present a narrative of the Buddha that people can understand and use to orient their own lives. He likens this project to the creation of “Buddhist gospel” that “everyone can carry with him and read wherever he goes,” such as can be found in other religions.\(^\text{260}\) Indeed he identifies the absence of such a gospel in Buddhism as a demerit when Buddhism is compared to other


\(^{260}\) Ibid.
religious traditions. He suggests that first and foremost such a gospel should present a “short life of the Buddha.” In Ambedkar’s view, the Buddha is a special case, different from figures like Jesus Christ, the Prophet Mohammad and Lord Kṛṣṇa. This Buddha “was born as a son of man and was content to remain a common man and preached his gospel as a common man. He never claimed any supernatural origin or supernatural powers nor did he perform miracles to prove his supernatural powers.”

He identifies two key distinctions in his view that place the “Buddha on the one hand and the rest on the other.”

The first of these exceptional features is what Ambedkar calls his “self-abnegation,” which he uses to point not to the Buddha’s practice of renunciation or asceticism but instead to his refusal of title or special status. He identifies the Buddha as uniquely concerned with playing the role of *margadatta*, or “way finder,” in his translation, where the founding figures of the other major religions are presented as *mokshadatta*, or “givers of salvation.” This theme of the Buddha as merely a guide on the path to liberation versus the actual vehicle for salvation himself is something that Ambedkar returns to repeatedly, including in his work *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, where, in the context of citing the *Majjhima Nikāya*, he states, “All prophets have promised salvation. The Buddha is the one teacher who did not make any such promise. He made a sharp distinction between *moksha data* and a *marga data*, one who gives

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261 Ibid.


263 From Hindi - *mārg* meaning “path” or “way” and *dātā* meaning “giver” or “donor.”

264 From Hindi - *moksha* meaning “salvation” or “freedom” and *dātā* meaning “giver” or “donor.”
salvation and one who only shows the way. He was only a marga data. Salvation must be sought by each for himself by his own effort.”

He notes in “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion,” “The Buddha made a clear distinction between a Margadata and a Mokshadata. Jesus, Mohammad and Krishna claimed for themselves the Mokshadata. The Buddha was satisfied with playing the role of a Margadata.” In The Buddha and Karl Marx, he states, “what the Buddha wanted was that each man should be morally so trained that he may himself become a sentinel for the kingdom of righteousness.”

In presenting this view of the Buddha as simply a “way finder” in contradistinction to other major founding figures, Ambedkar is particularly critical of Kṛṣṇa, who he notes is not just a god for his followers, he is “parameswhar,” or “supreme god,” god of all gods. He states,

Krishna went a step beyond both Jesus and Mohammed. He refused to be satisfied with merely being the Son of the God or being the messenger of God; he was not content even with being the last messenger of God. He was not even satisfied with calling himself a God. He claimed that he was ‘Parameswhar’ or as his followers describe him ‘Devadhideva,’ God of Gods. Buddha never arrogated to himself any such status.

Kṛṣṇa represents the proponent of the “gospel of inequality” for Ambedkar. His championing of chaturvarṇa in the Bhagavad Gītā is emblematic of the commitment of Hindus to caste and evidence of the force with which the Buddha attacked the gospel of inequality. He suggests that the central place and persuasive nature of the Gītā in Hindu


267 From the Sanskrit, parama - “highest” or “absolute” and iśvara – “god” or “lord”

theology suggests that the use of Kṛṣṇa in the justification of caste perhaps saved the Vedas as an authoritative source for the Hindu practice of caste.

The attack of the Buddha on the infallibility of the Vedas had destroyed the validity of this old foundation of Chaturvarna. It is quite natural that Hinduism which was not prepared to give up Chaturvarna and which it regarded as its very soul should attempt to find for it a better foundation which the Bhagvat Geeta proposes to do. But how good is this new justification given by Krishna in the Bhagvat Geeta? To most Hindus it appears to be quite convincing, so convincing that they believe it to be irrefutable. Even to many non-Hindus it appears to be very plausible, very enticing. If the Chaturvarna had depended only on the authority of the Vedas I am sure it would have long disappeared. 269

He is keen to highlight for his readers that it is, in part, this process of apotheosis that gives rise to an abandonment of morality in favor of empty religiosity. It is the human Buddha, focused on the suffering that arises from inequality and pushes back against a mokshadata god figure in Lord Kṛṣṇa, that Ambedkar wants to center in his new gospel.

The second point that marks the Buddha as special amongst his founding-figure peers for Ambedkar is that the Buddha made no claim about his teachings being the word of God or infallible. In his words, “He wished, His270 religion not to be encumbered with the dead wood of the past. He wanted that it should remain evergreen and serviceable at all times.”271 He again turns his sights particularly on Kṛṣṇa to make his case,

Both Jesus and Mohammed claimed that what they taught was the word of God and as a word of God what they taught was infallible and beyond

269 Ibid.

270 Ambedkar’s practice of using capitalization for the Buddha’s pronouns complicates, perhaps intentionally, his commitment to regard the Buddha as a human. While the content of his text presents the Buddha as a human, this stylistic choice with regard to the Buddha’s pronouns, juxtaposed here to Mohammad, Kṛṣṇa, and Jesus, also perhaps conveys something of his commitment to religion as a necessary component of moral meaning making in modernity. As the champion and exemplar for this new humanist religion, the Buddha is both human and extraordinary for Ambedkar.

question. Krishna was according to his own assumption a God of Gods and therefore what he taught being a word of God, uttered by God, they were original and final and the question of infallibility did not even arise. The Buddha claimed no such infallibility for what he taught...That is why He gave liberty to his followers to chip and chop as the necessities of the case required. No other religious teacher has shown such courage. They were afraid of permitting repair. As the liberty to repair may be used to demolish the structure they had reared Buddha had no such fear.  

This explicit emphasis on the Buddha as human can be seen in the section “What the Buddha Taught” in The Buddha and his Dhamma, where he notes “[the Buddha] claimed that he was one of the many human beings and his message to the people was the message of man.” Of the Buddha’s message he states, “it was based on universal human experience of life in the world.” Ambedkar enshrined this principle for his followers when he and his followers vowed to regard the Buddha as a human at the dikshabhoomi on October 14, 1956. In particular, of the twenty-two vows he added to the traditional three refugees and five precepts, vows four, five and nine point to the humanity of the Buddha. Vows four and five state, respectively, “I do not believe in the incarnation of God” and “I do not and shall not believe that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu (Viṣṇu). I believe this to be sheer madness and false propaganda.” Vow nine simply states, “I believe in the equality of man.” Ambedkar is pushing back

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272 Ibid, 98.

273 Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, The Buddha and His Dhamma, 121.

274 Ibid.

against the common Hindu view that dates back to at least as far as the Purāṇas\textsuperscript{276} that the Buddha was not a mere human but actually an emanation of the Hindu god Viṣṇu, who took human form in order to lure away and tame dangerous beings and spirits.\textsuperscript{277} While scholars of religion and theology may argue with Ambedkar’s reading of these founding figures as presented here, it is worth noting that Ambedkar’s intention is making the case for conversion to Buddhism for millions of Dalits in India, where movements for conversion to both Christianity and Islam were, and continue to be, present.

**By Omission of Miracles**

Ambedkar also highlights the humanity of the Buddha through his treatment of miraculous events found in the canonical material. Where Aśvaghōṣa’s flowing and ornate Sanskrit kāvya, or high poetry, is replete with magical incidents and the Buddha is given supernatural qualities, Ambedkar takes a more humanist, Jeffersonian approach.\textsuperscript{278} Where Aśvaghōṣa has the Buddha born from the side of his mother, fully conscious and walking, with deities rejoicing, the earth trembling, diseases suddenly becoming cured,

\textsuperscript{276} Wendy Doniger identifies the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* as the earliest textual source for the idea of Buddha-as-Viṣṇu. See Wendy Doniger, *The Origins of Evil in Hindu Mythology*, 1. paperback print (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of Calif. Pr, 1980), 200–201.


\textsuperscript{278} Thomas Jefferson’s work *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* or *The Jefferson Bible* is a re-telling of the Jesus story with the miraculous edited out completely. Jefferson literally cut out, with a razor, those sections of the gospels that presented Jesus’ divinity and those that depicted him performing miracles and reassembled the text to present a humanized Jesus figure. See, Thomas Jefferson et al., *The Jefferson Bible: The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, Extracted Textually from the Gospels in Greek, Latin, French & English, Smithsonian ed (Washington D.C: Smithsonian Books, 2011).
and drums sounding in the skies, Ambedkar depicts Mahāmāyā, the Buddha’s mother, simply reaching up for a branch of a tree in the Lumbini grove and giving birth. “While holding the branch of the sal tree she was delivered of a son in the standing position. The child was born in the year 563 BC on the Vaishakha Paurnima day.” Ambedkar’s description appears downright clinical next to Aśvaghoṣa’s kāvya.

In another example, Fiske and Emmrich note that the “miraculous marks of the Buddha are mentioned with restraint” in Ambedkar’s retelling. From Ambedkar’s text, “Asita… beheld that it [the body of the baby Buddha] was endowed with the thirty-two marks of a great man and adorned with the eighty minor marks…” Aśvaghoṣa gives us “then the great seer wonderingly beheld the prince, the soles of his feet marked with a wheel, the fingers and toes joined by a web, the circle of hair growing between his eyebrows and the testicles withdrawn like an elephant’s.” Similarly when Ambedkar portrays the Buddha seeking his five friends after his enlightenment, Fiske and Emmrich note that the “Buddha’s clairvoyant ‘power of divine clear wisdom’ is replaced by a simple asking for information”. Ambedkar merely states, “he asked for their whereabouts.”


281 Fiske and Emmrich, “The Use of Scriptures in B.R. Ambedkar’s The Buddha and His Dhamma,” 104.

282 Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, The Buddha and His Dhamma, 5.

283 Aśvaghoṣa and Johnston, Aśvaghoṣaṣ Buddhacarita, 13.


Likewise, the Buddha’s decision to finally leave his home in Aśvaghoṣa’s account is preceded by his vision of a mendicant (the fourth “sight”) who magically, “unseen of other men,” appears before him and tells him,

“I dwell wherever I happen to be, at the root of a tree or in a deserted temple, on a hill or in the forest, and I wander without ties or expectations in search of the highest good, accepting any alms I may receive.” After saying this, he flew up into the sky before the princes very eyes; for he was a heavenly being who in that form had seen other Buddhas and had encountered him rouse his attention.286

This experience is what drives the final nail for Siddhārtha. Immediately following this event he goes to his father to declare his intention to leave home and the wheels begin to turn for his flight from the palace.287 As Ambedkar presents him though, Siddhārtha never encounters a wandering mendicant at all, magical or otherwise. Instead, it is division in the Sakya sangh, which is remarkably like a parliamentary body, that drives him to take parivrāja.

Unsurprisingly, the Buddha’s final enlightenment in the Buddhacarita is presented with much pomp and ornament. Aśvaghoṣa tells us that “the earth swayed like a woman drunken with wine, the quarters shone bright with the clouds of Siddhas, and mighty drums resounded in the sky. Pleasant soft breezes blew softly, the heavens rained moisture from a cloudless sky, and from the trees dropped flowers and fruit out of due season as if to do him honor.”288 The Lalitavistara Sūtra dedicates chapters to the


287 Ibid, 61-80; Canto V, “Flight”

description of the miraculous events that occur at the moment of the Buddha’s enlightenment,

All the worlds throughout the ten directions shook in six ways: they quivered, trembled, and quaked, wobbled, rocked, and swayed; they vibrated, shuddered, and reeled, rattled, shook, and convulsed; they clattered, rattled, and clanged, boomed, thundered, and roared. All the buddhas offered congratulations to the Thus-Gone One for reaching perfect and complete awakening and conferred upon him religious gifts. With these religious gifts, this trichiliocosm became covered with a jewel parasol, and from that jewel parasol issued forth a network of light rays, which illuminated the immeasurable and innumerable worlds throughout the ten directions.289

Ambedkar’s account on the other hand conveys a much more human Buddha, stating simply that “light dawned upon him.” 290 He then proceeds immediately to the content of this human Buddha’s realization, stating, “he realized that there were two problems. The first problem was that there was suffering in the world, and the second problem was how to remove this suffering and make mankind happy. So in the end, after meditation for four weeks, darkness was dispelled, light arose, ignorance was dispelled and knowledge arose. He saw a new way.”291

**Commitment to Family**

When the Buddha decides to take *parivṛāja* in the traditional literature, his family is presented as an impediment to his decision to seek enlightenment. To dissuade his son

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291 Ibid.
from renouncing the spiritual path and encourage him to ascend to the throne in his due time, his father continually attempts to block his path to the forest. He orchestrates a life of pleasure and has Siddhārtha married to create the conditions for his pursuit of a this-worldly life.292 When Siddhārtha’s son is born, Aśvaghoṣa tells us that it was Siddhārtha’s father who rejoiced, not Siddhārtha, because it meant Siddhārtha would be further embedded in the life of a householder. His father reasons that now Siddhārtha will feel compelled to stay in the palace due to his feelings of attachment for his own son. Siddhārtha’s reaction to the birth of his own son is not actually mentioned. Of Siddhārtha’s father, the Buddhacarita states,

Then the ruler of the earth, in possession of the son he had longed for and fully assured of the prosperity of his race, rejoiced at the birth of a grandson as much as he had rejoiced at the birth of a son. Overjoyed at the thought that his son would feel paternal affection, just as he himself felt it, he attended to the various ceremonies at the proper season, as if in his love for his son he were on the point of mounting to Paradise.293

But when the time comes for Siddhārtha to leave for the forest, he himself displays no such paternal affection. He tells Chandaka, his charioteer who is trying to dissuade him from taking the renunciate path,

Should affection lead me not to quit my kinsfolk of myself, still death would part us one from the other against our wills. My mother bore me in her womb with pains and great longing. Her efforts have been fruitless. What am I to her now or she to me? As birds collect on the roosting tree


“But, as the king of the Śakyas had heard from the great seer, Asita, that the prince’s future goal would be the supreme beatitude, he feared lest he should go to the forests and therefore he turned him to sensual pleasures.

Then from a family possessed of long-standing good conduct he summoned for him the goddess of Fortune in the shape of a maiden, Yaśodharā by name, of widespread renown, virtuous and endowed with beauty, modest and gentle bearing.”

293 Aśvaghoṣa and Johnston, 29.
and then go their separate ways again, so inevitably the union of beings ends in their parting.  

If Siddhārtha feels compelled to stay for the wellbeing of his son or out of a sense of obligation to his family, it is not evident in his response to his charioteer, Chandaka.

It is at this point in his narrative that Ambedkar first departs sharply from the canonical material. While he relies heavily on the *Buddhacarita* and *Nikāya* sources for the stories of Siddhārtha’s birth, Asita’s prophecy, the description and failure of the harem to seduce Prince Siddhārtha, the leaving of home and dismissal of his servant, Siddhārtha’s exchange with King Bimbisara and Siddhārtha’s training with his preliminary teachers, the sections on Siddharth’s decision to take *parivrāja*, which are Ambedkar’s primary focus, are sourced to Dharmanand Kosambi’s 1940 Marāṭhī language book *Bhagwan Buddh* and 1949 play *Bodhisatta*.  

In Ambedkar’s telling, Siddhārtha does not display a dispassionate attitude toward his family. In fact, his attitude toward his family can safely be described as supremely concerned. His explicit motivation for offering to exile himself and take on the life of a wandering mendicant is so that his family will be spared pain and suffering. He pleads with the assembly,

> Please do not punish my family. Do not put them in distress by subjecting them to a social boycott. Do not make them destitute by confiscating their land, which is their only means of livelihood. They are innocent. I am the guilty person. Let me alone suffer for my wrong. Sentence me to death or exile, whichever you like.  

294 Ibid, 87.  


Ambedkar presents Siddhārtha’s parents as overcome with grief but eventually, through discussion and debate with him, they come to see that his position is noble and his desire to avoid war with the neighboring Koliyas requires him to take their leave.297 They reluctantly grant their blessing for his decision to take parivrāja. Siddhārtha’s wife, Yeshodara,298 displays even more understanding and encouragement for him,

‘Your decision is the right decision. You have my consent and my support. I too would have taken Parivrajka with you. If I do not it is because I have Rahula to look after. I wish it had not come to this. But we must be bold and brave and face the situation. Do not be anxious about your parents and your son. I will look after them as long as there is life in me. All I wish is that now that you are becoming a Parivrajaka, leaving behind all who are near and dear to you, you will find a new way of life which will result in the happiness of mankind.’ Siddharth Gautama was impressed. He realized as never before what a brave, courageous, and noble-minded woman Yeshodhara was, and how fortunate he was in having her as his wife, and how fate had put them asunder. He asked her to bring Rahula. He cast his fatherly look on him and left.

This presentation of Siddhārtha in counsel with his family about his decision to leave while showing deep concern with the effects of his parivrāja on them is in stark contrast to the Siddhārtha of the Buddhacarita and Lalitavistara Sūtra where Siddhārtha is depicted as single-pointedly focused on renunciation as a path to liberation from the psychospiritual suffering associated with birth, aging, sickness and death. While in the traditional accounts he does indeed ask for his father’s blessings to leave, but when he does not receive it, he leaves anyway.299 Ambedkar’s Siddhārtha is presented as a human who is embedded and engaged in a network of relationships with his kin and who is


298 This is Ambedkar’s spelling of Yaśodharā.

identifying his spiritual path as arising from his commitment to and maintenance of those social relationships.

We can see from the above selected examples that while the Buddha that Ambedkar is presenting to his readers has been extracted from the rich and ornate kāvya of the textual sources it has also been wrung out to dry. He becomes someone with whom his intended audience, 20th century Dalits seeking empowerment in particular, can connect.

Rationality

Fundamental to Ambedkar’s reading of the Buddha’s life story is the idea that the Buddha was led by reason. While, as noted above, the miraculous events around the Buddha were excised in service of presenting a humanized figure, the Buddha himself is also presented as particularly driven by reason and logic. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar states of the Buddha, “If there is anything which could be said with confidence it is: He [the Buddha] was nothing if not rational, if not logical. Anything therefore which is rational and logical, other things being equal, may be taken to be the word of the Buddha.”300 While at first glance this practice of analyzing the purported word of the Buddha through reason may seem like a modern litmus test introduced by Ambedkar, he is most likely referencing a section of the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* where

the Buddha instructs his students to do just that. He makes reference to this *sutta* in the

“The Buddha and the Future of his Religion” in this same context where he states,

In the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* He told Ananda that His religion was based on reason and experience and that his followers should not accept his teaching as correct and binding merely because they emanated from Him. Being based on reason and experience they were free to modify or even to abandon any of his teachings if it was found that at a given time and in given circumstances they do not apply.\(^{301}\)

The *sutta* presents the Buddha giving his final instructions to his students and in it he warns his students about not simply taking the words of another monk at face value, but instead examining those words thoroughly. It is this Buddha, whose appeals to the rationality of the modern reader that Ambedkar pulls out of the sources. The Buddha in the *sutta* states,

…monks, you should neither approve nor disapprove his words. Then, without approving or disapproving, his words and expressions should be carefully noted and compared with the Suttas and reviewed in the light of the discipline. If they, on such comparison and review, are found not to conform to the Suttas or the discipline, the conclusion must be: "Assuredly this is not the word of the Buddha, it has been wrongly understood by this monk", and the matter is to be rejected. But where on such comparison and review they are found to conform to the Suttas or the discipline, the conclusion must be: "Assuredly this is the word of the Buddha, it has been rightly understood by this monk…\(^{302}\)

This emphasis on the Buddha’s rationality is particularly on display in Ambedkar’s work *The Buddha and Karl Marx* where he opens with an acknowledgment that on its face, a comparison between Marx and the Buddha may at first seem absurd. He states,

Marx and Buddha are divided by 2381 years. Buddha was born in 563 BC and Karl Marx in AD 1818. Karl Marx is supposed to be the architect of a new ideology-policy – a new Economic system. The Buddha on the other

\(^{301}\) Ambedkar, “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion.”

hand is believed to be no more than the founder of a religion which has no relation to politics or economics. The heading of this essay ‘Buddha or Karl Marx’ which suggests either a comparison or a contrast between two personalities divided by such a lengthy span of time and occupied with different fields of thought is sure to sound odd. The Marxists may easily laugh at it and may ridicule the very idea of treating and the Buddha on the same level. Marx so modern and Buddha so ancient!\(^{303}\)

That Ambedkar even sees the Buddha as an appropriate and fruitful conversation partner with Marx already points to his conceptualization of the Buddha as a rational, philosophical figure. He takes up the question of Marx as an interlocutor with the Buddha again in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* where he asks explicitly, “Can the Buddha answer Karl Marx?”\(^{304}\) Ambedkar answers that question in the affirmative and notes that the Buddha and Karl Marx are in “complete agreement” on the proper function of philosophy, which is to “reconstruct the world and not to waste its time in explaining the origin of the world.”\(^{305}\) Here Ambedkar turns again to the *Dīgha Nikāya* for support where the Buddha is presented as displaying a marked disinterest in metaphysical speculation. When presented with direct questions from the brahmin Poṭṭhapāda regarding his position on the origins and nature of the cosmos, the nature of the soul, the reality of past and future lives etc., the Buddha famously takes no position. The Buddha reframes the questions posed to him by Poṭṭhapāda to show that he is interested in engaging in philosophy only in so far as the practice serves to uproot suffering. When asked by Poṭṭhapāda, “why has the Lord not declared such things?,” the Buddha replies Poṭṭhapāda, that is not conducive to the purpose, not conducive to Dhamma, not the way to embark on the holy life; it does not lead to


\(^{304}\) Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, 122, Book III, Part II, Section I.

Ambedkar cites this *sutta* at length in *The Buddha and Karl Marx* in an effort to demonstrate that the Buddha is practical, pragmatic even, and views speculative philosophy as, at best, a distraction and at worst a tool that religionists use to placate subordinate classes. The rightful focus of religion in general and Buddhism in particular for Ambedkar is on the removal of social oppression and a moral reorientation toward the welfare of others. With this frame, Ambedkar’s Buddha is presented as a rational actor whose focus is firmly on the amelioration of suffering for people in this life, not in some future life or in some idealized afterlife. As Rathore notes of Ambedkar’s presentation of the Buddha, “The notion of achieving salvation in this life on earth rather than being promised salivation in heaven after death comes right out of Marx’s critique of religion.”

The Buddha on display in *The Buddha and Karl Marx* is a Buddha who views philosophy as properly pragmatic in orientation as shown in the *sutta* materials, who sees private property as a source of misery and exploitation as shown in the eightfold path, and who advocates for the abolition of private property as necessary for the removal of suffering as evidenced in the *vinaya* directives for a simple life in the early monastic *saṅgha*. Ambedkar sees the Buddha as fundamentally on the same page as

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Marx in terms of the diagnosis of the problem; the exploitation of man over man and the 
function of private property in that dynamic. They differ in the application of means to 
the end. Where Ambedkar presents Marx as advocating violence and a dictatorship of the 
proletariat, Ambedkar presents the Buddha as advancing a “new gospel,” a new 
technology for a therapeutic, inner revolution that can more effectively affect permanent 
change in the social order. He states of the Buddha in contradistinction from Marx,

The Buddha’s method was different. His method was to change the mind 
of man: to alter his disposition: so that whatever a man does, he does it 
voluntarily without the use of force or compulsion. His main means to 
alter the disposition of men was his Dhamma and the constant preaching 
of his Dhamma. The Buddha’s way was not to force people to do what 
they did not like to do although it was good for them. His way was to alter 
the disposition of men so that they would do voluntarily what they would 
not otherwise do.  

Ambedkar again makes the case that Buddhism is a special case, as in “The 
Buddha and the Future of His Religion” where he argues the Buddha is unique amongst 
the founders of world religions. Here though he argues that Buddhism is special in that it 
isn’t deserving of the Marxist criticism of religion, to which in most cases Ambedkar is 
deeply sympathetic, as his criticism of Hinduism owes much to Marx. Marx’s critique of 
religion and the work it can do in his effort to characterize Hinduism as a religion of 
rules, one that can stupefy both caste Hindus and outcastes alike, is evident throughout 
his writing. As Aakash Singh Rathore has noted, “As far as religion necessarily being an 
opiate of the people, Dr. Ambedkar would concede that certain religions, such as 
Brahminic Hinduism, may be properly termed opiate or even worse, but Buddhism was
categorically not among them.”310 He views the Buddha’s religion, a religion of principles, as a corrective for the violence deployed in service of establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat and suggests that if the communists were to see the Buddha clearly, they would recognize the advantages that his rational project has for their ends. He states,

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 Sangh was concerned without dictatorship. It may be that it was a communism on a very small scale but it was communism without dictatorship, a miracle which Lenin failed to do.311

If Ambedkar’s rational Buddha was a communist economically, he was a democrat politically as he states explicitly in The Buddha and Karl Marx, “the Buddha was born a democrat and died a democrat.”312 His depiction of Siddhārtha’s decision to take parivṛṣṭa is presented as a rational process of deliberation that is ultimately bound by his need to abide by the procedural rules of the Sangh. In the end, despite his eloquent and persuasive arguments, he is outvoted and must exile himself. On the one hand, Ambedkar presents the Buddha in a modernist light in a parliamentary context but on the other he is showing the ways in which the majority in this parliament, in this case those advocating war, are driven by outdated, caste-based thinking. They argue, based on the logic of the Gītā, that it is the Kṣatriya’s inborn duty to fight and that Siddhārtha is out of


312 Ambedkar, 185.
line for suggesting otherwise. Siddhārtha, despite his passionate arguments for progress and reason, is driven from the Sangh by casteism.

Another striking example of Ambedkar’s emphasis on the Buddha’s rationality can be found in the section “The Buddha and His Predecessors” in The Buddha and His Dhamma. It follows the Buddha’s enlightenment and in it, the Buddha is searching for a philosophical system that fits with his realization. In these sections, Ambedkar’s aim seems to be to introduce his readers to the major philosophical systems underpinning the Hinduism from which they are converting and, in the process, to note the ways in which the Buddha uses reason to dispatch competing theories and to demonstrate the superiority of his view. After a careful consideration of the flaws of each system, Ambedkar notes that the Buddha’s new religion was of his “own creation.”

First, the Buddha is presented as being partial toward Kapila’s Sāṅkhya system because Kapila’s teachings appealed to the rational nature of the Buddha. He states,

[Kapila’s teachings] appeared to the Buddha to be based on logic and facts. But he did not accept everything which Kapila taught. Only three things did the Buddha accept from Kapila. He accepted that reality must rest on proof. Thinking must be based on rationalism. He accepted that there were no logical or factual basis for the presumption that God exists or that he created the universe. He accepted that there was Dukha [sic] (suffering) in the world. The rest of Kapila’s teachings he just bypassed as being irrelevant for his purpose.

Of the other philosophical systems, Ambedkar is less generous. Of the “Vedic Rishis” he notes that,

the Buddha did not regard the Vedic Sages as worthy of reverence…in the Mantras he saw nothing that was morally elevating. In his view the Mantras were as worthless as a

313 Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, The Buddha and His Dhamma, 63.
314 Ibid, 55.
Their theories were mere speculations, not based on logic nor on facts. Their contributions of philosophy create no social values. He therefore rejected the philosophy of the Vedic Rishis as useless.\footnote{Ibid, 53.}

The Brāhmaṇas are equally dispatched as, like the Vedas, for their central role in the Śruti tradition. Ambedkar presents the Buddha as being “repulsed” by the theories of ritual sacrifice and chaturvarna as in the Brāhmaṇas. He notes that the idea of Vedic infallibility violated the Buddha’s sense of rationality, stating

He repudiated their thesis that the Vedas are infallible and their authority could never be questioned. In his opinion, nothing was infallible and nothing could be final. Everything must be open to reexamination and reconsideration, whenever grounds for reexamination and reconsideration arise… Infallibility of the Vedas meant complete denial of freedom of thought.\footnote{Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, \textit{The Buddha and His Dhamma}, 57.}

Likewise, the Buddha rejects the Upaniṣads due to their central thesis, as Ambedkar presents it: “The main thesis of the Upanishads was that \textit{Brahmana} was a reality and that \textit{Atmana} was the same as Brahmana.”\footnote{Ibid, 59.} For Ambedkar, this sort of speculation about whether \textit{brāhmaṇa} is reality and whether there is an ātmana whose nature is \textit{brāhmaṇa} is just the sort of speculative philosophy that the Buddha had no time for as noted above. He states, “the Buddha could find no proof in support of the thesis of the Upanishads.”\footnote{Ibid.} He notes that in response to Yājñavalkya’s famous epistemic stance regarding \textit{brāhman} and ātman, “\textit{neti, neti},”\footnote{neti, neti – Sanskrit – “not this, not that” from “\textit{na iti, na iti},”} the Buddhas asks “how can anything be a
reality about which no one knows anything?” Ambedkar goes on, “he had, therefore, no difficulty in rejecting the Upanishadic thesis as being based on pure imagination.”

In the “What the Buddha Taught” section of The Buddha and His Dhamma the Buddha similarly considers and rejects the tenets of the Vedānta system. He again identifies the project of the union of ātman and brāhman at the center of Vedānta as a fatal logical flaw. Ambedkar states,

The Buddha had no respect for this doctrine. He regarded it as based on false premises and producing nothing of value, and therefore not worth having. This he made clear in his discussion with two Brahmins, Bharadvaj, and Vasettha. The Buddha argued that there must be proof before one can accept a thing to be a reality. There are two modes of proof, perception and inference. The Buddha asked, ‘Has anybody perceived Brahma; have you seen Brahma; have you spoken to Brahma; have you smelt Brahma?’ Vasettha said, ‘No.’ ‘The other mode of proof is inadequate to prove the existence of Brahma.’ ‘From what is Brahma the inference of?’ asked the Buddha. There again was no answer.

In so far as Ambedkar is producing a new pragmatist-inspired social religion, the above depiction of the Buddha is notably much closer to Dewey’s pragmatism than to James’. Where James seeks to leave open the possibility for an epistemic leap, where a believer must meet a possible truth half-way, Dewey, like Ambedkar and the Buddha as Ambedkar finds him, displays a marked disinterest in the transcendent and in “philosophies of escape.”


322 On “philosophies of escape,” Dewey states, “Life as it is actually lived has been treated as a preparation for something outside of it and after it. It has been thought lawless, without meaning and value, except as it was taken to testify to a reality beyond itself. The creeds that have prevailed have been founded upon the supposed necessity of escape from the confusion and uncertainties of experience. Life has been thought to be evil and hopeless unless it could be shown to bear within itself the assured promise of a higher reality. Philosophies of escape have also been philosophies of compensation for the ills and sufferings of the
Social Reformer

Ambedkar states plainly in Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India that “the first Social Reformer and the greatest of them all is Gautama Buddha. Any history of Social Reform must begin with him and no history of Social Reform in India will be complete which omits to take account of his great achievements.” In some sense, though the depiction of the Buddha as a human figure and a person of reason as described above are critical to the understanding of the Buddha as Ambedkar found him, his Buddha is principally a social reformer.

In Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India, Ambedkar describes at length the “degraded condition of the Aryan civilization at the time when the Buddha started on the mission of his life.” He states, “the Aryan Community of his time was steeped in the worst kind of debauchery: social, religious and spiritual.” He turns to both Hindu texts such as the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyana and to Buddhist suttas, such as the Brahmajāla Sutta to make the case that the Aryan people at the time practiced casteism and engaged in morally reprehensible activity, such as incest, bestiality, rape, 


323 Ambedkar, “Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India,” 165.

324 Ibid, 166.

325 Ambedkar uses the many long lists of wrong conduct in the Brahmajāla Sutta, found in the Dīgha Nikāya, as evidence of the degraded moral practice of Brahmins in the Buddha’s time. See Walshe, The Long Discourses of the Buddha, 69–90.
and murder and were just generally morally bankrupt. He suggests that the reason for this moral bankruptcy was the domination of society at large by a corrupted Brahmin caste. He argues that through the exercise of their role as religious leaders, which Ambedkar identifies as the practice of mere religiosity centered around materially-oriented, self-interested ritual sacrifice, the Brahmins managed to hold power at the expense of the wellbeing of other castes. Of the religious tradition of the Brahmins at the time of the Buddha, he states,

The hymns are prayers addressed by the Aryans to their gods. What do they ask for in these prayers? Do they ask to be kept away from temptation? Do they ask for deliverance from evil? Do they ask for forgiveness of sins? Most of the hymns are in praise of Indra. They praise him for having brought destruction to the enemies of the Aryans. They praise him because he killed all the pregnant wives of Krishna, an Asura. They praise him because he destroyed hundreds of villages of the Asuras. They praise him because he killed lakhs of Dasyus. The Aryans pray to Indra to carry on greater destruction among the Anaryas in the hope that they may secure to themselves the food supplies of the Anaryas and the wealth of the Anaryas. Far from being spiritual and elevating, the hymns of the Rig-Veda are saturated with wicked thoughts and wicked purposes.

He states, “Many of the great sacrifices were for the gaining of good things on earth. That one should sacrifice without the ulterior motive of gain is unknown. Brahmanic India knew no thank offering. Ordinarily the gain is represented as a compensating gift from the divinity, whom they sacrifice. The sacrifice began with the recitation: ‘He offers the sacrifice to the god with this text: ‘Do thou give to me (and) I (will) give to thee; do thou bestow on me (and) I (will) bestow on thee’…The ceremony of the sacrifice was awe-inspiring. Every word was pregnant with consequences and even the pronunciation of the word or accent was fateful. There are indications, however, that the priest themselves understood that much in the ceremonial was pure hocus-pocus, and not of much importance as it was made out to be.” B.R. Ambedkar, *Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India*, https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/attach/amb/Volume_03.pdf, 173;

And “Every sacrifice meant fee to the priest. As to fee, the rules were precise and their propounders were unblushing. The priest performed the sacrifice for the fee alone, and it must consist of valuable garments, kine, horses or gold—when each was to be given was carefully stated. The priests had built up a great complex of forms, where at every turn fees were demanded. The whole expense, falling on one individual for whose benefit the sacrifice was performed, must have been enormous. How costly the whole thing became can be seen from the fact that in one place the fee for the sacrifice is mentioned as one thousand cows. For this greed, which went so far that he proclaimed that he who gives a thousand cows obtains all things of heaven. The priest had a good precedent to cite, for, the gods of heaven, in all tales told of them, ever demand a reward from each other when they help their neighbour gods. If the Gods seek rewards, the priest has a right to do the same.” Ibid, 174.
The Aryan religion never concerned itself with what is called a righteous life…Such was the state of the Aryan Society when Buddha was born.\footnote{Ibid, 176.}

In contrast, Ambedkar presents the Buddha as bringing much needed reform to this degraded scene. In fact, this is perhaps the central theme undergirding Ambedkar’s Buddha. The Buddha for Ambedkar is first and foremost a figure who exposes the empty religiosity of Brahminical religion and establishes in its place a religion of concern for others. This thread can be seen throughout all of his work on the Buddha. Ambedkar views the Buddha as a revolutionary who saw clearly the problem of exploitation and caste and sought to create a new order; one based on a religion of equality and justice. As he states in “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion,”

\ldots the official gospel of Hinduism is inequality. The doctrine of Chaturvarna is the concrete embodiment of this gospel of inequality. On the other hand Buddha stood for equality. He was the greatest opponent of Chaturvarna. He not only preached against it, fought against it, but did everything to uproot it. According to Hinduism neither a Shudra nor a woman could become a teacher of religion nor could they take Sannyasa and reach God. Buddha on the other hand admitted Shudras to the Bhikkhu Sangha. He also admitted women to become Bhikkhunis. Why did he do so? Few people seem to realise the importance of this step. The answer is that Buddha wanted to take concrete steps to destroy the gospel of inequality.\footnote{B.R. Ambedkar, “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion,” in Maha Bodhi Society Journal, May 1950, Dr. Babasaheb Writings and Speeches, vol 17.2 ed. Vasant Moon, 97-108, https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/attach/amb/Volume_17_02.pdf.}

In Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India, Ambedkar’s Buddha demonstrates his concern with social reform primarily by rejecting the authority of the Vedas, by denouncing the practice of yajña, or the ritual sacrifice made by the Brahmins, and by rejecting caste. Ambedkar turns to the Kutadanta Sutta in the Dīgha Nikāya and to
a story from the *Jātaka* tales, to make his case that the Buddha rejected the Vedas and *yajña*. In both stories the Buddha refuses to participate in animal sacrifices and instead demonstrates the superiority of “sacrifices” involved with mental cultivation and beneficence and he advocates and teaches the five precepts as a better path.\(^{329}\) Ambedkar turns to the *Ambaṭṭha Sutta* for support in his attack against caste, where the Buddha is confronted by a particularly arrogant Brahmin, Ambaṭṭha, who wishes to humiliate the Buddha and demonstrate the superiority of the Brahmin caste over others. Instead, the Buddha demonstrates the superiority of his teachings on equality and, in the end, converts Ambaṭṭha’s teacher.\(^{330}\) In *Revolution and Counter-Revolution* Ambedkar simply presents these canonical references without much commentary. With regards to the *Ambaṭṭha Sutta*, he states,

> In the matter of his opposition to Caste, Buddha practised what he preached. He did what the Aryan Society refused to do. In the Aryan Society the Shudra or low caste man could never become a Brahman. But Buddha not only preached against caste but admitted the Shudra and the low caste to the rank of a Bhikku who held the same rank in Buddhism as the Brahman did in Brahmanism. \(^{331}\)

As noted above, in the traditional accounts of the Buddha’s life story, Siddhārtha’s deliberation around the taking of *parivrāja* was largely an internal psychospiritual struggle related to his growing realization of the inescapability of birth, aging, sickness, and death. In short, he is moved by a recognition of the human condition and a deep intuitive inclination toward *dharma* drives his steadfast aspiration to leave his


home. This inclination is often presented as having been inculcated in him over the
course of his many previous lives as a bodhisattva on the path to Buddhahood. The
Jātaka tales famously recount many of the meritorious deeds of the Buddha-to-be
bodhisattva and the predetermined quality of his enlightenment colors much of the
traditional narrative as found in the Buddhacarita and Lalitavistara. Ambedkar, in his
decision to drop the “three sights” (aging, sickness, and death, and, implicitly the fourth
sight, that of the mendicant) altogether because it strains reason that a twenty-nine year
old prince would have been ignorant of them, instead presents the story of the plowing
festival as the beginnings of his dissatisfaction with things as they are. While this story
also appears in traditional accounts, Ambedkar’s story deviates in some critical ways that
serve to orient the Buddha toward social reform instead of personal liberation. In the
traditional accounts the Buddha is portrayed as seated under a tree at the plowing
festival and is moved by witnessing the suffering of the animals, in particular the insects and
worms turned up and killed by the plows produces a sense of compassion in him that in
turn pushes him into a meditation experience. The Buddhacarita states,

Desire for the forest as well as the excellence of the land led him on to the
more distant jungle-land, and he saw the soil being ploughed, with its
surface broken with the tracks of the furrows like waves of water. When
he saw the ground in this state, with the young grass torn up and scattered
by the ploughs and littered with dead worms, insects and other creatures,
he mourned deeply as at the slaughter of his own kindred.\\ \footnotemark[332]

Siddhārtha in Aśvaghoṣa’s account sees and is moved by the suffering of the bugs. He
does notice the “ploughmen with their bodies discoloured by wind, dust and sun’s rays”
but this is mentioned in the same breath as the “labored breathing of the oxen.”

\footnotetext[332]{Aśvaghoṣa and Johnston, Aśvaghoṣa Buddhacarita, 62, Canto V, Verses 4, 5.}
Ambedkar, on the other hand, uses Siddhārtha’s experience at the ploughing festival as an opportunity for the young Siddhārtha to become conscious of class and caste through his witnessing of the exploitation of “man by man” on his father’s own farm. He is also moved by witnessing the suffering and killing of innocent animals by his friends during their hunting expeditions but where Aśvaghoṣa prioritizes the role of suffering of non-human beings in the stirring of Siddhārtha’s compassion, Ambedkar sees Siddhārtha primarily moved by human exploitation of other humans. He states,

> Once he went to his father’s farm with some of his friends and saw the laborers ploughing the land, raising bunds, cutting trees, and doing other such jobs dressed in scanty clothes under a hot burning sun. He was greatly moved by the sight. He said to his friends, can it be right that one man should exploit another? How can it be right that the laborer should toil and the master should live on the fruits of his labour? His friends did not know what to say. For they believed in the old philosophy of life that the worker was born to serve, and that in serving his master he was only fulfilling his destiny.  

Echoes of the Marxist influence on Ambedkar’s thought can be heard in Siddhārtha’s disquiet about labor exploitation above. Further on in this section the young Siddhārtha takes on caste in his defense against his step-mother’s concerns regarding his compassionate attitude. She reminds him “you are a Kshatriya and fighting is your duty…” to which he replies, ‘but, mother, why should a Kshatriya fight?’ When she replied with the Brahminical “because it is his duty” Siddhārtha rejects it, saying, “tell me, how can it be the duty of man to kill man?” and “if all Kshatriyas loved one another, would they not be able to protect their kingdom without resort to killing?” His step-mother has no satisfactory reply to this logical attack on caste-bound duty.


334 Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, 8–9.
When Siddhārtha does enter into meditation in Ambedkar’s account in this section it is other-oriented, as a practice to induce a compassionate attitude. Ambedkar states, “Siddharth believed that meditation on right subjects led to development of the spirit of universal love.” In echoes of the teachings on the four immeasurables, he presents Siddhārtha instructing his friends to fix their minds on thoughts like “may I be happy, may my relations be happy, may all living animals be happy.” Siddhārtha’s primary aim in practicing meditation is in “overcoming the dividing lines” between friends and enemies. Aśvaghoṣa’s Buddha is presented as entering into a “trance of calmness” that yields “ecstasy and bliss” and allows him to “rightly perceive the world” in regard to birth, old age, sickness, and death.335 No mention is made of the cultivation of a compassionate attitude towards others.

Perhaps the most significant example of the Buddha’s commitment of social reform in The Buddha and His Dhamma comes from his decision to take parivrāja. Ambedkar’s Buddha is so totally committed to the principle of ahīṃsa that he is willing to give up everything he has, all his connections to his family, his status in the community, his belongings etc., to maintain it. He is unconvinced by the appeals made by his family and fellow Sangh members to his Kṣatriya caste duties in their efforts to persuade him to join the war. His main argument against them was “Dharma as I understand it, consists in recognizing that enmity does not disappear by enmity. It can be conquered by love only.”336

335 Aśvaghoṣa and Johnston, Aśvaghoṣa’s Buddhacarita, 63-64, Canto V, Verses 9-12.

The Buddha’s enlightenment is also decidedly colored by his commitment to social reform. In place of the lengthy and poetic presentation found in the *Buddhacarita*, which centers on the contents of the Buddha’s meditation state and the four noble truths, the realization of the Buddha in Ambedkar’s account is socially-oriented and is framed in a socially-oriented awakening. He states, “He realized that there were two problems. The first problem was that there was suffering in the world, and the second problem was how to remove this suffering and make mankind happy.”

**Conclusion**

At times, Ambedkar’s presentation of the Buddha has been called into question on the grounds that it deviates too sharply from the canonical material. In a paper in defense of Ambedkarite Buddhism against some of these attacks, Pradeep Gokhale notes that

> What Ambedkar was doing goes very well with this tradition where philosophical innovations were introduced by authors mostly under the garb of discovering the hidden meanings of the original texts. In fact the Indian philosophical systems have developed through commentaries in this way. Buddhism is not an exception to this general trend. The propounders of various schools of Buddhism have rearranged and reinterpreted Buddha’s statements and derived the basic tenets of their own schools from them.

The Buddha that Ambedkar finds in the traditional source material is a humanized, rational, social reformer, but he does indeed find him in the sources. In this sense, his Buddha is not so different from other contemporary, modernist iterations of the Buddha’s

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338 Gokhale “Dr. Ambedkar’s Reconstruction of Buddhism.”
life story. Noted Vietnamese monk and engaged Buddhist proponent Thich Nhat Hanh also presents a humanized Buddha, drawn from textual sources, in his well-known biography *Old Path, White Cloud*.\(^{339}\) Another more recent example is Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche’s narration of a humanized, rational Siddhārtha in his book *Rebel Buddha*, aimed at a younger, Western-educated audience.\(^{340}\) As noted by scholars such as Donald Lopez and Richard King, the humanization and rationalization of the Buddha is part of a larger trend in the Western reception and construction of Buddhism. That Ambedkar’s time at Columbia University and the influence of his mentor John Dewey colored his reading of the Buddha is not surprising.

It is perhaps Ambedkar’s emphasis on reading the Buddha as a social reformer that have marked his presentation as unique and often gives scholars in Euro-America pause. Trained as they are to find a rational and humanized Buddha but also a contemplative and psychospiritual one, the encounter with Ambedkar’s fierce social reformer, in dialogue with Marx no less, can appear, as even he himself notes, as quite a shock. Given his position as a leader of Dalits in India, Ambedkar’s emphasis is on a Buddha who is indigenous and as such, not a cultural import. This Buddha can speak directly to the source of injustice that produces misery for the millions of Dalits, namely caste, and offer an alternative that is only a small shift in allegiance. In fact this conversion is so close to home that he suggests that it is actually a returning of sorts, where the mantle of the original śramana movement can be reclaimed and the work of establishing a universal religion based on care, started by the Buddha, can be resumed.


He suggests they follow the example of the first and greatest social reformer in all of India, whose attacks on caste, Brahminism, and inequality are as fresh and applicable today as they were 2500 years ago, and who can speak directly to their experience of injustice at the hands of Brahminical religionists. Ambedkar offers Dalits a new-old religion. New in the sense that it is a “religion of principles” informed by Deweyan pragmatism and consonant with the values of liberty, equality and fraternity but old in the sense that it is Siddhārtha Gautama who is pointing out the way forward. It is noteworthy that Ambedkar seeks to place the Buddha at the center of a new social movement.

Perhaps anticipating Habermas’ call for a reappraisal of the role of religion in liberal secular societies by fifty years, Ambedkar, although deeply influenced by Marx, identifies religion as a critical component in moral meaning making.%

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CHAPTER 4
AMBEDKAR’S DHAMMA

Religion, it is said, is personal, and one must keep it to oneself. One must not let it play its part in public life. Contrary to this, Dhamma is social. It is fundamentally and essentially so. Dhamma is righteousness, which means right relations between man and man in all spheres of life. From this it is evident that one man, if he is alone, does not need Dhamma. But when there are two men living in relation to each other, they must find a place for Dhamma whether they like it or not. Neither can escape it. In other words, Society cannot do without Dhamma. B.R. Ambedkar – *The Buddha and His Dhamma*.

When Ambedkar looks at the Buddhist scriptural tradition, he sees a set of disjointed and disparate teachings. This applies to his view of the traditional accounts of the life story of the Buddha, as explored in the previous chapter, as well as to his approach to the *buddhadharma*, or the teachings of the Buddha. In 1950 in the *Journal of the Maha Bodhi Society*, he called for a reorganization of the basic teachings of the Buddha and he expressed an urgent need to re-present the *dharma* in a neat and succinct way in order that they can be more easily applied in a modern context. He states,

The Buddhist literature is a vast literature. It is impossible to expect a person who wants to know the essence of Buddhism to wade through the sea of literature. The greatest advantage which the other religions have over Buddhism is that each has a gospel which every one can carry with him and read wherever he goes. It is a handy thing. Buddhism suffers for not having a handy gospel.

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Eventually, Ambedkar’s seminal Buddhist work, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, was produced to fill this perceived void, though it was not finished at the time of his death and was assembled from his unedited manuscript and from his notes. This fact, that it was unedited and unpublished before his death has certainly and unfortunately contributed to some of the chronic controversy surrounding its reception from the larger Buddhist world. As Sangharakshita and Christopher Queen have noted, Ambedkar’s works on Buddhism, composed shortly before his death and most unfinished, are plagued by a lack of annotation, leaving scholars to reconstruct and at times speculate as to what his sources were for some of his claims. Ambedkar’s early work is much more thoroughly and assiduously referenced. The work of annotating *The Buddha and His Dhamma* has since been undertaken by Adele Fiske and Christoph Emmrich in their chapter “The Use of Buddhist Scripture in B.R. Ambedkar’s *The Buddha and His Dhamma,*” and more recently by Aakash Singh Rathore and Ajay Verma in their critical edition of the text.

The criteria that Ambedkar set out for this new gospel were that it should first, present a succinct re-telling of the life story of the Buddha, second, it should contain selections from the *Dhammapada*, or sayings of the Buddha from the Pāli cannon, third, it should include dialogues of the Buddha and, finally, it should also contain liturgical guides for life cycle ceremonies, such as marriages, births, and funeral rites as well as ordination vows. His emphasis was on simplicity and portability, going so far as to say

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that the verse of the text should be capable of producing “an hypnotic effect.” He wanted it centered around a captivating story and instead of being an ethical exposition or a dry narrative, he wanted the language to “live” for the reader so that it could be embodied.\textsuperscript{347}

In Ambedkar’s approach to the production of this text, on display is his thoroughly liminal position with regards to tradition and modernity. On the one hand, the quote above regarding the need for a new “gospel” of Buddhism marks him as a modernist. His understanding of religion as a natural category and his conceptualization of the world religions as objects that individuals with agency can evaluate and decide to choose for themselves are thoroughly modern in orientation. Indeed, Gandhi’s criticism of Ambedkar’s decision to convert, that he was changing his religion like he was changing “a house or a cloak,” reflects this modernist outlook and Gandhi’s disdain for it contrasts his own traditionalist view with that of Ambedkar.\textsuperscript{348} Additionally, Ambedkar’s emphasis on the written word and an individual’s ability to access that literature for themselves, as well as the sense that the “essence” of the Buddhist tradition, or of any religious tradition, is to be found in sacred texts and the literary tradition are also hallmarks of a modernist, comparative approach to religion. Indeed, in the contrast between Ambedkar and Gandhi, Ambedkar’s modernist leanings, influenced by Deweyan pragmatism, are a central part of his popular reception.\textsuperscript{349} One need only look at the

\textsuperscript{347} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{348} Sangharkshita, \textit{Ambedkar and Buddhism}, 48.

representation of the two figures across India to note this contrast in emphasis. Ambedkar is almost always depicted wearing a Western style suit and holding the constitution of India, while Gandhi, by contrast is depicted in his khadi dhoti; Ambedkar the Law Minister and scholar and Gandhi, the Mahatma. At the same time, Ambedkar’s approach to this gospel-creation project, modernist though it may seem at first glance, also demonstrates Ambedkar’s desire for his Buddhism to be a lived-religion; one that is not stuck in the literary tradition and that can speak directly to people’s experience. He is aware of the ways in which a project stuck in the literary tradition will fail to speak directly to the people and will consequently fail to take root. His need to speak to his audience and his unflagging commitment to the larger meliorative project that his gospel will serve keep his focus from becoming overly scholastic. In this regard he states,

Every great religion has been built on faith. But faith cannot be assimilated if presented in the form of creeds and abstract dogmas. It needs something on which the imagination can fasten—some myth or epic or gospel—what is called in journalism, a story. The Dhammapada is not fastened around a story. It seeks to build faith on abstract dogmas.\(^\text{350}\)

In some ways, while Gandhi’s call for a return to the simple, village-centered agrarian society is often presented as a traditional-religious Indian approach to the problem of modernity in early post-colonial South Asia in contrast to Ambedkar’s apparent embrace of modernity, Ambedkar’s pragmatic approach may be more rooted in tradition than is initially apparent. His approach is one that acknowledges the power of religion in particular as a primary site of moral meaning-making while also accepting and exploiting the reality and ubiquity of modernity. He is perhaps more flexible and, ironically, is

perhaps no more modernist in his approach than Gandhi in so far as Gandhi’s Hinduism is heavily inflected by the modern reception of a spiritualized, Vedanta export product, co-created as it was between the West and the Bengali Renaissance.\footnote{351} Ambedkar appears to have been able to glean from liberalism those things necessary for the construction of a new democratic nation state but when it came to religion, he was unconvinced of the need for secularization in the liberal European sense. Likewise, his criticism of Marxism is that it fails to appreciate the depth of moral meaning-making that religion can provide and that the construction of a new civic religion can serve the Marxist end with more efficient and effective means.\footnote{352} While he used modern methods to fabricate a new religion based on Enlightenment principles, he is unwilling to jettison religion completely as so many progressive and liberal thinkers of his time did. Instead, he turns to tradition in the form of embodied religion in order to advance the aims of a people for whom “tradition,” in the form of Hinduism, has often been synonymous with domination.

\footnote{351}{Here I follow Richard King (and Bhabha by extension), who notes, “Homi Bhabha’s notion of ‘hybridity,’ for instance, reflects an awareness that colonial discourses are deeply ambivalent and not susceptible to the constraints of a single, monolithic agenda. For Bhabha the master discourse is appropriated by the native whose agency reflects cultural resistance in the form of mimicry and parody of colonial authority…Orientalist presuppositions about the ‘spirituality’ of India, etc., were used by reformers such as Rammohun Roy, Dayānanda Sawaswati, Swāmi Vivekānanda and Mohandas K. Gandhi in the development of an anticolonial Hindu nationalism.” See King, Orientalism and Religion, 86.}

\footnote{352}{From “Buddha or Karl Marx:” “One has to choose between government by force and government by moral disposition...What the Buddha wanted was that each man should be morally so trained that he may himself become a sentinel for the kingdom of righteousness.” Ambedkar, The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar, 186.}

“The Buddha’s method was different. His method was to change the mind of man: to alter his disposition: so that whatever man does, he does it voluntarily without the use of force or compulsion. His man means to alter the disposition of men was his Dhamma and the constant preaching of his Dhamma. The Buddha’s way was not to force people to do what they did not like to do although it was good for them. His way was to alter the disposition of men so they would do voluntarily what they would not otherwise do…” Ambedkar, 189.
In the creation of his Buddhist gospel, part of Ambedkar’s intention in this editing project was, in addition to cleaning up the teachings, to make the buddhadharma consonant with basic principles of liberal modernity, as epitomized in the French revolution’s tripartite motto, “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité.” It is Ambedkar’s deeply held belief that morality must be grounded in religion for it to effectively function as a basic meaning-making system. He makes this clear in “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion” when outlining the need to replace a morally apathetic Hinduism with Buddhism, whose center is, in his view, morality. He states,

…I maintain…:

(i) That society must have either the sanction of law or the sanction of morality to hold it together. Without either, society is sure to go to pieces. In all societies, law plays a very small part. It is intended to keep the minority within the range of social discipline. The majority is left and has to be left to sustain its social life by the postulates and sanction of morality. Religion in the sense of morality, must therefore, remain the governing principle in every society.

(ii) That religion as defined in the first proposition must be in accord with science. Religion is bound to lose its respect and therefore becomes the subject of ridicule and thereby not merely loses its force as a governing principle of life, but might in course of time disintegrate and lapse, if it is not in accord with science. In other words, religion if it is to function, must be in accord with reason which is merely another name for science.

(iii) That religion as a code of social morality, must also stand together another test. It is not enough for religion to consist of a moral code, but its moral code must recognise the fundamental tenets of liberty, equality and fraternity. Unless a religion recognises these three fundamental principles of social life, religion will be doomed.

(iv) That religion must not sanctify or ennoble poverty. Renunciation of riches by those who have it, may be a blessed state, but poverty can never

353 He states, “Hinduism is a religion which is not founded on morality. Whatever morality Hinduism has it is not an integral part of it. It is not imbeded in religion. It is a separate force which is sustained by social necessities and not by injunction of Hindu religion. The religion of the Buddha is morality. It is imbeded in religion. Buddhist religion is nothing if no morality. It is true that in Buddhism there is no God. In place of God there is morality. What God is to other religions morality is to Buddhism.” B.R. Ambedkar, “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion,” in Mahabodhi Society of India Journal, May, 1950, 98; https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/attach/amb/Volume_17_02.pdf
be. To declare poverty to be a blessed state is to pervert religion, to perpetuate vice and crime, to consent to make earth a living hell.\textsuperscript{354}

In the points above, Ambedkar’s commitment to both a more traditionalist stance, where religion is a necessary ground for morality, and a more progressive stance where that religion must be grounded in the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity and must be in accord with science and reason can be clearly heard. When approaching \textit{The Buddha and His and Dhamma}, published six years later, this frame, as quoted above, can be viewed as a blueprint for the larger project of the book. I argue that it should be kept in mind when approaching Ambedkar’s presentation of the \textit{buddhadharma} in general to make sense of his idiosyncratic take on the Buddha’s teachings. Without the above frame, the way in which some of his presentation deviates from more “traditional” presentations of the Buddhist teachings can be shocking. With it, the intention of his project can shed light on just why Ambedkar’s \textit{dhamma} appears so distinctive.

It is also worth noting here that while in many ways Ambedkar’s focus is on uplifting the “depressed classes” in India, his objective in creating this new gospel of Buddhism is not limited to those groups only. His ambition is much larger. As Aakash Singh Rathore and Ajay Verma note,

\begin{quote}
Ambedkar’s work on several projects, such as the Hindu Code Bill, shows that his interests were not in every case reducible exclusively to Dalit interests, but, rather, to contributing to the enlightenment of the Indian people. Indeed, even the liberation of the Dalits was meant as a contribution to humanity as such, and not simply an expression of ‘class interest.’\textsuperscript{355}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{355} Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, \textit{The Buddha and His Dhamma}, xv.
Ambedkar rejects the artificial categories of caste, buttressed as they are by Brahminical religion, and his project can be properly viewed as one aimed at the reorganization of society as a whole around the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Johannes Beltz notes,

To do justice to Ambedkar’s conversion, we have to understand his struggle to eliminate caste in India, to reconstruct society, and to build up a modern, progressive society of justice, equality, and freedom…It was not, as many claim, that he was preoccupied with the removal of untouchability. Though a source of inspiration for Dalit(s), Ambedkar’s importance clearly transcends the Dalit issue – he intended to reconstruct human society. 356

In order to reconstruct human society in this way, Ambedkar’s new religion is aimed as much at uplifting Dalits as it is at removing the scales from the eyes of Brahminical religionists. It is pointed at the transcendence of a “religion of rules” wherever it is found, in favor of a “religion of principles” that is in accord with the equality and justice. He makes this clear in “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion” when he advocates for the adoption of Buddhism by the whole world, stating, “If the new world—which be it realised is very different from the old - must have a religion—and the new world needs religion far more than the old world did—then it can only be the religion of the Buddha.” 357


The Two Problems

In the introduction to *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar identifies two root problems related to the reception of the Buddhist teachings by modern readers. The first problem is associated with the proper place and understanding of the well-known Buddhist teachings on the “four noble truths”. While these teachings are often presented as an early and central teaching of the Buddha, Ambedkar is not so sure. In his introduction, he raises doubts that they were part of the early teachings of the Buddha at all and he suggests that their presentation of suffering as an all-pervasive condition, present from birth to death, amounts to a nihilism that ultimately functions to prevent non-Buddhists from “accepting the gospel of Buddhism.” He states plainly, “the four Aryan Truths make the gospel of the Buddha a gospel of pessimism.” Instead he suggests that perhaps they are “a later accretion by the monks.” This assertion has placed him at odds with many commentators on *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, and has been the source of much hemming and hawing regarding the acceptance of Ambedkarite

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359 Ibid, xxx.

360 Ibid, xxx.

361 Ambedkar states, “The four Aryan truths are a great stumbling block in the way of non-Buddhists accepting the gospel of Buddhism. For the four Aryan Truths deny hope to man. The four Aryan Truths make the gospel of the Buddha a gospel of pessimism. Do they form part of the original gospel, or are they a later accretion by the monks?” Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, xxx.
Buddhism in the larger Buddhist fold. The following section will unpack and analyze Ambedkar’s claims with regard to these Four Aryan Truths and consider what he adds in their place in his reformulation of the Buddha’s initial teachings.

The second main problem Ambedkar identifies, and which will be treated subsequently below, relates to the doctrine of *karma* and the implications it has for the concepts of “soul” and “rebirth.” With a keen eye on his Dalit audience, Ambedkar is particularly concerned with clarifying how the Buddha intended those particular terms to be understood in light of his other teachings on equality and moral action. He states,

In what sense did the Buddha use the words *karma* and *rebirth*? Did he use them in a different sense than the sense in which they were used by the Brahmins of his day? If so, in what sense? Did he use them in the same sense in which the Brahmins used them? If so, is there not a terrible contradiction between the denial of the soul and the affirmation of *karma* and rebirth? This contradiction needs to be resolved.\(^{362}\)

Developing a rational frame for a new understanding of *karma* is of paramount importance to Ambedkar because, culturally, it functions at the level of a first principle in South Asia. Where Weber identified aspects of Calvinist theology as foundational to the ethic of work and individual worth in America, *karma* similarly functions to account for an undergirding ethic in the Brahminical idiom of South Asia.\(^{363}\) From childhood people within the Brahminical fold are taught from birth that their material circumstances were earned by them in their past lives, and as such, cosmic justice demands that one accept it. In this context, one’s future is dependent on accepting the social situation into which one is born. The work one can do, the people one can marry, with whom one can eat, are all

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\(^{362}\) Ibid, xxxi.

deeply inscribed in the Brahminical ethic of karma. Confronting Brahminical thought at this first-principle level is important for Ambedkar because it is at that level that conceptions of individual worth based on caste are grounded. Christopher Queen notes of Ambedkar’s rethinking of karma, “practically, we may understand Ambedkar’s concern that such a metaphysic blames victims of social oppression by viewing their sufferings as punishment for misdeeds in former lives.”

While social scientists such as James Scott have persuasively argued that dominated peoples are often not as hoodwinked by the larger justifying narratives that elites use to maintain their dominance as it may appear on the surface, to at least a certain degree, the maintenance of caste demands that caste-Hindus and Dalits alike subscribe to a basic metaphysic that justifies what in another context, absent that basic metaphysic, would simply be termed oppression. With subscription, karma and the degraded conditions it justifies become simply the natural order of things; the cosmic order of things. By defining one of its core justifying principles, namely karma, in this way, Ambedkar seeks to pull one of the foundational legs out from under the structure of caste. Again, as Christopher Queen has noted, “He recognized that the metaphysics of karma and rebirth intensified self-blame by alleging the sufferer’s misconduct in former lives.”

By including these sections in his introduction to The Buddha and His Dhamma, Ambedkar is both acknowledging the traditional presentation of the core teachings of the

364 Christopher Queen, “Ambedkar’s Dhamma,” in Jondhale and Beltz, Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India, 137.


366 Queen, “Dr. Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation,” 59.
Buddha and warning those readers who are already familiar with those traditional presentations that the content that they will find in the following pages of his work may come as a bit of a shock. He is eager to draw a line between the Buddha’s religion as he finds it in the source texts, focused on principles of justice and equity, and the religion of the Brahminists, who he sees as using many of the same dharmic terms and concepts, like karma and rebirth, to justify, in his view, a morally bankrupt and self-interested religious orientation that is used to dominate and maintain power. His attention is on reclaiming and rehabilitating these concepts to work in service of a project that can function to address class, caste, and gender inequity.

As noted above, much of the deliberation about Ambedkarite Buddhism’s place in the larger Buddhist world revolves around Ambedkar’s reframing of these two key principles and their heterodox or orthodox implications. In Christopher Queen’s treatments of Ambedkarite Buddhism, it is primarily Ambedkar’s reworking of the four noble truths and his presentation of karma that marks it as novel enough to question its place inside the Buddhist fold at all.367 While Sallie King suggests that Ambedkar’s reworking of the four noble truths marks it as one of the “more problematic” attempts of engaged Buddhist leaders at reformation.368 For their part, Rathore and Verma as well as Pradeep Gokhale have weighed in on these apparent deviations from orthodoxy, arguing that when viewed from the perspective of the history of philosophical innovation in Indian Buddhist thought, they are essentially no different than the pioneering work of figures like Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga, Candrakīrti etc. who all broke from their predecessors in

367 Queen and King, Engaged Buddhism, 45–71.

368 King, Socially Engaged Buddhism, 161.
varied and significant ways. In any case, Ambedkar’s novel treatment of these concepts in particular warrants explicit treatment from his receivers.

In what follows, a more detailed exploration of these concepts will hopefully shed light on how Ambedkar deploys these concepts in his own reception of the Buddhist teachings.

The Four Noble Truths

In the simplest sense the four noble truths, perhaps the most well-known of all the teachings of the Buddha, are a set of assertions about reality that form the ground of the larger Buddhist soteriological project as Western receivers have traditionally understood them. These teachings are found across the Pāli canon in various suttas but are perhaps most commonly attributed to the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, which is found in the Samyutta Nikāya. Sanskrit sources of the four truths include biographical literature

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369 Gokhale has argued “… So, even the doctrine like that of four noble truths, which is generally regarded as the core of Buddhism, becomes the subject of critical examination and consequent dialectical negation in Madhyamika philosophy of Nāgārjuna. Śūnyatā is accepted as the framework and other Buddhist doctrines are adjusted in a deconstructed form within this framework. So, one need not be surprised to see Ambedkar questioning the originality and centrality of the doctrine of four noble truths. Only he is doing it in a very different framework, in the framework of secular rationality and sacred morality. So Ambedkar’s restatement and reinterpretation of Buddhism could be methodologically permissible from the point of Indian philosophical tradition in general and Buddhist one in particular.” Pradeep Gokhale, “Universal Consequentialism: A Note on B.R. Ambedkar’s Reconstruction of Buddhism with Special Reference to Religion, Morality, and Spirituality,” in Jondhale and Beltz, Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India, 121–22.


371 The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, or “Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma Sutta,” is found in the Mahāvagga, or Book 5 of the Samyutta Nikāya of the Pāli canon. It begins at the 11th subsection of sutta 56, Saccasamyutta Sutta. See Bodhi, ed., The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A New
such as the *Lalitavistara Sūtra*, as well as in the Aśvaghoṣa’s *Buddhacarita*, for which the section on the four truths exists only in the Tibetan translation, as well as in the *vinaya* literature of the Mahāsaṅghikas, Sarvāstivāda, and Dharmaguptaka traditions.\(^{372}\) In later Mahāyāna literature, they are famously referenced in the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtras*\(^{373}\) and by commentators such as Nāgārjuna in the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*.\(^{374}\)

The presentation of the four truths as found in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* depicts the Buddha returning to the “group of five,” or the companions with whom Siddhārtha practiced asceticism before his discovery of the middle way, after having attained enlightenment. First, he explains to them that the two extremes, the pursuit of sensual pleasure and of the pursuit of the path of asceticism, will not lead to enlightenment. In place of those two paths, he instead presents the Noble Eightfold Path, which represents a middle-way alternative between those two extremes. He states,

*Bhikkhus, these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone forth into homelessness. What two? The pursuit of sensual happiness in sensual pleasures, which is low, vulgar, the way of worldlings, ignoble, unbenevolent; and the pursuit of self-mortification, which is painful, ignoble, unbenevolent. Without veering toward either of these extremes, the Tathāgatha has awakened to the middle way, which gives rise to vision, which gives rise to knowledge, which leads to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna.

And what, bhikkhus, is that middle way awakened to by the Tathāgata, which gives rise to vision… which leads to Nibbāna? It is the Noble Eightfold Path…*\(^{375}\)

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\(^{373}\) The four noble truths are famously negated in the *Heart Sūtra*. See Karl Brunnhölzl, *The Heart Attack Sutra: A New Commentary on the Heart Sutra* (Ithaca, N.Y: Snow Lion Publications, 2012), 141–44.


The Buddha then, in the repetitive and rhythmic style of the *suttas*, enumerates the four truths. He states in summary in the *sutta*, “Bhikkhus, there are these four noble truths. What four? The noble truth of suffering, the noble truth of the origin of suffering, the noble truth of the cessation of suffering, the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering.”\(^{376}\) In the *Lalitavistara Sūtra*, while the reunion of the Buddha with his five former companions is accompanied with more paranormal display, the core presentation of the four truths is remarkably similar.\(^{377}\) In both the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* and the *Lalitavistara Sūtra* presentations, the Buddha presents the truth of suffering in both physical and psychological terms. The *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* states, “birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in brief, the five aggregates subject to clinging are suffering.”\(^{378}\) The presentation of the origin of suffering and the cessation of suffering are decidedly psychological in nature, with the mental state of craving as the primary focus. On the origin of suffering the Buddha states, “it is this craving which leads to renewed existence, accompanied by delight and lust, seeking delight here and there; that is craving for sensual pleasures, craving for existence, craving for extermination.”\(^{379}\) And of the cessation of suffering is

\(^{376}\) Ibid, 1847.

\(^{377}\) Dharmachakra Translation Committee under patronage and supervision of 84000: Translating the Words of the Buddha, “The Play in Full: Lalitavistara.”


\(^{379}\) Ibid, 1844.
rendered thus: “it is the remainderless fading away and cessation of that same craving, the giving up and relinquishing of it, freedom from it, nonreliance on it.” The fourth truth is said to be the Noble Eightfold path, from right view through to right concentration.\textsuperscript{380}

Despite the obvious influence of the four truths in subsequent Buddhist literature for the way in which they ground the soteriological project of both the Theravāda and Mahāyāna traditions is grounded, Ambedkar expresses a marked disquiet with this centrality. He notes in his introduction to the \textit{Buddha and His Dhamma} that the four truths present a significant problem to the project of the creation of a modern Buddhist religion. He states,

The second problem\textsuperscript{381} is created by the four Aryan Truths. Do they form part of the original teachings of the Buddha? This formula cuts at the root of Buddhism. If life is sorrow, and rebirth is sorrow, then there is an end of everything. Neither religion nor philosophy can help a man to achieve happiness in the world. If there is no escape from sorrow, then what can religion do, what can Buddha do, to relieve man from such sorrow which is ever there in birth itself? The Four Aryan Truths are a great stumbling block in the way of non-Buddhists accepting the gospel of Buddhism. For the four Aryan Truths deny hope to man. The four Aryan Truths make the gospel of the Buddha a gospel of pessimism. Do they form part of the original gospel, or are they a later accretion by the monks?\textsuperscript{382}

Ambedkar’s repeated questions about the authenticity of the canonical sources for the four truths suggests that his answer to the question posed above is in the negative. He does not believe they form part of the original teachings of the Buddha and that they are

\textsuperscript{380} Ibid, 1844.

\textsuperscript{381} The first problem was related to the question of why the Buddha took \textit{parivrāja}. See chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{382} Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, \textit{The Buddha and His Dhamma}, xxix–xxx; Echoes of a similar argument made by Thích Nhất Hạnh can be heard here. Nhất Hạnh makes the case that it is not life that is suffering as well; Thích Nhất Hạnh, \textit{The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching: Transforming Suffering into Peace, Joy & Liberation: The Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and Other Basic Buddhist Teachings} (New York: Broadway Books, 1999), chap. 5.
in fact “a later accretion by the monks.” It is worth noting that Ambedkar uses the term “four Aryan Truths” in the above passage, perhaps leaving an implied link to the people to whom these truths apply, instead of to the truths themselves. Ambedkar’s rendering is perhaps closer to a literal translation of the term *catvāri āryasatyāni*, which could literally be rendered “four truths of a noble.”

Christopher Queen’s work to examine Ambedkar’s personal library has revealed a wealth of insight regarding not only what Ambedkar was reading as he wrote *The Buddha and His Dhamma* but also those particular passages and themes, marked with margin notes of various colors, that most inspired him. He seems to have been most influenced by the early European and Indian philological scholars, such as T.W. Rhys Davids, Caroline Rhys Davids, Hermann Oldenberg, James Bissett Pratt, Edward J. Thomas, P. Lakshmi Narasu and others and, as Queen has noted, was particularly keen to note any of the ways in which their scholarship mistrusted the standard narratives that place the four noble truths at the center of the Buddha’s *dharma*.384

Particularly interesting in Ambedkar’s sources is James Pratt’s account of the early Buddhist tradition, found in his 1928 work *The Pilgrimage of Buddhism*, as it is aimed at reorienting scholarship away from textualism in favor a lived-religion approach based on Pratt’s own experience on the Buddhist pilgrimage circuit.385 Pratt, a Jamesian

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383 *Catvāri* – four; *āryasatyāni* is a *samāsa*, or Sanskrit compound: *satyāni* – “truths” and *ārya* can be glossed *āryāya* “for the noble” or *āryasya* “of the noble” (my translation).


385 Pratt states, “I hope the reader will be able to find in these pages: namely, a fairly intimate understanding of Buddhism as it is actually lived to-day. If this is to be done some knowledge of its origin and its history is essential; hence the historical chapters of this volume. But the history of Buddhism one can find much more learnedly presented elsewhere. The thing I have sought chiefly to do is to make Buddhism plausible. It would be possible with sufficient study to write a learned book on Buddhism which
pragmatist and scholar of religious experience and religions of India, seems to have had a particular influence on Ambedkar’s approach to the buddhadharma. In *The Pilgrimage of Buddhism*, Pratt argues that much of the previous scholarship on Buddhism has, through an overemphasis on the four noble truths, misrepresented the Buddhist tradition as being overly pessimistic and that any number of repeatedly occurring sets of teachings could have instead been emphasized by Western receivers, but the four noble truths were particularly attractive due to the influence of Schopenhauer’s philosophy on German Buddhologists and on the early influence of the *Dhammapada* on English readers. He states:

> ...if one takes the teachings of the Buddha as a whole and in the large, noting the actual emphasis of the Nikayas, it becomes very difficult to give the Four Noble Truths the all-dominating position that our Western convention assigns them. The Buddha indeed recognizes sorrow in the world, but he also recognizes joy. And there is certainly no such emphasis upon pessimism as we in the West commonly suppose.  

Pratt turns to both the *Majjhima Nikāya* and the *Dīgha Nikāya* for support, and in particular, like Ambedkar, to the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta*, noting that in the list of the most important teachings presented by the Buddha before his death, the four noble truths are not mentioned in full. Only the final truth, the truth of path, is presented.  

Pratt also, like Ambedkar, presents the Buddha’s teachings as primarily concerned with morality and he characterizes that morality as “rationalistic.” He states, “the central

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should recite the various facts with scholarly exactness yet leave the reader at the end wondering how intelligent spiritual men and women of our day could really be Buddhists. I have sought to avoid this effect and have tried in addition to enable the reader, when he has turned the last page, to understand a little how it feels to be a Buddhist.” (emphases are Pratt’s). James Bissett Pratt, *The Pilgrimage of Buddhism and a Buddhist Pilgrimage* (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1996), vii.

386 Pratt, 18.
theme of the Buddha’s teachings is the moral life”387 and in pointing to the richness of the
Nikāya tradition outside the four noble truths, states, “the Buddha’s moral teaching, as I
view it, is thus more inclusive, more human, more persuasive, than is commonly thought,
and consequently less striking and less original.” In what is perhaps most striking in
terms of Ambedkar’s approach to the four noble truths, Pratt states:

> If we are to find a fundamental principle in the Buddha’s ethical system, we must discover something more directly related to all his moral teachings than are the Four Noble Truths, and something also more truly basal than they. This principle is not difficult to discover. If we examine his directions for the moral life, his praise of the virtues and his denunciations of vice, we shall find that in every case in which he justifies his position (and to do so is a common practice with him) his argument is by appeal to reason and to recognize human values.

And what does Pratt present as the “positive side of the Buddhist ethic?” Again, like Ambedkar, he identifies “wisdom and love” as the “two cardinal virtues of Buddhism.”389

More recent scholarship, such as Carol Anderson’s work in her book *Pain and Its Ending: The Four Noble Truths in the Theravāda Buddhist Canon*, suggests that perhaps Ambedkar (and Pratt for that matter) was not very far off, if at all. Deploying a text-historical methodological approach, Anderson suggests that it is likely that the four noble truths were added to the biographical literature later, subsequent to their composition, as well as to the *sutta* material. In reference to Gregory Schopen’s work in *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks*, Anderson states,

> It is more likely that the four truths are an addition to the biographies of the Buddha and to the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta*. These additions were probably made at some point after the earliest versions but early

387 Pratt, 19.

388 Pratt, 19.

389 Pratt, 36.
enough within the leveling period that Schopen describes to establish the forms in which the four truths appear.\(^{390}\)

Implicit in Ambedkar’s attempts to inject doubt into the provenance of the four truths is his subscription to modernist approaches to the study of religion. His privileging of the literary tradition as a source of authority as well as his appeal to the earliest as authoritative, ring of Christian theology, where authority and historicity are intimately intertwined. At the same time, he was also driven by an acute sense that, as Richard King has noted, “when studying Sanskrit and Pāli texts for the sources of Hindu and Buddhist religious expression we are of course, focusing on the literary expressions of an élite. Neither Sanskrit nor Pāli are vernacular languages, thus they cannot reflect the religious opinions of the non-literate masses in anything other than an indirect manner.”\(^{391}\)

Ambedkar is never naïve about this reality, as his position at the margins of Indian society, indeed his personal experience of being forced to learn Sanskrit independently due to caste prohibitions, render it obvious. For Ambedkar, when reading Buddhist source material, the most germane aspects of the Buddhist teachings are those on

\(^{390}\) Anderson, \textit{Pain and Its Ending}, 17. The Schopen passage that Anderson appears to be referencing here states: “In applying the principle that says, in effect, if all known versions of a text or passage agree, that text or passage must be very old, almost no account has been given to the fact that all the material to which it is applied is very late: the Pāli sources, as we have already seen, cannot be taken back beyond 29 to 17 B.C.E. (the Alu-vihāra redaction), and we cannot know anything definite about their actual contents until the fifth or sixth centuries (the Aṭṭhakathā redaction); probably none of the Chinese sources go back beyond the second century C.E. and most are considerably later; the Sanskrit sources for the early literature-and here we are talking about manuscripts-are, with few exceptions, even later (from the fifth century on); and the Tibetan sources later still (not before the seventh century). The textual critic is therefore comparing texts from uniformly late stages of the literary tradition. Once this is taken fully into account, any agreement between the sources is open to a very different, if not the very opposite interpretation. The cardinal tenet may then have to be framed in the following form: If all known versions of a text or passage agree, that text or passage is probably late; that is, it probably represents the results of the conflation and gradual leveling and harmonization of earlier existing traditions.” Gregory Schopen, \textit{Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected Papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy, and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India} (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1997), 26–27.

\(^{391}\) King, \textit{Orientalism and Religion}, 66.
egalitarianism, justice, and social order, while, for many Western receivers, influenced by the reception history of Buddhism in the West, the most germane aspects are those teachings on philosophy, meditation, and personal liberation. This fact drives Ambedkar to deploy and advocate for an hermeneutic of suspicion in his approach to what gets counted as orthodox Buddhist teachings. In a passage in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* that has received attention from Western commentators like Christopher Queen, he warns his readers,

> These doctrines have also a place in Brahminic religion; consequently, it was easy for the Bhāṇakas[^392] to incorporate the Brahminic tenets into the Buddhist Religion. One has therefore to be very careful in accepting what is said in the Buddhist canonical literature as being the word of the Buddha.[^393]

Ambedkar then goes on to prescribe a three-part test to determine if what one is reading is actually the word of the Buddha. He suggests that first, it must be “rational, if not logical.” Second, he was always interested in “man’s welfare.” And third, he was clear when he was certain about something and when he was not. Ambedkar’s fondness for the *Poṭṭhapāda Sutta*, where a brahmin interlocutor of the Buddha tries to nail down the Buddha’s metaphysical commitments regarding the cosmos, time, origins of the universe etc., and is met with an honest but noncommittal response from the Buddha who states that his dharma is unconcerned with philosophical speculation. Ambedkar references this

[^392]: Ambedkar describes this term: “What the Buddha preached was heard by his audience, which largely consisted of the Bhikkhus. It is the Bhikkhus who reported to the people at large what the Buddha had said on a particular matter. The art of writing had not yet developed. The Bhikkhus had therefore to memorize what they had heard. Not every Bhikkhu cared to memorize what he heard. But there were some that had made it their profession to memorize. They were called Bhanakas. The Buddhist canonical literature is a vast ocean. To memorize all this was indeed a great feat. In reporting the Buddha, it has often been found that he has been misreported.” Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, 184.

[^393]: Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, 185.
sutta in *The Buddha and Karl Marx* and in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* to support this aspect of his hermeneutic of suspicion.394

Regardless of when the four truths were added to the canonical material, the influence that they have had on the tradition is beyond doubt. As Anderson, Pratt, and many others have noted, they are perhaps the best-known teachings of the Buddha and “outside the world of academic studies, the four truths are nearly synonymous with the Buddha and his teachings.”395 Because of this ubiquity, Ambedkar was forced to relate to them and his decision to treat them warrants a closer study.

In Ambedkar’s telling of the post-enlightenment activity of the Buddha, he sets the stage by narrating the account of Brahma’s request to the Buddha to teach his dharma to the world.396 His references for the account of this event are the *Majjhima Nikāya* and the *Mahāvagga*, where the Buddha, initially intent on simply remaining a solitary ascetic, is convinced by Brahma that the world needs his teachings as the world is filled with grief and suffering.397 Brahma beseeches him, “Rise up, O hero, victor in battle, O caravan-leader, free from the debt of birth, go to the world and do not turn away from it. May the Lord in his compassion design to teach his gospel to me and to gods.”398 The Buddha’s response to Brahma is telling in Ambedkar’s account. He emphasizes the need


397 Ibid.

398 Ibid.
for action over passive contemplation and is motivated by a need to “change the world and make it better.” Ambedkar states,

Knowing that there was so much unhappiness in the world, the Buddha realized it was wrong for him to sit as a sanyasi with folded arms and allow things to remain as they were. Asceticism, he found to be useless. It was vain to attempt to escape from the world... it was his duty to return to the world and serve it, and not sit silent as the personification of inactive impassivity.\(^{399}\)

Thus, motivated to act and, in particular, by a desire to change the world for the better, Ambedkar’s Buddha sets out to turn the wheel of dharma. While Fiske and Emmerich note that the Buddha in Ambedkar’s account locates the five companions by simply asking around for “their whereabouts” in place of using clairvoyance as he does in the scriptural sources,\(^{400}\) Ambedkar’s initial post-enlightenment narrative otherwise follows the sutta material closely. Upon finding the five companions, the Buddha in Ambedkar’s account similarly admonishes them to reject the two extremes and advocates for the adoption of a new middle path between them. It is at this point in the narrative, where the Buddha traditionally presents the four truths, that Ambedkar deviates most sharply from scriptural sources. In place of the four-fold breakdown found in the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, Ambedkar gives the reader a simpler, dichotomous frame in which Ambedkar’s socially-oriented commitments regarding religion can be clearly heard. He states,

He began by saying that his path which is Dhamma (Religion) had nothing to do with God and the Soul. His Dhamma had nothing to do with life after death. Nor has his Dhamma any concern with rituals and ceremonies. The centre of his Dhamma is man, and the relation of man to man in his life on earth. This, he said was his first postulate. His second postulate was

\(^{399}\) Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, 65.

that men are living in sorrow, in misery, and poverty. The world is full of suffering and that discovering how to remove this suffering from the world is the only purpose of Dhamma. Nothing else is Dhamma. The recognition of the existence of suffering, and to show the way to remove suffering, is the foundation and basis of his Dhamma. This can be the only foundation and justification for Dhamma.\textsuperscript{401}

Gone are the psychological features noted in the \textit{Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta} above. Craving for existence and extinction and for sense pleasures are totally omitted. Gone also is the third truth, \textit{nibbāna}, completely. In their place is a more expansive postulate, that of the path to the ending of suffering. He goes on to present this second postulate in a three-fold frame, where the five precepts are presented as the “Path of Purity,” the Eightfold Path is presented as the “Path of Righteousness,” and the \textit{pāramīs} are presented as the “Path of Virtue.”\textsuperscript{402} Of this Path of Purity, the Buddha states,

‘The Path of Purity,’ he told the Parivrajakas, ‘teaches that a person who wishes to be good must recognise some principles as principles of life. According to my Path of Purity, the principles of life recognized by it are: Not to injure or kill; Not to steal or appropriate to oneself anything which belongs to another; Not to speak untruth; Not to indulge in lust; Not to indulge in intoxicating drinks. The recognition of these principles, I say, is most essential for every man. For every man must have a standard by which to judge whatever he does. And these principles, according to my teachings, constitute the standard.\textsuperscript{403}

Ambedkar’s aim to establish his religion as a “religion of principles” and not a “religion of rules” can be explicitly heard in the above and implied in his explanation for the reason for following these precepts as principles. He is keen to explain to the reader that these precepts are not intended to be dictates but as therapeutic interventions aimed at

\textsuperscript{401} Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, \textit{The Buddha and His Dhamma}, 68–69.  
\textsuperscript{402} Ibid, 69-70.  
\textsuperscript{403} Ibid.
creating both a just social order and to bring benefit to the individual. The Buddha anticipates a “why?” question from his listeners,

You may ask, ye Parivrajakas! ‘Why are these principles worthy of recognition as a standard of life?’ The answer to this question you will find for yourselves, if you ask: ‘Are these principles good for the individual?’ [;] also if you ask: ‘Do they promote social good?’ If your answers to these questions are in the affirmative, then it follows that the principles of my Path of Purity are worthy of recognition as forming a true standard of life.\textsuperscript{404}

Similarly, the Eight Fold Path, as the “Path of Righteousness,” is framed as socially beneficial with individual meliorative effects instrumental to that end. “With his eye on Brahminism as a “religion of rules” that propagates inequity and domination, “right views” is framed as “giving up belief in efficacy of rites and ceremonies, to have disbelief in the sanctity of the Shastras” and “requires the abandonment of superstition and supernaturalism.” “Right behavior” teaches that “every action should be founded on respect for the feelings and rights of others.” And of “right livelihood” the Buddha states, “every individual has to earn his livelihood without causing injury or injustice to others.” Finally, of “right sadhi” Ambedkar’s Buddha emphasizes that “mere samadhi” is not enough as it leads to dhyānic (meditative) states that do not necessarily give rise to compassion. For the Buddha here, “right samādhi” is tied to the mental cultivation required to cultivate good habits and to think of the welfare of others. The Buddha states, “Sama Samadhi gives a habit to the mind to think of good, and always to think of good. Sama Samadhi gives the mind the necessary motive power to do good.”\textsuperscript{405}

\textsuperscript{404} Ibid, 69-70.

\textsuperscript{405} Ibid, 72.
The third section of the First Sermon is devoted to the “Path of Virtue,” and Ambedkar again frames the Buddha’s teachings as both socially-oriented and grounded in personal transformation through religious practice. The concluding section of the Buddha’s First Sermon ties these ideas together in summary. The Buddha establishes that personal purity and strength of character must be sufficiently built-up to establish a just social order. The Buddha rhetorically asks, “How can a man be an instrument of good if he has no personal purity in him… why do men not mind making the lives of others unhappy? Is it not because men are not righteous in their conduct towards one another?” He concludes this section by noting simply “doing good deeds blindly” is “not enough.” He states, “The Path of Virtue must, therefore, be subject to the test of Prajna, which his another name for understanding and intelligence.” The Buddha elaborates,

There is also another reason why Prajna-paramita is so important and so necessary. There must be Dana. But without Prajna, Dana may have a demoralizing effect. There must be Karuna. But without Prajna, Karuna may end in support evil. Every act of Paramita must be tested by Prajna Paramita, which is another name for wisdom.

The Buddha’s final words in the First Sermon are aimed at clearing up any doubt that his religion is one of pessimism or nihilism. Ambedkar’s goal of correcting the “later accretion” of the elite monastics, the four noble truths, can clearly be heard. The Buddha states,

You are likely to call my Dhamma pessimistic, because it calls the attention of mankind to the existence of suffering. I tell you such a view of my Dhamma would be wrong. No doubt my Dhamma recognizes the existence of suffering, but forget not that it also lays equal stress on the

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406 Ibid, 73.
407 Ibid, 74.
removal of suffering. My Dhamma has in it both hope and purpose. Its purpose is to remove Avijja, by which I mean ignorance of the existence of suffering. There is hope in it because it shows the way to put an end to human suffering.\textsuperscript{408}

In these critical passages above, Ambedkar does the reformist work to replace the four truths with his two postulates, but he stays quite close to the sutta material in doing so. While displaying his tendency to demythologize the Buddha, as explored in chapter two, his use of scriptural material for support is broad. Verma and Rathore note that he appeals to various suttas in the Majjhima Nikāya, and the Samyutta Nikāya, the Mahāvagga, and the Lalitavistara Sūtra in this section.

It is worth noting that craving as the source of suffering, the traditional second noble truth, does appear later in Ambedkar’s text, though it is reframed. In the section, “To Give Up Craving as Dhamma,” he notes that the Dhammapada warns against greed and promotes the virtues of contentment and he turns as well to an exchange between the Buddha and Ānanda in the Mahānidāna Sutta, which is found in the Digha Nikāya.\textsuperscript{409} In this passage he notes that the Buddha instructs Ānanda that craving is to be uprooted because it leads to “blows and wounds, strife, contradiction and retorts; quarrelling, slander, and lies.” He concludes this passage as follows: “that this is the correct analysis of class struggle, there can be no doubt. That is why the Buddha insisted upon the control of greed and craving.”\textsuperscript{410} The thesis of The Buddha and Karl Marx, that the Buddha has something profound to teach Karl Marx, namely his therapeutic project that allows for

\textsuperscript{408} Ibid, 74-75.

\textsuperscript{409} Ibid, 128-129.

\textsuperscript{410} Ibid, 129.
contentment without fetishizing poverty and without the necessity of violence, is certainly resonant here.

Ambedkar’s alternate frame articulates a distinction between religion and dhamma.\textsuperscript{411} It is on this foundation, initially articulated here, that he later expands this framework as presented in section IV of \textit{The Buddha and His Dhamma}. Echoes of his 1950 \textit{Mahabodhi Society Journal} article, where he outlined the need for a new religion, one that is consonant with the principles of modernity, as well as his work in \textit{Revolution and Counter-Revolution}, where he presents the Buddhist teachings as first and foremost a religion of principles, anchored to a universalizable morality and in contradistinction to an amoral-at-best Brahminical religion of laws, can be heard. This distinction between religion and dhamma, at the root of his two postulates, is fundamental to his larger project of reorienting the followers of his Buddhist tradition away from Brahminical theism and toward a liberated dhammic morality, unmoored from a religion of rules. In this sense, Ambedkar’s Marxist and Deweyian inspired articulation of a dhamma-centric social order presents a significant South Asian alternative modernity. Central to his conception of dhamma, in contradistinction to religion, is that it is fundamentally social in nature where religion, as conceived by “European theologians” is a private affair.\textsuperscript{412}

\textsuperscript{411} Pradeep Gokhale has noted Ambedkar’s multivalent use of the term “religion.” For Ambedkar, the term can broadly point to theism or more specifically, a dharmic moral order. Gokhale notes that for Ambedkar “religion” can mean: “theistic religion in which according to him, both morality and rationality are undermined. Religion emphasizes the relation between individual and God and undermines social relations; it also falls prey to superstition…But Ambedkar does not always use the word “religion” in a popular sense; he also uses it in the sense of Dharma, when he says the purpose of religion (according to the Buddha) is to make the world a kingdom of righteousness. Here the word is used in the sense of the ideal form of religion…” Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, \textit{The Buddha and His Dhamma}, nn. 50, 151.

\textsuperscript{412} Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, 168.
For Ambedkar, dhamma is an absolutely essential ingredient for a healthy society. He states,

Dhamma is social. It is fundamentally and essentially so. Dhamma is righteousness, which means right relations between man and man in all spheres of life. From this it is evident that one man, if he is alone, does not need Dhamma. But when there are two men living in relation to each other, they must find a place for Dhamma whether they like it or not. Neither can escape it. In other words society cannot do without Dhamma.\textsuperscript{413}

And what is this dhamma? He goes to articulate that dhamma consists of two basic components, namely karuṇā, or “love,” and prajñā, or “understanding.”\textsuperscript{414}

Prajna is understanding. The Buddha made Prajna one of the two cornerstones of His Dhamma because he did not wish to leave any room for superstition. What is Karuna? And why Karuna? Karuna is love. Because without it, Society can neither live nor grow; that is why the Buddha made it the second cornerstone of His Dhamma. How different is this definition of Dhamma from that of Religion. So ancient, yet so modern, is the definition given by the Buddha.\textsuperscript{415}

As Yashwant Sumant has noted, Ambedkar’s conceptualization of religion is in part informed by a comparative religion approach where an evolutionary-developmental model of religion, one that presents religion as a category that changes over time from a primitive animism to a more developed theism, is at work.\textsuperscript{416} This is on display in The Buddha and His Dhamma when he traces the development of religion from animism and magical thinking, to ritual sacrificial practices, to the propitiation of malevolent and then

\textsuperscript{413} Ibid, 169.

\textsuperscript{414} These are Ambedkar’s translations.

\textsuperscript{415} Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, The Buddha and His Dhamma, 166.

benevolent gods, to the concept of a soul and personal relationship with God.\textsuperscript{417}

Ambedkar seeks to impel this evolutionary process further by using Buddhism, an already non-theistic religious tradition, by inserting a morality at the center in place of creed, or doctrine, or belief. On the one hand, his suspicion of religion, informed by Marxist thought and early 20\textsuperscript{th} century social scientists, produces a sharp, critical perspective on religion as a legitimate repository for morality but perhaps his position as a non-European, marginalized scholar allowed for a resistance to any subscription to secularization in the way that many pre-independence era Indian thinkers demonstrated.

He seeks to sacralize the everyday, relational reality of people. Sumant states,

\ldots if the doctrine of \textit{dhamma} is internalized and practised, it will promote social conscience, and the social conscience will secure morality more effectively than the institution of religion or the state. Thus Ambedkar’s doctrine of \textit{dhamma} does not situate morality in a transcendental domain. Neither does it think it adequate to situate morality in a civil association, including the state. It situates morality in the day-to-day life of the people. Dhamma is a social praxis...\textsuperscript{418}

Pradeep Gokhale addresses Ambedkar’s attempts to fashion a religious yet non-theistic, human-centered, relational, morality:

To my understanding, this was a Copernican revolution in the relationship between morality and religion that Ambedkar tried to bring about. To put it crudely, religions have put religious beliefs at the centre and morality is supposed to rotate around them. In Ambedkar’s reconstruction of Buddhism, morality is placed at the centre and religious beliefs are supposed to rotate around it.\textsuperscript{419}

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\item[\textsuperscript{417}]Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, \textit{The Buddha and His Dhamma}, 165.
\item[\textsuperscript{418}]Yushwant Sumant, “Situation Religion in Ambedkar’s Political Discourse,” in Jondhale and Beltz, \textit{Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India}, 74-75
\item[\textsuperscript{419}]Pradeep Gokhale, “Universal Consequentialism: A Note on B.R. Ambedkar’s Reconstruction of Buddhism with Special Reference to Religion, Morality, and Spirituality,” in Jondhale and Beltz, 124.
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The reception of Ambedkar’s two postulates in place of the four noble truths has been perhaps the biggest stumbling block for commentators on The Buddha and His Dhamma. Its initial reception and review in the Mahabodhi Society Journal was sharply critical, going so far as to call it “hate” and “dangerous” to newcomers to the Buddhist tradition. Queen suggests that Ambedkar was driven by a need to ensure that his intended audience did not misunderstand a set of teachings that, if misunderstood, could serve to reinforce their domination. He states,

For Ambedkar, the Four Noble Truths, as presented in the canonical account of the Buddha’s first sermon (Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta) were problematic for their attribution of suffering to the ignorance and craving of sufferers… rather than to the objective and often externally controlled conditions of society.

I would suggest that perhaps this only half of the picture. While Queen is correct to note the ways in which Ambedkar is motivated by his desire to mobilize, protect, and cultivate his Dalit audience, he is also at least equally motivated to create a new chapter in the development of religion as a category; a religion intended not just for Dalits but for all. It is precisely his perspective from the margin, as an Untouchable, that allows him to see clearly the ways in which reform and secularization of Brahminical Hinduism would fail to address the caste and communal problems of India, as he so clearly articulates in texts like The Annihilation of Caste. The clarity of perspective afforded from the margins allowed him to adopt a more expansive vision, one that could imagine a total annihilation of caste and a decentering of a hierarchical, theistic ideology toward a human-centered

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420 Christopher Queen, “Ambedkar’ Dhamma,” in Reconstructing the World : B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India, 138-139

421 Ibid, 140.
social and relational morality. Short of being an impediment, his Dalit perspective offered a fresh vision. Through a practice of pluralism, as Diana Eck has articulated, the commentators on Ambedkar’s work in this regard can allow for a simultaneous revaluation of what counts as Buddhism and subsequent widening of the tent. This is distinct from the perspective, as articulated by Queen, that attempts to re-articulate Ambedkar’s work back into the four noble truths, in an effort to make his writing more palatable and closer to a Western-received Buddhism. Ambedkar was obviously aware of the centrality of the four truths and the need to relate to them, as he does explicitly in his introduction, but he consciously chose not to use them in his work because in part, as Queen and King note, that they can be used to continue to blame Dalits for their own suffering but also because they don’t fit with his project to push religion past, in his view, the theistic and personally-oriented developmental stage. His larger project is to move religion into a relational stage where morality can be ground in social relationships.

It’s also worth noting here that Ambedkar does not jettison the teachings found in the second and third Noble Truths completely in his presentation of the buddhadharma. The Buddha famously denied the existence of such an independently existing self and proclaimed that all compounded phenomena, including the aggregates that make up the sense of self, are impermanent. Ambedkar presents these teachings, those of no-self, impermanence, and śūnyatā, or emptiness, in the section “What the Buddha Taught,”

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423 Queen states, “For Ambedkar, the first noble truth for the present age was the widespread suffering of injustice and poverty; the second truth was social, political, and cultural institutions of oppression – the collective expressions of greed, hatred, and delusion; the third truth was expressed by the European ideals of “liberty, equality, and fraternity”; and the fourth truth was the threefold path of Ambedkar’s famous slogan, “Educate! Agitate! Organize!” Queen and King, *Engaged Buddhism*, 62.
immediately following his section on “craving.” Interestingly, in addition to turning to Nikāya sources to present the three-fold teachings on impermanence Ambedkar relies on Asaṅga, the hugely influential Mahāyāna figure whose teachings gave rise to the Yogācāra school of Buddhist philosophy, for support in this section. In particular, Ambedkar looks to the Yogācārabhumi-Śāstra to support his case. He translates Asaṅga: “All things… are produced by the combination of causes and conditions, and have no independent noumenon of their own…” And summarizes with regard to the self in his own words:”

Being is becoming. In this sense a being of a past moment has lived, but does not live, nor will he live. The being of a future moment will live, but has not lived, nor does he live; the being of the present moment does live, but has not lived, and will not live. In short, a human being is always changing, always growing. He is not the same at two different moments of his life.

Echoing Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā, Ambedkar notes that the doctrine of śunyatā, or emptiness, is what makes everything possible, “without it nothing in the world would be possible. It is on the impermanence of the nature of all things that the possibility of all other things depends.”

The moral of these teachings for Ambedkar,

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424 The impermanence of composite things, the impermanence of the individual being, and the impermanence of the self-nature of conditioned things are sourced to Dīghā Nikāya Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, The Buddha and His Dhamma, 130.

425 Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, 130.

426 Ibid.


428 Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, The Buddha and His Dhamma, 130.
perhaps unsurprisingly, is socially oriented: “Do not be attached to anything. It is to cultivate detachment - detachment from property, from friends, and such other things – that he said ‘All these are impermanent.’”

**Karma**

The other major scriptural dilemma Ambedkar wanted to solve in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* was establishing how the teachings on *karma* and rebirth, concepts already familiar to his South Asian audience, should be properly understood in his new Buddhist frame. In particular, Ambedkar was concerned about the way in which the Buddhist conception of *karma* had been subject to the creeping influences of Brahminical religionists and consequently was misrepresented by some of the early monks. Ambedkar’s appeal to the Buddha for an intended meaning of these terms is perhaps in consonance with a larger pre-independence South Asian theme of reformism, evident in the writing in figures as diverse as Veer Savarkar to Dayananda Saraswati to M.K. Gandhi to Ambedkar, all of whom appeal to a golden period or to better days of some kind, defined variously in pre-British, pre-Christian/Muslim, or Vedic terms.

In the biographical section of *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, “How a Bodhisatta Became the Buddha,” Ambedkar presents his own understanding of the Brahminical notion of *karma*. He states,

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429 Ibid.

It was part of the thesis of transmigration of the soul. The Karma of the Brahmins was an answer to the question, ‘Where did the soul land on transmigration with his new body on new birth?’ The answer of the Brahminic Philosophy was that it depended on a man’s deeds in his past life. In other words, it depended on his Karma.\(^{431}\)

The Buddha in Ambedkar’s presentation considers this philosophy and then rejects it. Ambedkar states,

The law of Karma as formulated by the Brahmins, thought the Buddha, was calculated to sap the spirit of revolt completely. No one was responsible for the suffering of man except he himself. Revolt could not alter the state of suffering; for suffering was fixed by his past Karma as his lot in this life. The Shudras and women – the two classes whose humanity was most mutilated by Brahminism – had no power to rebel against the system… Instead of rebelling against Brahminism, they had become the devotees and upholders of Brahminism.\(^{432}\)

So for Ambedkar, the trouble with “karma” as a concept is that it is theologically linked to the Brahminical conception of a soul and as such allowed for the maintenance of a system that blamed the dominated members of society for their own domination. In such a system, the idea that a substantial entity, or soul, transmigrated from life to life and body to body, carrying with it past merits and demerits, can be used to justify any present state of ostensible injustice in the name of a theologically rooted appeal to a cosmic order. Ambedkar could not allow this reading of karma, already so familiar to his audience who were enculturated within the contemporary Brahminical idiom. Sallie King echoes this, stating that “Ambedkar was well aware that in order for the untouchable class to raise themselves to a higher standing in the world, they would need to be free of self-hatred and self-blame, free of thoughts that they deserved their misfortune; and

\(^{431}\) Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, 58.

\(^{432}\) Ibid.
instead confident in the belief that they deserved better. This seemed impossible if traditional teachings on *karma* were maintained.433

When applied to his presentation of *karma* in the quote above, Ambedkar’s use of his hermeneutic of suspicion434 leads him to conclude that these teachings on *karma* were in fact distorted by later receivers of the tradition and could not, in fact, be considered the words of the Buddha. The Buddha, who for Ambedkar was always logical and rational, rejected the idea of a soul in his teachings on *anatman* (no self), so he could not possibly have understood *karma* in the Brahminical sense. The Buddha was also always primarily concerned with human welfare, so he could not have endorsed a reading of *karma* that would be used to buttress the caste system. And finally, the Buddha was clear about those matters about which he was certain and those that he wasn’t, as his exchange with *Poṭṭhapāda* makes clear in Ambedkar’s presentation, and so Ambedkar is sure that he would not be interested in the type of metaphysical speculation implied in the ideas of transmigrating souls or storehouses of past karmic merit. King notes of Ambedkar’s reasoning here, “Teachings on karma and caste were the very beliefs in Hinduism against which he was struggling. They must therefore be later interpolations into the Buddhist texts.”435 And Ambedkar states directly,

> The basis of the Hindu doctrine of past karma as the regulator of future life is in iniquitous doctrine. What could have been the purpose of

433 King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, 160.

434 As Queen has noted, Ambedkar evaluates the authenticity of Buddhist scripture against a kind of hermeneutic of suspicion. For Ambedkar, the Buddha’s rationality, concern for the welfare of others, and his insistence on certainty in his views (and not on mere philosophical speculation) are the determining criteria against which established scripture must be measured to establish authenticity. For Ambedkar, if a scripture is at odds with any of these principles, it can be dismissed as inauthentic. See Queen, “Dr. Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation,” 59.

435 King, *Socially Engaged Buddhism*, 160.
inventing such a doctrine? The only purpose one can think of is to enable the state of the society to escape responsibility for the condition of the poor and the lowly. Otherwise, such an inhuman and absurd doctrine could never have been invented. It is impossible to imagine that the Buddha, who was known as Maha Karunika, could have supported such a doctrine.\textsuperscript{436}

Although the application of Ambedkar’s hermeneutic of suspicion eliminates any Brahminically-inflected reading of \textit{karma}, Ambedkar did not discard the teachings on \textit{karma} completely. He instead presents a more constrained version, in contrast to his Brahminical presentation of it. For Ambedkar, \textit{karma} as the Buddha presented it was an essential component of his teaching but amounted to no more than a causal description of the phenomenal world. Its scope is limited to appearances as they arise in this present life. Its explanatory force does not extend to any point prior to meeting of sperm and egg and its future effects die with the disintegration of this present body. He states, “The Law of Karma was enunciated by the Buddha. He was the first to say: ‘Reap as you sow.’ He was so emphatic about the Law of Karma that he maintained that there could be no moral order unless there was a stern observance of the Law of Karma. The Buddha’s Law of Karma applied only Karma and its effect on present life.”\textsuperscript{437} The Brahminical presentation, as described above, he termed the “extended doctrine” of \textit{karma}; “extended” in the sense that it extends beyond the present and encompasses both past and future. It is this extended Brahminical doctrine that Ambedkar attacks and that he suggests has crept into Buddhist understandings of their own, originally rational, view of \textit{karma}.

\textsuperscript{436} Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, \textit{The Buddha and His Dhamma}, 182.

\textsuperscript{437} Ibid, 179.
Similarly, when Ambedkar treats the topic of rebirth, he begins by acknowledging that this concept originally appears in Brahminical religion, albeit in a different form. He uses the Alagaddupama Sutta\(^{438}\) to argue that the Buddha was not an “annihilationist”\(^{439}\) who held that death was the end of everything nor was he an eternalist who held that a soul transmigrated forever. Ambedkar quickly discards the idea that the Buddha was an eternalist noting that the rational Buddha rejected the idea of soul and simply would not hold such a position. He turns to the suttas to demonstrate that even in the Buddha’s own time, he was being misrepresented by Brahmins who wanted to counter his teachings, and who charged him erroneously with being an annihilationist. Ambedkar defends the Buddha by suggesting that the Buddha does indeed believe in rebirth, though his conception of rebirth is not based on a soul or essence, but instead on a scientifically compatible doctrine of dependent origination. While Ambedkar does not use the term “dependent arising” or the Sanskrit \(pratītyasamutpāda\), in his defense of the Buddha against charges of annihilationism, he does articulate a version of it, albeit in scientific terms. Though not named explicitly, he appeals to the first law of thermodynamics to make the case that the Buddha’s teachings on rebirth conform with the laws of science and are neither nihilistic nor eternalistic. He states,

> It is easy to understand why the Buddha said he was not an annihilationist. He believed in the regeneration of matter and not in the rebirth of the soul. So interpreted, the Buddha’s view is in consonance with science. It is only in this sense that the Buddha could be said to have believed in rebirth. Energy is not lost. That is what science affirms. Annihilation in the sense that after death nothing is left, would be contrary to science. For it would

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\(^{438}\) This sutta is found in the Majjhima Nikāya, sutta 22. See, Buddha and Isaline B Horner, The Collection of the Middle Length Sayings: (Majjhima-Nikāya). (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2004), 167.

\(^{439}\) Here Ambedkar uses the Sanskrit \(ucchevad\) (with the final “a” elided) meaning “the doctrine that death causes extinction.”
mean that energy is not constant in volume. This is the only way by which the dilemma could be solved.440

Ambedkar then turns to the Samyutta Nikāya to demonstrate that the subject of life after death is again one that the Buddha refused to speak about definitely. In an exchange with King Pasenadi of Kosala, he refuses to take a position in response to the question, “does the Tathagatha exist after death?” The Buddha states, “not revealed by me, maharajah, is this matter.” Instead, in a response that echoes Nāgārjuna’s famous tetralemma, he leaves room for an expansive view on the subject. The Buddha states,

If one should try to define the Tathagata by his bodily form, that bodily form of the Tathagata is abandoned, cut down at the root, made like a palm-tree stump, made some thing that it is not, made of a nature not to spring up again in future time. Set free from reckoning as body, maharajah, is the Tathagata. He is deep, boundless, unfathomable, just like the might ocean. To say, ‘The Tathagata exists after death,’ does not apply. To say, ‘The Tathagata exists not after death,’ does not apply. To say, ‘The Tathagata both exists and exists not, neither exists nor not exists, after death,’ does not apply…441

Quite a bit of real estate in The Buddha and His Dhamma is dedicated to making Ambedkar’s position clear on karma and rebirth. In the bulk of the chapter “Religion and Dhamma,” Ambedkar presents short aphoristic sections modeled on and taken from his reading of the Dhammapada, a project that he noted in 1950 article “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion” was essential for the new Buddhist gospel, as well as short sections of “sermons” taken from the Nikāyas that present the Buddha’s instructions for living a righteous life. Most of the sections here one to two paragraphs in length and contain short prescriptive instructions with titles like “On Hypocrisy” where the reader is

440 Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, The Buddha and His Dhamma, 176.

441 Ibid, 177.
instructed to refrain from speaking falsely and “On Anger and Enmity” where the instruction is to “still the fire of anger.” The sections on *karma* and rebirth by contrast number eight pages in this chapter alone, suggesting this is a topic he wants his reader to grasp. In these eight pages, he is essentially trying to do two things in his writing on *karma* and rebirth. First, as Queen and King have noted above, he is trying to disentangle a Buddhist conception of *karma* from a perceived mess that Brahminical religionists have made of it, who in his view have actively coopted the Buddhist use of the term and fed it back into the Buddhist tradition for their own benefit. He suggests this process was both inadvertent and also a conscious, bad-faith effort at disruption by Brahminical actors. He states,

> Ignorant Hindus, out sheer want of understanding, say by comparing merely the similarity of words, that Buddhism is the same as Brahminism or Hinduism. The educated and orthodox section of the Brahmins also do the same. They do so deliberately, to mislead the ignorant masses. The educated Brahmins know full well that the Buddhist Law of Karma is quite different from the Brahminic Law of Karma. Yet they keep on saying that Buddhism is the same as Brahminism and Hinduism. The similarity in terminology gives them an easy handle for their false and malicious propaganda.442

Righting the wrong pointed to in the above quote is the aim that King identifies above; to unmoor the new religious tradition from the theological principles that have been used for centuries to justify the domination of Dalits and to refashion them for their use in a new paradigm. In this light, Ambedkar’s attraction to Buddhism is not surprising at all. He can point directly to *sutta* material that explicitly justifies his anti-caste message and also uses the theological terminology with which his followers are already familiar. He can make a

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claim to a truer, more original reading of those familiar principles while appealing to an indigenous source of liberative power.

The second thing that Ambedkar is doing with his extensive reworking of these principles is building some of the basic theological/dharmalogical scaffolding of his new, modernist religious movement. He needs to build the metaphysic of his textually-based, scientifically-compatible, morally-oriented, nontheistic religious movement. This metaphysic needs to account for the arising, abiding, and extinction of aggregated phenomena and provide the ground for the work of moral meaning-making. His take on karma and rebirth seeks to do just that. In many ways, it is remarkably like the presentations of rebirth by other noted Asian Buddhist modernist teachers like Shunryu Suzuki Roshi and Thich Nhat Hanh. Consider Suzuki Roshi’s presentation of rebirth in his famous Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind, where he compares the seeming separateness perceived by bodies and aggregated selves to the seeming separateness of drops of water in a waterfall, soon to be returned to their original source at the bottom, the river, or Thich Nhât Hanh’s recounting of his story of his mother’s death and the realization that the elements that come together to form bodies and selves are impermanent and any sense of separation between temporarily aggregated objects is an illusion. From these insights into impermanence, interdependence, and lack of an inhering self, these modernist Buddhist teachers present a Buddhist understanding of rebirth. Ambedkar draws similarly on sutta material to make the case that “there can be rebirth without transmigration.” He states, “There is a mango stone. The stone gives rise to a mango tree.


The mango tree produces mangoes. Here is rebirth of a mango. But there is no Soul. So there can be rebirth although there is no Soul." Echoes of the exchange between Nāgasena and King Milinda about a lamp being lit from another lamp and verses being taught from teacher to student as evidence of rebirth without transmigration of a soul can be heard here. Ambedkar’s reading of rebirth, though overtly scientific in tone, is perhaps not so far off from other Buddhist modernist teachers. The tendency to equate Ambedkar’s metaphysics to a reductive materialism, as Viplov Dhone has recently argued, perhaps misses some of the subtlety implied in his reading and use of the sutta support material. Dhone suggests that Ambedkar solves his karma problem by having the Buddha adopt the metaphysics of Ajita Keśakambalī, the sixth century BCE forerunner to the materialist Cārvāka school. But a closer reading of Ambedkar’s approach to rebirth, where he is clearly driven by a need to rationalize and make karma and rebirth scientifically compatible, also leaves room for the emptiness-is-form and form-is-emptiness approach deployed by the Buddhist masters of emptiness-philosophy and articulated in the Heart Sūtra. Ambedkar’s appeal to the four-fold logic of the Indian Buddhist tetralemma in his defense of the Buddha’s position on rebirth suggests his position is not entirely compatible with that of the Cārvāka school and Ambedkar’s Buddha’s resistance to speak on matters about which he is not certain should not be confused with an implicit endorsement of materialism.

445 Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, The Buddha and His Dhamma, 266.

446 The Milindaapañha, or Milinda’s Questions, is canonical in the Burmese Canon and was originally translated into English by Thomas Rhys David from the Pāli. Ambedkar references it in The Buddha and His Dhamma in the “Religion and Dhamma” section. Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, 184.

**Karma** as a first-principle concept is deeply culturally and historically embedded in South Asia. As a basic undergirding theological principle, the debates on the workings of *karma* are not settled by a long stretch. The Buddhist tradition historically relegates a complete understanding of the workings of *karma* to the state of enlightenment achieved by the Buddha and realized fully only during his famous enlightenment experience under the Bodhi tree. In non-Buddhist traditions, *karma* is described variously as ritual efficacy in the Vedic tradition, as physical substance in Jaina traditions, and as fate or cosmic justice in Euro-American popular conceptualizations. In light of this remarkable lexical diversity Ambedkar’s modernist South Asian interpretation of *karma* is only one of many competing uses of the term.

**What the Buddha Did Not Teach**

In some ways, Ambedkar was as concerned with clarifying what the Buddha did *not* teach as he was in presenting and affirming what he *did* teach. A major reason for

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448 BK Matilal’s notes this given-ness level of *karma* in Śaṅkara’s thought and the implications for it in terms of social justice. His voice echoes Ambedkar’s: “The rational defence of karma seems to be based very much upon inadequate evidence and a priori assumption. Hence if one depends on karma to explain inequalities and presence of physical and moral evils rather than on the inscrutability of Providence, is one not flying from one ‘asylum of ignorance’ to another? This is a more substantive issue. Besides, the karma doctrine faces some well-known objections. It leads to some repugnant consequences. First, it cannot be sustained without the hypothesis of transmigration. How can it be believed, as the Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina mythologies declare, that humans are born as birds, beasts and insects? Besides, it leads to fatalism, which makes people passively accept their destiny and discourages them from making sincere efforts to change the world. At worst it would support the argument in favour of keeping the caste-orientated society intact and go against any doctrine of change of the status quo.” Bimal K. Matilal, “A Note on Śaṅkara’s Theodicy,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 20, no. 4 (1992): 371–72.


450 For a detailed look at both Buddhist and non-Buddhist uses of the term *karma* as well as the development of the Buddhist understanding of the concept see Gombrich’s chapter “How, not What: Kamma as a Reaction to Brahminism,” in Richard F. Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1997), 27–64.
this, as with the theological principles presented above, was that he wanted to be sure that
the Indian followers of his nascent movement, be they Dalits attempting to free
themselves from the fetters of the oppressive caste system or sāvarṇa Hindus convinced
of the need for a new scientifically-compatible religious movement for the emerging
nation, were clear about the hard break from Brahminical Hinduism implied in taking
refuge in the Buddhist Three Jewels. In most of his writing on Buddhism, Ambedkar is
eager to both highlight the differences between the Buddha and the Buddha’s
contemporary Brahminical religionists via the demerits of the latter as well as present the
affirmative ways that Buddhism as a religion is distinctive from Hinduism. In “The
Buddha and the Future of His Religion,”\textsuperscript{451} it is against Kṛṣṇa that the Buddha is most
favorably compared and in \textit{Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India}
Ambedkar presents \textit{sutta} material in support of his argument that the moral orientation of
the adherents of Brahminism at the time of the Buddha was particularly degraded.\textsuperscript{452} In
his speculative historical work \textit{The Untouchables}, where he argues that the source of
untouchability can be traced back to the centuries-long struggle between the \textit{śramaṇa}
movement and the Brahminists, this concern with the contrast of Hinduism and
Buddhism is also on marked display. In \textit{The Untouchables}, according to Ambedkar, these
early Buddhists, who the Brahmins despised deeply, became the predecessors of
contemporary Dalits.\textsuperscript{453}


\textsuperscript{452} Ambedkar, “Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India.”

\textsuperscript{453} Ambedkar states of the origin of untouchability (here “Broken Men,” a term that Ambedkar uses to
refer to the Untouchables before they were “untouchable”): “If we accept that the Broken Men were the
followers of Buddhism and did not care to return to Brahminism when it became triumphant over
Buddhism as easily as others did, we have an explanation for both questions. It explains why the
In The Buddha and His Dhamma this concern for noting what the Buddha did not teach is laid out in detail in a section fittingly titled, “What is Not Dhamma,” found in the chapter “What the Buddha Taught.” These several short sections outline those doctrines that are not in accord with the Buddha’s teachings and amount to basically three categories of things: theological principles, ritual practices, and a relationship to the textual tradition. In the theological principles section, he emphasizes that the Buddha was a rationalist who rejected supernatural claims and explanations, that the Buddha is not a god nor does any god exist, and the Buddha rejected the idea of a soul, or more specifically, the Brahminic idea of ātman. He appeals to various Nikāya sutta sources for evidence of the Buddha’s rejection of these concepts. In his argument against the supernatural as dhamma he reinforces his narrow view of karma as a central feature of his dhamma,

In repudiating supernaturalism, the Buddha had three objects. His first object was to lead man to the path of rationalism. His second object was to free man to go in search of truth. His third object was to remove the most potent source of superstition, the result of which is to kill the spirit of inquiry. This is called the law of Kamma or Causation. This doctrine of Kamma and Causation is the most central doctrine in Buddhism. It preaches Rationalism, and Buddhism is nothing if not rationalism. That is why worship of the supernatural is not Dhamma.

Untouchables regard the Brahmins as inauspicious, do not employ them as their priest and do not even allow them to enter in their quarters. It also explains why the Broken Men came to be regarded as Untouchables. The Broken Men hated the Brahmins because the Brahmins were the enemies of Buddhism and the Brahmins imposed untouchability upon the Broken Men because they would not leave Buddhism. On this reason it is possible to conclude that one of the roots of untouchability lies in the hatred and contempt which the Brahmins created against those who were Buddhist.” Ambedkar, The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables, 75.


455 Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, 133.
Likewise, in the other sections, Ambedkar emphasizes the Buddha’s rationality and principal concern for the welfare of others in contrast to Brahminical approaches to dharma that are, in his view, focused on empty ritualism and legalistic textualism. He implores his followers to reject the practice of Vedic sacrifice as non-dharmic and to reject appeals to authority and texts, stating

> Before you accept anybody’s teachings as authoritative, do not go by the fact that it is contained in the scriptures; do not go by the subtleties of logic; do not go by considerations based upon mere appearances; do not go merely by the fact beliefs and views preached are agreeable; do not go merely because the look to be genuine; do not go merely by the fact that the beliefs and views are those of some ascetic or superior. But consider whether the beliefs and views sought to be inculcated are salutary or insalutary, blameworthy or blameless, lead to well-being or ill-being. It is only on these grounds that one can accept the teachings of anybody.\(^{456}\)

Ambedkar’s concern with protecting his followers from the potential predations of their Brahminical contemporaries lead him to take the concepts listed in this section and enshrine them in a much more explicit way. In addition to the traditional three-fold refuge formula that contemporary Buddhists recite to formally convert to the Buddhist tradition, Ambedkar added twenty-two supplemental vows to the conversion formula. On his conversion day at the Deekshabhoomi in Nagpur in 1956, after taking refuge himself in front of the Rev. Bhikku Chandramani, Ambedkar then turned to lead the 500,000 assembled followers in their taking refuge, and in so doing he stated,

> By discarding my ancient religion which stood for inequality and oppression today I am reborn. I have no faith in the philosophy of incarnation; and it is wrong and mischievous to say that Buddha was an incarnation of Vishnu. I am no more a devotee of any Hindu god or goddess. I will not perform Shraddha. I will strictly follow the eightfold path of Buddha. Buddhism is a true religion and I will lead a life guided by the three principles of knowledge, right path and compassion.\(^{457}\)

\(^{456}\) Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, 149–50.

\(^{457}\) Keer, Dr. Ambedkar, 500.
Prior to the ceremony, Ambedkar had enumerated these points into the twenty-two precepts that his followers, in addition to the five precepts and going for refuge to the three jewels, then vowed to follow. Enumerated, they are:

1. I shall have no faith in Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh nor shall I worship them.
2. I shall have no faith in Rama and Krishna who are believed to be incarnation of God nor shall I worship them.
3. I shall have no faith in ‘Gauri’, Ganapati and other gods and goddesses of Hindus nor shall I worship them.
4. I do not believe in the incarnation of God.
5. I do not and shall not believe that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this to be sheer madness and false propaganda.
6. I shall not perform ‘Shraddha’ nor shall I give ‘pind-dan’.
7. I shall not act in a manner violating the principles and teachings of the Buddha.
8. I shall not allow any ceremonies to be performed by Brahmins.
9. I shall believe in the equality of man.
10. I shall endeavour to establish equality.
11. I shall follow the ‘noble eightfold path’ of the Buddha.
12. I shall follow the ‘paramitas’ prescribed by the Buddha.
13. I shall have compassion and loving kindness for all living beings and protect them.
15. I shall not tell lies.
16. I shall not commit carnal sins.
17. I shall not take intoxicants like liquor, drugs etc.
18. I shall endeavour to follow the noble eightfold path and practise compassion and loving kindness in every day life.
19. I renounce Hinduism which is harmful for humanity and impedes the advancement and development of humanity because it is based on inequality, and adopt Buddhism as my religion.
20. I firmly believe the Dhamma of the Buddha is the only true religion.
21. I believe that I am having a re-birth.
22. I solemnly declare and affirm that I shall hereafter lead my life according to the principles and teachings of the Buddha and his Dhamma.

In Keer’s account, he notes that Ambedkar’s voice broke when he announced his conversion and rejection of Hinduism. Rathore and Verma note how shocking the
reception of these vows was and continues to be for India’s Hindu elite; so much so that while buildings and airports and roads and schools etc. may all be named after Ambedkar, even serious research university curricula still shy away from presenting Ambedkar’s thought, with Buddhist studies in particular hiding behind claims that his Buddhism is too “unorthodox” to warrant serious study. Rathore and Verma make the incisive point that neo-colonialist critiques of indigenous actors like Ambedkar, who sought to modernize his religion by embracing aspects of modernity, attack him as thus “inauthentic” or “unorthodox,” and these critiques ironically and invariably recreate the asymmetrical power structures involved between subject and object in the creation and study of Buddhism.

Conclusion

Ambedkar had deep reservations about presenting some of the core Buddhist theological principles as they appeared in other English language publications of the Buddhist tradition in his own work. In particular, his approach to the four noble truths, a central and defining feature of the Buddhist tradition in most English language presentations of the tradition, appears markedly altered in Ambedkar’s work. He reduces

459 Verma and Rathore state, “The irrepressibly radical sentiment expressed in Ambedkar’s vow illustrates better than any textual investigation into his orthodoxy how uncomfortable the elites in Indian academia must feel when confronted with his political theology. Despite the number of colleges, institutes, university buildings, and centres named after B.R. Ambedkar in India, there are a disproportionately fractional number of Ambedkar texts on syllabi of any of the serious research departments of the country. The constitutional democracy Ambedkar helped to create sees to it that his name is, albeit reluctantly, honoured and preserved in the hallowed (hollow) public sphere; but he makes little appearance in substantive terms. In academia, when pushed to account for the lack of his inclusion, academics in Buddhist studies resort to his unorthodoxy as a justification.” Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, The Buddha and His Dhamma, xxii.

460 Ibid.
the four truths to a dichotomous presentation where the second and third truths appear collapsed into an expanded fourth truth. Previous treatments have hedged regarding the legitimacy of Ambedkar’s Buddhism due to this treatment. In their reservations, a clear but unarticulated subscription to a standard Anglophone reception of Buddhism is evident. Apologetic treatments of Ambedkar’s work have sought to downplay or reinterpret his own reinterpretation to make it compatible with so much of the rest of English language readings of Buddhism. A more fruitful avenue for engagement with Ambedkar’s work though may be to meet it on its own terms and consider that perhaps his intention, inspired as it was by his need to uplift his community, with all its particular needs and also to turn the wheel of a new liberal Buddhism for the modern world, was to take up the work suggested by early scholars like Pratt in highlighting other possible readings of the Buddhist tradition based on Pāli source material.

His treatment of karma and rebirth are also marked by adaptation from many of the standard presentations found in the West. It has been argued elsewhere, as with the four noble truths above, that Ambedkar’s decision to alter these teachings in his presentation has placed it outside the Buddhist fold. Apologists have also excused his deviations from the standard Western received tradition due to his need to tailor the teachings to his intended audience, namely Dalits. In some ways, this is true and Ambedkar himself, at times noted that his work aimed to make dense material accessible for a largely non-literate audience who would need to access it through hearing and recitation.\footnote{Keer notes “he admitted that his followers were ignorant. He would inculcate in them the principles of Buddhism through his books and sermons.” Keer, Dr. Ambedkar, 498.} But Ambedkar was also equally concerned with creating a religion for
modernity; for all. His vision was much larger than a liberation theology for the oppressed classes of India. Indeed, in interviews before conversion ceremony in Nagpur, Ambedkar compared his “neo-Buddhism” to the nascent Christian movement in the Roman empire, soon to spread throughout the world. As he notes in “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion,” he envisioned all of India, and then the whole world, quickly taking up the teachings of the Buddha as he presented them, in accord with the discourses of modernity. As Rathore and Verma have noted, to pigeonhole Ambedkar into a “leader of the Dalits” is to participate in some ways, in the ghettoization of Ambedkar Studies in India and in Ambedkarite Buddhist studies in the Buddhist Studies. Ambedkar was interested primarily in creating a moral ground for a new religion. He recognized the inability of secularism, as a privatization of the religious sphere as practiced in the West, to provide sufficient ground for that project. He noted that Marxism, in its failure to appreciate that religion was the source of caste oppression and only religion could uproot that problem, was also not fundamentally up to the task of providing that moral ground.⁴⁶² A closer look at Ambedkar’s “altered” teachings suggests that while in some cases they are markedly different from many other English language presentations, his claims are rooted in scriptural sources and his decision to emphasize some teachings over others is nothing new in the reception history of the Buddhist tradition, as Gokhale and Verma and Rathore have argued.

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If the Bhikku is only a perfect man he is of no use to the propagation of Buddhism, because though a perfect man he is a selfish man. If, on the other hand, he is a social servant, he may prove to be the hope of Buddhism.
– B.R. Ambedkar, The Buddha and His Dhamma

In chapter two, an exploration of B.R. Ambedkar’s framing of the life of the Buddha, particularly around the question of why the Buddha took parivrāja, was presented. In chapter three Ambedkar’s concerns regarding the proper understanding of the dharmic concepts of suffering, karma, and rebirth, were investigated. The final “problem” that Ambedkar explicitly set out to settle in his writing on Buddhism, and which will be explored in this chapter, is the proper understanding of the Buddhist saṅgha, or more specifically, the role of the bhikṣu. He asks,

What was the object of the Buddha in creating the Bhikku? Was the object to create the perfect man? Or was his object to create a social servant devoting his life to service of the people and being their friend, guide, and philosopher? This is a very real question. On it depends the future of Buddhism. If the Bhikkhu is only a perfect man he is of no use to the propagation of Buddhism, because though a perfect man he is a selfish man. If, on the other hand, he is a social servant, he may prove to be the hope of Buddhism.

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463 bhikṣu (Sanskrit) and bhikkhu (Pāli) – monk or religious mendicant.

On display in Ambedkar’s framing of this question is his commitment to approach the Buddhist tradition through the lens of the social. The two loaded choices he presents in answer to the question he poses, those of a selfish and reclusive mendicant or an engaged guide of the people, intentionally reveal his implicit position and frames his presentation in contrast with that of other, here unnamed, presentations of the saṅgha; presentations that frame the saṅgha as, in his terms, a “perfect” though “selfish” man. Ambedkar sees this question as critical, or “a very real question,” on which the future of Buddhism depends, and as such, can be argued to be the central problem related to the creation of his religious movement. Insofar as Ambedkar approaches the buddhadharma as a project aimed at shaping a religion that is compatible with democratic values, the center of his Buddhism is naturally, in some ways, the saṅgha. For this Buddhism to be this-worldly oriented and other-facing, concerned with the establishment of a moral ground and a religion of principles, he must deal with the reality of monks and nuns who, in their decision to leave the world and remain cloistered in monasteries, have historically often not acted as the “devoted social servant” of the people. In characteristically direct style he states,

The Bhikkhu Sangha in its present condition can therefore be of no use for the spread of Buddhism. In the first place there are too many Bhikkhus. Of these a very large majority are merely Sadhus and Sannyasis spending their time in meditation or idleness. There is in them neither learning nor service. When the idea of service to suffering humanity comes to one’s mind every one thinks of the Ramakrishna Mission. No one thinks of the Buddhist Sangha. Who should regard service as its pious duty the Sangha or the Mission? There can be no doubt about the answer. Yet the Sangha is a huge army of idlers.465

Ambedkar addresses this problem by deploying the now familiar Ambedkarian hermeneutic of suspicion and suggests that the Buddha, an eminently rational and care-oriented individual, would have established the original saṅgha in accord with those qualities. For Ambedkar, the answer is clear. A rational Buddha whose activity is animated by a desire to uproot injustice and oppression, grounded as it is in the power imbalance between a priest class and those at the margins, would have created a saṅgha driven by an ethic of care; one actively engaged with the laity and one that would model compassion for those around it. In this chapter a presentation of some of the defining features of Dr. Ambedkar’s approach to the Buddhist saṅgha will be presented and explored. In particular, an exploration of the theoretical roots for his perspective on the saṅgha, the religio-ethical context for thinking about Ambedkarite ethics, his unique and idealized frame for the saṅgha, his use of the concept of saṅgha to respond to Marx, and finally his writing on the place of women in the saṅgha are explored in more detail below.

“Untouchables”: the Original Saṅgha

I argue that the theoretical origins of Ambedkar’s thought regarding the saṅgha can be found in his work, The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables. While the saṅgha is not explicitly addressed by Ambedkar in The Untouchables, his perception of who the early Buddhists were is significant for an understanding of his conceptualization of how the saṅgha should be rightly

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conceptualized in the present. In *The Untouchables*, Ambedkar undertakes an historical reconstruction of the conditions that gave rise to the practice of untouchability. In brief, he concludes, and as will be explored in more detail below, that contemporary Dalits are the heirs to classical-period Indian Buddhists. The preface of the book makes clear that his effort in the book is necessarily limited by a significant dearth of evidence and as such, is more of a hypothesis than a work of historical scholarship. He notes that scholarship in India had traditionally been dominated by Brahmins and consequentially the idea of “untouchability” as an object of study had long been overlooked, leaving little data for use in understanding how the practice of untouchability arose. He notes,

> That the Hindus should not have undertaken such an investigation is perfectly understandable. The old orthodox Hindu does not think that there is anything wrong in the observance of untouchability. To him it is a normal and natural thing. As such it neither calls for expiation nor explanation. The new modern Hindu realises the wrong. But he is ashamed to discuss it in public for fear of letting the foreigner know that Hindu Civilization can be guilty of such a vicious and infamous system or social code as evidenced by Untouchability.

Ambedkar sees his efforts, therefore, as a correction, writing the wrongs done by Brahmin scholars of the past and present. In a move that anticipates Foucault and Asad, Ambedkar deploys an historical method that skillfully weaves together a reconstructive narrative while skirting the boundaries between evidence-based historical scholarship and speculative fabrication. In anticipation of his critics’ objections regarding this

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468 Ambedkar, xi.

469 On Ambedkar’s method of writing history from below, S. Anand and Alex George note in their commentary on *The Untouchables*, “The methodology becomes militant. Ambedkar’s fundamental fidelity to the truth of equality comes at play in the formal structure of his study. The now infamous declaration in the collective Laboria Cuboniks’ The Xenofeminist Manifesto (2018) comes to mind: ‘If nature is unjust, change nature!’ Speculation replaces deduction, because deduction would mean maintaining a relation with caste and being restricted to the world this ideology would allow him to conceive. At the moment of
reconstructive method he states, “What critics should concern themselves with is to examine (i) whether the thesis is based on pure conjecture, and (ii) whether the thesis is possible and if so does it fit with the facts better than mine does?” He likens his work to that of an archaeologist, who through the piecing together of artifactual data, can reproduce a coherent picture of a city or a paleontologist who can reconstruct an extinct animal based on disparate bones and teeth. He states,

It is a case of reconstructing history where there are no texts, and if there are, they have no direct bearing on the question. In such circumstances what one has to do is to strive to divine what the texts conceal or suggest without being even quite certain of having found the truth. The task is one of gathering survivals of the past, placing them together, and making them tell the story of their birth.

Ambedkar’s legal training shines through here. He notes that his work in this regard is “in great part based on facts and inferences from facts” and, it is based on circumstantial evidence of presumptive character resting on considerable degree of probability. There is nothing that I have urged in support of my thesis which I have asked my readers to accept on trust. I have at least shown that there exists a preponderance of probability in favour of what I have asserted. It would be nothing by pedantry to say that

impasse, where the study would halt, Ambedkar turns the dead end itself into a site where he can perform an equalizing gesture and speculate the possibility of a world where no subject is interpellated by Untouchability. He constructs (im)possible relations. And yet, in manufacturing new historical relations, he insists on the speculative nature of his thesis. This insistence is crucial. If he was simply declaring his work as the truth, he would be creating new superstition. But by placing a fundamental doubt at the centre of his argument—‘I am not so vain as to claim any finality for my thesis. I do not ask them to accept it as the last word’—Ambedkar performs a radical epistemological exercise in service of the present. The task of annihilating caste is accompanied also by the envisaging of a world with new relations, this new relation is unknown because it hasn’t come yet. Just like the past is unknown, for Dalits, because it has been violently erased by Brahmanism… Ambedkar’s method enables the exit from merely studying culture in our superstitious corners and offers an ontology of objects, a material possibility of the new. When he uses historical material to construct new relations, Ambedkar sets a precedent. Of thinking the possibilities in the past and the future.”


Ambedkar, The Untouchables Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables, xiv.

Ibid, xiv.
a preponderance of probability is not a sufficient basis for a valid decision.\textsuperscript{472}

So what is Ambedkar’s argument? Why is he hedging and building a legal case in his preface? In short, he wants to advance an hypothesis that the root of untouchability, which according to Ambedkar’s theory came into existence as a practice only around 400 CE, originates in the “contempt and hatred” of Buddhists by Brahmins. Ambedkar considers and rejects arguments that untouchability is rooted in racial or occupational differences and instead argues that it was in the larger social transition from nomadic social organizations to settled agrarian communities that created the conditions in which some peoples found themselves outside of the newly developing village. He terms these people “the Broken Men,” who resisted urbanization and lived in tension and conflict with the wealthier and more powerful settled communities. They are “broken” because while previously they had tribal identities within which they found community and power, conflict with the increasingly dominant settled people broke them down into smaller and disparate groups that could no longer effectively resist the power of the settled communities.\textsuperscript{473} In Ambedkar’s reading, during the Buddhist golden age of India, which he dates from the Ashokan period to around 400 CE, many of those Broken Men, along with much of the subcontinent, adopted Buddhism because it offered a source of authority outside of the Brahminical system, within which they existed at the margins.

\textsuperscript{472} Ibid, xv.

This marked them as particularly loathsome to the Brahmins in that in addition to their stigmatized status as outsiders to the village, they were also proponents of a rival religious tradition.

In answer to the question of why not all Buddhists became Untouchables, why only the Broken Men, Ambedkar points to the practice of beef eating amongst the Broken Men, which, in combination with their Buddhist identity, gave rise to their untouchable status. Ambedkar’s thesis here, while perhaps curious at first, is that in competition with Buddhists for supremacy, Brahminical religionists adopted many of the ethical and metaphysical stances of their more powerful Buddhist opponents, often in an exaggerated and imitative way, in a bid to regain power. His argument in this work regarding the power of imitation and its role in the formation of caste is an idea that Ambedkar originally developed and advanced decades earlier in his 1917 work *Castes in India* where, in reference to French sociologist Gabriel Tarde, he suggests that the practice of endogamy and the power of imitation were the initial key components in the establishment of castes in India. Here again, he appeals to the power of imitation, in particular in regards to dietary practices, to explain the formation of untouchability. He notes the textual evidence for the existence and widespread practice of beef eating and animal sacrifice (particularly that of cows) in pre-*śramaṇic* Vedic India and suggests that the pressure exerted by the ethically oriented *śramaṇic* religionists produced an

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475 Ambedkar notes, “This propensity to imitate has been made the subject of a scientific study by Gabriel Tarde, who lays down three laws of imitation. One of his three laws is that imitation flows from the higher to lower or, to quote his own words, ‘Given the opportunity, a nobility will always and everywhere imitate its leaders, its kings or sovereigns, and the people likewise, given the opportunity, its nobility.’” B.R. Ambedkar, *Castes in India* (Delhi: Siddharth Books, 1945; 2009), 26.
overzealous appropriative response from the Brahmins. Ambedkar theorizes that the Brahmins rejected their increasingly unpopular practice of animal (cow) sacrifice and adopted an even stricter (than the Buddhists), totally vegetarian diet. He suggests that the Buddhist saṅgha, driven primarily by the ethical practice of ahimsa and by a theological rejection of Vedic ritual injunctions, were practicing an ethically conscious form of mindful eating; consuming meat as it was offered but were not, at the time, strict vegetarians. When the Buddhist golden period ended, this form of strict Brahminical vegetarianism and reactionary cow worship, adopted initially in response to Buddhist hegemony, then appeared to have always been a Brahminical practice in contradistinction to the less restrictive Buddhist concerns about ethical eating. Taken together, Brahminical hatred of Buddhists and disgust for beef eating created the conditions for the rise of untouchability. Those Broken Men who continued to identify as Buddhists and who remained eaters of beef became literally untouchable. Ambedkar turns to the Manusmriti to demonstrate that Brahminical aversion toward the “broken men” was already established before the dominance of Buddhism in India and he suggests that as Brahminical power grew and that of Buddhism declined, their aversion developed into the practice of untouchability. He states,

This antipathy can be explained on one hypothesis. It is that the Broken Men were Buddhists. As such they did not revere the Brahmins, did not employ them as their priests and regarded them as impure. The Brahmin on the other hand disliked the Broken Men because they were Buddhists

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476 Ambedkar references Manusmriti Chapter 10, verses 51-56. For example:
X.51 – But the dwellings of the Chandalas and the Shvapakas shall be outside the village, they must be made Apapatras and their wealth (shall be) dogs and donkeys.
X.52 – Their dress (shall be) the garments of the dead, (they shall eat) their food from broken dishes, black iron (shall be) their ornaments and they must always wander from place to place…
and preached against them contempt and hatred with the result that the Broken Men came to be regarded as Untouchables.\textsuperscript{477}

He appeals to various sources of Brahminical textual material to support his claim that the Brahmins harbored a deep-seated hatred towards Buddhists. He again points to the \textit{Manusmṛiti} and Sanskrit \textit{nāṭya}\textsuperscript{478} works, such as the \textit{Mricchakaṭika}, to demonstrate anti-Buddhist animosity.\textsuperscript{479} An example he cites from the \textit{Manusmṛiti} states, “if a person touches a Buddhist or a flower of Pachupat, Lokayata, Nastika and Mahapataki, he shall purify himself by a bath.”\textsuperscript{480}

Most of Ambedkar’s argumentation, though, is a deductive reasoning project that explores the effects of what he contends is the most consequential and overlooked tension in South Asian history; namely the struggle for supremacy between the Buddhists and Brahmins. He states,

The strife between Buddhism and Brahminism is a crucial fact in Indian history. Without the realisation of this fact, it is impossible to explain some of the features of Hinduism. Unfortunately students of Indian history have entirely missed the importance of this strife. They knew there was Brahminism. But they seem to be entirely unaware of the struggle for supremacy in which these creeds were engaged and that their struggle, which extended for 400 years has left some indelible marks on religion, society and politics of India.\textsuperscript{481}

\textsuperscript{477} Ambedkar, 73.

\textsuperscript{478} \textit{nāṭya} – Sanskrit – a play (theatrical), performing arts

\textsuperscript{479} On Ambedkar’s use of the \textit{Mricchakaṭika} for support in \textit{The Untouchables}, George and Anand note that Ambedkar may be stretching a bit in his reading of anti-Buddhist sentiment. See Ambedkar et al., \textit{Beef, Brahmins, and Broken Men}, 66.

\textsuperscript{480} Ambedkar, \textit{The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables}, 74.

\textsuperscript{481} Ambedkar, 110.
For Ambedkar, trying to understand caste and, in particular, untouchability in contemporary India without fully appreciating the centuries long struggle for power between Buddhists and Brahmins, and which shaped the total landscape of actors, both Buddhists and Brahmins alike, would be akin to trying to understand race relations in the contemporary United States without an appreciation of the history American slavery and the US Civil War. For Ambedkar, the fact of Buddhist supremacy during the golden age of Buddhism in India would necessarily have altered the landscape of South Asian political formations and religious commitments.\textsuperscript{482} The Broken Men became untouchable in the wake of a centuries long battle for supremacy and the ruthlessness of their treatment is essentially a reflection of the ferocity of that struggle between Brahminists and Buddhists. Ambedkar is making a direct connection between the current practice of untouchability, the Buddhist tradition, and Brahminical domination.

This framing of contemporary Dalits as lineage holders of the anti-Brahminical Buddhist holdouts, the “Broken Men,” has several obvious advantages. First it provides a plausible empowering narrative for contemporary Dalits while simultaneously flipping the script on the dominant, Brahminically-inflected version of South Asian history. As such, it narrates a version of history where Dalits are not inheritors of the karmic deeds of

\textsuperscript{482} In her work \textit{Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste}, Gail Omvedt considers Ambedkar’s argument and offers a word of caution, “...at the cultural-ideological level itself, ‘Buddhism’ and ‘Brahmanism’ were not the only factors in Indian society. There have been other important cultural-philosophical-religious trends, including other parts of the samana tradition, such as Islam which was influential for over a millennium, Christianity influential in the last two centuries, as well as the secular modern philosophies of Marxism and liberalism. These have been crucial in and of themselves, and in their linkages with Brahmanism and Buddhism. In other words, we would suggest that Ambedkar’s formulation of the Buddhism-Brahmanism conflict should be taken much in the spirit of Weber’s effort to add cultural-ideological factors to explanation in terms of economic factors. With this in mind, the formulation does provide a crucial insight into the processes of Indian social-historical development. For over a millennium, Buddhism and Brahmanism, as the major contending philosophical-religious ideologies in India, fostered very different types of individual behaviour and social order.” Omvedt, \textit{Buddhism in India}, 280.
their past lives, as Brahminical religionists would maintain, but instead, they are the successors of a people who, for centuries, once ruled over their current dominators. Contemporary Dalit suffering can be contextualized as a low point in an ongoing struggle between the righteous and their corrupt oppressors; not a reflection of some degraded inherent nature. Religiously, it associates the movement with a tradition, or in Sanskrit terms, a sampradāya. More specifically, those Dalits who convert to Buddhism are simultaneously both newly becoming Buddhists while also returning from the wilderness, back to a home they had forgotten they belonged to. In this sense Ambedkar’s vision of the saṅgha is rooted in a pre-Sangh Parivar, bottom-up version of ghar wapsi. Ambedkar’s speculative historical reconstruction inverts the logic of domination and offers Dalits as the original saṅgha of the early Buddhist tradition. They just need to reclaim their membership.

**Ambedkarite and Neo-Hindu Ethics**

Ambedkar’s reservations about the ability of Vedic Hinduism to provide a moral ground for the new nation were not his alone. In his project of articulating an ethics

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483 *ghar wapsi* – (Hindi) “return home,” is a term that refers to the Hindu right’s attempts to “re-convert” non-Hindu South Asian people “back” into the Hindu fold. It is based on a Hindutva ideology that maintains that all South Asians were originally, at some point in the past, Hindu before forcible or coercive conversion by outside forces. Much of the rhetoric of the proponents of *ghar wapsi* focuses on the “reconversion” of Christians and Muslims in particular, who are presented as having fallen victim to the depredations of colonial era Christian missionaries and Mughal period Islamic authorities. See Yashasvini Rajeshwar and Roy C. Amore, “Coming Home (Ghar Wapsi) and Going Away: Politics and the Mass Conversion Controversy in India,” Religions 10, no. 5 (2019), https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10050313. Major Hindu nationalist actors, such as Yogi Adityanath, have stated that *ghar wapsi* activities will continue in India until religious conversion is banned in India altogether. See CM of Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath’s remarks here: https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/ghar-wapsi-to-continue-till-conversions-are-banned-adityanath/article6929001.ece
through his vision for the Buddhist saṅgha, Ambedkar was part of a larger twentieth-century Indian movement that was attempting to morally ground the new nation. While Ambedkar devotes quite a bit of scholarly attention to demonstrating the moral deficiencies of Vedic Hinduism in much of his work, many of his early independence-period Hindu contemporaries were also acutely aware of the need to address potential deficiencies in the ethical frame offered by their brand of Vedāntin-inspired Hinduism, which has become the dominant expression of “Hindu” philosophy and theology. In light of these Neo-Hindu attempts to excuse caste in Vedic texts Ambedkar’s criticism cannot be totally dismissed as reactionary hyperbole. Vivekananda was particularly troubled by the need to assert the presence of some type of universalizing ethic for compassionate action based on the non-duality of the Vedāntin philosophy that he was exporting to the West. While Vivekananda’s presentation of Śaṅkara’s monism interfaced nicely with Anglo-European philosophical inquiry, he recognized a need for creative reconstruction to address Christian concerns regarding the obvious eremitic implications

484 For some examples of this see: B. R Ambedkar, “Riddles in Hinduism: An Exposition to Enlighten the Masses,” in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, ed. Vasant Moon, vol. 4 (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014); Ambedkar, Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India.

485 The affinity for Vedānta by its Neo-Hindu interpreters is certainly no surprise and, in some ways, it was a perfectly natural choice. Śaṅkara’s brand of Advaita Vedānta was particularly influential in the late classical period and spurred numerous commentarial traditions whose almost total influence has reached up to the present. It succeeded in effectively refuting its opponents or, perhaps more commonly, in absorbing into its own system those aspects of competing philosophies that suited its interests, such as Śāṃkhya’s ontology, Nyāya’s epistemology, Yoga’s methods toward and concern for mokṣa, and Buddhism’s philosophical articulation of non-duality. Because of Vedānta’s success, this practice of co-option has rendered access to the views of earlier schools, as they themselves articulated them, difficult. For their part, the Neo-Hindu reformers’ (perhaps natural) choice to use Vedānta to build their modernist response to the influence of their Christian colonizers brought with it certain challenges. In particular, the conservative and characteristically South Asian nature of Vedānta needed to be domesticated by the Neo-Hindu reformers in order for it to effectively meet and counter dominant Christian and Western interlocutors. In other words, Vedānta needed to be universalized in order to speak to the extra-Vedic world. See, Gerald Larson, Śāṃkhya: A Dualist Tradition in Indian Philosophy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).
of Vedānta’s introspective monistic inquiry into the nature of reality, as Ambedkar also notes in his criticisms of Hindu sādhus explored above.\textsuperscript{486} Vivekananda identifies the famous passage from the \textit{Chāndogya Upaniṣad} “\textit{tat tvam asi},” (you are that) as the ground of his ethic, arguing that this Upaniṣadic statement implies that “you shall love your neighbor as yourselves, because you are your neighbor, and mere illusion makes you believe your neighbor is something different from your yourselves.”\textsuperscript{487} In his analysis of this unprecedented move by Vivekananda, Paul Hacker demonstrates both the novelty of this effort and the ways in which the idea for it came directly from Vivekananda’s interaction with the West. In fact, Hacker proposes a convincing reconstruction of the exact origins of Vivekananda’s Vedāntin ethical foundation, suggesting that the German philosopher Paul Deussen, whose unsuccessful attempts (according to Hacker) to find an ethical framework in Advaita Vedānta, inadvertently planted the idea directly into Vivekananda’s mind.\textsuperscript{488}

As Ambedkar suggests above, the shame of untouchability prevents the “new modern Hindu” from publicly discussing caste for “fear of letting the foreigner know that Hindu Civilization can be guilty of such a vicious and infamous system.” At stake for

\textsuperscript{486} See Anantanand Rambachan, \textit{The Advaita Worldview: God, World, and Humanity}, SUNY Series in Religious Studies (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 1–2. Rambachan argues that Vivekananda and other later Vedāntins misrepresented Śaṅkara’s epistemology by subordinating the authority of scripture to personal experience. This allowed them a method to accept those aspects of Śaṅkara’s thought that they liked, and reject those did not. Rambachan states, “Vivekananda is one of the most influential interpreters in recent history of Hinduism. He champions the argument that the authoritative means of knowledge, in Advaita, is a special experience that reveals, beyond doubt, the truths of the universe and human existence. The teachings of the Vedas, according to Vivekananda, possess only hypothetical or provisional validity and need the verification that personal experience provides. He subordinates the scripture to experience.”


\textsuperscript{488} Ibid, 278 – 279.
Vivekananda and the Neo-Hindus in the articulation of their new Hindu ethics was the integrity of Hindu philosophy on the world stage and the foundation for a unique cultural, philosophical, and religious Hindu nation, one that did not need to turn to their former colonizers for legitimacy. Both Ambedkar and his neo-Hindu contemporaries recognized that concepts such as dharma, and karma, and saṃyāsa needed to be “modernized.” For Vivekananda this meant reconstructing them in order to play nicely with Christian imperatives to “love thy neighbor,” no matter how imperfectly the colonizers actually practiced their ideal ethical principles. For Ambedkar though, these concepts take on new meaning by his move to reclaim them and re-present them from a critical Buddhist perspective and, in distinction with his neo-Hindu contemporaries, is not hampered by a project that seeks to glorify the ancient Vedic tradition. He is happy to openly turn to Western sources for support, such as Dewey and Marx, in his rehabilitation of Indian Buddhism. Ambedkar’s argument that in its classical (pre-Neo-Hindu form) Advaita Vedānta makes no claims about the necessity of ethical action for liberation finds support from Hacker, who argues philologically, “before the beginning of European influence, tat tvam asi was certainly not…used in an ethical sense…” and logically, the universal One is to be reached not by ethical identification, but by intellectual abstraction. There is no route from the monism of consciousness to ethics. As Albert Schweitzer rightly said, it is supra-ethical. The view that my cognition is a manifestation of a universal cognitive substance which is the only reality, and that all volition and


action are unreal objective appearance, cannot be the basis any volitional behavior toward another.491

Finding ethics in Vedānta is an ongoing project, as Anantanand Rambachan, himself a scholar and practitioner of Advaita Vedānta, has demonstrated in his work. In it, he attempts to clean up this dissonance by first acknowledging the reality of Vivekananda’s creation of a Europeanized Vedānta, which he acknowledges has no referent in traditional sources, then, subsequently, by engaging in a project of exegesis, or “theological reconstruction,” he attempts to answer the question of “whether or not the Advaita tradition can attractively articulate a purpose for the world and life in it, or whether it lends itself only to the mode of renunciation and world-negation.492 Is the purpose of life enriched or does it end with the understanding of non-duality?”493 As his address to the Jat-Pak-Todak Mandal and his well-documented clashes with Gandhi would suggest, Ambedkar’s response to this is that while he is sympathetic to this project, it may be a case of too-little-too-late to make any real difference. Ambedkar is happy to provide example after example from Brahminical texts that support his claim that

491 Ibid, 277.


493 In effect, Rambachan takes seriously the implications of Hacker’s critique of Vivekananda’s need to find an ethical framework based on tat tvam asī and in response he proposes a work-around that instead attempts to fill in the gaps. He rejects Hacker’s conclusion that an ethics based on Advaita monism is impossible. He attempts to find in Upaniṣadic sources some ground for reconstructing an Advaita moral theory but in doing so implicitly acknowledges that the modern voices that point out Vedāntin problems with regard to caste and gender, and the lack of scaffolding to address those deficiencies, are perhaps on point. For Rambachan caste and gender oppression have been allowed to persist due to a Vedānta based on an interpretation of the Upaniṣads that justifies those practices, but it is not resigned to those realities. Its strengths in non-dual philosophy can be used to create a new articulation of what it means to live a moral life from a Vedāntin perspective. Ibid, 6.
Hinduism is a “religion of rules,” and of those rules, caste is foundational.\textsuperscript{494} For Ambedkar, a religion of rules is simply not ethically-oriented by nature. He contrasts this with \textit{Dhamma}, and argues that morality in Vedic Hinduism amounts to,

\begin{quote}
Be good to your neighbor, because you are both children of God. That is the argument of religion. Every religion preaches morality, but morality is not the root of religion. It is a wagon attached to it. It is attached and detached as the occasion requires. The action of morality in the functioning of religion is therefore causal and occasional. Morality in religion is therefore not effective.\textsuperscript{495}
\end{quote}

On the other hand, morality \textit{is}, in essence, \textit{Dhamma} for Ambedkar. He states,

\begin{quote}
Morality is Dhamma and Dhamma is morality. In other words, in Dhamma morality takes the place of God, although there is no God in Dhamma. In Dhamma there is no place for prayers, pilgrimages, rituals, ceremonies, or sacrifices. Morality is the essence of Dhamma. Without it there is no Dhamma. Morality in Dhamma arises from the direct necessity for man to love man. It does not require the sanction of God. It is not to please God that man has to be moral. It is for his own good that man has to love man.\textsuperscript{496}
\end{quote}

Ambedkar is contrasting Brahminical Hinduism here, along with its modern reformers including Gandhi and Vivekananda, the Arya Samaj etc., with his new Buddhism. For Ambedkar, a religion of rules, like Brahminical Hinduism, centered on caste and prayers, pilgrimages, rituals, ceremonies, and sacrifices, has at its center, not human relationships and community, but God and rules. Hacker, like Ambedkar before him, gets right to the heart of this issue of whether morality can be found in Vedic tradition as articulated by the Neo-Vedāntins, stating, “the student of the history of Indian thought must ask himself

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{494} See B.R. Ambedkar, \textit{Revolution and Counter Revolution in Ancient India}; Ambedkar, \textit{Annihilation of Caste}.
\item \textsuperscript{495} Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, \textit{The Buddha and His Dhamma}, 171–72.
\item \textsuperscript{496} Ibid, 172.
\end{itemize}
whether this modification is a straight prolongation of the lines traced out by the ancient masters of the monistic Vedânta, or whether there is a break between the ideas of the old school and Vivekananda’s presentation of the Vedânta.” And he concludes unequivocally, and implicitly in agreement with Ambedkar, that, based on rigorous philological analysis, “the result of such scrutiny is that there is actually a break.” 497 Both Ambedkar and the Neo-Vedântins recognize the problem of locating ethics in the Brahminical religious idiom. As Rambachan notes regarding the persistence of the issue, “It remains a matter of concern that the greatest historical exponent of this teaching remained untroubled by social inequality, a contradiction that is still not uncommon. There is still a tendency to offer mild explanations for Śaṅkara’s attitude.” 498 For Ambedkar, the whole of the śramaṇa movement, and the rise of early Buddhism in particular, are themselves a recognition of the impossibility of rescuing ethics from the Vedic conception of moral-action-as-ritual-activity or orthodox views of action as caste-bound dharmic duty.

_Saṅgha as a Model Community_

In most Euro-American accounts, of the three jewels of the Buddhist tradition, the _saṅgha_ is often given short shrift in favor of a presentation of the jewels of Buddha and _dharma_. Explorations of the jewel of _Dharma_ has allowed for fruitful academic cross-cultural philosophical investigation and psychological self-help applications in popular


approaches to Buddhism. The jewel of the *Buddha* is also given more weight in comparison. The idea of a scientifically compatible Buddha who, for the educated and often elite Western receivers of the tradition, can play the foil to the culturally familiar Christian creator God as well as a deified messianic Christ figure that has played a central role in the construction of Buddhism in the West.\(^\text{499}\) According to Ambedkar though, the jewel that takes center stage in his modernist reception of the Buddhist tradition is actually, in some ways, the *saṅgha*. This shift in emphasis from other English-language modernist receptions of Buddhism is perhaps one of the reasons for the relative dearth of literature on Ambedkarite Buddhism in the West. Where Ambedkar sees the heart of the tradition, Western receivers often offer little more than a passing glance in their quest to mine the tradition for its wisdom teachings on liberation for the individual seeking enlightenment. For Ambedkar, the *saṅgha* becomes the vehicle through which the work of social transformation, his ultimate goal, can actually take place.

The influence of Hammalawa Saddhatissa on Ambedkar’s approach to Buddhism in the 1940’s, when Saddhatissa acted as advisor to Ambedkar, can clearly be heard in Ambedkar’s approach to ethics and the *saṅgha* in his writing.\(^\text{500}\) In particular, echoes of Saddhatissa’s emphasis on the universality of the Buddha’s ethical teaching and that the Buddha’s teachings on morality were not ancillary to a more important philosophical project as articulated in the *dhamma* are evident in Ambedkar’s work. Hallisey notes of Saddhatissa’s work,


Indeed, the last sentence of *Buddhist Ethics* is a ringing affirmation of this practical integration seen as an intent of the Buddha himself: The Buddha’s teaching ‘began with the most elementary of the moralities, and proceeded *without a break* to the realization of the ultimate goal: the realization of Nibbāna with the realization of the Four Noble Truths’ (p 149, emphasis added). In this respect Ven. Saddhatissa is quite at odds with many other modern interpreters of Buddhist practice, who tend to see a sharp divide between the practices of the virtuoso monks and everyone else.\(^501\)

Likewise, Ambedkar is keen to keep morality at the center of his presentation of the Buddhist tradition and to argue that the monk’s role is much more integrated into the larger Buddhist community than often thought, as will be explored below. Ambedkar opens his discussion of the Buddhist *saṅgha* in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* by noting the ways in which the Buddha’s idea of *parivrāja* differs from that of the “old Parivrajakas.” He notes,

> The Buddhist Bhikku is primarily a Parivrajaka. This institution of Parivrajaka is older than that of the Buddhist Bhikku. The old Parivrajakas were persons who had abandoned family life, and were a mere floating body of wanderers. They roamed about with a view to ascertain the truth by coming into contact with various teachers and philosophers, listening to their discourses, entering into discussion on matters of ethics, philosophy, nature, mysticism, and so on… These old type of Parivrajakas had no Sangh, had no rules of discipline, and had no ideal to strive for. It was for the first time that the Blessed Lord organized his followers into a Sangh or fraternity, and gave them rules of discipline, and set before them an ideal to pursue and realise.\(^502\)

Ambedkar is keen to contrast, as he presents it, the individual-focused practice of renunciation exemplified by the wandering *sādhu* tradition with that of his socially-oriented Buddha. Ambedkar contends that the Buddha’s practice of renunciation is special because for the first time it centers human relationships and community, or, as

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\(^501\) Ibid, xvi-xvii.

Ambedkar frames it in Enlightenment inspired terminology, “fraternity.” In this sense the Buddha’s followers are not renouncing society writ large, but society as conceived and ordered by the Brahminical system. To renounce in this context means to consciously form a new social order that centers a relational morality in place of the individual path to personal liberation as practiced by previous renunciates.

Following the vinaya, Ambedkar divides the Buddhist saṅgha into two parts. First, he describes the “shramanera” as anyone who takes the ten precepts and the threefold refuge.\(^\text{503}\) This person follows a particular bhikkhu, or fully ordained person, and can leave the community at any time to become a lay person again. The aspiring bhikkhu, on the other hand, first takes parivrāja and then, after a period of training, can request that the saṅgha accept him as a fully ordinated renunciate. Ambedkar’s taxonomical description of the Buddha’s saṅgha follows the description found in the Mahāvagga and notes that while the śrāmeṇera takes the precepts and is obligated to follow them, the bhikkhu, by contrast, takes the precepts as vows, which must not be broken. “If he breaks them, he becomes liable to punishment.”\(^\text{504}\)

Where Ambedkar’s presentation takes a unique turn is in his attempts to answer a question regarding the Buddha’s intended audience for his ethical teachings. Did the Buddha intend his teachings on prescriptive action only for the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis (female renunciants) or did he intend for those teachings to apply to householders as

\(^503\) “The entrants into the Sangh were divided into two classes: Shrameneras and Bhikkhus. Anyone below twenty could become a Shramenera. By taking the Trisaranas and by taking the ten precepts, a boy becomes a Shramenera.” Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, 223; Rathore and Verma note that Ambedkar is referencing Mahāvagga I: 56 here.

\(^504\) Ibid, 223.
well? Ambedkar seeks to demonstrate that the Buddha had householders as well as monastics in mind. This idea is central to Ambedkar’s reconceptualization of the saṅgha. He intends to make the saṅgha into an exemplary community that can serve as a guide for the wider society. He envisions it as necessarily engaged. He notes,

…the Blessed Lord also knew that merely preaching the Dhamma to the common men would not result in the creation of that ideal society based on righteousness. An ideal must be practical, and must be shown to be practicable. Then and only then do people strive after it and try to realize it. To create this striving, it is necessary to have a picture of a society working on the basis of the ideal, and thereby proving to the common man that the ideal was not impracticable but on the other hand realizable. The Sangh is the model of a society realizing the Dhamma preached by the Blessed Lord. This is the reason why the Blessed Lord made the distinction between the Bhikkhu and the Upasaka.\footnote{Ibid, 232.}

And in “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion,” he states,

What was the necessity for creating a separate society of Bhikkhus? One purpose was to set up a society which would live up to the Buddhist ideal embodied in the principles of Buddhism and serve as a model to the laymen. Buddha knew that it was not possible for a common man to realize the Buddhist ideal. But He also wanted that the common man should know what the ideal was and also wanted there should be placed before the common man a society of men who were bound to practice His ideals. That is why He created the Bhikkhu Sangha and bound it down by the rules of Vinaya.\footnote{B.R. Ambedkar, “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion,” Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Volume 17, Part 2, 106. https://www.mea.gov.in/Images/attach/amb/Volume_17_02.pdf.} [italics in the original]

For Ambedkar, the proper motivation for joining the saṅgha, either as a śrāmeṣṭera or a fully ordained bhikkhu, is to provide service to the world, not to retire from the world and seek personal liberation. It is worth noting that Ambedkar’s reconceptualization of the saṅgha here is similar in some ways to other twentieth century Buddhist modernist movements in Asia, including the work of A.T. Ariyaratne and the Sarvodaya
Shramandana movement in Sri Lanka and Sulak Sivaraksa’s and Buddhadasa Bhikkhu’s influence in Thailand, among others.\textsuperscript{507} For Ambedkar, the Buddhist saṅgha is the social organization \textit{par excellence}. It required of its members a commitment to equality and a simplicity in living that could serve as a model to all. Ambedkar is keen to dispel what he sees as common misunderstandings that the Buddha’s teachings were intended only for the bhikkhu. He argues that while references to the bhikkhu are found all over the canonical material, his hermeneutic of suspicion is applied to make the case that a rational, care-oriented Buddha would have certainly had the laity in mind when presenting his teachings. He points to the five precepts, the eightfold path, and the \textit{pāramitās} as evidence in themselves that the Buddha was primarily concerned with the whole of his followers, not simply with those who had received full ordination. He states,

Merely because the sermons were addressed to the gathering of the Bhikkhus, it must not be supposed that what was preached was intended to apply to them only. What was preached applied to both. That the Buddha had the laity in mind when he preached: (i) the Panchasila, (ii) The Ashtanga Marga, and (iii) The Paramitas, is quite clear from the very nature of those things; and no argument, really speaking, is necessary. It is for those who have not left their homes and who are engaged in active life that the Panchasila, Ashtanga Marga, and Paramitas are essential… When the Buddha, therefore, started preaching his Dhamma, it must have been principally for the laity.\textsuperscript{508}

Ambedkar notes that the historical practice of privileging the saṅgha resulted in an only loosely organized laity. He argues that while there was a formal ordination ceremony for joining the saṅgha, there did not exist a similar path of commitment for the laity. A natural consequence of this, he argues, was that members of the Buddhist laity tended

\textsuperscript{507} See Queen and King, \textit{Engaged Buddhism}.

\textsuperscript{508} Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, \textit{The Buddha and His Dhamma}, 238.
toward opportunistic religious seeking. This failure of the Buddhist tradition to create a commitment ceremony, or Dhamma-Diksha as Ambedkar terms it, was a contributing factor to the decline of Buddhism in India. In his inclusion of the additional twenty-two vows during his Dhamma-Diksha ceremony in Nagpur in 1956, Ambedkar’s attempts to correct this oversight and commit the laity to the Buddhist teachings can be seen. Ambedkar is linking his presentation of the dharma here with his vision for the saṅgha. He seeks to demonstrate that the dharma and the saṅgha are inextricably linked and that without one, you cannot have the other. In his commentary on Saddhatissa’s similar claim, Hallisey notes that there is abundant support for this position in the Buddhist literature. Like Ambedkar, he turns to the Dhammapada to demonstrate that the Buddha’s moral teachings are essential on the path to awakening,

Refraining from what is detrimental,
The attainment of what is wholesome,
The purification of one’s mind:
This is the instruction of the Awakened Ones.  

Charles Hallisey, intro to Saddhatissa, Buddhist Ethics, xvii; verse 183 of the Dhammapada,

On the lack of Dhamma-Diksha, Ambedkar states, “This was a grave omission. It was one of the causes of the which ultimately led to the downfall of Buddhism in India. For this absence of the initiation ceremony left the laity free to wander from one religion to another and, worse still, follow them at one and the same time.” Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, 238.
material and emotional suffering that will result from the decision to wage war. Likewise, in regard to the motivation for the bhikkhu to take parivṛāja he states,

A Bhikkhu leaves his home. But he does not retire from the world. He leaves home so that he may have the freedom and the opportunity to serve those who are attached to their homes, but whose life is full of sorrow, misery, and unhappiness and who cannot help themselves. Compassion, which is the essences of Dhamma, requires that everyone shall love and serve, and the Bhikkhu is not exempt from it. A Bhikkhu who is indifferent to the woes of mankind, however perfect in self-culture, is not at all a Bhikkhu. He may be something, else but he is not a Bhikkhu.511

While Ambedkar emphasizes the social responsibilities and the role of compassion in the ethical imperative of the monk, he does not reject the role of personal religious cultivation completely. He does emphasize those practices of “self-cultivation” insofar as they are integrated into the creation of morally-oriented Buddhism. In the story of the Siddhārtha’s path to Buddhahood, for example, Ambedkar presents Siddhārtha as inducing “his companions to join him in practising meditation.”512 He states, “Siddharth believed that meditation on right subjects led to development of the spirit of universal love.”513 And at the end of the biographical section of The Buddha and His Dhamma, Ambedkar states clearly that mental self-cultivation is essential to the Buddhist path. He states, “if mind is comprehended, all things are comprehended. Mind is the leader of all of its faculties… The first thing to attend to is the culture of the mind.” He goes on, “Whatsoever there is of good, connected with good, belonging to good – all issues from


512 Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, 9.

513 Ibid, 9.
mind… the cleaning of the mind is, therefore, the essence of religion.”514 Pradeep Gokhale has noted the ways in which Ambedkar is at times charged with ignoring the role of meditation in his teachings. He has suggested that Ambedkar’s subordination of the role of meditation has parallels in other Asian Buddhist modernist movements, and notes,

Though Ambedkar gives subordinate status to meditation, it can be doubted whether he was radically opposed to it. Social issues are central for Buddhism as interpreted by Ambedkar and meditation can play only an instrumental role according to him. Bhikkhu according to him is a model social worker. According to Ambedkar’s analysis the Bhikkhu should discharge both the functions: practicing self-culture and providing service and guidance to people. (Ambedkar, 1974: V.II.4). 'Practicing self-culture' includes meditation. For Ambedkar self-culture is necessary, but not enough; it should be translated in the social activity.515

Gokhale suggests that Ambedkar’s approach to meditation can be compared to Sulak Sivaraksa’s and is consonant with other engaged Buddhist approaches in its presentation of meditation as supplemental to social engagement. As Gokhale notes, Sivaraksa states, “we should not treat meditation as a form of escapism or personal salvation. Rather mental training must awaken our wisdom; so we will be able to wisely engage with society and deal with the multiple crises of greed hatred and delusion in the present.”516 This is similar to Ambedkar’s presentation of prajñā. Ambedkar’s Buddha states, “the Path of Virtue must, therefore, be subject to the test of Prajna, which is another name for understanding and intelligence.”517 And,

514 Ibid, 62.


517 Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, The Buddha and His Dhamma, 74.
I premise that there must be knowledge and consciousness of what wrong conduct is, how it arises; similarly there must also be knowledge and consciousness of what is right conduct and wrong conduct. Without such knowledge there cannot be real goodness, though the act may be good. That is why I say Prajna is a necessary virtue.  

**Saṅgha as an Answer to Marx**

This approach to the saṅgha as an example for the Buddhist laity and a model for the world is a major point of contact between Ambedkar’s Buddhism and his affinity for Marxist thought. When Ambedkar evaluates these two approaches, he ultimately concludes that the Buddhist approach to building an egalitarian society offers clear advantages. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma* Ambedkar famously asks, “did the Buddha have no social message?...Could the Buddha answer Karl Marx?” He of course answers these questions in the affirmative, though his form of Buddhism resembles something of, as Aakash Singh Rathore has called it, a “Marxist Buddhism.”  

Ambedkar identified four key points of overlap between Marxist thought and his reading of Buddhism:

1. The function of philosophy is to reconstruct the world and not to waste its time in explaining the origin of the world.
2. That there is a conflict of interest between class and class.
3. That private ownership of property brings power to one class and sorrow to another through exploitation.
4. That it is necessary for the good of society that the sorrow be removed by the abolition of private property.
In addressing these four points, Ambedkar turns primarily to the Buddhist *saṅgha* to demonstrate that while the ideals of Marx and the Buddha appear to be in accord with each other, it is in their implementation that they differ. In particular, on the third point, Ambedkar refers to a *sutta* passage where the Buddha explains to his disciple, Ānanda, that personal possessions give rise to negative mental states, such as avarice, and for this reason private property is problematic.\(^{521}\) On the fourth point, Ambedkar points to the rules regarding personal possessions for Buddhist monks found in the *vinaya* to support his claim that Buddhists walk the walk better than their Marxist counterparts,

The rules of the Bhikshu Sangh will serve as the best testimony on the subject. According to the rules a Bhikku can have private property only in the following eight articles and no more. These eight articles are:

1. Three robes or pieces of cloth for daily wear (1, 2, and 3)
2. a girdle for the loins
3. an alms-bowl
4. a razor
5. a needle
6. a water strainer

Further a Bhikku was completely forbidden to receive gold or silver for fear that with gold or silver he might buy something beside the eight things he is permitted to have. These rules are far more rigorous than are to be found in communism in Russia.\(^{522}\)

The Buddha, for Ambedkar, consciously created a society based on the principles of egalitarianism and one that rejected private property. While not absolutely opposed to violence where the ends justify it,\(^{523}\) Ambedkar’s Buddha is committed to the practice of

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521 Ibid, 446.
522 Ibid, 446.
collective self-cultivation, where each member of the society engages in personal moral
cultivation to contribute to the end of a just moral order. After a lengthy and detailed
exposition of the Five Disciplines, the Eightfold Path, and the Six Pāramitās, presented as
the means by which the Buddhist path reaches its egalitarian ends, he argues that the
communist means are insufficient,

It is clear that the means adopted by the Buddha were to convert a man by
changing his moral disposition to follow the path voluntarily. The means
adopted by the Communists are equally clear, short and swift. They are (1)
Violence and (2) Dictatorship of the Proletariat. The Communists say that
these are the only two means of establishing communism. The first is
violence. Nothing short of it will suffice to break up the existing system.
The other is dictatorship of the proletariat. Nothing short of it will suffice
to continue the new system. It is now clear what are the similarities and
differences between Buddha and Karl Marx. The differences are about the
means. The end is common to both.524

As Singh Rathore notes, Ambedkar is reading Marx sympathetically in his
characterization of Buddhist and Marxist shared ends with differing means. Reading
Ambedkar more broadly, his commitment to religion as foundational to a just society puts
him at serious odds with Marx. Ambedkar attempts to salvage the relationship by noting
that Marx’s criticism of religion can be applied to religions like Christianity and
Hinduism, but are not appropriate against Buddhism, with its commitment to rationality
and its compatibility with science and materialism. He states, “Their hatred to Religion is
so deep seated that they will not even discriminate between religions which are helpful to
Communism and religions which are not. The Communists have carried their hatred of
Christianity to Buddhism without waiting to examine the difference between the two.”
For Ambedkar, Buddhism, particularly his reading of it, is special and the saṅgha is an

524 Ibid, 450.
exemplary site for the ways in which religion can model the destruction of private property and the expansion of the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity. As Gokhale has noted,

The Buddha exhibited an ideal form of social life through the establishment of the Sangha in which the members possess the bare minimum private belongings. Ambedkar assimilated this ideal with the Marxist ideal of abolishing private property. Ambedkar was clearly aware of this duality of approaches in Buddhism and he seemed to appreciate both. In fact this was the question of a possible tension among the two principles and of cutting a balance between them. Ambedkar seems to have believed that the balance between liberty and equality can be reached through fraternity which was another name of the Buddhist principle of Maitrī.525

While Ambedkar shared Marx’s concern for the alleviation of economic inequality and the class conflict associated with the rise of capitalism, Ambedkar’s principal concern was always the annihilation of caste.526 For Ambedkar, caste represented the fundamental


526 For a thorough look at the ways in which Ambedkar’s thought both builds on and critiques Marx see Gopal Guru, “Neo-Buddhism, Marxism and the Caste Question in India,” in Gokhale, Classical Buddhism, Neo-Buddhism and the Question of Caste, 111–26. Guru notes, “Ambedkar suggests the social as an initial condition and ethics as the essential condition for the annihilation of social relations based on caste-induced hierarchy. Buddhism for him provides both social as well as ethical inputs for such a project. In a Marxist scheme, however, it is the dismantling of material structures that would lead to the resultant destruction of the caste system. Marx’s The Future Results of British Rule in India (1853) does mention caste, though a class perspective will eventually abolish caste according to him. But he does treat caste as hereditary, exploitative and based on obsolete divisions in a premodern economy. His distinction between manual and mental labour is perhaps a little helpful here. Ambedkar is well aware that this would not happen—his own experience of suffering caste discrimination despite so-called caste mobility shows as much. Here lies the basic difference in the methods Marx and Ambedkar suggested to address the question of caste annihilation. It, in fact, is less methodological and more a question of strategy. Ambedkar’s response to the annihilation of caste can be understood using the metaphor of engineering. Engineering, at least in its less advanced phase, would suggest starting the demolition of a dilapidated structure from the top floor. A simple, mechanical reading of Marx could argue that if the demolition of the structure starts from the base, then the superstructure will automatically collapse. Similarly, once the material base is changed, caste as a superstructure will consequently be evaporated. Ambedkar treats the four-varna system as the four-storied building whose top floor is occupied by Brahmins. Hence, he starts the demolition at the top. But he does not maintain such a mechanical understanding throughout. He argues that on every floor, there is an element of Brahminism. Ambedkar treats Brahminism as a varna ideology that operates through several
original sin of Brahminical India and until its foundations could be properly and
thoroughly disrupted, no real progress could possibly occur. In this respect, Ambedkar
notes that the Buddhist *saṅgha* mainly arose as a corrective to the Brahminical order.
Where Brahminism replicated itself along patriarchal lines, conferred by birth right,
initiation into the Buddhist *saṅgha* was voluntary and open to all. In the section “The
Bhikkhu and the Brahmin” in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, he asks, “Is the Bhikkhu the
same as the Brahmin?,” and notes that this is certainly not the case, as the “brahmin is
born” while the “Bhikkhu is made.” The brahmin, as Ambedkar describes him, is
primarily concerned with ceremonial and ritual observations related to life cycle events
which must be performed because of subscription to sin-based theological principles. The
brahmin cannot be unmade, as he notes “once a Brahmin always a Brahmin.” A
bhikkhu or bhikkhuni on the other hand is made, and therefore can be unmade if he or she
behaves in a way that violates their vows. A bhikkhu must undergo moral and mental
training before he is accepted into the *saṅgha*, while the brahmin is a brahmin simply by
virtue of birth and “all that is expected of him is to know his religious lore.” Perhaps
most interestingly, Ambedkar notes the ways in which community and its relationship to

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528 Ibid.

529 Ibid.
property that distinguishes the Buddhist renunciate from their Brahminist counterparts. He states,

A Brahmin is free to acquire [an] unlimited amount of property for himself. A Bhikkhu, on the hand, cannot. This is no small difference. Property is the severest limitation upon the mental and moral independence of man, both in respect of thought and action. It produces a conflict between the two. That is why the Brahmin is always opposed to change. For, to him a change means loss of power and loss of self. A Bhikkhu, having no property, in mentally and morally free. In his case, there are no personal interests which can stand in the way of honesty and integrity. 530

The role of the community of bhikkhus and bhikkunis in keeping each other honest and in providing companionship is also a point of contrast that Ambedkar draws out between them and the brahmin who is an “individual by himself” despite his caste identity. 531

Women in the Saṅgha

While contemporary readers may take note of Ambedkar’s tendency to default to traditional epicene masculine pronouns, as was common practice in his time, his awareness of gender inequity was nonetheless markedly progressive for his historical moment. Drawing on the tradition of the non-Brahmin equality movement instigated by Savitribai and Jyotiba Phule in nineteenth century Mahārāṣtra, Ambedkar’s mobilizing efforts amounted to a broad tent movement that reached out to marginalized people in terms of caste, class and gender and as such it was the first successful large scale mass mobilization movement of untouchables across India. 532 In Ambedkar’s early work,

530 Ibid.

531 Ibid.

532 Pawar and Moon, *We Also Made History*, 21.
*Castes in India,* he argues that functionally, the practice of endogamy is the key defining feature of caste and as such he suggests that the control of women is fundamental to the maintenance of the caste system. Because caste is principally about regulating and limiting marriage, and there are only so many available men or women for marriage at any given time, the policing of women’s life choices became essential. He argues that practices like *sati* (widow burning), enforced widowhood, or childhood marriage arrangements arose as necessary practices for the maintenance of caste. He points to the *Manusmṛiti* frequently to highlight the clearly prescribed rules that outline who is allowed to marry whom and he emphasizes the ways in which women are described as property in the text. For Ambedkar, to truly understand caste in India, an appreciation of the way in which the subjugation of women is at the base is necessary. As Pratima Pardeshi has noted regarding the regulation of women’s bodies in the maintenance of caste,

> These practices are exploitative of women and thus Ambedkar underlines the fact that castes are maintained through the sexual exploitation of women. It is only through the regulation and control of women’s sexuality that the closed character of the castes can be maintained; in this sense, he argues that women are the gateways to the caste system.\(^5^3^4\)

And again, in highlighting the ways that Ambedkar’s anti-caste position is also necessarily feminist,

> The subordination of women will not automatically end with the end of capitalism. Ambedkar argues that to achieve this purpose the caste system and patriarchy will have to be attacked. The subordination of women cannot come to an end in a caste-based society and it is therefore women


who must lead the struggle for the annihilation of caste. He sees organic links between the struggle against the caste system and the struggle for the liberation of women. Thus, the idea of women’s liberation is intrinsic to his ideology and not a token add-on.535

As the first Law Minister of India, Ambedkar’s efforts to advance the Hindu Code Bill in 1950 sought to establish protections and rights for women in the areas of marriage and divorce, guardianship and adoption, and inheritance and property ownership, all of which were severely regulated in pre-independence India. He undertook extensive study of the textual and theological justifications behind the orthodox Hindu resistance and highlighted the ways in which Hindu textual appeals were illiberal. In short, as Pardeshi has noted, he sought to make political and public what had been personal and private.536 This was met with such stiff resistance from his political opponents that his version of the bill was ultimately defeated and it marked the end of his political career.537

535 Ibid, 144.

536 Pardeshi notes, “His position seems to take the same stance as the feminist commitment that “the personal is the political.” He sought to bring into the public sphere, within the auspices of the legal system, the atrocities that women suffered as private within the confines of the home. Issues of bigamy, maintenance, etc., were all brought into the public debate. He wished to transform these matters of the private into political issues and to this end drafted the Hindu Code Bill (2003a). His journey of codifying the Law is one that sought to delimit the private sphere and make more encompassing the public sphere. Share in property for women, and the rights to seek divorce and marry according to one’s will were all issues that come up in the Bill. These stood in opposition to the prevalent familial abuse of women. Even within the political sphere, he was opposed to private ownership of land and stood for its socialization. Thus, his views on the public/private and on political issues kept with those on the woman question… He opposed the law of Manu because it subordinates and enslaves women. He preferred the Buddhist non-Brahmanical tradition because it grants freedom to women and gives them access to knowledge. He, thus, believed that any social transformation is incomplete until gender discrimination in that society comes to an end. Pratima Pardeshi, “Ambedkar’s Critique of Patriarchy,” in Gokhale, Classical Buddhism, Neo-Buddhism and the Question of Caste, 144.

537 For details of the Hindu Code Bill proceedings, see Keer, Dr. Ambedkar, 417–25.
Given Ambedkar’s deep abiding concern for the rights of women and his awareness of the ways in which patriarchy was inextricably linked to the maintenance of the dominant Hindu social order, he was also concerned about the patriarchal history of the Buddhist tradition. In a piece published in the *Maha Bodhi Journal* to what he perceived to be unfair attacks on Buddhist gender inequity entitled, “The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman,” Ambedkar mounts a strong defense of the Buddhist tradition’s record on women.\(^{538}\) In it, he first considers the ways in which the Buddha could be found guilty of oppressing women. First, he turns to a passage in the *Mahāparanibandhāna Sutta* that suggests the Buddha viewed women as objects of potential defilement.\(^{539}\) Ambedkar argues, first, that this passage should be regarded as a later interpolation by male monastics for two reasons. First, he appeals to reason and notes that because of the large gap in time between the events of the *sutta* and when they were actually written down there is ample occasion for error. This is all the more likely, he suggests, when considering that it was primarily male monastics writing for a male monastic audience.

\(^{538}\) Ambedkar states, “In the journal of the Maha Bodhi for March 1950 there appeared an article on “The Position of Women in Hinduism and Buddhism” by Lama Govinda. His article was a rejoinder to an article which had appeared in Eve’s Weekly of January 21, 1950, and in which the Buddha was charged as being the man whose teachings were mainly responsible for the downfall of women in India. Lama Govinda did his duty as every Buddhist must in coming forward to refute the charge. But the matter cannot be allowed to rest there. This is not the first time such a charge is made against the Buddha. It is often made by interested parties who cannot bear his greatness, and comes from quarters weightier in authority than the writer an Eve’s Weekly can claim. It is, therefore, necessary to go to the root of the matter and examine the very foundation of this oft repeated charge. The charge is so grave and so vile that the readers of the Maha Bodhi will, I am sure, welcome further examination of it.” B. R Ambedkar, “The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman,” in *Dr. Babasaheb Writings and Speeches*, ed. Hari Narake et al., vol. 17.2 (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2020), 109.

\(^{539}\) The *sutta* passage from Ambedkar’s text:

“How are we to conduct ourselves, (asked Ananda) with regard to womankind? As not seeing them, Ananda. But if we should see them, what are we to do? Not talking, Ananda. But if they should speak to us, Lord, what are we to do? Keep wide awake, Ananda.” Ibid.
After appealing to Caroline Rhys Davids for support, who also expresses suspicion about the providence of the passage in question, he applies his hermeneutic of suspicion,

There is therefore nothing very extravagant in the suggestion that this passage is a later interpolation by the Bhikkhus. In the first place the Sutta Pitaka was not reduced to writing till 400 years had passed after the death of the Buddha. Secondly, the Editors who compiled and edited them were Monks and the Monk Editors compiled and wrote for the Monk. The statement attributed to the Buddha is valuable for a Monk to preserve his rule of celibacy and it is not unlikely for the Monk Editor to interpolate such a rule.

Ambedkar doesn’t stop here though. He then engages in a more rigorous comparative text-historical *sutta* investigation to determine the passage’s authenticity. By comparing other *suttas* in the *Dīgha Nikāya* that contain passages from the *Mahāparanibbāṇa Sutta* he notes that none replicate this particular passage. He also notes that Chinese versions of the *sutta* lack the passage in question.\(^{540}\)

He then turns to some of the charges made against Ananda at the First Council, namely those that suggest it was he who allowed women into the *saṅgha* and as such committed a grave error. Ambedkar again suggests that this position is inconsistent with the actions and words of the Buddha in numerous other places throughout the *sutta* material. He offers various examples, noting,

Where are the facts? Two examples at once come to mind. One is that of Visakha. She was one of the eighty chief disciples of the Buddha with the title of “Chief of Alms-givers”. Did not Visakha at one time go to hear Buddha preach? Did she not enter his monastery? Did the Buddha act towards Visakha in the manner he directed Ananda to act towards women? What did the Bhikkhus present at the meeting do? Did they leave the meeting? The second instance that comes to one’s mind is that of Amrapali of Vaisali. She went to see the Buddha and gave him and his monks an invitation for a meal at her house. She was courtesan. She was

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\(^{540}\) He notes: “…page XXXVIII of the introduction to this Sutta (published in Vol. XI of the S.B.E. by Davids) it appears that there exists a Chinese version of this Sutta. But this Chinese text also does not contain this particular passage.” Ambedkar, “The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman,” 111.
the most beautiful woman in Vaisali. Did the Buddha and the Bhikkhus avoid her? On the other hand they accepted her invitation-rejecting the invitation of the Licchavis who felt quite insulted on that account- and went to her home and partook of her food.\footnote{Ibid, 109.}

While acknowledging that the Buddha did indeed advise the monks to be careful around women, Ambedkar suggests that he did so because his primary concern was with guarding their commitment to celibacy, not with any sense of an inherent inferiority of women.\footnote{He notes, “It is also true that the Buddha was dreadfully keen in maintaining celibacy. He was painfully aware of the fact that, to use his own words, “Women doth stain life of celibacy”. But what did he advise? Did he advise the Bhikkhus to shun all contact with women? Not at all. He never put any such interdict. Far from doing any such thing what he did was to tell the Bhikkhus that whenever they met any women, do ye call up the mother-mind, the sister-mind, or the daughtermind\footnote{Ambedkar reasons, “By entrusting the work of training the Bhikkhunis to the Bhikkhus, their relationship became one of teacher and pupil. Now does not the relationship of teacher and pupil involve some authority for teacher over the pupil and some submission or subordination on the part of the pupil to the teacher? What more did the Buddha do?” B.R. Ambedkar, “The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman,” 116.} as the case may be i.e. regard a woman as you would your own mother, sister or daughter.” Ibid, 114.} In an argument that perhaps holds less water, he reasons that the bhikkhuni saṅgha was made inferior to the bhikkhu saṅgha because of practical concerns regarding the need for the more experienced male monastics to teach the newer, less experienced women, not because they were considered less than the men.\footnote{Ambedkar reasons, “By entrusting the work of training the Bhikkhunis to the Bhikkhus, their relationship became one of teacher and pupil. Now does not the relationship of teacher and pupil involve some authority for teacher over the pupil and some submission or subordination on the part of the pupil to the teacher? What more did the Buddha do?” B.R. Ambedkar, “The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman,” 116.} He saves most of his energy, though, for contrasting the conditions of women in the Brahminical tradition as presented in the Manusmṛiti. He states,

It is important to understand the reason why the Brahmins debarred woman from taking Sannyas because it helps to understand the attitude of the Brahmins towards woman which was in sharp contrast with that of the Buddha. The reason is stated by Manu. It reads as follows : — IX. 18. Women have no right to study the Vedas. That is why their Sanskars (rites) are performed without Veda Mantras. Women have no knowledge of religion because they have no right to know the Vedas. The uttering of the Veda Mantras is useful for removing sin. As women cannot utter the Veda Mantras they are as untruth is. Although Manu was later than the

\footnote{He notes, “It is also true that the Buddha was dreadfully keen in maintaining celibacy. He was painfully aware of the fact that, to use his own words, “Women doth stain life of celibacy”. But what did he advise? Did he advise the Bhikkhus to shun all contact with women? Not at all. He never put any such interdict. Far from doing any such thing what he did was to tell the Bhikkhus that whenever they met any women, do ye call up the mother-mind, the sister-mind, or the daughtermind\footnote{Ambedkar reasons, “By entrusting the work of training the Bhikkhunis to the Bhikkhus, their relationship became one of teacher and pupil. Now does not the relationship of teacher and pupil involve some authority for teacher over the pupil and some submission or subordination on the part of the pupil to the teacher? What more did the Buddha do?” B.R. Ambedkar, “The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman,” 116.} as the case may be i.e. regard a woman as you would your own mother, sister or daughter.” Ibid, 114.}
Buddha, he has enunciated the old view propounded in the older Dhanna Sutras.\textsuperscript{544}

Ambedkar then argues that it is in this context, that of Brahminical oppression of women, that the Buddha’s decision to admit women to the saṅgha should be viewed. He suggests the decision to subordinate women monastics to their male counterparts pales in comparison to the ways in which the Brahminical order subjugates them and that consequently, the Buddha’s decision’s should be viewed in light of his social context,

By admitting women to the life of Parivrajika, the Buddha, by one stroke… gave them the right to knowledge and the right to realize their spiritual potentialities along with man. It was both a revolution and liberation of women in India…This freedom which the Buddha gave to the women of India is a fact of far greater importance and out-weighs whatever stigma which is said to be involved in the subordination of the Bhikkhunis to the Bhikkhu Sangha.\textsuperscript{545}

This concern for the status and place of women in the saṅgha can be found in \textit{The Buddha and His Dhamma} as well. Ambedkar dedicates a chapter to the “conversion of women,” and narrates a version of the admission of women in the saṅgha in direct terms.

In his version, Ananda approaches the Buddha on behalf of the Buddha’s stepmother, Mahaprajapati, to advocate for their admission. The Buddha initially rejects his request, but Ananda repeatedly presses him,

\begin{quote}
Then the Venerable Ananda asked the Blessed One, ‘What can be the ground, Lord, for your refusal to allow women to take Parivraja?’ ‘The Lord knows that the Brahmins hold that the Shudras and women cannot reach moksha (Salvation) because they are unclean and inferior. They do therefore not allow Shudras and women to take Parivraja. Does the Blessed One hold the same view as the Brahmins? Has not the Blessed
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{544} Ibid, 119.

\textsuperscript{545} Ibid, 119.
One allowed the Shudras to take Parivraja and join the Sangh in the same way he has done to the Brahmins?...\textsuperscript{546}

The Buddha is quick and forceful in his reply, “Ananda! Do not misunderstand me. I hold that women are as much capable as men in the matter of reaching Nibbana. Ananda! Do not misunderstand me, I am not an upholder of the doctrine of sex inequality.”\textsuperscript{547} The Buddha then, following Ambedkar’s logic in the “The Rise and Fall of the Hindu Woman,” goes on to explain that his previous refusals to admit women into the saṅgha were based on practical concerns and not because he felt women to be inferior.\textsuperscript{548}

Ambedkar’s presentation of Siddhārtha’s wife, both in the time before his decision to take parivrāja where she is depicted as a supportive companion, and after his return, when she chastises him for his absence as well as the way in which his stepmother initially resists his decision to leave home but eventually gives her blessing all reflect Ambedkar’s commitment to humanizing the women of the life story. Siddhārtha’s wife, Yashodara, responds to the news of her husband’s decision to leave not with tears and grief, but with strength,

\textit{With full control over her emotions, she replied, ‘What else could I have done if I were in your position? I certainly would not have been a party to a war on the Koliyas. Your decision is the right decision. You have my consent and my support. I too would have taken Parivraja with you. If I do not, it is only because I have Rahula to look after. I wish it had not come to this. But we must be bold and brave and face the situation…’}\textsuperscript{549}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{546} Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, \textit{The Buddha and His Dhamma}, 108.
  \item \textsuperscript{547} Ibid, 108.
  \item \textsuperscript{548} Ibid, 108.
  \item \textsuperscript{549} Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, \textit{The Buddha and His Dhamma}, 23.
\end{itemize}
Ambedkar depicts her not only accepting his decision, but granting her consent, a move that stands in marked contrast to traditional Brahminical attitudes toward women, both at the time of his writing and in many ways, up to today.

Women in Buddhism is a complex subject. While the voices of inclusion and integration can be found in the early Buddhist *sutta* material, voices expressing androcentrism and misogyny are present as well. As the work of scholars like Rita Gross have pointed out, Buddhism has, like most institutionalized religious traditions, a patriarchy problem and Ambedkar’s attempts to rehabilitate the tradition through appeal to an original and pure Buddha whose feminist leanings were later distorted by self-interested monks reflects his commitment to creating a strong foundation for his re-narrated, anti-Brahminical history. In service of this end, Ambedkar’s asks his hermeneutic to do some heavy lifting, as the textual and lived Buddhist traditions contain abundant anti-female passages. In this sense, Ambedkar’s identification of an early

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551 Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy*.

552 Scholars such as Liz Wilson have documented at length the explicitly anti-woman stance found across Buddhist source materials. See Liz Wilson, *Charming Cadavers: Horrific Figurations of the Feminine in Indian Buddhist Hagiographic Literature, Women in Culture and Society* (Chicago, IL; London: University of Chicago Press, 1996).
anti-patriarchal Buddhist movement in contrast to a misogynistic Brahminical tradition reflects his larger pragmatic impulses to make use of those aspects of the tradition that serve his larger meliorative ends and to discard the “dead wood of the past.”

His pragmatic pruning should not be mistaken for insincerity. If his monumental effort to write and pass the original Hindu Code Bill are any measure of his sincerity, he couldn’t have been more committed as he resigned his cabinet position in protest of its failure to pass. 553 Given that even today India continues to rank at near the bottom in global measures of gender equity 554 and that the Buddhist male monastic saṅgha continues to enjoy a privileged status over female monastics (in those places where full bhikkhunī ordination is even recognized), 555 Ambedkar’s mid-twentieth century feminist progressivism is quite remarkable. The strength of contemporary Dalit feminist voices and their outsized success in achieving equity in the larger society (one major example being Mayawati’s tenure as Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh) reflect the centrality of Phule-Ambedkar feminist thought to his larger vision of social justice.

553 From Ambedkar’s resignation letter to the Prime Minister: ‘For a long time I have been thinking of resigning my seat from the Cabinet. The only thing that had held me back from giving effect to my intention was the hope that it would be possible to give effect to the Hindu Code Bill before the life of the present Parliament came to an end. I even agreed to break up the Bill and restricted it to Marriage and Divorce in the fond hope that at least this much of our labour may bear fruit. But even that part of the Bill has been killed. I see no purpose in continuing to be a Member of your Cabinet.” Keer, 434–35.


Conclusion

Ambedkar accomplishes much of the work of establishing his new Buddhism through the construction of his Buddhist saṅgha. As has been amply demonstrated by scholars such as King, McMahan, Lopez and others, the story of Buddhism in the West has often been told through the lens of the contemplative, filtered by the discourses of modernity and the biases toward textualism, individualism and meditation that come with it. The saṅgha, in this reading, is a support for the individual to achieve personal liberation through self-cultivation and is often ancillary to that project. The reception of Buddhism could perhaps be as compellingly told through the lens of saṅgha. Its historically monastic orientation has given incredibly detailed thought about how to live in intentional social settings via the vinaya, an exhaustive treatment of pragmatic ethics as applied in monastic communities. This is how Ambedkar is approaching the tradition, with the saṅgha at the center. His decision to position the Dalit community in India within a long historical arc supplies much needed ground for his nascent religious movement. He appeals to the early saṅgha to demonstrate that they were once dominant in India and commanded the respect of the Brahminical religionists. In his reading, they articulated a universalizable ethic of care, that, thanks to the Buddha’s rationality and commitment to compassion, is as applicable today as it was 2500 years ago.

Ambedkar’s historical reconstruction project, which seeks to read-back into ancient Indian history for a universalizable ethic was not limited to his movement alone. Many of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Indian renaissance figures, such as Vivekananda and Gandhi, were engaged in similar reconstructive projects. Where their projects sought to ground their ethical frame in Vedāntin non-dual or monistic
spirituality, Ambedkar appeals to a pragmatist-inspired, universalizable morality grounded in the śramaṇa traditions’ critique of Brahminist religion. Ambedkar’s commitment to a meliorative new Buddhism places the saṅgha in the center as a model a community composed of individuals who are working toward egalitarianism and a just social order. As such, Ambedkar’s chief conversation partner is Marx, with whom he agrees about the end, the dissolution of private property, but not about the means. For Ambedkar, the method is the buddhadharma, with its therapeutic project for the individual and its social program in the form of the saṅgha that can affect real change at the base. Ambedkar’s sense that religion, in the form of an enlightened religion of principles, is necessary for moral orientation marks a significant divergence of his thought from that of Marx.

Ambedkar displayed a surprising awareness and concern for the upliftment of women in India at the time. As Pawar and Moon note, Ambedkar’s advocacy for women’s rights predates his time in America, suggesting that his family background, his exposure to Phule’s work, and his personal disposition all played a role in his awareness. He portrays the Buddha in The Buddha and His Dhamma as also being explicitly concerned for the welfare of women and goes out of his way, as Fiske and Emmrich note, to depict a Buddha who shows no patriarchal prejudice and a saṅgha with humanized women represented. Ambedkar’s concern with the welfare of women also

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556 Pawar and Moon, We Also Made History, 157–58.

reflects his larger concern that the *saṅgha* be lay-centered and move away from the historical dominance of the community by male monastic elites.
CONCLUSION

Can you respect or believe in a religion which recommends actions that bring happiness to oneself by causing sorrow to others; or happiness to others by causing sorrow to oneself; or sorrow to both oneself and others? Is not that a better religion which promotes the happiness of others simultaneously with the happiness of oneself, and tolerates no oppression? These were some of the most pertinent questions which he asked the Brahmins who opposed Equality. The religion of the Buddha is perfect justice, springing from a man’s own meritorious disposition. – B.R. Ambedkar, The Buddha and His Dhamma

Ambedkar succeeded in the creation of a pan-Indian anti-caste movement, the likes of which had never before been seen. Instead of rejecting religion completely, as perhaps may be expected of a Western educated, liberal-minded thinker whose disaffection with Hinduism was near total, he instead moved toward it. His enchantment with the Buddha from a young age as the first and most effective anti-Brahminical champion of equality coupled with his sense of the need for a religious social consciousness to morally orient not only Dalits but all Indians around egalitarianism inspired him to pragmatically carve out a Buddhism that he found fit for the job.

Ambedkar was deeply concerned with answering one fundamental central question about the Buddha. That is, why did the Buddha take parivrāja? Inspired by contemporary modernist scholarship on the Buddha, three critical features can be used to triangulate an answer to the above question as it emerges from Ambedkar’s framing of the Buddha. First, Ambedkar’s Buddha was an ordinary human, not a god. Ambedkar was keen to frame the Buddha as a “path finder” or as someone who merely points out the way toward liberation; not as the way himself. In Ambedkar’s concern for presenting

558 Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, The Buddha and His Dhamma, 166.
the Buddha as a way-finder can be heard his caution, inherited from his respect for Marx, for the monotheism of Christianity and Islam as well as his aversion for orthodox Brahminical Hinduism. This ordinary human Buddha also displays a marked concern for his familial relationships, in contrast to some of the presentations of the Buddha found in canonical source material. The humanity of Ambedkar’s Buddha is additionally demonstrated through the omission of most miraculous activity. The Buddha, as Ambedkar’s narrative presents him, accomplishes his activity in through human effort without the aid of the gods or the supernatural. Where traditional accounts ascribe clairvoyance or divine intervention to the Buddha’s accomplishments, Ambedkar’s Siddhārtha is displayed as practical and rooted in the physical, material world.

Second, in addition to being an ordinary human, Ambedkar presents the Buddha as an eminently rational actor. He is driven primarily by reason. Ambedkar centers the Buddha’s rationality to such a degree that it becomes one of the primary operative principles of his hermeneutic regarding what should be accepted or rejected when evaluating scripture for authenticity. For Ambedkar, the Buddha’s rationality is so established that if a passage in question does not meet the test of rationality, a sufficient condition has been met to reject that passage as an authentic teaching from the Buddha. In the accounts of the Buddha found in Ambedkar’s work, the Buddha’s rationality is presented in several ways. First, and primarily, he communicates this feature through his decision to reject, as he presents them, the “three sights,” as found in the Buddhacarita and Lalitavistara Sūtra. Where, traditionally, the Buddha is motivated toward renunciation through his extra-palatial encounters with the realities of aging, sickness, death, (as well as a fourth sight, a mendicant), Ambedkar’s narrative depicts Siddhārtha
as motivated instead by his experience of social injustice. For Ambedkar, the idea that Siddhārtha would not have been familiar with these “sights” strains reason to such a degree that it renders the traditional story absurd. Ambedkar’s antipathy for this explanation of a psycho-personal inner disquiet about birth, aging, and death, shocking as it might be at first due their centrality in the co-production of almost all iterations of Buddhist modernism, is only logical when one recalls the aims of Ambedkar’s larger project. Ambedkar is keenly aware that establishing the reason for Siddhārtha’s parivṛāja is critical to the rest of the narrative and he sees clearly that the these “sights” are the foundation for the psycho-personal reading of the Buddha’s journey. It is important for Ambedkar to demonstrate that the Buddha’s motivation for renunciation is not his own personal liberation, but instead, it is for the welfare of all his kin and community. He can then build a different narrative on that foundation, one that places the values of egalitarianism and justice at the center. Additionally, Ambedkar demonstrates the Buddha’s rationality time and again through consideration and rejection of Hindu teachings on concepts like karma, soul, caste, and God. The Buddha, on rational grounds, rejects all metaphysical speculation in favor of a project of pragmatic meliorism.

Finally, Ambedkar’s Buddha can be seen as a social reformer. In the biographical sections of The Buddha and His Dhamma, Ambedkar depicts Siddhārtha as deciding to leave the palace not in search of personal salvation through yogic effort but instead because he feels a need to protect his family from the social consequences of his commitment to the principle of nonviolence. When his community decides to wage war against their neighbors, Siddhārtha’s refusal to endorse the decision causes his exile from the community. It is this deep and unrelenting commitment to justice and equality, as
displayed by Siddhārtha in his decision to vote against an unjust war, that marks him as distinctive. His resolve to stand by his principles, based on an ethic of care, and to seek justice above and against irrationalism and tribalism, which are based on an improper understanding of the world, is the example that others are drawn to follow.

Motivated by a desire to organize what he perceived to be a disparate and consequently inaccessible set of teachings, Ambedkar sought to organize the Buddha’s teachings into a succinct and user-friendly handbook. On the one hand, his analogies to the portability and accessibility of the Christian gospels and the Qur’an reveal both an evangelical impulse as well as a sense of the centrality of the Buddhist literary tradition as the primary site of Buddhist meaning making. On the other hand, Ambedkar’s commitment to accessibility and lived-religion approaches to the Buddhist tradition places him at odds with many other modernist iterations of the Buddhist teachings. His efforts to ground a new, socially-oriented and morally-centered religious movement reveal a tension between his rational, pragmatist-inspired commitment to liberalism and his view from the margins that produced a sober reading of secularization and religiously-unmoored morality. Ambedkar’s liminality between his subscription to liberalism on the one hand and his commitments to religion on the other prefigure the post-secular and demonstrate a subaltern modernity in his thought.

Ambedkar’s efforts to update the dharma were complicated by the centrality of a set of teachings that, as traditionally understood, undermined his larger project of creating a universalizable, morally-centered, socially-oriented religion via the Buddhist tradition. To advance his perspective on Buddhism, Ambedkar felt he needed to address and replace two core traditional understandings of the Buddhist tradition, namely the
teachings on *karma* and on the four noble truths. Ambedkar was uncomfortable with the teachings on the four noble truths because he felt that they allowed for a sense of pessimism and nihilism to color the Buddha’s teachings. While Ambedkar’s reading of the four truths was informed by contemporary Buddhist studies scholarship, it was also informed by his own life experience as a marginalized person in India for whom the individualist, psycho-religious approach to the *dharma* implicit in Western approaches to Buddhism offered little help. For Ambedkar, this approach addressed a type of suffering that could naturally lead to a disengagement from the world and, historically, that disengagement was reserved for only the deeply motivated *sadhu* or monastic, the high-caste and late-life-stage *sannyāsin*, or increasingly, a Western, educated practitioner. It represented to Ambedkar an approach to religion that allowed the moral bankruptcy of Brahminism, evidenced by the horrific practice of untouchability, to persist for centuries. Ambedkar saw the four truths as they were presented in other Anglophone iterations of the *dharma* as laying the groundwork for a personal liberation approach to Buddhism. He instead advanced a narrative of the first sermon of the Buddha that replaced the four truths with two postulates. First, he suggested that the Buddha told his earliest disciples that “the centre of his Dhamma is man, and the relation of man to man in his life on earth” and, second, that “men are living in sorrow, in misery, and poverty. The world is full of suffering and that discovering how to remove this suffering from the world is the only purpose of Dhamma.” Ambedkar seeks to re-orient the Buddha’s initial teachings away from the world of inner psychological experience and toward the sacralization of the world of social relations.

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In his approach to *karma*, Ambedkar was concerned with defending non-caste Hindus from the theological implications of a concept that, as *karma* was traditionally deployed in Brahminical contexts, can blame the suffering of the dominated for their own condition. Again, his position from the margins afforded him a vantage point from which to see the ways that that concept was being deployed, either unrecognized by Brahminical religionists or actively exploited by them, to maintain a social order with Brahmins and *savāraṇa* Hindus on top. He argued that this Brahminically-inflected reading of *karma* was ferried into Buddhist conceptualizations of the concept over time, and it was subsequently imported into Anglophone readings. He sees his task as using scholarly methods, including the hermeneutic outlined in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, to re-write a meaning of the term as he imagines the Buddha intended and to put that term to work in the larger project of crafting a new, socially-oriented religion. He considers this re-appropriative work justified because his position from the margins gives him a vantage point from which to see things that have been overlooked by centuries of elite (Brahminical and monastic) scholarship, as he explicitly describes in *The Untouchables*.\(^{560}\) For Ambedkar, a reappropriated *karma* looks strikingly like the laws of physics. It rejects the idea of a transmigrating soul, within which, as Brahminical religionists deploy the term, inheres the soul’s respective merits and demerits accrued over lifetimes of activity. In its place, Ambedkar proposes a *karma* whose descriptive power is limited in scope to this one lifetime only. It points to the cause and effect of the arising and ceasing of material phenomena in place of a cosmic tally of good and bad deeds. For Ambedkar, the proper understanding of *karma*, as the Buddha intended, gives

the Buddhist follower a clear view of how things really are and allows for wisdom to arise and for effective action to follow. His emphasis on the principles of wisdom and compassion and his appeal to the Indian Buddhist tetralemma approach,\(^{561}\) complicate attempts to identify his thoughts on religion with materialism. This clear insight into how things arise coupled with the practice of compassion and love, provide the ground for Ambedkar’s conceptualization of a new morally grounded Buddhist movement.

In line with his vision of Buddhism as a social movement, Ambedkar held that the Buddhist monk as it exists in the contemporary period is not what the Buddha originally intended. He suggests that the original Buddhist community led by the Buddha was organized around a monastic movement whose primary role was to model the religious life outlined by the Buddha for application by the Buddhist laity in general. Ambedkar’s vision for this original saṅgha contrasts with one that idealizes monasticism as the normative ideal and conceptualizes it as the exclusive domain of “real” Buddhists. In some ways, Ambedkar’s conceptualization of the saṅgha is completely opposite from presentations that are centered on the saṅgha as the place where serious practitioners who are aimed at personal liberation can retire. Ambedkarite Buddhism aims to create an egalitarian and just society, where the principle of compassion is joined with rational clarity to bring those principles to life. For that to happen, the monastic saṅgha must provide an example for how those principles can be practiced in a community intentionally built on them so that their successes can then be replicated in the wider Buddhist community. The goal is not the personal liberation of the dedicated and serious practitioners who renounce the world here, it is the distillation of the core operating

\(^{561}\) See note 441 on page 174.
principles by serious practitioners who can then instruct and model for those outside the ordained saṅgha.

The historical and theoretical underpinning of Ambedkar’s conceptualization of the saṅgha was identified primarily as his work in the book *The Untouchables,*\textsuperscript{562} which argues via a speculative reconstructive historical method that the Untouchables are in fact, direct lineage descendants of the original Buddhists of India. He bases this assertion on a narrative history from below and suggests that those people who resisted the development of settled communities were pushed to the margins and as those nascent states became more successful, nomadism failed to keep pace. Those who maintained a nomadic lifestyle outside of settled communities became attracted to the anti-Brahminical message of Buddhism. With rise of the golden age of Buddhism came competition with Brahminical religionists whose antipathy for the outsider-Buddhists eventually, with their return to power and in combination with food politics and existing caste prejudices, rendered the outsiders literally untouchable. In this way, Ambedkar lays the ground for a return-to-home for contemporary Indian Ambedkarite Buddhists who have historically been marginalized and have internalized a narrative of inferiority due their domination inside a Brahminical paradigm. He provides Indian Buddhists with a religious and material lineage that can be used to buttress his conversion movement with appeal to history and to re-dignify those who have historically be denied dignity.

Finally, drawing on influences from Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule, Ambedkar demonstrated a marked progressive attitude toward women’s rights and advancement. His writing on the history of women in the saṅgha argued that the Buddha’s intention

\textsuperscript{562} Ambedkar, *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables.*
was always sympathetic toward women. His monumental labor to advance the Hindu Code Bill, an effort to significantly advance the standing of women in India society, challenged patriarchal norms regarding the treatment of women in India at the time. In the time since, women’s efforts in the Ambedkarite movement have played a key role its origin and development. Ambedkar’s writing and activism are a clear articulation of intersectional feminism from the Global South that continue to challenge patriarchy in both the Hindu and Buddhist worlds.

**Significance**

Thanks to the larger “Copernican Turn,” as Richard King has termed it, in the study of religion, contemporary Buddhist studies is in the midst of significant change, characterized by the inclusion of both more diverse objects of study and more reflexivity in methods. As José Cabezón has noted, in only the last three decades, Buddhist Studies as a discipline has markedly widened the tent of what is included in valid objects of study, particularly expanding the idea of “text” significantly:

The notion of “text” has exploded. This is not to say that we no longer study written doctrinal and philosophical texts. Certainly we do. Indeed, in just the past few years there has been something of a renaissance in doctrinal studies. But today we are as interested in the context as we are in the content of such texts. For example, we not only study what the great texts say, but how they were produced and used: the use of texts in educational institutions, the patterns of patronage, the historical evolution of book production, and so forth. And alongside doctrinal texts, we also now study narratives, poetry and plays. We still study the works of elite monks, but increasingly we also study the oral and literary traditions of the Buddhist laity. We not only study what Buddhists have written and what they think, but also what they do – from complex monastic rituals to popular practices. We also now explore non-verbal “texts,” reading Buddhism through the lens of material culture. In short, realizing that our
studies had yielded a very incomplete picture of Buddhism, one that
excluded most of what Buddhists actually did, we have increasingly
turned our attention as a corrective precisely to those areas that had
previously been neglected.\textsuperscript{563}

The methods deployed in the study of Buddhism have also been undergoing
significant change. Where the earlier generation of Buddhologists were often limited by a
narrow methodological approach, defined by a strong bias toward textualism,
contemporary methodological approaches, informed again by the larger cultural turn in
the humanities, are becoming more diverse. As Cabezón notes with respect to
contemporary Buddhist Studies:

Eschewing broad generalizations, our studies now deal with more specific
periods, places, individuals and institutions. The relative ahistoricism of
early Buddhology has also been replaced by a keen historical
consciousness that seeks to contextualize Buddhist doctrines, practices and
institutions within multiple contexts – social, political and economic.
Moreover, scholars no longer sit in armchairs. They go into the field, and
they often learn the spoken languages of the cultures they study.
Methodologically, Buddhologists increasingly find themselves asking
questions about rhetoric, power, material culture, the production of goods,
and forms of exchange, thereby bringing the methods of literary theory,
political science and economics to bear on their studies.\textsuperscript{564}

It is in this expanding disciplinary approach that opportunities for a deeper
exploration of the transmission lines amongst elites on both sides of the cultural
exchange, in both classical and contemporary Buddhist Studies in South Asia, can occur.
Donald Lopez, Richard King, David McMahan, Ananda Abeysekara and other
contemporary scholars have thoroughly documented the ways in which the
presuppositions of early Western receivers colored the way Buddhism as a category was

\textsuperscript{563} José Ignacio Cabezón, “The Changing Field of Buddhist Studies,” \textit{Journal of International Association

\textsuperscript{564} Ibid, 289.
created and how it was inflected with liberal biases toward rationalism, literary primacy, originalism, romanticism, individualism, scientific materialism, and a predisposition toward personal spiritual attainment or relationship with the divine.\textsuperscript{565} For their part, the Asian export dynamic, through a process of, as Charles Hallisey has coined it, “intercultural mimesis,” participated in the creation of a modernist, liberally inflected Buddhism.\textsuperscript{566} They did so both as a means to reclaim power in a post-colonial context, as exemplified by the state-aligned monastic movements seen in places like Sri Lanka and Myanmar in the twentieth-century as well as in reformist moves aimed at building grassroots modernist forms of Buddhism, often through appeals to originalism, such as the Sarvodaya movement in Sri Lanka, Sulaka Shivaraksha’s movement in Thailand, and Soka Gakkai in Japan, amongst others.

Ambedkarite Buddhism fits into this reformist mold of modernist Buddhist movements.\textsuperscript{567} It makes claims to originalism, grounded in Ambedkar’s speculative historical work found in works like Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India, Who Were the Shudras, and, particularly, The Untouchables, while also seeking to forge new ground, as demonstrated in Ambedkar’s efforts to craft a new Buddhist gospel in the form of The Buddha and His Dhamma. Ambedkarite Buddhists themselves articulate their subscription to a Buddhist tradition that is both ancient in its roots as it calls back to

\textsuperscript{565} King, Orientalism and Religion; McMahan, The Making of Buddhist Modernism; Ananda Abeysekara, Colors of the Robe: Religion, Identity, and Difference, Studies in Comparative Religion (Columbia, S.C: University of South Carolina Press, 2002).

\textsuperscript{566} Hallisey, “Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravāda Buddhism.”

an original intention of the Buddha himself while also being thoroughly modern in its theology and practice. On Ambedkarite Buddhist shrines everywhere in India, the statue of the Buddha takes pride of place, but the bodhisattva Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar is also always present by the Buddha’s side.

More generous critiques of Ambedkar’s Buddhism, as forwarded by scholars like Christopher Queen and Gail Omvedt, suggest that while novel, this form of Buddhism is as authentic as any other, and have carved out space for it as a “navayāna” or “new vehicle.” The less sympathetic have suggested that Ambedkar’s Buddhism is an illegitimate iteration, fabricated from modernity without sufficient Buddhist roots to lay claim to being “Buddhism” at all, as exemplified in the characterizations of Ambedkar’s Buddhism advanced by Trevor Ling or even by Arun Shourie, whose failure to even mention Ambedkar’s religious orientation at all in his extensive book-length treatment of Ambedkar, Worshipping False Gods, delegitimizes his Buddhism by omission.568

Ambedkar’s Buddhism is a product of modernity and largely in consonance with liberal commitments to individualism, liberty, personal agency, democracy, etc., but it is also a subaltern product. It is aimed squarely at disrupting narratives that have been used to maintain social dominance for centuries in South Asia and, as Ambedkar imagines it, as a guard against domination in any form. It offers a non-elite approach to modernist Buddhism, a tradition that has been largely defined by elites on both sides of the transmission lines. Although educated at an elite Ivy-league institution, Ambedkar was positioned as an “Untouchable” and at the margins of Indian society, both before his

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experience in the US and after. His Buddhist movement, aimed squarely at uprooting injustice and establishing a religion based on egalitarianism, arose out of his experience as an “Untouchable” and the inability or unwillingness of Hindu elites to seriously address that inequity and it has been taken up and championed largely by marginalized people of India. As such it displays a remarkable flexibility in its reformist and modernist stance but also functions to unsettle the boundaries of other modernist iterations of the Buddhist tradition. In taking Ambedkarite Buddhism seriously in the Euro-American Buddhist Studies academy, a further widening of the tent of “Buddhism” is necessarily entailed. Placing Ambedkar’s Buddhism in conversation with critical religionists and postcolonial religion scholars can open new avenues in the exploration of King’s “new Religious Studies.”  

In-line with much of the “cultural turn” now occurring in Buddhist Studies scholarship as outlined above, the inclusion of Ambedkarite Buddhist studies in the larger discipline of Buddhist Studies can allow for a fruitful further expansion of the category of “Buddhism.” As the larger discipline continues to expand out from those categories that dominated the center, Ambedkar’s position from the margin necessarily emphasizes some of those aspects of the tradition that were historically overlooked, such as issues around power, justice, egalitarianism, and politics. This project has sought to lay some of the groundwork necessary for that engagement.

**Areas for Further Exploration**

Implied, but beyond the scope of this project, are several areas for potential future exploration. First, a deeper dive into the reasons for Ambedkar’s relative invisibility

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outside of India is in order. Relative to his work and influence his profile is markedly underarticulated across the board, and the religious dimension of his life is particularly underappreciated. Ambedkar’s Buddhist followers number approximately seven million in India and regard him as a literal bodhisattva. His followers adorn their shrines with his pictures, invoke his name in prayer, hagiographize him, and have literally replaced everyday Indian greetings like “namaste” with “jai bhām,” meaning “victory to Babasaheb Ambedkar.” Yet, Euro-American Buddhists are far more likely to identify with one of his chief rivals, M.K. Gandhi, than with Ambedkar, if they have any familiarity with him at all. What are the reasons for this? Can it simply be explained by the difference between theological content in Euro-American received Buddhism and Ambedkarite Buddhism? In other words, does the re-tailoring of the core teachings away from the four noble truths and toward a socially-engaged tradition mark Ambedkarite Buddhism as so fundamentally different from contemplative Western Buddhism that it renders it invisible? While attractive at first, this explanation is perhaps complicated by other non-contemplative yet successful Asian modernist traditions, such as Soka Gakkai, who, despite differences from much of the psychological and meditation-based biases of both pop and scholarly Western Buddhists, have been remarkably successful in terms of number and diversity of converts and popular visibility, in transplanting their brand of Buddhism in the US and Europe.570

570 The Harvard Pluralism project estimates that Soka Gakkai has around 330,000 adherents in the US alone. See https://hwpi.harvard.edu/pluralismarchive/soka-gakkai-america-2001#:~:text=Soka%20Gakkai%20represents%20the%20largest,Hispanic%2C%20and%207.81%25%20other.
Perhaps another explanation lies in the subalternity of Ambedkar and his Buddhist followers and the ways in which domination and caste dynamics in the South Asian setting have created the conditions for the relative invisibility of Ambedkar in Western academic and popular imaginations about Buddhism. From the beginning of the opening of the “mine of Sanskrit,” Sir William Jones identified the problems of access and understanding associated with reliance on Brahmins to learn and interpret Sanskrit texts.\textsuperscript{571} Euro-American knowledge of Hinduism has been filtered through and inflected by caste privilege from the South Asian side and the meaning of religious texts has been interpreted through the priest class and, more recently, through the largely upper-caste diaspora, and on the receiving side, initially through Boston Brahmins and upper-class intelligentsia and academicians. This monophonic quality, in terms of caste and class in the export and import and co-creation of the “world religions” of South Asia has necessarily flattened those traditions, and the myriad religious perspectives and normative stances of the vast number of South Asian people throughout history have been conflated with those of the dominate but numerically far fewer \textit{savarna} Hindus. This has contributed to a reading of the tradition that is heavily modulated by the voice of the priest/Brahmin, rendering its contours particularly “spiritually” concentrated where the religio-normative world of the Euro-American reader appears diluted in its orientalized reception by the realities of the social, political, and quotidian aspects of life in contrast.

In many ways, the anthropological study of religion in South Asia continues to present moral meaning making from a largely Brahminical point of view with little

\textsuperscript{571} Fields, \textit{How the Swans Came to the Lake}, 31–53.
challenge about the absence of Dalit or Adivasi (tribal) voices. Christophe Jaffrelot has noted, that “at best the Gandhian concept of a conflict-free society reflects a form of naivety; at worst it is a discourse intended to make more palatable the strategy of maintaining the social status quo.”  

Ambedkar’s reading and presentation of the Buddhist tradition appears threatening to established power structures in South Asia who seek to marginalize religio-normative voices that challenge existing caste-based power structures while benefiting from commodifying and exporting an in-demand brand (“International Yoga Day” for example).  

Jaffrelot highlights this effort by the dominant castes in India to ignore or forget Ambedkar in noting the fact that Ambedkar, the first Law Minister and chief architect of the Indian constitution, wasn’t even mentioned in school history textbooks until 1999. In short, perhaps one of the reasons we fail to see Ambedkar in the West is because dominant Euro-American readings of religion in South Asia have consciously or unconsciously inherited and replicated the structural caste privileges of South Asia. Methodologies borrowed from critical approaches to race that foreground caste and intersectionality and interrogate the historicity of dominate narratives can potentially further expand the tent of South Asian


573 As Rathore and Verma note, “Despite the number of colleges, institutes, university buildings, and centres named after B.R. Ambedkar in India, there are a disproportionately fractional number of Ambedkar texts on the syllabi of any of the serious research departments in the country. The constitutional democracy Ambedkar helped to create sees to it that his name is, albeit reluctantly, honoured and preserved in the hallowed (hallow) public sphere; but he makes little appearance in substantive terms.” Ambedkar, Rathore, and Verma, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, xxii.

574 Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability*, 164.
religious studies. The project of explicating forgotten or marginalized histories in the US by critical race theorists certainly has resonance here.

Ambedkar and his legacy continue to be contested in India, with current Hindu Nationalist/RSS efforts to return Ambedkarite Buddhists to the Hindu fold, both through overt re-conversion pressure such as seen in the current *ghar wapsi* (return home) movements and through structural pressure related to reservations. The left in India and postcolonial scholars outside India, as Rathore and Verma note, are also reticent to whole heartedly embrace Ambedkar due to his subscription to a religious frame in place of a Marxist one. Ambedkar’s polemical work, *The Buddha and Karl Marx*, makes a forceful case for the necessity of religion for the creation a morally grounded new nation. This allergy to Buddhism as “religion” also extends to the “wellness industry” and pop-psych/self-help approaches to Buddhism as “lifestyle.”

Another potential avenue for future exploration is a thorough mapping of the Ambedkarite Buddhist landscape as it exists in India currently. Alan Sponberg and Timothy Fitzgerald have conducted limited and now somewhat dated ethnographic studies of small Ambedkarite communities in Mahārāṣtra and a more comprehensive treatment was completed by Johannes Beltz in 2005 but a more recent treatment has not been done. The Ambedkarite Buddhist world is diverse. Some communities, like

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*Triratna Baudhha Mahāsaṅgha*, have been significantly influenced by outside modernist Buddhist organizations while others appeal exclusively to Ambedkar for authority. Monastic influence has largely flowed from Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, but different communities and *vihāras* have connections with different monastic lineages. Still other Ambedkarite communities eschew religious practice completely and view their commitment to Dr. Ambedkar’s Buddhist legacy via their political activity. While outside the scope of this project, which has been a descriptive mapping of Dr. Ambedkar’s conceptualization of the Buddhist tradition informed by some ethnographic work in India, this more up-to-date and in-depth ethnography could advance Buddhist Studies approaches to Ambedkarite Buddhism by expanding our understanding of the contemporary landscape.

Ambedkar’s Buddhism is positioned from the margins in the larger post-colonial context and also in terms of caste domination within South Asia. As such his Buddhism is an incredibly rich and vibrant branch of the modern Buddhist world. It represents a unique expression of Buddhist modernism, where the post-colonial Indian context allows for the expression of a subaltern approach to Buddhism as religion. Ambedkarite Buddhism’s critique of power and domination can offer unique pragmatic Buddhist critiques of imbalanced power dynamics and conversely, how a modernist Buddhist tradition can offer a path toward justice and equality. As the field of Buddhist Studies continues to expand its methodological approach to objects of Buddhist study, taking up a position from the margin alongside Dr. Ambedkar can offer fresh perspectives on how Buddhism can bring about the realization of liberty, equality, and fraternity.
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