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The Future of India: A Buddhist Contribution

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Abstract: On August 15, 1947 from the ramparts of the Red Fort in Delhi the national tricolour flag fluttered over independent India. We had made 'a tryst with destiny' then.¹ We celebrated the golden jubilee of that moment this year. The Independence of India and her citizens is young - only half a century compared to the long history of our culture and civilization. Our past evokes mixed feelings in us of nostalgia and nausea. Our future too makes us enthusiastic and cynical. We gaze from the same ramparts of the Red Fort and look to the horizon ahead of us. We need to make up our minds about the future of a free, sovereign, socialist, secular and democratic republic. The Indian The insight into reclaiming the symbol of the Asoka Chakra is to incorporate religion, a social institution, into the modern polity of India. He hoped that reappropriation of such a tradition would give to India a new identity as a community, culture and country. He had a dream to make liberty, equality and fraternity a reality for every citizen with the dawn of Buddhism again on the horizon of India's future.

Keywords: Buddhism, Indian Buddhism, Dhamma, Ambedkar

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The Future of India A Buddhist Contribution

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On August 15, 1947 from the ramparts of the Red Fort in Delhi the national tricolour flag fluttered over independent India. We had made 'a tryst with destiny' then.¹ We celebrated the golden jubilee of that moment this year. The Independence of India and her citizens is young – only half a century compared to the long history of our culture and civilization. Our past evokes mixed feelings in us of nostalgia and nausea. Our future too makes us enthusiastic and cynical. We gaze from the same ramparts of the Red Fort and look to the horizon ahead of us. We need to make up our minds about the future of a free, sovereign, socialist, secular and democratic republic.

Destiny has enacted our golden jubilation of Independence at the threshold of a new millennium. The third millennium is a metaphor of the future. It evokes in us, citizens of this land, images of what our past has been and what our future will be. Our land is 'a cradle of great religions' that have moulded the lives of its inhabitants, given a texture to their stories and a horizon to their dreams and aspirations.

We had dreams. We are awakened by nightmares. We dare to dream of a new horizon, a future better than our past or even our present. All that has

been was possible because our leaders in the freedom struggle dared to dream. Independence without violence was Gandhiji's dream. He wrote in the *Harijan* in reference to 15 August 1947 "... as for myself I only ask whether the dream of my youth is to be realized in the evening of my life." Gandhiji was not in Delhi that momentous night of August 15, 1947. He was awake with the nightmare of the Hindu-Muslim violence in Calcutta.

Nehru spoke of his dream for free India. "The service of India means the service of the millions who suffer. It means the ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity."² He resounded with the echo of Mahatma Gandhi's dream, "The ambition of the greatest man of our generation has been to wipe every tear from every eye."³

Independent India realized early one of her dreams. A despicable Mahar, wrote Dhananjay Keer, biographer of Dr B.R. Ambedkar, was made Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the new Indian Constitution – to define the will, aim and vision of India.⁴ He dared to dream of liberty, equality and fraternity.

Our dreams have urged us on. Our nightmares have rudely awakened us.

The more rude ones among them being the wars with China and Pakistan.

We were jolted and awakened on June 25, 1975 by the nightmare of the Emergency. It was almost the loss of our dream of freedom itself.

We are a young nation. We have a long way to go. We dare to dream not of the ancient glory of India, but the glory of her future. We have a dream not of the ignominy of caste, that's hardly a thing to boast about. We have a dream of the new nation rooted and grounded in liberty, equality and fraternity. We have a dream of a new tryst where in God's name all will love and serve every person as brother and sister, as honourable children of our Motherland. We have a dream where we will care for *Bhārat-Bhūmi* as our cosmic mother.

Indeed, the texture of our dreams has had a wide variety of hues and strokes. Understandably so, given the diversity of our land, culture and people. We are now awakened from the idealism of our founding fathers⁵ and the aftershocks of other tremors that gripped the minds of our national heroes: Gandhian decentralism, Nehruvian secular democratic socialism, or M N Royian radical humanism.⁶ Perhaps, realism is what looms on the horizon of our Independence jubilation. Nehru was quite right when he cautioned the nation that 'ostrich-like policy of ignoring real issues is bound to end in disaster'.⁷ Realistic pragmatism is a light to our paths to shade the colours of our dreams of the future. Influenced as he was by the vision of the latter philoso-

phy or economic theory, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar, the father of the Indian Constitution, points a finger in that direction. There lies our future. That's the way to go. If we dare!

Our way to the new horizon of liberty, equality and fraternity meanders through a terrain that has a long history. Though our secular democratic state has wisely declared equal respect for all creeds and equidistance from all of them, we are painfully aware that it may not be the only possible interpretation of the secular character of the Constitution of India. Down the lane of history those who ruled India have imprinted the character of their own faith and creed on this nation and people. It has embellished India's character, whether we care to acknowledge it or not. If it had not happened perhaps the past of this nation would have shaped itself differently. As a consequence the future then which is our present now would have been different.

The Gupta period of the Magadha Empire has a rightful role in shaping at least a part of the history of this land and its people. Asoka who came to be known as *devānam piya*, literally, 'dear to the gods' or 'His Sacred Majesty' left his own mark on his empire. The polity that he shaped for the governance of his empire drew directly from the teachings of the Buddha. Much of it is available to us in the varieties of Edicts that he promulgated throughout the land. That is evidently the ancient glory of Buddhism's past. Does Buddhism have a future in the land of its origin? Can one religion alone claim to do all to shape the future of our Motherland?

Can any one religion and the state shape the horizon of our future?

This article does not aspire to answer all the questions that arise in this context. Each of them provides adequate scope for further research in the socio-political and religious dimensions of Indian polity.⁸ This is an attempt to assess an aspect of realism and the tone of pragmatism in the conversion and orientation of Dr B.R. Ambedkar to Buddhism. We can then seek to assess if Buddhism, as interpreted by him, is capable of making a contribution to the future of India.

1. Symbols of the Past

The quest for the future begins by reclaiming symbols which in the past have urged our men and women to look to a future. In the Constituent Assembly Debates we read about the creation of one such symbol - the Indian national flag, the Tricolour. Its significance for the future could not have been more graphically expressed than was done by Shri Thirumala Rao:

... We have rightly selected, Sir, the Chakra as our emblem as the historic reminiscence of the period of Asoka. Describing the meaning of this Chakra, Rhys Davids, the famous orientalist has said that this Chakra is intended to send rolling the Royal Chariot wheel of the universal empire of truth and righteousness. If any country which (sic) departs from the essential moral principles on which it professes to stand it has no future. But this country in keeping with the ancient traditions and ideals has rightly chosen that Chakra which is called the Dharma Chakra of Asoka and Ma-

hatma Gandhi has blessed this Chakra.⁹

The polity of Asoka has evoked in the Fathers of the Indian Constitution a vision of what the future of this land could be. Reclaiming that same symbol in our times clearly highlights the significance of such a polity for this nation's future. His Sacred Majesty, Asoka, had proclaimed his new policy in a Minor Rock Edict (I)¹⁰ that gods who had not earlier associated with human beings were now doing so as the result of his reforms, and he calls on the small and great of his kingdom to follow his example. Asoka had reformed his administration under the influence of his new convictions: responsibility for the welfare of his subjects and the whole of humanity, which seem to be properly grounded, after his conversion, on Buddhism. He manifests pride in the social services that he inaugurated. These comprised free medical care; free supply of potable water along the roads to make travel more pleasant. His reforms of law aimed to make the legal system more just and less oppressive. In the Twelfth Rock Edict he advocated an ecumenical attitude and tolerance of other sects. He desired the prosperity of all citizens whom he regarded as 'my children' (Kalinga Edicts I).

Evidence of Asoka's critique of the religion prevalent then and after his conversion is also quite telling of another aspect of the role of religion and its influence on society in general. In Edict IV of the Fourteen Rock Edicts we read:

As for many hundred years before has not happened, now at this present, by

reason of the inculcation of the Law of Piety (*Dhamma*) by His Sacred and Gracious Majesty the King, have increased abstention from the sacrificial slaughter of living creatures, abstention from the killing of animate beings, seemly behaviour (or "courtsey") to relatives, seemly behaviour to Brahmans and ascetics, hearkening to father and mother, hearkening to elders. Thus, and in many other ways the practice of the Law has increased, and His Sacred and Gracious Majesty the King will make such practice of the Law increase further.¹¹

Elsewhere too, Asoka has spared no effort to instruct his 'children' on the true nature of *Dhamma*. In Edict IX of True Ceremonial he points to the different ceremonies which people tend to perform and how little fruit they in fact bear.

... on the other hand, to wit, the ceremonial of piety¹² bears great fruit. In it are included proper treatment of slaves and servants, honour to teachers, gentleness towards living creatures, and liberality towards ascetics and Brahmans. These things and others of the same kind are called the Ceremonial of Piety....¹³

Evidently, in the powerful symbol of the Asoka Chakra the Fathers of the Indian Constitution envisaged a universal empire of truth and righteousness. In it they saw the future of India. There is little doubt that the symbol comes from the realm of Buddhism. Emperor Asoka gave that symbol a non-sectarian perspective. Thus, in a land of many religions and sects, the Chakra has a rational appeal for a reasonable order of society founded on essential moral principles.

2. Religion in Modern Polity

Dr B. R. Ambedkar accords a positive role to religion in modern society. The nature of his thought on religion and its place in human life and in national life manifests that he regarded religion as a social institution. Therefore, in his polity, he did not choose to ignore this powerful social institution, which was not the case with Nehru, for example, who seemed to believe that the temples of modern India would be its manufacturing plants. The Nehruvian secular democratic socialism was more influenced by the Russian model of polity which had a secret hope that religion would die a natural death of neglect in the modern society. Dr Ambedkar was of the contrary opinion. He had critically assessed the *realpolitik* of the manner in which Brahmanical Hinduism had shaped the India of yesteryears, and the reforms that Buddhism had brought to revivify a decadent Hindu society. Religion for Dr Ambedkar was the "pro-pounding of an ideal scheme of divine governance, the aim and object of which is to make the social order in which men live a moral order."¹⁴ True religion, he believed, was the foundation of society with its values of individual freedom, social equality and fraternity. In April 1955, Dr Ambedkar spoke at the Siddharth College, Bombay, on the role of religion. He affirmed that religion alone could establish equality in human societies, and is essential for establishing equality and democracy.¹⁵ Through his critical studies he assessed that Hinduism was founded on inequality and discrimination. He did not envisage a future for India if it is not liberated from

the oppressive ideology of Hinduism. He seems convinced of the above position as we read in his introduction to the *Riddles in Hinduism*:

But the time has come when the Hindu mind must be freed from [the hold] which the silly ideas propagated by the Brahmans, have on it. Without this liberation India has no future. I have undertaken this task knowing full well what it involves. I am not afraid of the consequences. I shall be happy if I succeed in stirring the masses.¹⁶

He was keenly aware that Asoka had made religion, albeit non-sectarian Buddhist *Dhamma*, the bedrock of his own reforms for his empire. In our age where secularism is sickening, God is dead and Marx is dead, Buddhism is alive and affecting other traditions with its *modus vivendi*. There is something in the way and the teaching of the Buddha that appeals to the deepest human aspirations. It is not merely confined to India where Buddhism was not in its most vivacious form. The phenomenon is evident in the West turning East, and frankly, turning to Buddhism.

Dr Ambedkar did not place his faith in the Buddhist traditions merely because they are old and have come down to us through many generations, as we have the warning in the *Kalama Sutta*, but he perceived that the millions of oppressed people could attain equality and fraternity if they embraced Buddhism. He perceived in Buddhism and in its polity a challenge to religion and society. He would not engage himself in the task of reforming Hindu society, as we shall see later, but highlight the

liberating subaltern perspective in Buddhist polity as the right kind of religion needed for the future of India. He found in Buddhism the right way to awaken human society in India. *The Buddha and His Dhamma* is a significant achievement in Dr Ambedkar's efforts at reclaiming that polity through his own hermeneutics of Buddhism for contemporary Indian society. It is rightly regarded as "an important literary foundation for the new Buddhist movement".¹⁷

3. Assumptions of a New Hermeneutics

From a sociological perspective the assumptions in the process of a new hermeneutics of tradition could be two-fold, at least, namely, to bring about structural-functional reformation, or basic new communities. The structural-functional reformation assumption suggests that the goal of the process of a new understanding is to bring about changes in the functions within the given organizational structure to ensure greater efficiency. Max Weber and others have analyzed this as the paradigm at work in institutions of the capitalist market economy. Structural adjustments would necessarily be made in those institutions for the sake of the greater efficiency, in this case, profitability, of the market economy.

The assumption of the new hermeneutics to bring about basic new communities addresses itself to what is old and traditional and challenges institutions and traditions to make room for the new. In fact, reinterpretation is primarily utilized, in this perspective, to establish a new form of community

or institution with new principles and values.

The purpose of a new hermeneutics makes us aware of the identity of those for the sake of whom such an exercise is undertaken. In the structural-functional paradigm money market clientele is in focus and the underlying attitude is reformation for efficiency. In the basic new communities paradigm the target is the people seeking an end of the old, oppressive form of community and desiring to usher in the new. Dr Ambedkar had analyzed the old Hindu tradition and found it wanting. The focus of the Fathers of the Indian Constitution to reclaim the more liberative Asokan *Dhamma Chakra* as the symbol rather than the Charkha of Mahatma Gandhi is indicative of a new hermeneutics. Dr Ambedkar's conversion and reclaiming of the Buddhist tradition from a subaltern perspective, that is, from the vantage point of the millions of deprived and marginalized people, compels us to understand that Buddhist process going back to Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, who had set in motion the Wheel of *Dhamma*.

4. Siddhartha Gautama and Subaltern Hermeneutics

The whole quest of Siddhartha Gautama, revered as the Buddha, the Awakened One, was fundamentally of the nature of a new understanding of religion and society. Buddhism, that reveres the Buddha as its founder, "shows us how fallacious it is entirely to separate Buddhism from Brahmanism".¹⁸ It has its own history. It origi-

nated in the milieu of Brahmanical Hinduism.

Religious Brahmanical Hinduism is the heritage that was handed down to Siddhartha Gautama as a young man born and bred in his familial Hindu culture and religion. Hindu tradition is the context in which the Buddha 'lived, moved, and had his being', at least, till he perceived that the old traditions did not provide answers to his new questions. Buddhism, as we know it, is an on-going and radical hermeneutics that began with his critique of Hinduism. The single most crucial question that Siddhartha Gautama pursued relentlessly was not about the predicate but the subject of reinterpretation. It was his quest to scrutinize the kind of community that the Hindu tradition and its interpretation was imposing on all and sundry. The question confronted by him was to identify those for whom the new understanding was intended.

5. The Social Context of the Buddha

The subaltern perspective for the Buddha was a society held in bondage by the interpreters and reinterpreters of the Hindu tradition. His new hermeneutics was to create a new society where the principle of equality of all human beings was clearly laid out. The new community or society was to replace the inequality of its members prevalent in the old dispensation. In the *Vasala Sutta* of the *Sutta Nipāta* it is indicated in no uncertain terms that birth is not the determiner of a human being's

status in society.¹⁹ That is a new understanding indeed of the Hindu tradition where birth is the sure criterion of one's status. So the new hermeneutics, as far as the Buddha is concerned, has its origin in the social context of Hinduism.

Buddhism manifests a great variety of interpretations of the vision of the Buddha. The variety is seen in the reality of the various sects or schools of Buddhist thought. Beginning with the Buddhist Council at Vaishali in the first century after the Mahaparinibbana of the Buddha, Buddhist history is a continuous quest for a relevant, contextual understanding of society. Such a history continues even to this day. The phenomenon called Neo-Buddhism in modern India is a contemporary attempt at a new hermeneutics by Dr Ambedkar.

6. Dr Ambedkar: Religion and Society

He presents the Buddha as a rationalist humanist. This is quite evident from the three criteria put forward by Dr Ambedkar in *The Buddha And His Dhamma*²⁰ to determine the authentic words or teachings of the Buddha in the Buddhist scriptures (*Tipitaka*).²¹ The whole work of the Awakened One is interpreted as meant to awaken the society of the subaltern to its own identity²² and dignity. Hence, the purpose of a new hermeneutics has a clear goal in the emancipation of the marginalized. He seeks to understand the identity of the outcaste, the Mahar in Maharashtra. In his works, *Who were the Śūdras?* and *The Untouchables*²³ he has tried to trace the history of the native inhabitants and

how they were turned into a group, initially regarded as *Śūdras* and eventually despised as Untouchables, as outcastes.²⁴ He has even ventured to propose that the Mahars are descendants of the Nagas, their historic town being Nagpur, and that they were rulers while being followers of Buddhism. Hence setting them aside as an outcaste was an exercise in branding a religious community different from one's own as outcaste.²⁵

As a consequence of this search for his own identity Dr Ambedkar was aware that religion is one of its conditions. In 1935 at Yevla in the Nashik District, he declared his resolve to change his religion. At a massive Mahar conference in Bombay held on May 30-31, 1936 he spoke of the need for conversion.²⁶ He stated then that the "Hindu religion is not the religion of our ancestors, but it was a slavery forced upon them".²⁷ He went on to declare:²⁸

To reform the Hindu society is neither our aim nor our field of action. Our aim is to gain freedom. We have nothing to do with anything else. If we can gain our freedom by conversion, why should we shoulder the responsibility of reforming the Hindu religion? And why should we sacrifice our strength and property for that? None should misunderstand the object of our movement as being Hindu social reform. The object of our movement is to achieve social freedom for the Untouchables.²⁹ It is equally true that this freedom cannot be secured without conversion.

The process of liberation pursued by Dr Ambedkar is to be understood as Prakritization. It takes the Untouchables back to their indigenous iden-

tity and dignity, in this case, through Pali, the Prakrit of the Buddhists in contrast to the discriminatory social system resulting from the process of Sanskritization.

It is not the social context of the Hindus that Dr Ambedkar set out to reform. He is clear that the purpose of his new hermeneutics is "social freedom for the Untouchables". The decision to embrace Buddhism was arrived at after considering the manner in which Hinduism and Islam breed social stagnation, and the fact that Christianity does not manifest "sufficient organised national and social concern".³⁰

After Dr Ambedkar lost the election in 1952, he considered yet another aspect of his hermeneutics of society, namely, political organization. He established the Republican Party of India (RPI). He desired that the RPI would become the collective voice of the Untouchables, the marginalized, in the political democracy and much more in the social democracy of India. In the Constituent Assembly he had reiterated that "[w]e must make our political democracy a social democracy as well. Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy. What does social democracy mean? It means a way of life which recognizes liberty, equality and fraternity as the principles of life".³¹

7. *The Buddha and His Dhamma*³²

This is a major work of the hermeneutics of Buddhism by Dr Ambedkar. In the Preface³³ to the work it is referred to as the Sutta of Bud-

dhism.³⁴ That is a deliberate attempt to accord canonical, scriptural status to the work of interpretation by Dr Ambedkar.³⁵ It enjoys, in the oral tradition among the converts to Buddhism, the status of being the Bible of the Indian Buddhists. Even the day of his death is revered as the day of Dr Ambedkar's *Mahāparinibbāna*, that is, the state of final emancipation from life, rebirth and even death.³⁶

The aim of the revival of Buddhism is to bring about a Kingdom of Righteousness³⁷ to be a reality on earth. Dr Ambedkar interprets the purpose of religion according to the Buddha to be threefold, namely, to help human beings attain the Kingdom of Righteousness by righteous conduct in relation to others; to train the human mind, instincts and dispositions; and to infuse courage to stand, even alone, if necessary, by what is right.³⁸

While summing up the variety of opinions about what the Buddha taught, Dr Ambedkar enquires if the Buddha had no 'social Message'.³⁹ It is common knowledge that the Buddha taught *Ahimsā* (non-violence) and peace. Dr Ambedkar's hermeneutics of the Buddha's teaching highlights its social message of justice, love, liberty, equality and fraternity,⁴⁰ which, he maintains, has been 'buried by modern authors'.

The Buddha's teaching is presented as *Dhamma*, (religion) *Adhamma* (non-religion) and *Saddhamma* (true religion).⁴¹ He states forcefully the need to cultivate the social virtues of Buddhism, namely, *Maitri* or love for living beings, *Karuṇā* or compassion for all, *Pradñyā* or think-

ing aright, and *Śīla* or acting aright. The purpose of such an enterprise is to make the world a Kingdom of Righteousness. It is to be a reality on earth. It is to be attained by human beings by their righteous conduct in relation to others.⁴² Such a Kingdom of Righteousness on earth that the Buddha taught, Dr Ambedkar believes, is what distinguishes the Buddha's religion from all other religions with their notions of the kingdom of heaven.

Dr Ambedkar is conscious of three main concerns that religion must address, if it is to be a true religion. For *Dhamma* (religion) to be *Saddhamma* (true religion), he points out, it must pull down all social barriers between human beings. *Chaturvarṇa* (the four castes/classes) as a model for an ideal society was indeed regarded as a social barrier by the Buddha for it upheld social inequality. So, for *Dhamma* to be *Saddhamma* it must teach that worth and not birth is the measure of a human being. In the *Vasala Sutta*, mentioned earlier, the Buddha teaches that one is not high (*Brahmin*) or low (*Vasala*) by birth. By one's own actions does one become high or low. Finally, for *Dhamma* to be *Saddhamma* it must promote equality between human beings. Dr Ambedkar concludes his hermeneutics of *Dhamma* and *Saddhamma* with the affirmation that the Buddha argued that a religion which does not preach equality is not worth, and that the Buddha's religion "which promotes the happiness of others simultaneously with the happiness of oneself and tolerates no oppression" is better than others. Such a religion is capable of making a contribution to create a new

society. Thus, Dr Ambedkar's hermeneutics from a subaltern perspective incorporated the vital role of true religion to bring about justice, love, liberty, equality and fraternity in independent India.

8. Critique of Dr Ambedkar's Buddhist Movement

Perhaps the somewhat hasty criticism of Dr Ambedkar's attempt of a new understanding of the Buddha's teaching came from the Bhikkhu Sangha in India. Dr Ambedkar saw the mission of the Buddha after his awakening/enlightenment as devoted to the cause of the emancipation of the people. Having been awakened to the suffering of the masses his concern was to show the way out of suffering. D. C. Vijayavardhan in *The Revolt in the Temple* (1963:53) affirms the Buddha as the greatest social reformer. It is the hermeneutics of the Buddha, the social reformer, that Dr Ambedkar sought to make the paradigm for his new hermeneutics of the Awakened One's message and praxis. So he advised "the younger generation of the Buddhist countries to pay attention to the actual teaching of the Buddha".⁴³ In the same address to the Fourth Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists at Kathmandu, Nepal, he cautioned that :

If I may say so in conclusion if any peril arises to the *Dhamma*, in a Buddhist country the blame shall have to be cast upon the *Bhikkhus*, because I personally think that they are not wholly discharging the duty which devolves on them. Where is the preaching? The *Bhikkhu* is living in his cloister taking his meal, one meal

no doubt and sitting quietly probably he is reading, and most probably I find them sleeping, and in the evening having a little music. That is not the way of propagating religion. My friends, I want to tell you, I do not want to criticize anybody, but religion, if it is to be a moral force for regeneration of society, you must constantly din it in the ears of the people.⁴⁴

Such a critical view of the *Bhikkhus'* failure to propagate the Buddha's actual teaching earned the ire of the traditional monks on Dr Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism in *The Buddha And His Dhamma*. In *The Maha Bodhi*,⁴⁵ the journal of the Buddhists in India, appeared a three-pronged rejoinder:

i) *The Buddha And His Dhamma* was a dangerous book; Ambedkar's interpretation of the theory of *Karma*, the theory of *Ahimsā* and his theory that Buddhism was merely a social system, constituted not the correct interpretation of Buddhism but a new orientation. Indeed, the whole of the book ... explained the hatred and aggressiveness the neo-Buddhist nourished and displayed.

ii) The title should be changed from *The Buddha And His Dhamma* to that of *Dr Ambedkar and His Dhamma*; for Dr Ambedkar preached non-*Dhamma* as *Dhamma* for motives of political and social reform.

iii) Ambedkar's Buddhism is based on hatred, the Buddha's on compassion. It would seem more important to be careful what we accept in Dr Ambedkar's book as being the word of Buddha.⁴⁶

It is evident that Buddhist monks

in India had accepted at the time of Dr Ambedkar's interpretation a traditional *pabbajjā*, that is, going forth from the world (renunciation), as their paradigm. Buddhist monks elsewhere in Myanmar and Sri Lanka have since reappropriated the essence of the Buddha's going forth, namely, going forth for the welfare of all, for the happiness and well-being of the entire world.⁴⁷ They have found in such a hermeneutics the reason for their active involvement in, and commitment to, the struggles of the oppressed people. There are some of the oppressed people, the Dalits, at least, who have tried to follow Dr Ambedkar's vision of Buddhism for a new society.

9. Dalits and Dr Ambedkar

"Dalits awoken to a new political consciousness" was a headline in one of the English language newspapers recently.⁴⁸ A couple of days earlier "9 Dalit groups merge into a unified RPI" made front-page news as well.⁴⁹ While assessing the manner in which the Dalits appropriate the method and message of Dr Ambedkar the splintered RPI may be a crucial indicator.⁵⁰ Dalit leaders in the RPI have made themselves bargaining pawns for political office rather than be trailblazers for social democracy. Since the Independence of India some Dalits have experienced upward economic mobility into the middle class. They seem to want to have still more for themselves and their families, particularly through political office.

Disillusioned with the ineffectiveness of the RPI, but inspired by the Black Panther Movement for social and racial justice and equality in the United States of America, Dalit youth of

Maharashtra began a radical revolutionary Dalit Panthers Movement in 1972. By then Dr Ambedkar was seen as the champion of the Mahars, one of the Untouchable groups to which he belonged by birth. There were other groups that were Untouchables and who had not embraced Buddhism. While Dr Ambedkar had tried to work out his radical social reform with a Buddhist method without getting the bloody revolutionary Marxist Communist one, the Dalit Panthers were more strident.

The Dalit Panthers stated the identity of a Dalit in their Manifesto as:

Members of scheduled castes and tribes, Neo-Buddhists, the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion.⁵¹

The Dalit awakening to a new political consciousness says it all. Unity of the Dalits is essential to speak in one voice of the hermeneutics of the marginalized half a century after the Independence of India. Certainly the new identity as proposed in the Manifesto goes beyond the identity given to the Dalit by embracing Buddhism. It broadens its perspective to identify the Dalits as those suffering the social, economic, political and religious exploitation, and includes the Scheduled Castes and Tribes, and women. In the quest of some Dalits and Dalit leaders for quick po-

litical and economic gains for themselves mainstream political parties have accorded them 'a symbolic role in the political arena'. The great majority of the Dalits, however, still dream of the social democracy that Dr Ambedkar sought to bring about through his hermeneutics of the Buddhist tradition.

10. Conclusion

In the context of contemporary India and the efforts at a new hermeneutics of its traditions with a subaltern perspective, Dr Ambedkar was seized by the paramount importance of the purpose of such an exercise. He did not claim any originality to it, but a conscious appropriation of the heritage of the Buddha awakened to the suffering of the marginalized human beings. He reinterpreted Buddhist tradition as was done earlier by Emperor Asoka to challenge Indian society to create a new community, the Kingdom of Righteousness on earth. The insight into reclaiming the symbol of the Asoka Chakra is to incorporate religion, a social institution, into the modern polity of India. He hoped that reappropriation of such a tradition would give to India a new identity as a community, culture and country. He had a dream to make liberty, equality and fraternity a reality for every citizen with the dawn of Buddhism again on the horizon of India's future.

Notes

1. Jawaharlal Nehru to the Constituent Assembly on August 14, 1947. See J. Nehru, *Before and After Independence: A Collection of Speeches*, n.a., Vol. II, p. 432.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 432.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 432.

4. Dhananjay Keer, *Dr Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1990, p. 397.
5. Mahatma Gandhi is the prime example of them. His writings could be found in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1983.
6. See "Six Paths to India's Future" in *Sources of Indian Tradition* compiled by Wm. Theodore de Bary et al. New York: Columbia University Press, 1960, pp. 877-931. Dr Ambedkar does not figure among those six paths. That leaves us with an area to explore which is new to the known paths to India's future.
7. J. Nehru, *Recent Essays and Writings*, pp. 76, cited in Wm. Theodore de Bary, *Sources of Indian Tradition*, p. 896.
8. For the contribution of Buddhism towards building up a society far from communalism, see Noel Sheth, "Buddhism and Communalism" *Religion and Society* 34/4 (December 1988), pp. 44-66.
9. See The Constituent Assembly Debates, Official Report, Vol. X, 22nd November 1949, p. 820. The quote above has been reproduced in Vasant Moon, ed., *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 13, Bombay: Education Department, The Government of Maharashtra, 1994, p. 1183.
10. Translation of the texts of the Edicts cited in this study are from Vincent A Smith, *Asoka: The Buddhist Emperor of India* Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1920, chapters IV & V, pp. 149 – 230. See also Radhagovinda Basak, ed., *Asokan Inscriptions*, Calcutta: Progressive Publishers, 1959, for the critical text and translation of the Inscriptions.
11. V. A. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 165.
12. In Pali it is *Dhammamangala* and in Sanskrit rendered as *Dharmamangala*.
13. Perhaps we would have to refer to the most well-known of all Edicts, the Bhabru Edict or Second Bairat Rock Edict to comprehend the deep influence of Buddhism on the perspective of Asoka. In it he refers to seven passages of the Pali Buddhist Scriptures which he recommends that monks and nuns as well as laity, male and female, should frequently hear and meditate on. See V. A. Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-157.
14. Vasant Moon, ed., *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 3 (1987), p.6.
15. Cited by M. S. Gore, *The Social Context of an Ideology: Dr Ambedkar's Political and Social Thought*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1993, p. 251.
16. Vasant Moon, ed., *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*, Vol. 4 (1987), p. 9.
17. B.A.M. Paradkar, "The Religious Quest of Dr Ambedkar", in *Dr Ambedkar And The Neo-Buddhist Movement*, T.S. Wilkinson and M.M. Thomas, eds., Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1972, p. 66.
18. W. Geiger, *Culture of Ceylon in Medieval Times*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1960, p. 176.
19. For more details, see Noel Sheth, "The Buddha's Attitude to Caste," *Negations* 1:4 (October-December 1982)
20. Book IV, Part II, Section V.
21. A critical assessment of those criteria could be a topic for further research to explore Dr Ambedkar's assumptions in reinterpretation.
22. D.P. Pattanayak in posing the problem of Identity (*Seminar* No.387, 1991) states that

the Hindu tradition created 4000 Jatis, each with a distinct identity, out of the four Varnas. According to his view, a 'twin process of Sanskritization and Prakritization' is at work to change the face of identity. Dr Ambedkar's process seems to be a strong case for Prakritization.

23. Both works are available in a single volume (Number 7) of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches, Bombay: The Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1990.
24. For other valuable details about the identity of the Mahars of Maharashtra, see: R.W. Taylor, "The Dr Ambedkarite Buddhists", in *Dr Ambedkar And The Neo-Buddhist Movement*, T.S. Wilkinson and M.M. Thomas, eds., p. 141; Robertson, *The Mahar Folk*, Calcutta: YMCA, 1938; J.H. Hutton, *Caste in India* Bombay: Oxford, 1951; R.E. Enthoven, *The Tribes and Castes of Bombay*, II, 3 Vols. Bombay: Government Central Press, 1920-23.
25. Dr Ambedkar, *The Untouchables*, pp. 311-317.
26. The English translation of that speech can be found in Dr Babasaheb B. R. Ambedkar, *Why Go For Conversion?*, Bangalore: Dalit Sahitya Akademy, 1987.
27. Dr Ambedkar, *Why Go For Conversion?*, p. 18.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 15. A little earlier in the same address he had identified the Untouchables as *Mahar-Mangs*.
30. B.A.M. Paradkar, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
31. Quoted by Justice V.R. Krishna Iyer while considering 'Dr Ambedkar's Contribution to Indian Social, Political and Constitutional Thought in Indian Polity' in *Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit Future*, p. 32.
32. It was first published in 1957, and is now available as Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches, Vol. 11, *The Buddha And His Dhamma*, Bombay: The Education Department, The Government of Maharashtra, 1992.
33. The Preface is written by Justice R.R. Bhole to the second edition of B.R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha And His Dhamma*, Bombay: Siddharth Publication, 1974.
34. It was first printed for private circulation as *The Buddha And His Gospel*, and later changed to the present title. See, Dhananjay Keer, *Dr Ambedkar: Life And Mission*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1962, p. 486.
35. R.W. Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 145, refers to Dr Ambedkar's posthumous work as Dr Ambedkar's Buddhist Canon.
36. Ambedkar is acknowledged to be a Bodhisattva too.
37. D. Keer, the biographer of Dr Ambedkar, is aware that his subject sought to interpret Buddhism on account of its revolutionary social message as a revolutionary religion. He writes that Dr Ambedkar tried "to give political form to Buddha's teaching" Keer, *op. cit.*, 490.
38. *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Book III, Part V, Nn. 31-33.
39. See *The Buddha And His Dhamma*, Book III, Part II.
40. As Chairman of the Drafting Committee, Dr Ambedkar enshrined three of these, liberty, equality and fraternity, in the Preamble to the Constitution of India.
41. See *The Buddha And His Dhamma*, Book III, Parts III, IV, V.
42. Dr Ambedkar, *op. cit.*, Book III, Part V, Section I para. 2.
43. Dr Ambedkar, "Buddha and Karl Marx" in *Thoughts on Dr Ambedkar: Selected Ar-*

tics By Eminent Scholars compiled by Hoti Lal Nim, Agra: Siddharth Educational & Cultural Society, 1969, p. 7.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.
45. December 1959, pp. 518-19.
46. The text as quoted by D. R. Jatava, *The Critics of Dr Ambedkar*, New Delhi: Bharatiya Shoshit Jan Utthan Parishad, 1975, pp. 57-8.
47. As narrated in the *Mahāvagga* section of the *Vinaya Pitaka* of the Pali Canon. Its translation by T.W.Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg is published in *Vinaya Texts, Part I* in the Sacred Books of the East Series, Volume 13, Varanasi: Motilal Banarsidass, reprinted 1968, pp. 112-13.
48. Yogesh Vajpeyi, *Indian Express*, Pune, 28 December 1995.
49. *The Times of India*, Bombay, 26 December 1995.
50. I do not have exact figures of membership in the various factions of the RPI: Athavale, Gavai, Prakash Ambedkar, B.C. Kamble, Jogendra Kawade, T.M. Kamble and Khobragade. The last faction has not associated itself with the efforts at the RPI unity.
51. For the complete text of the Dalit Panthers Manifesto, Bombay, 1973, see Lata Murugkar, *Dalit Panther Movement in Maharashtra: A Sociological Appraisal* Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1991, pp.232-239. A useful resource for understanding the identity of the Dalits is James Massey, ed., *Indigenous People: Dalits; Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, Delhi: ISPCK, 1994. A valuable article in it is J. Massey, "Historical Roots," pp. 3-55.