

Engaging with Caste and Class in Modern India: Some Questions for Buddhists

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INTRODUCTION

The Buddha's teachings can be traced to one deep ontological truth: that nothing exists independently in itself. All phenomena are lacking in inherent existence and come into being due to a multiplicity of interconnected causes or a chain of causes. This insight leads to a wide variety of far-ranging implications that extend from the conceptual to the psychological, from the political to the ecological. Extrapolating this insight onto the UN Millennium Development Goals, the first observation we have to make is that the several goals listed therein are also subjected to this principle, this truth. They must be seen as interrelated. Looking deeply, we cannot separate any of these goals from each other. They must be seen to be part of a whole ecology of consciousness, of a world order which takes different local forms, but which, in an increasingly globalizing world, cannot be seen in terms of isolated and discrete nation-states and their respective social formations. Having made this qualification, this paper sets out to focus on some of

the goals as they play out in the history and current situation of India, the birthplace of the Buddhist tradition.

“A Life of Dignity for All”, is the title of the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon’s report presented to Member States. This inclusiveness segues quite well with what historians have seen as the Buddha’s radical intervention in Indian society. This works at two interrelated levels. The Buddha was a philosopher who challenged age-old hierarchies by establishing ontological grounds for rejecting these inequalities. He was also as a spiritual/religious leader who set up the institution of the monastic sangha that embodied these principles by institutionalizing them in concrete social and material practices. His teachings had social implications, and considered such ‘secular’ dimensions of life as the duties of a king and of the householder, all of which tended towards creating a more compassionate and egalitarian order. The subsequent disappearance of Buddhism in India, needless to say, has been seen to mark the recession of some of these values. Of course, traditions of Buddhism in India and outside India have grown in directions which might lack these social-political resonances. In fact the twentieth century revival of Buddhism in certain quarters has translated into a re-engagement with the changed realities of the same century. “Engaged Buddhism” is a term that comes to mind in this regard and much has been written on the spread of this new phase of Buddhism in East and South East Asia which need not be rehearsed here.

THE INDIAN CASE

Indian historians have, however, seen the residual and resurgent forms of many of these older Buddhist values in the *bhakti* movement that swept medieval India.¹ In the nineteenth century, archeological and textual revival of India’s Buddhist heritage under the aegis of Orientalist scholarship carried largely an antiquarian and scholarly stamp. However, there were also grassroots revivals of Buddhism amongst some sections of Indian society from the late nineteenth century onwards that focused on the social and political dimensions and possibilities of the Buddha’s

1. See Lal Mani. Joshi’s works, for instance.

message. In twentieth century India, two significant figures who were inspired to resurrect the Buddha's message were driven by precisely such concerns for social justice.

This paper traces the contours of the caste and class issue in India – arguably two of the most central concerns if we are to ensure Social Justice in this age-old civilization which is also a very young democracy. The paper brings these issues into sharper focus by closely reading the praxis of two modern Indians who led lives of extraordinary philosophical, political, and social engagement. Rahul Sankrityayan (1893-1963) and B.R. Ambedkar (1891-1956), rarely studied together, are interestingly juxtaposed here. The vexed issue of class/caste disparities as worked out in the writings of these two contemporaries acquires a piquant dimension, given their varied caste backgrounds. They, however, share one extraordinary coincidence: each had engaged with Buddhism and Marxism for their comparable socio-political agendas, both as philosophical systems and modes of social change. For each of them, these two grand emancipatory systems of thought and action are compellingly relevant for their own time. However, each engages with these two traditions in comparable yet diverse ways and reaches different conclusions. *Dhamma* becomes a cornerstone of their vision of an ideal society, though their sharp and critical minds also challenge some of the views and practices that had also come to be associated with this tradition. The challenges posed by these men, I argue here, ring true even today as we address the question of how Buddhism can answer to the requirements of building a more just and equitable society. Specifically, the interrelated issue of class and caste as modes of social stratification and the priority each gives to these as problems to be solved, draw our attention as these continue to be major impediments to the achievement of social justice. I do not detail here the definition of caste or of class, but it is significant that caste is an issue unique to the Indian sub-continent, though similar forms of differentiation that align people hierarchically by birth exist in other societies as well.

Rahul Sankrityayan, a relentlessly questing individual, became a Buddhist scholar who first trained in Sri Lanka (where he ordained as

a monk and acquired the degree of *Tripitakacharya*) and was a political activist for India's freedom from colonial rule and also from class oppression. Through the 1930s to the 50s, he was also a prolific writer on issues of social justice, in forms as varied as the polemical essay, the short story, the novel and the memoir. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who received extensive training in Western jurisprudence and liberal philosophy, emerged as a tireless advocate for the emancipation of the so-called Untouchables or Depressed Classes, the lowest rung in the hierarchical ladder of caste arrangements. As India's first Law Minister and the framer of its remarkable Constitution, he was to find inspiration in the example of the Buddha, whom he accepted as his spiritual master just before his death in 1956, in a public ceremony of mass conversion that has become an iconic part of the history of the struggle against caste oppression in India. In doing so, he also evolved his own understanding of the 'true' meaning of the Buddha's message, which he labeled 'Navayana'. What is significant is that he considered the received Buddhist tradition carefully and critically to frame his emancipatory politics.

It might be useful to turn our gaze backwards to see what it was that impelled these two—each deeply committed to social justice-- towards the Buddhist tradition and what elements they found troublesome. For in some ways, their difficulties with some aspects of Buddhist practice and tradition can guide us in understanding what may continue to be trouble areas in the application of Buddhism as a panacea to effect the radical social (and political and economic) transformations that must take place if the UN Millennium Development Goals are to be achieved.

In its methodology, the paper works at two levels. It engages with the ontological status of fixed categories such as caste (and, in passing, gender, and by implication race and other categories of "essentialist" differentiation between peoples) within Buddhist philosophy, while also juxtaposing this philosophically emancipatory vision with the complex history of the lived social realities of Buddhism as a religion in societies that are far from perfect. It thus raises questions of real import for a more realistic appraisal of the processes that must precede the achievement of the kinds of utopian social change that the UNMDGs envisage. It

argues that though Buddhism is eminently suitable for this program, as the historical example of the lived engagements of the two individuals (and communities they worked with) mentioned above indicate, there are significant problem areas that they also point to, which must be addressed by humanity, including the Buddhist world. These two thoughtful figures, in shining a bright light on these darker spaces, thus deserve to be read more closely.

BUDDHIST PHILOSOPHY AND PRAXIS

Ontological deconstruction of fixed categories makes for mental freedom. It undoes the ‘naturalization’ of traditional hierarchies. Historically, “Nature” had been deployed as a conceptual category to justify many inequities across cultures. Thus, just as in some forms of patriarchal thinking, women are innately, naturally, by birth, different and inferior to men, so in racism, blacks are inherently different and inferior to whites, and in casteism, the Untouchables (*Shudras*, later called *Dalits*) to Brahmins. While such logic justifies caste oppression, class oppression may or may not work in terms of heredity. As this learned audience knows only too well, at one level, Buddhist *philosophy* with its central concepts of *pratityasamutpada* (co-dependent origination) and *anatta* (no-self), does not allow for this form of discrimination conceptually. As in the well-known analogy given by the Buddhist sage Nagasena to the Bactrian Greek King Milinda (Menander), the ‘self’ is like the chariot composed of many parts the coming together of which produces the temporary and not-existing-in-itself chariot. It thus shows, logically, the ‘constructedness’ of the idea of ‘self’ itself, let alone of such ascriptive adjectives as ‘black’, ‘shudra’, or ‘woman’. However, there are important problem areas. The notion of past life karma and re-birth could be used to justify poverty or suffering in this life, which might well be demonstrably related to social and political systemic causes. Further, despite these philosophically sound principles, actual monastic rules have discriminated against women, as we only too well know from the efforts of *bhikkunis* in the twentieth century who have been seeking redressal of these grievances, often against stiff opposition

from the same sangha that is committed to those high-minded abstract principles that should guarantee, ontologically and epistemologically, zero discrimination.²

The relationship to ideas and praxis is a complex one, and Buddhist history is no exception. Its philosophical concepts have also been interpreted differentially in varying temporal and geographical zones, and current social pressures and political forces have determined these variations.

More to the point, one may argue that social inequality is produced and perpetuated by more than just concepts and ideology. Radical philosophical concepts alone do not suffice to undo social practices, though they have been used historically to devastating effect to *justify* such practices, as also to enable an oppositional politics and practice. All social practices, good or bad, have a concrete, institutional form within which the “ideological” achieves concrete manifestation. The sangha is such a form, one that is largely democratic.

Ambedkar, In “Buddha or Karl Marx”, celebrates this rather exaggeratedly by contrasting the Buddha’s abolition of private property within the monastic sangha to communism’s half successful experiment in the Soviet Union, arguing that this proves the Buddha’s superiority to Marx as the answer to the contemporary world’s problems. He also cites the Buddha’s *peaceful* achievement of this ideal as opposed to the exhortation to violence in the communist view of history as a sign of its superior ethical stance.

Rahul Sankrityayan has a slightly different trajectory vis-à-vis Buddha and Marx. He had ordained as a *bhikkhu* in Sri Lanka in 1928, where, at Vidyalkara Perivena, he acquired his mastery of the Tripitaka, but grew out of the Buddhist phase within a decade of donning the robe, and indeed, became a member of the Communist Party of India. He challenges Ambedkar’s assertions vis-à-vis Buddhism’s superiority to Marxism independently, in his own comparative analysis of the Buddhist and Marxist modes, by paying close attention to the rules for inclusion

2. Eltschinger has a good analysis of this gap between theory and practice.

and exclusion within the sangha. He sees the Buddha compromising with the powers that be, with monarchy and its vested interests. He finds evidence of this compromise in the kinds of people disallowed from joining the monastic sangha: runaway slaves, debtors and *rajsainiks* (soldiers in the employ of the king), arguing that this proves that the Buddha did not wish to disturb the existing status quo beyond a certain point. Writing in the mid-twentieth century, he finds the 'idealism' of Buddhism inadequate to the task at hand in the modern world, undoing entrenched vested interests that perpetuate structural economic violence.

But Rahul Sankrityayan also had a parallel career as a political activist both against British imperialism and against the feudal landed aristocracy in Bihar, one of the poorest states, and also, incidentally, the Buddha's place of Enlightenment and the seat of much Buddhist learning over centuries. Despite his move towards Marxism, his deep and continued reverence for the Buddha stemmed from seeing the Buddha's profound privileging of the collective over the individual (as evidenced in the Mahaprajapati Gotami episode) as socially transformative and exemplifying an ethos of sharing and non-possession.

He also saw an incipient socialism in the slogan "*Bahujan Hitaya Bahujan Sukhaya*" (For the Benefit of the Many, For the Happiness of the Many). *But*, he also read this rather closely and pointed out, shrewdly and interestingly, that the Buddha sought the good of the many (*bahujan*) and not of all (*sarvajana*). He interpreted this to mean that the Buddha saw that the interest of *some* (a privileged minority) may have to be hurt in order to secure the good of the *many*. Sankrityayan saw this as a recognition, in Buddha's thought, of the presence of class conflict. Further, the focus on greed as a source of social ills (in the originary narrative *Agannasutta*) points to the Buddha's critique of private property. (Subsequent scholars like D.P. Chattopadhyaya, Uma Chakravarti, and Kancha Ilaiah have argued the same, making a case of Buddhism as a kind of proto-Communism). Another powerful contemporary activist-leader who fought for the downtrodden, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, would posit the idea of trusteeship as the solution to the presence of extremes of wealth and poverty, but Sankrityayan the

Marxist saw this as a half-hearted compromise and held that all private property must be abolished. Driven by this vision, he saw the historical Buddha, and several Buddhist institutions, making compromises with their contemporary elites.

Unlike Ambedkar, who focused a great deal, though not exclusively, on caste as the foremost evil to be eradicated, Sankrityayan the Marxist saw caste as just one of the areas to be addressed. Class was the greater overarching category of analysis for him, and while he found the Buddha had much to say in terms of a general loosening of the binding structures of caste, class, race and gender, he found ultimately that the Buddha was too much a product of his time. In addition, he found the institutionalized forms of Buddhism that he saw either uninspiring or positively objectionable. His four journeys to Tibet in the 30s and 40s convinced him that the enmeshing of feudal forms of power with Buddhist monasteries was unhealthy and not an answer to the problems of the twentieth century. Buddhist rationalism had always appealed to him. He found it in ample amounts in the Nalanda philosopher's Dharmakirti's epistemological and logical explorations, especially his *Pramavartika* (Treatise on Valid Cognition), a text which he is credited with having rescued and revived on one of his early journeys into Tibet. This clarity of logic and its social effectiveness he found somewhat obfuscated in Nagarjuna's hair-splitting *sunyavada*.³ Thus a pragmatism bound his engagement with Buddhist philosophical tradition, an urgency to find there socially applicable principles and values that could be unambiguously applied to create a more rational, enlightened society free of superstitions, rituals, and inherited prejudices.

But the structural change that he saw as necessary to unseat prevalent forms of *global* domination, buttressed by the logic of capitalism, had for him only one philosophically valid and enabling answer in the twentieth century: Dialectical Materialism. During his travels and stay in Moscow, he was deeply impressed by the redistribution of land in communist Russia as well as with the strides made in ensuring literacy

3. See Darshan Digdarshan for his masterly survey of world philosophy from the perspective of social emancipation.

and employment for women. His experiences in Bihar had convinced him that the enemy of the poor was not just British Imperial rule but the indigenous landlords, the *zamindars*, whose stranglehold on the poor peasantry he witnessed firsthand. Reform of this feudal structure was for him a necessary step in ensuring social equality. In addition, the world presented the problem of global capitalism. Thus nationalism was not the solution, though it had a necessary role in consolidating opposition to imperialism.

Thus, while he saw much continuity in the Buddha's and Marx's messages, he found the problems of the contemporary world requiring a historically more updated solution, and dialectical materialism, he stated, was the most advanced philosophy of the times. A profound internationalism guided his vision, which saw the problems of the post-WW II era in an inevitably global context. Were he alive today, he would be deeply troubled by the spread of global capital and the subtle and complex forms of domination that it unleashes.

Significantly, Ambedkar found no fault with capitalism per se, though when he argued against Marxism in favor of Buddhism, he saw it fit to laud the Buddha's abolition of private property in the sangha. Educated in the UK and the US, and inspired by American pragmatism, when representing the interests of a community that had been systemically kept in poverty, he saw nothing to celebrate in the valorization of poverty for the householder. He thus found the Buddha's teachings on the just pursuit of a livelihood and the injunction to make adequate provisions for one's family to live in comfort through personal effort and enterprise a goal worth emulating. A model of moderate affluence and consumption is thus what emerges from his writings as a desirable social end. He only wishes that everyone, regardless of caste, be allowed access to the education and social opportunities necessary to enable them to secure this goal. To such end, the state must guarantee such rights and make provisions for the material well being of the citizens.

Religion however, was necessary, says Ambedkar - even in the modern world, and only Buddhism fulfilled his criteria of a religion of the future. Since he saw that the space of Law was not enough to

provide all that the society needs, namely a sense of morality essential to sustain it, Buddhism for him was the best choice being in accord with the principles of liberty equality and fraternity, with science, and in sanctifying or glorifying poverty.⁴

Christopher Queen, in a series of engagements with the issue, has named certain features of “Engaged Buddhism” in Asia, amongst which is a “this-worldliness” regarding the more “metaphysical” dimensions of some of the central teachings of the Buddha, such as those on *dukkha* (suffering) and *nirvana* (liberation). These acquire a distinctly identifiable social and politico-economic dimension in Ambedkar as well. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, his Buddhist Bible, he (re)interprets Buddha *vacana* (stressing that it is *vacana*, or oral teachings and thus one must account for the prejudices and accretions that guided those who wrote them down) in terms of certain principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, the slogans clearly echoing the French Revolution’s slogans. However, he hopes for a peaceful revolution effected by constitutional means, effecting, as was the Buddha’s way, “change of heart”, with some help from the modern slogan: “Educate, Agitate, Organize.”

Ambedkar takes Buddha’s teachings and subjects them to the test of reason and social utility. He takes Buddhist philosophical ‘idealism’ and selectively appropriates it. He rejects beliefs and practices he finds non-conducive to the achievement of these social goals. Significantly, he does not much care for the monastic sangha, finding it parasitic even, describing the monks he had seen as “idlers”. In this Protestantized (work ethic based) version of Buddha Dharma, a kind of pragmatic utilitarianism takes precedence over such fine points as psychological inner work. It is not that Ambedkar rejects the Buddha’s psychological insights: he sees the value of mental freedom, but he sees that freedom as social and economic and political.⁵ To the extent that the Buddha enables

4. In “The Buddha and the Future of His Religion”, p. 9.

5. However, traditional exegeses have also seen this existential pronouncement on *dukkha* in a more literal sense, as a fundamental disillusionment with *samsara*, which then supports the logic of *sanyas* or renunciation. Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, in his lecture called “Another Kind of Birth”, performs a creative interpretive feat in rendering this teaching acceptably “world- affirming” and “non-metaphysical” in so far birth

the dalit (and others) to rid their minds of false beliefs in inequality, it is good. Other practices such as giving alms or meditation or elaborate prayers, seen to be so central to so many forms of Buddhism, appear to hold no great charm for him. In this, he shares Sankrityayan's approach, who found yogic meditative practices to be appropriate only for the elderly, those unable to do real "work" in the "real" world. Each, then, sees the value of Buddhism in terms of its impact on the question of achieving a demonstrable degree of social justice.

CONCLUSION

So what do these two have to say to the UNMGDs? They point out that having clarity of ideals (Right Views) is significant but not enough. Right Effort is needed and that this Right Effort needs to go beyond the individual. They remind us in different ways that social structures need to be changed and that this involves political will and institutionalized support. Ideas cannot exist in a vacuum. They remind us that Buddha's message had a sense of urgency about eradicating suffering, though they interpret this largely in terms of social formations. One could disagree with their interpretations to argue that suffering has profound, sometimes invisible dimensions, and that securing material wellbeing is not the end of it, but coming from a deeply, visibly divided society, they would see this argument as evasive and status-quo-ist. They remind us that the sangha needs to be more proactive in interpreting the socially transformative character of Buddhism, that is has a social responsibility and that it might also be a product of social forces that

becomes a metaphor and freedom from this birth-as- suffering requires a recognition of the false clinging ego as the root of suffering. The solution then is to cultivate "clear awareness", by "keeping close watch on the mind", not letting samsara be born. "If a person experiences dozens of births a day he has to suffer dozens of times a day; if he does not experience birth at all, he has no suffering at all. Now, this is a reading of the Buddha's (possible) metaphysics as metaphor, a reading which is nevertheless non-materialist. In this psychologized/internalized understanding on dukkha, suffering is understood as a subjective, mental event, not just the objective, conventional understanding of suffering as physical pain, loss or deprivation. Ambedkar, who was leaning towards reading dukkha as "exploitation" or "poverty" and celebrating the fact that the "foundation" on which Marx rested was "already laid" in Buddhism, one guesses would have little sympathy for it ("Buddha or Karl Marx", p. 26) .

need to be interrogated. Both Sankrityayan and Ambedkar turned away from the monastics either because they saw them as feudal/parasitic or as too scholastic/idealistic/retired from the world and its concerns. The members of the monastic sangha must reinvent their roles in Buddhist societies and become exemplary teachers and productive compassionate members engaging with the myriad forms of suffering they see around them, beyond offering therapy to a lost middle class and ignoring the really poor and those historically crushed. India, with its searing poverty and glaring disparities, does not allow for the luxury of seeing suffering as an internal matter unrelated to how we live out our lives in their material specificities. Seeing dhamma as a matter of inner work, of epistemological and ontological clarity into the emptiness of phenomena, can only too often become a solipsistic or intellectual ruse for ignoring the fact that many do not have the access to the luxury of reflection and inner development. Perhaps dhamma needs to be calibrated differentially for different social conditions, perhaps in Tokyo or New York, a more individualized version of it might “work” but then, it would take a considerable amount of denial to ignore the rising numbers of the urban poor even in those advanced capitalist societies.

Focusing on India, they remind us, between them, that class and caste are interlinked and that systemic oppression must be resisted. They push for compassionate politics at the conceptual level and then urge us to envision institutions and practices that concretize this. Seeing in Buddhism’s history a rich source for inspiration, as well as possibilities for decadence, they serve as important beacons for understanding the possible obstacles to Buddhism being a means of achieving the long delayed goals of social equality that both the Constitution of India and the UN envision.

An important concrete feature of their legacy is their recognition that ensuring the wellbeing of the weak is a collective responsibility. As Emperor Asoka sponsored good works, governments must own responsibility. Society and economics must not be left to the mercy of the private sector. Capitalism worldwide, driven by the cancerous philosophy that “growth” is an end in itself, shows us how it benefits the

few. In countries like India, the state must not abdicate its responsibility. It needs to protect its weakest most vulnerable sections against the onslaught of multinationals driven by greed that can monopolize the markets and drive small players to starvation. The spirit of the sangha must proliferate, in new and innovative ways that go beyond the ochre robe. The spirit must also then put into question the very idea of “development” as a given good, seeing the complex ways in which it might be enmeshed in structures of power that indeed impede true “development”. This debate would need to engage with the meaning of modernity itself. Significantly, while each of the two figures under consideration was committed to modernity in its socially progressive avatars, they also simultaneously argued against its excesses. In this balancing act, they, each in their different way, offer rich resources for working on a way forward that draws deeply upon the Buddha’s legacy of wisdom, compassion, and skilful means.

As India stills struggles with these UNMDGs, 65 years after Ambedkar gave us our very progressive Constitution, we also realize that between the principles enshrined therein, and the practice of realpolitik, falls a shadow. That shadow is long and deep and analysis would reveal a range of interrelated factors in operation. The final Buddhist contribution to the issue would be to turn a profoundly *pratityasamutpada*-inspired gaze on the complex causes and conditions for this phenomenon. If we need to adapt the historical Buddha’s practices and some of the practices of traditional Buddhism in order to do so, that itself is in keeping with the Buddha’s injunction to his disciples in *Majjhima Nikaya*, which incidentally forms the basis for Rahul Sankrityayan’s epigraph for his autobiography: “I took knowledge/ideas as a raft to ferry me across, not as a load to be carried on the head.” The goal of Social Justice is on the other side of the shore, still, and we need the Buddha’s ideological revolution as well as the exercise of our own collective wisdom (*viveka*) to ferry us across.

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