



7-18-2024

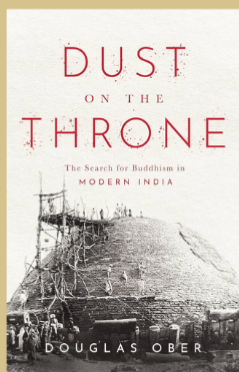
The Revival of Buddhism

Chandrabhan P. Yadav

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.nls.ac.in/popular-media>



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Cultural History Commons](#), and the [History of Religion Commons](#)



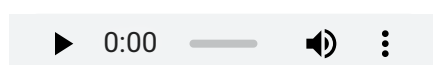
The Revival of Buddhism

Reports of the death of Buddhism in precolonial India were greatly exaggerated. The many Buddhisms promoted by ideologies across the spectrum in modern times came to distinctively shape South Asia.

JULY 18, 2024



Listen to this article



Speed: 100%



Dust on the Throne: The Search for Buddhism in Modern India

By Douglas Ober

(Stanford University Press, 2023.)

Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism on 14 October 1956 categorically placed on the historical map of India Buddhism as a *different* heritage, one of a de-brahmanised past which needed to be foregrounded in the historical narrative of India

and which could no longer be left on the margins or considered as an offshoot of Hinduism.

In *Dust on the Throne: The Search for Buddhism in Modern India*, Douglas Ober highlights that heritage by recording hitherto unheard or less-heard voices on Buddhisms not only from the colonial period but even from the ‘mediaeval’ centuries. He takes up the historian Gyandendra Pandey’s concept of “un-archived histories,” – where in the process of selecting something to archive, certain other pasts or traces are excluded and hence ‘un-archived’ – to opine that this has been the case with the historiography of Buddhism as well. Contrary to the existing understanding of Buddhism’s disappearance from the subcontinent, Ober collates scattered evidence from a wide range of sources to show that there were “periodic historical resurgences” and the presence of “trans-regional pilgrimage networks”.

Contrary to existing understanding of Buddhism’s disappearance from the subcontinent, Ober collates a wide range of scattered evidence to show that there were “periodic historical resurgences.”

Ober broadens the meaning of Buddhism to make tenable his argument. Much like Gregory Schopen, we see here an attempt to de-prioritise the Pali canon – the textual Buddhism of the Theravadin variety – to expand the purview and meaning of Buddhism. Varieties of practices in Nepal, Chittagong, Sikkim, Kinnaur, Spiti, Ladakh, and other regions become Buddhism, and rightly so. These Buddhisms have been highlighted by Ober to argue for Buddhist presence in what has traditionally been seen as a phase of decline. Relying on the works of several scholars, Ober weaves a narrative of pilgrimage networks, especially those centred around Nalanda and Bodh Gaya. He highlights instances of visits by Tibetans, Newars from Kathmandu valley, Lahaulis, Burmese, Thais, and Chinese. Drawing on diffuse data from the counter traditions (vis a vis Buddhism) he shows memories of Buddhists have been kept alive along with a sense of their presence in border areas.

Ober records dismissive but potent accounts of/about Buddhisms in the *Puranas*, hagiographies, philosophical works, plays and poems in the ‘mediaeval’ centuries. Buddhist memory within the larger Brahmanical tradition started with the Buddha’s incorporation in various puranas as one of the avatars of Vishnu. Ober describes how

that incorporation was driven by "religio-political pragmatism." The presence of Buddhist thought in scholastic manuals and commentaries produced by the Vedanta and Nyaya traditions was the other broad arena where memory of Buddhism and Buddhist thought was established. The discourses of Shankara, Jayanta Bhatta, Madhava and most importantly Kumarila Bhatta – spanning the 7th and the 14th century – entrench his claim that Buddhism was a constant reference point.

Buddhists were also discussed – often with ridicule – within the context of the Bhakti tradition, in particular the Gaudiya and Tamil versions. Ober notes a similar description in Abu al'Fazl's 16th century account, where he refers to the "tribe of Boodh." Ober gathers these facts to argue for a continued presence of Buddhism, if not in the textuality and materiality of the region of its origin, then in descriptions of counter traditions. The contents in these descriptions however can also be read as part of the 'older' story of Buddhism's disappearance from the scene through varieties of strategies of rejection as well as accommodation.

Contrary to earlier scholarship which gives a tad too much credit to Europeans in reshaping Buddhism in modern times, Ober brings to our notice the roles of local characters, even if all of them were not heroes.

Vajrasuchi had its afterlife: anti-caste activists like Jotirao Phule and Daboda Pandurang used this anti-Brahmanical Buddhist text to bolster their politics

The 'native's' role in the 'revival' begins with the *Vajrasuchi*, a 1st century CE Buddhist text written in Sanskrit, and the role of Subaji Bapu in its resurfacing in the 19th century. Subaji, a Brahmin, was reluctant to aid Lancelot Wilkinson, a British diplomat who acquired a manuscript of the *Vajrasuchi*, in producing an edited version and translation, due to the text's staunch critique of Brahmanism. However, Subaji agreed to help on the condition the edition carried his own response to the text.

The 1839 edition of the English and Sanskrit bilingual *Vajrasuchi* had its afterlife: anti-caste activists like Jotirao Phule and Daboda Pandurang used this anti-Brahmanical Buddhist text to bolster their politics. Subaji, according to Ober, as a modern Brahmin represented the transition from the erstwhile position of Brahmanical

antagonism towards Buddhism, which would be less relevant in subsequent centuries as new forms of 'Buddhist-Brahmanical (Hindu) relations emerged.

The other character who played a significant role in the story of modern Buddhism was Raja Shivaprasad (1823-95) who wrote *Itihas Timir Nashak*, a three-volume Hindi textbook which was remarkably sensitive to the Buddhist past. Ober notes Shivaprasad's observation that "Indians could no longer afford to ignore the era of the Buddha which begins from Sakyamuni." Apart from Subaji Bapu and Raja Shivaprasad, we come across figures like Bhagavanlal Indraji (1839-88) who worked with Buhler on the Ashokan edicts, Sarat Chandra Das (1849-1917), a Bengali scholar who returned from spying missions to Central Tibet with several Tibetan Buddhist texts, Rajendralal Mitra (1824-91) who edited the *Lalitavistara Sutra* and wrote many books on Buddhism, and Haraprasad Shastri (1861-1930) who authored *The Discovery of Living Buddhism in Bengal*.

The stories of Mahavir Singh and other Indians are possible in Ober's narrative through a shift of scholarly focus away from the "Anglo-centric and elite" nature of earlier work which largely highlighted "globetrotting cosmopolitans".

We also come to face with the curious figure of Mahavir Singh, a Rajput from Arrah (in Bihar). Born in 1833, Singh, a wrestler was later ordained into the *sangha* at a monastery in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) in 1885. He was probably the "first north Indian Hindu in modern time to become a Buddhist monk" and Ober argues that he represented an Indian whose understanding and initiation to Buddhism was not mediated by "Orientalist writings" or "colonial pedagogies." He was initiated into the Buddha's teachings from the "living Buddhist culture" of Ceylon and through a "regimented," "monastic curricula." In 1956, when Ambedkar took to Buddhism, the ritual officiant at the ceremony was bhikkhu U Chandramani, a disciple of Singh.

Ober echoes Ulrike Stark's observation of these locals being "hybrid intellectuals" with mastery over both Indian and British systems of learning and not merely "native informants." The stories of Mahavir Singh and other Indians are possible in Ober's narrative through a shift of scholarly focus away from the "Anglo-centric and elite" nature of earlier work which largely highlighted "globetrotting cosmopolitans like Anagarika Dharmapala," a Sinhalese Buddhist

activist. However, the story of Mahavir Singh is not unknown in the Hindi public sphere, and Ober relies on the Punjabi bhikku Anand Kausalyayan's 1941 work in Hindi to bring this figure to the fore.

In the spirit of recovering the role of Indians in the 'revival' of Buddhism, Ober reminds us that the colonial Archaeological Survey of India had no legal authority over the large number of Buddhist monuments located inside princely states. These monuments included Sanchi, Bharhut, and Ajanta. He cites Nayanjot Lahiri's detailed account of the 20th century Muslim Begums of Bhopal who generously supported conservation efforts at Sanchi.

Relying on the works of Upinder Singh and Tapati Guha-Thakurta, Ober talks about the "anglophone and Eurocentric" nature of British archaeology which invisibilised Indian participants with labels like "my babu," "my assistant," and "my pandit". While Ober extends his *maitri* (friendship) in highlighting the role of 'natives' whom earlier 'anglophone' scholarship have ignored, it would have been good to know his own positionality. Historians often forget that politics is not part and parcel of the past, but also belongs to our own realm, and the past should not come to rescue our own privileged positionalities.

However, Ober's invocation about the role of "caste subalterns" in the practice of colonial archaeology is appreciable. He calls it "the true underbelly of colonial archaeology" and remarks that they remain "largely outside of our historical understanding." The histories of these figures is possible if we move beyond the written records and use visual archives (especially photographs).

The above observations lead to Ober's third argument, that the modern 'revival' of Buddhism began nearly a century before Babasaheb's conversion and the Indian government's celebration of 2,500 years of Buddhism in the year 1956.

Across several chapters Ober tells us the pre-history of these two supposedly great events in the history of modern Buddhism. While Ambedkar's genealogy of Buddhist thought is concentrated in chapter 5, we find these discussions scattered throughout the book. Ober cites Dhananjay Keer's biography on how Ambedkar's encounter with Buddhism went back to his school days in 1907, when he got a Marathi book on the life of Buddha from his teacher,

an indication of the clear presence of Buddhism in the Marathi public sphere in the early 20th century.

Ober could have possibly explored the connections between the rulers' anti-Brahmin outlook (which led them to fund Ambedkar's education) and their interest in Buddhism.

Ober points out that Sayajirao Gaikwad III (1863–1939), the ruler of Baroda who provided a scholarship for Ambedkar's education, was interested in Buddhism. Apart from installing a statue of the Buddha at a square in Baroda, the maharaja commissioned the publication of several Buddhist texts and generously supported Dharmanand Kosambi (1876–1947), a renowned scholar of Buddhism. Kosambi, who wrote on Buddhism in Marathi as well as Gujrati, has been often quoted in Ambedkar's writings.

In this fashion, Ober provides us a deep genealogy of present day Ambedakrites and the Bahujan interest in Buddhism. However, while discussing Ambedkar's educational journey Ober writes, "Ambedkar's graduation was an unusual event, and with the support of several progressive Hindu reformers, he went on to attain scholarships to study in the UK and the US." These 'progressive Hindus' were the rulers of two princely states in western India, both known for their anti-Brahmin outlook. The term 'progressive Hindu reformers' seems inappropriate for these figures, and Ober could have possibly explored the connections between the rulers' anti-Brahmin outlook (which led them to fund Ambedkar's education) and their interest in Buddhism.

In the Tamil region, modern Buddhism appeared as carrying an anti-caste egalitarian ethos. The Shakya Buddhist Society and one of its leaders, Iyothee Thass (1845–1914), argued that "the "original inhabitants" of India were (Dravidian) Buddhists and that when "foreign" Aryans migrated to the subcontinent, they conquered the "indigenous" Buddhist dynasties and punished them with the stigma of untouchability." They also believed that Buddhism with its "progressive outlook and egalitarian ethos" could solve "the pariah problem."

Thass's articulation had a shade not dissimilar to the Buddhism of Ambedkar's vision. The Shakya Buddhist Society, much before Ambedkar's great conversion of 1956, converted 1,000 workers and their families and installed a Buddhist statue inside the temple in Mysore's Kolar Gold Fields. However, in his attempt to show the similarities of Thass's articulation and those of Ambedkar's, Ober

misreads the latter's *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables*. Ober says, "Similar to Bodhananda's and Thass's earlier works, Ambedkar's thesis is that untouchables were "broken men," the scattered survivors of "original Indians" conquered by Aryan–brahmin invaders." Further, he argues that Ambedkar "projected dalits as the true indigenous populace while berating brahmins as the foreign pollutants."

In fact, Ambedkar did not think in terms of indigenous and foreign when he discussed the origin of untouchability and the *shudra* as *varna*. In Ambedkar's thesis, the 'broken men' emerged from the inter-community conflicts *within* Aryan society and they were not racial others. Separated from their own social groups, these 'broken men' were forced to live outside settled villages.

In considering the flourishing of Buddhist societies, networks, and ideas in the colonial world, Ober looks at developments beyond Ambedkar's Buddhism. The Theosophical Society is succinctly captured by a quotation from the scholar Laurence Cox: "not all Theosophists became Buddhists; but any serious member had to engage with Buddhism." Ober also discusses the Maha Bodhi Society's Calcutta chapter and the crucial role of Anagarika Dharmapala, with the caveat that this was neither the first nor the only Buddhist organisation in colonial South Asia.

It came to be that "the right-wing Hindu organization, the All-India Hindu Maha Sabha, and its industrialist sponsors, the Birlas, that became the foremost patrons of Buddhist construction and publishing projects."

These different receptions of Buddhisms in the colonial period is the final theme of the book. The revival of Buddhism has played a distinctive role in the shaping of modern South Asia in general and India in particular. Figures like M. Singaravelu, Dharmanand Kosambi, and Rahul Sankrityayan represented the the Indian left's tinkering with Buddhism. Ober shows how Buddhism's public reception in many ways and forms during the newly emerged nation state was an amalgamation of Nehru's personal interest in the Buddha and his teachings, and the resurgence of Buddhism as currency in the international network during the first half of the 20th century.

Ober elaborately discusses Hindu nationalism's links with Buddhism and the role played by capitalists in shaping the meaning of Buddhism as well as Hinduism and India as a nation. It came to be that "the right-wing Hindu organization, the All-India Hindu Maha Sabha, and its industrialist sponsors, the Birlas, that became the foremost patrons of Buddhist construction and publishing projects."

The idea of Buddhism as an offshoot of Hinduism developed along with Hinduism's nationalisation. (The Buddha was barely mentioned in Hindu sources for the first 1,000 years and when he made an appearance in the *Puranas*, he was represented as a teacher of false propaganda along with an identification as an avatar.) The 19th and 20th century interest in Buddhism by Hindu nationalists was due to Buddhism's international reception as a progressive value from South Asia.

The idea of *Sanatan Dharma* as a meta-religion, developed by Hindu nationalists at this juncture made possible the accommodation of Buddhism (as other 'sects' and religions). Ober quotes Vivekananda saying, 'the Lord Buddha is my Ishta – my God. He preached no theory about Godhead – He was Himself God. I fully believe it.' As part of his project of universalising Hinduism, Vivekanand called the Buddha a 'rebel child' of Hinduism. Savarkar's in his *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*, claimed "the Buddha – the Dharma – the Sangha. *They are all ours*". Similarly, Gandhi too opined that "Buddhism is a part of Hinduism." The Birlas' temple building initiative had the Buddha and Hindu deities placed side by side, furthering the enfolding of Buddhism into Hinduism.

Ober's book shows that 'there is not one single identity at the heart of modern Indian Buddhism' and lives of many figures with different motives and interest is tied with Buddhism and opens up future research. We may never re-cover the throne in its entirety, and there will always be some dust on it. Or maybe one is not interested in the throne, but rather, in a leaf lost in the past.

Chandrabhan P. Yadav teaches history at National Law School of India University, Bengaluru. He is a recipient of the Navayana Dalit History Fellowship and is working on a monograph titled Following the Trail: Ambedkar, Buddhism and Caste.

EDITOR'S CHOICE



Lonely Twilight of Older Women in India

ALLEN PRABHAKER UGARGOL



Widowhood and its Associated Vulnerabilities in India: A Gendered Perspective

BABUL HOSSAIN



A Field Study of Rajasthan's Urban Employment Guarantee Programme

SHIULI VANAJA, NIRUJ DEKA, AMIT BASOLE



The Congress in a New Ideological Avatar

RAHUL VERMA, PRANAV MATHUR

Please support 'The India Forum'

[Donate](#)

This article was last updated on July 19, 2024

The India Forum welcomes your comments on this article for the Forum/Letters section.

Write to: editor@theindiaforum.in

Tags: [Book Review](#) • [Religion](#) • [South Asia](#)

READ ALSO

More Practical than Principled

This comprehensive road-map for better governance focuses more on practical solutions than on the underlying principles that guide government actions and citizen relationships. But can solutions be “non-ideological” and without a strong political vision?

Published On: July 31, 2024

Updated On: August 02, 2024

Widowhood and its Associated Vulnerabilities in India: A Gendered Perspective

Both widows and widowers in India face challenges living alone, though women of course are more vulnerable. After losing a spouse, both genders experience difficulties like food insecurity and abuse. We need to address in particular the health-related vulnerability of widowed women living alone.

Published On: July 31, 2024

Updated On: August 02, 2024

History's Key Role in Bangladesh Students' Deadly Protests

In their struggle against authoritarian rule, Bangladesh's students rely on their history's many artefacts.

Published On: July 30, 2024

Updated On: July 31, 2024

Sign up for The India Forum Updates

Get new articles delivered to your inbox every Friday as soon as fresh articles are published.

Subscribe

The India Forum seeks your support...

to sustain its effort to deliver thoughtful analysis and commentary that is without noise, abuse and fake news.

To make a one-time donation please click here:

Donate

You can now also use the QR code in the link above to make a quick one-time donation via UPI.

To make a monthly or annual donation click here:

Donate

Donations enjoy tax exemption under Section 80G of the Income Tax Act.