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From the Pali Turn to *The Buddha and His Dhamma:* Reading Ambedkar as a Philologist

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Abstract

This article reconstructs B.R. Ambedkar as a philologist by engaging with three different strands of his scholarship. First, it traces his work on language in general and his construction of Pali as a language emblematic of Buddhism. By following cues in Ambedkar's own writings and historicizing it, the article in its second section close reads the major historical stakes of his work. These two strands focus on how liturgical languages engage with caste hierarchy, and how ancient Indian history is perceived anew through Ambedkar's critique of Brahmanism alongside contemporary scholarship on history. This long historical thread culminates in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* along with the focus on religion within his writings, which forms the third section of the article. I propose that the three strands together complete the trajectory of Ambedkar's philological project for which he lays a critical foundation through an overarching history of India and its linguistic and religious past. In the article, the object of analysis is caste as a non-static category and how it functions from antiquity to the mid-twentieth century. Ultimately, I argue that Ambedkar reformulates the idea of what it means to be sacred from a Navayana Buddhist point of view, symbolized through a move away from Hinduism, which he announced at the Yeola conference in 1935, to the moment of his conversion to Buddhism in 1956.

Keywords

Ambedkar, Language, Pali, History, Religion, Philology, Buddhism, Brahmanism, Navayana, Conversion, Caste, Religion, Sacred

Introduction

The article reconstructs Ambedkar as a philologist following his own engagements with the history of language and literary texts. Ambedkar engages with philology as a way of reading old religion, so he develops philology not for the sake of philology

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(or the love of words) alone. Further, Ambedkar goes on to elaborate a 'new' religion based on the old one, hence, religion not for the sake of religion alone. The question remains: what is Ambedkar's aim in initiating a practice of philology? Is it for the sake of 'caste' or 'annihilation of caste,' as the title of Ambedkar's most famous text states? (Ambedkar 2021). Caste, one must note, is also historically developing and changing, and not static. Hence, the reconstruction begins through a critical reading of three different strands of Ambedkar's scholarship—linguistic, historical, and religious—indicating the integral elements of his emancipatory doctrine. First, it traces his work on language in general and his construction of Pali as a language emblematic of Buddhism (*BAWS*, *Vol. 16*). By following cues in Ambedkar's writings, it then close-reads part 3 of Volume 3 (Revolution and Counter-Revolution). These two threads within the article focus on how liturgical languages engage with caste hierarchy, and how ancient Indian history is perceived anew through Ambedkar's critique of Brahmanism alongside evidence from historical scholarship (Omvedt 2003; Chakravarti 1987; Harvey 2012). The object of analysis here is *caste* and how it continues to function from antiquity to the mid-twentieth century. Further, I historicize Ambedkar's engagement with language through Bronkhorst and read it with philological interpretations of early Buddhism, alongside other scholarship on Ambedkar (Bronkhorst 2019; Jondhale 2004; Rathore 2011). This long historical thread culminates in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (Volume 11) in what is the third thread of the article completing the trajectory Ambedkar sets for an overarching history of India and its linguistic and religious past.

A note on the method I implement in reading Ambedkar's scholarship. In Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Thought* (1946), Said traces how firstly, Giambattista Vico interprets history, followed by how Eric Auerbach does it. Said states that Vico's great discovery was the 'primitive mentality' in Homer, which he did by refuting generations of interpreters who had assumed that Homer was a wise sage (Said 2003, p. xiii.).

> In order to be able to understand a humanistic text, one must try to do so as if one is the author of that text, living the author's reality, undergoing the kind of life experiences intrinsic to his or her life, and so forth, all by that combination of erudition and sympathy that is the hallmark of philological hermeneutics. Thus the line between actual events and the modifications of one's own reflective mind is blurred in Vico, as it is in the numerous authors who were influenced by him, like James Joyce. But this perhaps tragic shortcoming of human knowledge and history is one of the unresolved contradictions pertaining to humanism itself, in which the role of thought in reconstructing the past can neither be excluded nor squared with what is "real". Hence the phrase, "the representation of reality" in the subtitle to *Mimesis* and the vacillations in the book between learning and personal insight (Said 2003, p. xiii.).

The passage above sums up and illuminates what it takes for a critic to read, understand, and interpret a text from Vico's philological point of view. The reader or critic in this case is not simply reading the text but living the author's reality. Said points to a combination of erudition and sympathy as significant to understanding a humanistic text. Importantly, he notes that the line between actual events or what is real, and the modifications of one's own reflective mind is blurred in Vico and others who followed him like Joyce and Auerbach. Here, Said makes an analogy between an actual event and history, and between knowledge and personal insight. Auerbach, according to Said, vacillates between learning and insight in *Mimesis.* Another interpretation of philology is introduced by Pollock, who by tracing the contrast between two types of readers of classical studies, suggests there was "a struggle between historicists and humanists, *Wissenschaft* and *Bildung,* scholarship and life, of a sort not unique to European modernity" (Pollock 2009, p. 931).[1] The reason I bring Said and Pollock together is because Pollock critiques Said's (and de Man's) definition of philology as being simplistic, and offers three domains of history–"textual meaning, contextual meaning, and philologist's meaning" where ultimately, he states philology is "the discipline of making sense of texts" (Pollock 2009, pp. 950, 934). In my reading of Ambedkar as a philologist, I employ strategies suggested by both Said and Pollock. Ambedkar's work is modern, in the sense that it was written in the twentieth century. However, much of his attention is directed towards history, which makes it both a historicist and humanist effort, as I see it. Based on Said's suggestion, I make it a point to read Ambedkar and learn with him, and further, add my insights alongside existing scholarship on topics in history and religion. In my attempt at philological hermeneutics as Pollock frames it, I try to "make sense of" Ambedkar's religio-political aims in his writing alongside other contemporary readers of Ambedkar.

As a philologically integrating project which attempts to cover a large timeline, there are limits to this preliminary research. It would be instructive to remember that the focus here is on historicizing Ambedkar's work on language and religion based on Ambedkar's own writings which were mostly in English. Due to this factor, and what some scholars refer to as the 'polemical' nature of Ambedkar's writing, it is beyond the scope of this article to fully engage with ancient Indian history or excerpts in the original Pali and Sanskrit. While subsequent scholars on Ambedkar have added the textual sources of Ambedkar's writings, these evidence in the form of secondary historical and religious scholarship, adds to the study in the manner of a survey of selected volumes by Ambedkar than a potentially deeper engagement with any of the three strands of scholarship mentioned above, which perhaps merits separate attention on its own. Thus, the pursuit of a more rounded philological inquiry would demand

[1]Pollock traces Wilamovitz and Nietzsche's positions on how to pursue classical studies and argues that historicism and humanism are "far from being mutually exclusive" and that they are "complementary, even mutually constitutive."

sustained engagement with premodern Indian history in the long durée, which could be a possible follow-up to this scholarly conversation.

The chapter begins by tracing one of the scholarly trajectories of B.R. Ambedkar through Pali and its connection with the Buddhist religion. The specific attention Ambedkar invests on Pali is read critically alongside his engagement with Sanskrit where my specific focus is on how the two liturgical languages engage with caste hierarchy. A philological study of Ambedkar's work across languages with a focus on sacred texts reveals a remarkable conflict between Buddhism and Brahmanism in ancient Indian history since around 600 BC. Among the seventeen volumes of Ambedkar's *Writings and Speeches,* volume 16 titled *Grammar and Dictionary of the Pali Language* stand apart from the rest of the writings. The volume sheds light on a linguistic aspect of Ambedkar's scholarship, that of lexicography. Vasant Moon points out that Ambedkar was past fifty years old when he began his work on Pali, and compares the task undertaken by Ambedkar with that of Samuel Johnson who attempted his dictionary of the English language in 1755 (Moon 2020). Moon explains the magnitude of the task Ambedkar had undertaken–a compilation of a dictionary of words and phrases of a language no longer spoken–as fraught with difficulties. Compared to the *The Pali Text Society's Pali–English Dictionary*, Ambedkar's volume includes, in addition to the Pali - English dictionary as Book I, a section where words in Pali are translated into English, Ambedkar's native Marathi, neighboring state language Gujarati as well as Hindi, one of the big lingua francas of the by then newly formed nation of India (Davids and Stede 1925). The third book titled 'Pali Grammar' is further classified into orthography, rules of change, etymology, syntax, general conversation, etc., and is like introductory grammar texts by colonial-era grammarians. The assigned theme is Buddhism and monasteries which lead to the final book in the volume, a twelve-page article published in Marathi in 1956 and titled '*Bouddha Pooja Pāth*' (Lessons to Worship Buddha). Ambedkar explains and translates Buddhist rituals and prayers in Marathi and then presents the original Pali prayer alongside it, further emphasizing his target audience, people from the Mahar community alongside the broader Marathi speaking people. Ambedkar does not explain the gradual movement from a dictionary and grammar to religious education in the text. Pali is considered a liturgical language and is hence used in the same context. The structure of this dictionary and the Buddhist lessons reveal the early stages of Ambedkar's research on Buddhism.

Ambedkar's turn to Pali does not necessitate scrutiny of his writings and speeches. It is well documented in some of the early biographies and writings on Ambedkar. Moon's biography of Ambedkar titled *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* mentions the 'World Fellowship of Buddhists' conference held in Rangoon (or Yangon, in modern day Myanmar) in December 1954 where Ambedkar had remarked, "it is pathetic that the country where Lord Buddha was born had also witnessed the eradication of his religion" (Moon 2020, p. 206). Ambedkar in his speech informs the audience, "I introduced the

study of Pali, the lion-seal of Ashoka in front of the Rajbhavan and the Ashok wheel on the flag without any opposition. In two colleges in Mumbai and Aurangabad, there are faculties for the study and research of Buddhist religion" (Moon 2020, p. 206). Moon adds that it is around this period that Ambedkar started to edit the multilingual Pali dictionary. Ambedkar's work on Pali had by then been established. His impending conversion to Buddhism and the ongoing work on *The Buddha and His Dhamma* is shaping up during the mid-1950s. It further emphasizes the interrelation between Ambedkar's work on language and his work on religion. There is a developing sense of Ambedkar and his propagation of Pali studies and Buddhism at this point. Eleanor Zelliot, one of the foremost scholars of the Ambedkar movement, however, makes a distinction between Pali and Sanskrit.

> The Pali scriptures, rather than the Sanskrit scriptures of Mahayana Buddhism, are used in the current movement. Dr. Ambedkar felt that the Pali tradition was purer and more rational; it is also more logical that rebels against Brahmanism would want Pali rather than Sanskrit as their religious language, and so in the Bible of the movement, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar' s *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (Bombay: Siddharth Publications, 1957), stories from the Pali scriptures as well as interpretations of Buddhism from a rational, humanistic viewpoint dominate (Zelliot 2005, p. 250).

This distinction connects Ambedkar's stake in the ancient historical understanding of caste with language. It also makes a binary between Pali as the sacred language of the Buddhist scriptures and Sanskrit as the language of Brahmanism and its sacred texts. Ambedkar's placing of ancient Indian history gains prominence here—"The history of India is nothing but a history of a mortal conflict between Buddhism and Brahmanism" (*BAWS Vol. 3*, p. 267). Ambedkar engages at length on early India especially in part III of Volume 3 'revolution and counter-revolution in Ancient India' where the Buddhist tradition at its peak is referred to as the "revolution" whereas the return of Brahmanism is referred to as the counter-revolution. At this point of our reading, there is a bridge between Ambedkar's later work on the Pali grammar, language, and the conversion to Buddhism, and Ambedkar's early work on ancient history and philosophy.

Thinking from the perspective of language throws open multiple questions on language, religion, and caste. A close look at languages in ancient India and its philosophies show that there was prior concern about language among philosophers in India. Bronkhorst explains that most of the participants were either Brahmans or Buddhists, along with the Jainas who played a minor role (Bronkhorst 2019, p. 4). And both Brahmans and Buddhists approached the field of language with strong but different convictions. The status of the Brahmans depended on the fact that they knew part of the Vedas by heart. The *mantras* in this context affected the world without

the intermediary of other beings, whether human or nonhuman. Bronkhorst states how underlying the Brahmans' ritual activity is the conviction that Sanskrit can have a direct effect on the world, because Sanskrit and reality are related in ways other languages (considered "incorrect use of words") are not. Bronkhorst points to the centrality of Sanskrit in Brahmanical linguistic thought, and how languages other than Sanskrit were rarely, if ever, taken into consideration by Brahmanical thinkers. Buddhism, according to Bronkhorst, did not start out with any identifiable implicit or explicit convictions about language. The message of the Buddha was spread in local languages, being adjusted or translated where necessary (Bronkhorst 2019, p. 5). Overall, it must be noted how there exists a division between early Brahmanism and Buddhism, and how there is a fundamental difference in conceptions about language which then later led to interaction and borrowings, including the three *dharmas* that stood for linguistic units as well as the elevation of Pali as the one sacred language of Buddhism. The language ideology where one language is attributed as sacred has roots in Brahmanical linguistic thought. It is a tradition, from a linguistic ideological point of view, Ambedkar adopts from Sanskrit and carries forward in his propagation of Pali studies. The current existence of Pali as the language of clergy and rituals among Ambedkarite Buddhists in India is largely due to the identity of Pali as the language of Buddhism, even if *The Buddha and His Dhamma,* widely referred to as Ambedkar's magnum opus, is written in English.

Pali as a source language is foremost in Ambedkar's spiritual quest and study of Buddhism but Ambedkar's works are all in English. There is, however, a rather obvious disconnect between Ambedkar's specific interest in Pali and Buddhist sources and his writing *The Buddha and His Dhamma* in English with respect to its initial reception.[2] Most of the followers of Ambedkar during the time of his writing were only beginning to learn English, as it was then the language of the social elite. The other factor that would determine the reception of this book was that most of Ambedkar's then immediate and potential readers were Marathi (ex-Untouchable Mahars who converted to Buddhism with Ambedkar) which meant that *The Buddha and His Dhamma* as a text remained in the shadows for a long time. Additionally, the publication of Ambedkar's volumes take place in 1979, 23 years after his passing, suggesting how the reception of Ambedkar's writings take place in a largely unconventional manner.[3] There are unanswered questions regarding the intention behind Ambedkar's writing *BHD.* What kind of book was it? Is it a biography of the Buddha? If yes, where do we situate it among other works on the Buddha? Does Ambedkar succeed in the task of spreading the message of the Buddha? It would be useful to make a closer observation

[2]Henceforth cited parenthetically as *BHD.*

[3]The history of its translation to Marathi would be a useful reference here, something I am unable to research on as I do not read Marathi.

of Pali as a language and the intersection between ancient Pali and Sanskrit sources on Buddhism.

The role of language in *Navayana* (new method or spiritual practice) Buddhism initiated by Ambedkar is rooted in ancient Indian history. In order to understand and/or translate early texts in Pali or Sanskrit, Norman argues how it involves making use of all the resources of philological and literary criticism to establish the original form of the text along with a knowledge of the languages of North India and Ceylon at the time of the Buddha and the centuries immediately after his death (Norman 2006, p. 16). It "...necessitates expertise not only in the Middle Indo-Aryan languages, of which Pali is one and Ardhamāgadhī and Gāndhāri are the others, but also in Classical Sanskrit, Buddhist Sanskrit, and Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit," since much of the language of early Buddhist texts is related to or taken over from Sanskrit, while parallel versions of many Pali canonical texts exist in Buddhist Sanskrit or Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit. Norman (2006) broadly tries to explain a philological approach to Buddhism as a classicist who studied classical philology. The addition of other dialects/languages blurs the distinction between Pali and Sanskrit as drawn by Zelliot earlier. It helps the reader make sense of how words and languages existed for its own sake and nothing more. Besides, a philological undertaking in the making of *A Critical Pali Dictionary* would involve, according to Norman, analysis of the usage of each word listed without, for the most part, a doctrinal importance of each word and the part it played in Buddhism (Norman 2006, p. 9). This decision by Norman suggests a lack of engagement with the social aspects of language. It leaves the question of ideological origin or belonging of words in Pali unanswered. From a literary point of view, integrating literary texts from the time with words in Pali could provide more direction on this regard.

The section moves its attention to the second thread, the historical strand in Ambedkar's works with a focus on *The Buddha and His Dhamma.* It is compelling to note how Ambedkar unlearns many of the myths and legends that he had ingrained as a young boy. He writes in the preface to the critical edition of *BHD* that he was introduced to Buddhism at an early age (Rathore and Verma 2011). After narrating the story of how he was gifted a book on Buddha by Dada Keluskar, Ambedkar mentions how his father encouraging him to read the Mahabharata and Ramayana early in life meant that he could compare once he started to read on Buddha. For Ambedkar, the fact that it was not with an empty mind that he had first read Buddha is where lies the origin of his interest in Buddha and his message. Further, in the introduction to *BHD,* Ambedkar writes that anyone who is not a Buddhist finds it difficult to present the life and teachings of the Buddha in a manner which would make it a consistent whole. He continues:

> Depending on the Nikayas, not only the presentation of a consistent story of the life of the Buddha becomes a difficult thing and the presentation of

> some parts of his teachings becomes much more so. Indeed it would not be an exaggeration to say that of all the founders of religions in the world the presentation of the life and teachings of the founder of Buddhism presents a problem which is quite puzzling if not baffling. Is it not necessary that these problems should be solved and the path for the understanding of Buddhism be made clear? Is it not time that those who are Buddhists should take up these problems at least for general discussion and throw what light they can on these problems? (*BAWS 11,* Introduction)

Ambedkar sets out four problems related to Buddhism – one on Buddha's *Parivraja* and the social situation surrounding it, the second on whether the four "Aryan" truths are part of the original teachings of Buddha, the third problem relates to the doctrine of soul, of karma and rebirth, and the fourth problem relates to that of the role of the *Bhikku* in Buddhism. At the end of the introduction, Ambedkar hopes that his questions in this work will excite the readers enough to make them want to come out with their solutions. This suggests how Ambedkar, by compiling a book on Buddha and by acceding to the 'one religion, one text' religio-modernist formula that was in vogue among many major religions of the world, was now inviting his readers to participate in the making of the text. By stressing on the rational and humanistic nature of Buddhism, Ambedkar regards the Buddha's dhamma to be the best. He says, "If a modern man who knows science must have a religion, the only religion he can have is the religion of the Buddha" (*BAWS 11,* Introduction).

The posthumously published *BHD* (1957) brings early research on Buddhism, the historical intervention and culminates in a part biography, part sacred history of the Buddha as seen through Ambedkar's interpretation. It elaborates how Ambedkar by introducing a 'biographical' text does not just revive the by now completely diminished influence of Buddhism in India but formulates a historical interpretation of ancient India's religious traditions and social reality. The text is today read in its many translations in Indian languages Hindi, Punjabi, Marathi, Kannada, Tamil, etc., and is mainly available at Buddha Viharas around India, the Chaityabhoomi (shrine) at Mumbai, and Deekshabhoomi (site of conversion) at Nagpur of Ambedkar. The text may have been originally and especially intended for a large section of his followers, the Mahar community, and by extension the rest of the Dalit people in India who converted to Navayāna (New Vehicle) Buddhism. The message of the text, however, involves and reaches out to a larger audience who would be interested in Buddhist history and Dalit history. From my reading of the text, it engages with the idea of the sacred as well as the sacred as a means of emancipation through its narrative.

Based on the reading, I observe that the BHD. I observe that the *BHD* when read together with *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India* (both part of volume

3 of Ambedkar's writings and speeches, and suggested by him as books that give an overall perspective of Buddhism in India) reconstructs the idea of ancient India and in effect results in the making of both a spiritually and historically liberating text for a new imagination of the land. It must be added that this entire process of conceiving the text takes place during the nation-making formation of India. Ambedkar is also often trivialized or undervalued as (just) the leader of the Dalits or as the head of the committee drafting the Constitution of India. The range of his work, however, reveals a broad anti-caste vision and its influence goes beyond the Dalit question and to that of a free and equal world that is rid of the continually oppressive category of caste in South Asia.

A comparative reading of the different ways in which Buddha's story has been told over the ages show that Ambedkar's narrative of the story of the Buddha is a useful addition to the archive of retelling the Buddha's life and teachings. One of the earliest works is Asvaghosa's *Buddhacarita* written in Sanskrit verse in the *kavya* (poetic) tradition. It is also one of the earliest extant *carita kavyas* in Sanskrit which form a part of biographical literature. The other older works include the *Mahavastu* where over half of the text is composed of Jātaka and Avadāna tales, accounts of the earlier lives of the Buddha and the bodhisattvas, and belongs to early Buddhism; and the *Lalitavistara,* from the Sanskrit Buddhist Mahayana sutra which tells the story of Gautama Buddha from the time of his descent from Tushita until his first sermon in the Deer Park at Sarnath near Varanasi. It must be noted that Ambedkar derives from *Buddhacarita* extensively in the *BHD* among other sources both historical and modern. Asvaghosa's *Buddhacarita*, according to Olivelle, "is an 'apologia' for Buddhism against Brahmanical attacks and arguments, an apologia in the form of a finely crafted 'Life of the Buddha' from his conception to his Awakening, preaching and death" (Olivelle 2008).[4] The text is divided into 28 cantos out of which the first 14 are complete while the rest of it is missing in Sanskrit but is preserved in its Chinese and Tibetan translations. This text is another evidence that shows the early discord between brahmanism and Buddhism.

Among modern texts, there is *The Life of the Buddha* composed in the mid-eighteenth century by Tenzin Chögyel. It uses the twelve-act structure used by Tibetan writers who write the biography of the Buddha where the structure is simple and outlines the basic chronology of Buddha's life.[5] Bernard Faure's *The Thousand*

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[4]According to Olivelle, Ashvaghosha lived in the first century CE according to scholarly consensus; The book *Buddhacarita* by Ashvaghosha was translated by Olivelle as *Life of the Buddha* (2008).

[5]Life in heaven (prebirth), descent to earth (conception and gestation), birth (age 1), education (ages 1 to 16), the pleasures of his royal harem (ages 16 to 29), renunciation of house (age 29), spiritual discipline (ages 29 to 35), journey to Bodhgaya (age 35), battle with demons (age 35), enlightenment (age 35), teaching (ages 35 to 80) and death (age 80) make up the twelve structures.

and One Lives (2022) abandons the search for the historical Buddha and the need to limit the narrative to early Indian stories. Faure is critical of prevalent historicism and examines the mythological elements in the life of the Buddha that are no longer constrained by an artificial biographical framework. This work of historiography on how Buddha and his life has been interpreted 'biographically,' a genre of writing that does not align well to sources that are 2500 years ago, is a significant contribution to studies on the Buddha as well as how Buddha is imagined in the world today especially outside India. Going by this reading, other modern works like Osamu Tezuka's manga-style graphic novel adaptation of Buddha's life, Herman Hesse's fictitious imagination of a Brahmin youth's aspiration for Buddhist ideals in *Siddhartha* (1922), and academic works like *Buddha* (2004) by Karen Armstrong are different forms of giving structure to or *narrating* the Buddha's life and teachings. Ambedkar's *BHD* in the larger spectrum of narrations of Buddha focuses on the broad classifying category of Indian Buddhism in a modern, first-of-its-kind caste-conscious retelling, one that fills a vacuum in terms of Indian contributions to this genre. Indian Buddhism from the context of contemporary Buddhist studies is classified as classical Buddhism and it is often associated with origin stories that are based in ancient India. While there are works on different traditions of Buddhism outside India, the reason(s) behind the decline of Buddhism in India is not engaged extensively as a topic of scholarship in the study of Buddhism in the world. It is, however, one of the topics Ambedkar focuses on in his *BHD*. He addresses this lacuna by historicizing Buddha's life and teachings as well as compiling a narrative of the Buddha from the conclusions he draws from his research. This is part of a specific section on the decline and fall of Buddhism in part 3 of volume 3 of his writings, 'Revolution and Counter-Revolution,' and provides historical context to the study of *BHD*.

The question of the disappearance of Buddhism in India, Ambedkar addresses, by comparing how it continues to thrive in "China, Japan, Burma, Siam, Annam, Indo-China, Ceylon and parts of Malay-Archipelago" (*BAWS 3*, p. 229). He makes a distinction between the 'fall' of Buddhism and the 'decline' of Buddhism. Ambedkar specifies that the fall of Buddhism in India was due to the invasions of the *Musalmans* (Muslims) where Islam's positioning against idol worship or as "the enemy of the '*But*'" is well-known. Further, he questions how if Islam attacked both Brahmanism and Buddhism, how should one survive and the other perish. Additionally, he states three circumstances which made it possible for Brahmanism and impossible for Buddhism to survive the onslaught of Islam (*BAWS 3*, p. 230):

1. Brahmanism at the time of the Muslim invasions had the support of the State. Buddhism had no such support. What is however more important is the fact

that this State support to Brahmanism lasted till Islam had become a quiet religion and the flames of its original fury as a mission against idolatry had died out.

2. The Buddhist priesthood perished by the sword of Islam and could not be resuscitated. On the other hand, it was not possible for Islam to annihilate the Brahmanic priesthood.
3. The Buddhist laity was persecuted by the Brahmanic rulers of India and to escape this tyranny the mass of the Buddhist population of India embraced Islam and renounced Buddhism.

This is a portrayal of eighth-century Indian subcontinent when the first Muslim invasion occurred in 711 CE led by Mohammad Bin Qasim, as historicized by Ambedkar. It is a period in which the decline of Buddhism in India is attested to in scholarship as well as popular rhetoric. However, Ambedkar uses the term 'Brahmanism' instead of either 'Vedic religion' or 'Hinduism' to describe the other prominent religion that coexisted with Buddhism before the arrival of Islam. Harvey points out that one of the primary reasons was the dilution of the distinctiveness of Buddhism relative to the rising power of 'Hinduism' (the apostrophe is my emphasis) even if Mahayana writers were critical of Hinduism (Harvey 2013, p. 195). Harvey notes that the surface similarities of Hindu and Mahayana devotional cults and Tantrism may have led the laity to perceive the two religions as quite similar. Moreover, Hinduism borrows elements of Buddhism—devotees of Vishnu practicing vegetarianism, followers of Shiva viewing caste distinctions as less relevant to religion, etc., eventually leading to a (mis)interpretation of Buddha as the ninth incarnation of Vishnu, while interestingly and contrastingly in Ceylon, Vishnu is seen as a Bodhisattva. It reveals that Buddhism was beginning to get coopted by brahmanism during this period, and alongside it, it portrays how the dominant religious viewpoint of a region influences how historical divine figures get represented in history. The second reason, according to Harvey, may be classified as the role played by Sankara (788 - 820) in developing monasticism paralleling that of the Sangha. Sankara described the Buddha as the enemy of the people and there is further observation of sporadic persecution directed at the Buddhists from the sixth century. This example shows newer ways in which Buddha's message is countered by Brahmanical representatives like Sankara. According to Omvedt, Basham observes that:

> persecution played only a minor role; rather the major factor was a reformed religion which we can now call 'Hinduism', which transformed worship of Shiva and Vishnu (the latter in various *avatars* which could absorb local deities…Though it (Buddhism) had theoretically, and for some time in practice as well, been a separate religion, challenging caste and denying the Vedas, it failed to base itself in the practical aspects of popular life; the life rituals of

> even Buddhist families were handled by Brahmans. Thus the Buddha could be re-interpreted as the ninth *avatar* of Vishnu, while his teachings were ignored (Omvedt 2003, pp. 160-161).

The (re)formation of Brahmanism between the sixth and eighth centuries in India is crucial in tracing the decline of Buddhism. It divulges how brahmanical ideology counters against its religious and existential thread by either assimilating other religions into its fold. The example cited above where there is a transformation in the worship of Shiva and Vishnu captures this well. In this case, the radical aspects of the Buddhist religion gradually lose its hold as the authority that comes with caste supremacy trumps over its critics. Moving to the third reason, and the worst blow, according to Harvey and supported by Basham, are the Muslim invasions which dealt a final blow though by then Buddhism was restricted to monastic centers and Hinduism had woven itself into the fabric of society through the caste division. Bringing Harvey's point about Buddhism's confinement to monastic centers with Ambedkar's point 2 about Buddhist priesthood perishing by the swords of Islam and point 3 about Buddhist laity being persecuted by the Brahmanical rulers (or in other words, the caste division) points towards a persuasive argument as to the main reasons behind both the fall, on the one hand, and demise on the other, of Buddhism as distinctively drawn by Ambedkar.

Omvedt (2003), addressing the same question of the 'defeat of Buddhism', shows the complications involved in deriving a straightforward understanding of history at this point due to the lack of historical material or literature available in India. Omvedt relies on Chinese traveler Hsuan Tsang's visit to India in the seventh century, various local histories within India that address the issue of caste indirectly, and scholarship on ancient India to connect the dots of the social reality of the time. In conclusion, it must be noted that power remained with the elite few, the nature and ideology of which is referred to as Brahmanism. Despite the Vaishnava and Shaiva traditions taking root, followed by the Bhakti or devotional movements which were major religious expressions for oppressed caste men and women, the cultural and religious expressions were still interpreted by Brahmanism. Omvedt concludes her section by stating that the Dalit-Bahujan masses could not maintain institutions, or become intellectuals, and even those who became rulers had to accept Brahmanic intellectual and social hegemony. It is remarkable to think how a study of Buddhism, like the study of caste, eventually leads to deeper insights into Brahmanism, headed by the Brahmins who, according to Omvedt, "constitute the single most powerful and wealthy social group, knit together by a sophisticated ideology and wide institutional networks." (Omvedt 2003, p. 184). The nature and complexity of the historical problem which resulted in the disappearance of Buddhism in India, perhaps called for a historical and religious intervention by Ambedkar in the form of a New Vehicle (Navayana) to bring the Buddhist tradition back to the land of its birth.

A close reading of some of the standout features of *BHD* indicates the way Ambedkar interpreted Buddha's life and message. Ambedkar tends "towards the ethical and social, away from the mystical and metaphysical", according to Fiske and Emmrich (Fiske and Emmrich 2004, p. 98). The move towards the ethical and the rational is evident but to say that it also includes a move away from the mystical and metaphysical is to undervalue the idea of conversion and the spiritual element of Navayana. This is where I bring in the idea of the sacred as Ambedkar believed and practiced even if the 'rational' aspects were emphasized due to the concern and threat posed by Brahmanism and its tendency to absorb other religions as its own. The introduction to the text by Ambedkar is an important part of *BHD.* Without it, the vital aspect of his interpretive lens is lost to the audience.[6] Fiske and Emmrich point out how the answers to the four problems Ambedkar frames are implicitly suggested in the section itself. The first problem relates to the reader and believer's reinterpretation (by way of rational, historical research) of the traditional understanding of Buddha taking the *parivraja* (renunciation) because he saw a dead person, a sick person, and an old person. The second question relates to whether the 'four Aryan truths' form part of the original teachings of the Buddha. Ambedkar uses the term 'Aryan' instead of 'noble' referring to the possibility of an outsider's interpretation of the Buddha.[7] This is again a question of historical facticity that is rooted in the understanding of religion as well as the idea of India's sacred past. A factual reading of history and Buddhism would give a large segment of the people of India, the oppressed castes, a historical anchor in its reading of the ancient Indian tales. Ambedkar here questions, "If there is no escape from sorrow, then what can religion 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?" (*BAWS 11*, pg. 6). The author is skeptical about the origins of the aspect of *dukkha* among the noble truths and observes that it would discourage non-Buddhists from converting to Buddhism. It is the irony of converting to more sorrow from the already sorrowful realities of the Dalit people that possibly leads the author towards seeking joy rather than sorrow in religion.

The third problem, according to Ambedkar is, "if there is no soul, how can there be karma? If there is no soul, how can there be rebirth? These are baffling questions.

[6]The quotations are due in part because this section (Ambedkar's introduction to *Buddha and his Dhamma*) has been removed from the latest edition of Ambedkar's volume of *BHD* either because of a serious publishing error or as an attempt by the State (since it is published by Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India) at sanitizing Ambedkar's radical interpretation of Buddhism.

[7]4 Noble truths: the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering, and the truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering.

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 which sense?... 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" (*BAWS 11,* p. 6). Problems 2 and 3 relate to the long history of give and take between Brahmanism and Buddhism in ancient Indian history and Ambedkar's hermeneutics of suspicion regards the idea of rebirth. It is especially unjust for a person to be born in caste oppression and then be told that it is because of the sins committed in a past life. Lastly, the fourth problem relates to the contradiction involved in a religion that is either too inward-looking or is open to engaging with the people. It is stated as "... what was the object of the Buddha in creating the Bhikkhu? Was the object to create a 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? …" (*BAWS 11,* p. 6). It poses a question on the contradiction between asceticism as a means of spiritual enlightenment as opposed to service to people as a way of attaining good deeds. At this point, Ambedkar interestingly ends the introduction by inviting the reader to be part of the making of the narrative and contribute their solution in a postmodern engagement with the reader. The sentiment and emphasis on the pursuit of truth in history is unique in the Buddhist tradition even if Ambedkar had his critics among the Buddhist orthodoxy of the time. If there is one point that cuts across the four problems stated by Ambedkar, it is the conviction surrounding the logical and rational idea of the sacred that he builds from the foundational doctrines of Buddhism.

Moving our attention to the main content of the book, the last three sections of the first chapter 'Siddharth Gautama–How a Bodhisatta Became the Buddha?' gives historical context to the Buddha's predecessors and contemporaries. On line 20, there is a mention of ten Vedic Rishis as the most ancient and authentic creators of the mantras. The very next line, however, points to how the Buddha did not see anything morally elevating in the mantras. Similarly, the Buddha, according to Ambedkar, does not find anything in the philosophy of the Vedic Rishis who were "groping for the truth but did not reach it" (*BAWS 11,* p. 83). It leads towards a section titled, 'Kapila–The Philosopher', whose philosophy of Sankhya is elaborated in the next 37 lines where Buddha's acceptance of Kapila's teachings were three things: "1. He accepted that reality must rest on proof. Thinking must be based on rationalism. 2. He accepted that there was no logical or factual basis for the presumption that God exists or that he created the universe. 3. He accepted that there was *dukha* in the world" (*BAWS 11,* pp. 84-87); while the rest of Kapila's teachings, Ambedkar adds, Buddha just bypassed as being irrelevant for his purpose. The rational or logical reading of Buddha's learning and teaching becomes crucial in the interpretation and denial of the authority of the Vedas during the time of the Buddha. This is the period that contemporary Hindutva

organizations refer to as the glorious Vedic Age, and this is the same glory that Ambedkar debunks through a reconstruction of Buddha's role during the time.

The next section titled 'Bramhanas' (i.e. Brahmins) explains 'Sruti,' the common name that described both the *Vedas* and the *Brahmanas* as sacred books. It details the four theses of Brahmanic philosophy, the theory of Chaturvarna and its four rules, and how Buddha rejected Brahmanism as being opposed to the true way of life. The historical pointers that were made in 'Revolution and Counter-Revolution' gets a follow-up by laying the texts, ideas, and philosophy of Brahmanism in direct contrast with the teachings of Buddha. The animal sacrifices made by Brahmins is condemned by Buddha as false sacrifice. This is an example of how Brahmanism/ Hinduism borrowed from Buddhism as Brahmins in the twentieth century have turned into proxy flag bearers of vegetarianism and ahimsa as explicated by Ambedkar in his other work 'The Untouchables.' Ambedkar in lines 32-36 explains the fixed order of Chaturvarna and how society is structured on the status conferred upon an individual by the accident of his birth. It concisely mentions how inequality in Brahmanism is based on its official doctrine which Ambedkar calls 'graded inequality' as the occupations were fixed based on birth, and so were other choices like the right to knowledge, or the right to bear arms. Ambedkar specifies that the Shudras and the women were the two classes most oppressed by Brahmanism and had no power to rebel against the system. Ambedkar's voice and Buddha's voice seem to blend in the last two lines 45-46 of the section. "Could it (*caste*) be amended? Knowing that it was a divinely ordained social order, he knew it could not be. It could only be ended" (*BAWS 11*, p. 92, italics my emphasis). The rhetorical question of whether caste can be amended followed by Buddha's awareness of the religiously codified nature of caste and ensuing rejection of Brahmanism stands as a metaphor for Ambedkar's own engagement and failure with Hindu revisionism and eventual conversion to Buddhism.

The conversation on conversion in the Navayana movement is, I suggest, a trifecta of events, and represents the third strand of this section. 1. Buddha's conversion of his followers in the 6th century BC; 2. the decline of Buddhism in the seventh century CE; and 3. the event of Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism with thousands of his followers and in turn a revival of the Buddhist religion in India. I propose that for a precise understanding of the sacrality of the Navayana movement, it is important to understand the holiness with which the Buddha is worshipped, and the movement away from Hinduism and caste division, which is unlike other religious conversions due to the intersectional cosmologies between Brahmanism and Buddhism. Along with the sacred qualities attached to the act of moving away and into a new religion, a significant aspect of the idea of conversion as regards to Buddhism in modern India is the Bodhisattva-like stature of Ambedkar, the initiator of the movement, within the Navayana imagination of the sacred.

The large section titled, 'Campaign of Conversion' in *BHD* focuses on Buddha's quest for the conversion of his subjects. The decision to preach or not to preach itself bears major Buddhist connotations. The one who decides to preach is an enlightened being choosing to be a bodhisattva by renouncing further pursuit of salvation. Their immediate goal is to help others attain enlightenment. Ambedkar lays out in the form of the narrative, the decision of the Buddha to preach his doctrine after an encounter where the Brahma Sahampati (the king of Gods) appears before the Buddha and says, "Thou art no longer Siddharth Gautama. Thou art Buddha. Thou art the Blessed One who is blessed with the fullest enlightenment. Thou art the Tathagatha. How canst thou refuse to enlighten the world? How canst thou refuse to save erring humanity?" (*BAWS 11,* p. 112). The appearance of the Brahma points to how the whole of Ambedkar's retelling or narrative is not as rational or logical as the reading of Ambedkar's introduction to the text suggests. The potential of a good story to create an impression in the minds of his readers in the *carita* tradition is not lost on Ambedkar. Additionally, there are a few concise instances and descriptions of conversion in the *Buddhacarita* of Asvagosa in the sixteenth Canto of the translation by Olivelle. The canto or text available in the manuscript of the canto starts with the first converts, "The four other mendicants then became converted, and the Buddha shines in the midst of his first five disciples like the moon surrounded by five stars" (Olivelle 2008*,* p. 419). It includes miracles and other events that resulted in the conversion of important people from the time like Yashas, and Auruvila Kashyapa.

> Arriving at Kashyapa's residence, the Buddha asks for a residence in the hermitage. He is given the fire stall with a fierce snake. The mighty snake hisses fiercely at the Buddha, and the fire of his wrath sets the fire stall alight. The fire, however, does not touch the Buddha's body. Seeing the Buddha in the middle of that conflagration, the snake pays homage to him. The Buddha then takes the snake in his begging bowl, shows it to Kashyapa, and performs many miraculous deeds. Auruvila Kashyapa and his five hundred disciples become converts. Then Auruvila's two brothers, Gaya and Nadi, arrive there and are also converted (Olivelle 2008*,* p. 420).

The acts of the Buddha are represented using the strength of Buddha's wrath, and the taming of the fierce snake who ends up paying homage to the Buddha. Ambedkar carries forward the biographical tradition of ancient India and then adds to it his own modern interpretation. The enlightenment of the Buddha is poetic for Ambedkar as the more he learns about Buddhism in India through a literary, historical, and social lens, the more enlightened Ambedkar gets in terms of the social history of the nation in formation as well as the reasons behind the disappearance of Buddhism. The rest of the chapter on conversion sees Ambedkar's narration of conversion among the high

and holy, the low and the lowly, conversion of women, as well as the conversion of the fallen and the criminals. It portrays a religion that is inclusive and belongs to everyone across the caste and class divide, and it also shows how significant and symbolic the act of conversion is in Ambedkar's imagination of Buddha's campaign of conversion, and importantly, foreshadowing Ambedkar's own conversion in 1956.

The conversion of Ambedkar has a historical timeline of its own, and its beginning can be traced to the moment he announced, "I will not die a Hindu" at the Depressed Classes Conference at Yeola, near Nasik, on 13 October 1935. Zelliot classifies it as the "religious conversion movement, 1935-1956" of the larger Dalit movement for emancipation (Zelliot 2004). The public announcement leads to speculations as to which religion the "depressed classes" or the "untouchables" would convert into. The options were open and there were possibilities the community would convert to either Sikhism or Islam or Christianity, though according to Zelliot, the religion Ambedkar most seriously considered merging was Sikhism as it had the advantage of being an India-founded religion and it involved no loss of patriotism (Zelliot 2004, p. 161). The choice of an Indic religion and the question of patriotism reveal how none of the questions Ambedkar engaged with happened outside the realm of nation-formation. However, the main reasons for the delay in conversion, according to Zelliot is, "…none of the available choices were intellectually and politically suitable to him, and, more importantly, that he had opportunities to work for constitutional change, a method more suited to his abilities than working for a change of heart among caste Hindus or building a religious movement among Untouchables" (Zelliot 2004, p. 165). It is only after 1950 that Ambedkar started to speak more about Buddhism. The first instance of Ambedkar hinting at a move to Buddhism was when Mahar people at Dehu Road invited Ambedkar to dedicate a temple to Cokhamela in 1954, a fourteenth-century Mahar poet-saint. Ambedkar responded that he would participate if they would build a Buddhist Vihar (Zelliot 2004, p. 168). Eventually, the actual conversion only takes place in 1956 and, according to sources, the crowd present on *diksha* (initiation) approached half a million people.

> Ambedkar received conversion at the hands of the eighty-three-year-old *bhikku* from Burma, and then administered the three refuges (*tisarana),* the five vows (*panca sila),* and twenty-two oaths of his own devising to the assembled multitudes. The *tisarana* is a Pali chant known throughout the Theravada Buddhist countries: I take refuge in the Buddha; I take refuge in the Dhamma (law, faith, right morality), I take refuge in the Sangha (the body of monks). The *panca sila* is also part of classical Buddhism: I will attempt not to take life, not to steal, not to lie, not to drink, to avoid wrongful sex. The twenty-two oaths combine an affirmation of Buddhism and a negation of Hinduism, and were made in Marathi, not Pali (Zelliot 2004, p. 168).

There is symbolic importance to the act of conversion and its sacredness. The religious experience of the *bhikku* from Burma, a country that is traditionally steeped in Buddhism and the classical Theravada form of Buddhism, along with the question of the public perception of the person entrusted with the task of conversion become important factors when it is a public personality that is converting in a socially and politically charged atmosphere. The administration of the three refuges and the five vows according to tradition, and in Pali, shows the importance and attention to detail Ambedkar paid to matters of history, tradition, and purity. The idea of the sacred on the day of conversion goes according to conventional and classical Buddhist tradition until the twenty-two oaths come into the picture. This phase of the conversion as an act exemplifies the radicality of Ambedkar and the thousands of Mahar people's conversion from caste-centric Brahmanism (or Hinduism as it is referred to in modern times) to Buddhism. It combines aspects of the sacred from which the community is moving away from with aspects of the sacred that the community is moving into. Fittingly, the twenty-two vows are inscribed in a structure at the site of conversion reminiscent of the Ashokan inscriptions from history.

A close reading of the vows reveals key insights in terms of its affective nature and the special role it plays by bringing Ambedkar's own words into the act of conversion for the Mahar community and the larger Dalit world today. The twenty-two vows by paying attention to the Hindu Gods, and deities in the first five vows, and symbolically relinquishes the Hindu religion they were born into. Additionally, the vow 19 indirectly invites Hindus in general to reflect and perhaps act against the detrimental role modern Hinduism and the caste division embedded in it plays in the oppression of the oppressed caste people. Dahat notes how Ambedkar's embracing Buddhism was a revolutionary call for a *Prabuddha* Bharat (Buddhist India), "...22 vows is a perfect path to make a journey from Hindu religion to Buddha's *Dhamma*" (Dahat 2019, p. 9). He further adds that "the 22 vows do not intend to insult or defame any god or goddess, but it is a sincere attempt to liberate the masses from slavery and blind faith of the masses" (Dahat 2019, p. 9). The sacred in this instance includes the de-hinduizing or de-brahmanizing process in the first five vows. The fifth vow or oath as compiled in Zelliot, "I do not believe that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this propaganda is mischievous and false," takes the reader back to the question of the decline of Buddhism during the seventh century after the appearance of Shankara and the origin of Vaishnava and Saivite movements (Zelliot 2004, p. 170). The vows, by emphasizing history and religion, emphasizes de-brahmanizing the mind and then emancipating it through Buddha's principles and teachings.

Ambedkar's ideological and spiritual influence is ever-present in the making and current existence of the Navayana school of Buddhism. It is hence conceptually right

to call Navayana as Ambedkarite Buddhism. However, the spiritual importance of the role Ambedkar plays in the emancipation of the modern-day Dalit people makes him more than an icon, a sacred figure, as many of the portraits, garlanded idols, and the celestial place alongside the Buddha at shrines and viharas in India indicates. The sacred in the reading of the *BHD* and the Navayana textual tradition is not a connection with a specific God as Buddha himself is not imagined as a god. The idea of the sacred is not a religious opposition to the secular because it is specifically a religious movement that has a long tradition in India. The sacred is rational too but it is difficult to extricate the mystical and the miraculous from the rational as India's biographical (*carita*) tradition is based on narratives and stories. Ambedkar's emphasis on rationalism and logic in his writings is, I suggest in the article, to remove superstition and blind faith among the oppressed castes and the downtrodden people. It adopts a sacred turn in both the intertextual reading of the *BHD* and the relevance of twenty-two vows as, firstly, an intervention, and for the people, a deeply religious experience. Hence, the Navayana vehicle of Buddhism cannot be either solely classified as rational or just mystical because ultimately, its goal is emancipation by following the eightfold path of the Buddha, and the ten *paramitas* of the *dhamma*. This article argues that Ambedkar reformulates the idea of what it means to be sacred through his reading of language, history, religion and thereby advancing a second coming of Buddhism in India.

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