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# Religion, Kinship and Buddhism: Ambedkar's Vision of a Moral Community

by *Anne M. Blackburn*

## *Introduction*

On October 13, 1935 Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891-1957), a leader of the Mahar Untouchable community, of Maharashtra, India, announced his intention to renounce Hinduism. Just over twenty years later and shortly before his death, Ambedkar publicly converted to Buddhism. Today, a generation after this conversion, many Mahars identify themselves as Buddhists. Still more revere Ambedkar for offering Untouchables an alternative religious and social vision. Scholarly treatments of Ambedkar and his movement uniformly assert that Ambedkar's Buddhist conversion was an attempt to strengthen the Mahar community against the dominant Hindu social and political hierarchy by providing his followers with an alternative, and egalitarian, identity. These studies have not, however, explored either the historically conditioned nature of Ambedkar's view of Buddhism or the logic behind Ambedkar's choice of religious, and specifically Buddhist, conversion as a mobilization technique for Untouchables. The following pages are a preliminary attempt to understand the historical background to Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism and the reasons for his choice of religious, and specifically Buddhist, conversion. I argue that Ambedkar understood Buddhism, religion, kinship and nationalism as a related set of terms with social and political implications, and that Ambedkar drew upon Indian cultural resources as well as "Orientalist" interpretations of Buddhism in order to create a model for a moral community ideologically

coexistent with, although not subordinate to, Brahmanical Hinduism and Indian nationalism.<sup>1</sup>

*Indic Culture and Moral Criticism: R.S. Khare*

Studies of Ambedkar and Mahar (or Dalit, the term now preferred by the Mahar community) Buddhism typically conclude that its character as an Indian religion was a crucial reason for Ambedkar's choice of Buddhism rather than, for instance, Christianity. Common sense appears to dictate that compatibility with the surrounding Indian culture was essential to the psychological renewal promised by Buddhist conversion.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, until recently scholars have not pursued in detail the links between Buddhism's Indian-ness and its apparent attraction as an alternative for Untouchable Hindus. However, R.S. Khare's new study of the Untouchable Chamars in Lucknow and their moral stance vis-à-vis Brahmanical hierarchy suggests a way to refine discussions of Buddhism as an Indian cultural resource for Untouchables. In a move away from Dumontian models of Indian society which assume a holistic Indian social order defined by Brahmanical ideology, Khare argues against the caste system as a complete explanation of Indian society.<sup>3</sup> Insisting on the presence of multiple "evaluative and decision-making structures" within the contemporary "Indian social order," Khare asserts that "other indigenous moral orders may explain more and explain it better."<sup>4</sup> This attempt to show the existence of, and relations among, several visions and moral criticisms of Indian society has suggestive implications for an analysis of Ambedkar's choice of Buddhism.

Khare argues for a distinction between a Brahmanical and an "Indic" sphere of discourse and action which is visible in the self-reflection and action of Lucknow Chamars. For this community, philosophical issues and categories which form part of Indic culture serve as a source for and site of moral challenges to Brahmanical authority. Khare describes Lucknow Chamar reflection on and action within an Indic philosophical frame as an effort to "show the hierarchical person an equalitarian mirror that the Indic civilization

offers.”<sup>5</sup> The relations between the spheres of discourse and action identified as Indic and Brahmanical are not, however, straightforwardly oppositional. Although a relation of contrast is fundamental to the criticism brought by Lucknow Chamars against upper-caste dominance, a successful attempt to wage a moral battle based on Indic issues and categories relies also upon the relations of “controlled difference and sharing” which obtain between Untouchable and uppercaste Indians.<sup>6</sup> Khare is careful to note that in the ritual and political dynamics of the Chamar community social dependence as well as cultural antagonism characterize relationships between Untouchables, Brahmins and ascetics (who may be Brahmins or Untouchables with broadly ranging levels of anti-Brahmanical radicalism).

The locus of moral criticism within the Indic sphere, according to Khare, is the figure of the ascetic, since the ascetic and the Brahmin are the two predominant “genres of moral power” in Indian culture. Here the ascetic is defined by a set of individual goals accessible to householders as well as to homeless renouncers. These goals are renunciation, self-control and austerities.<sup>7</sup> In other words, Khare posits two realms of moral authority within the Indian cultural sphere: ascetic and Brahmanical. The two may, and do, overlap at times but are seen by the Lucknow Chamars as participating in an ongoing pattern of moral contestation.<sup>8</sup> The ascetic ideal is, by this reading, the natural site upon which to contest Brahmanical dominance since it offers a source of indigenous philosophical criticism based on moral and spiritual ideals shared (although to varying degrees) by Brahmin and ascetic alike. Chamar reflections on the moral status of Brahmanical hierarchy do not rest on a simple opposition between Brahmin and ascetic. In order to contest Brahmanical assumptions of inequality, Khare shows, Lucknow Chamars insist upon an understanding of asceticism which emphasizes the individual as locus of spiritual morality.

By achieving identity with “the Universal Spirit,” the ascetic remembers the fact that equality and “innate sameness” are the fundamental characteristics of humanity.<sup>9</sup> By identifying equality, in religious and philosophical terms, as a fundamental characteristic of

humanity Lucknow Chamars try to place Brahmanical assumptions of social inequality on the moral defensive. Khare argues that the ascetic as “cultural construct” helps Untouchables to clarify the moral nature of social deprivation, to identify “moral issues, paradoxes, and sources of resentment” and to articulate the cultural foundations for “ultimate moral individuality and identity.”<sup>10</sup> Thus asceticism, understood as a form of spiritual discipline accessible to all Untouchables, be they householders or not, reinforces a view of the person which emphasizes equality and individual moral responsibility. This view, which is not, of course, that commonly found in Brahmanical sources, in turn helps Untouchables to identify the grounds upon which they can criticize Brahmanical social practices; that is, for failing a broader, Indic moral test of accountability. At the same time, moral individualism empowers Untouchables to battle existing upper-caste dominance. “Only a new moral accountability,” Khare claims, “could combat [the Untouchable’s] abject social dependency and disadvantage.”<sup>11</sup>

Khare’s discussion of Lucknow Chamar ideology clearly helps counter visions of a holistic Brahmanical Indian social order. The multiple religious exemplars (including Hindu sectarian and non-Hindu figures) upon which Lucknow Chamars draw for their view of the ascetic ideal also challenges simple definitions of Hinduism.<sup>12</sup> More important for my purposes, however, is the fact that Khare’s account of Lucknow Chamars’ distinction between Indic and Brahmanical cultural spheres and his consideration of the ways in which Lucknow Chamars understand Indic culture as a source for moral criticism of Brahmanical hegemony has implications for a discussion of the creation of Buddhist tradition within the contemporary Indian cultural sphere. For these Chamars, the Buddha serves as one of many ascetic exemplars. Buddhism is thus understood as but one representative of an encompassing cultural and moral sphere—the Indic philosophical and spiritual tradition.

*Buddhist History and Intracommunal Morality: B. R. Ambedkar*

Is this interpretation of the Buddhist tradition as one of many possible representatives of an Indic philosophical and spiritual tradition the only way Indian Untouchables understand Buddhism's relation to Brahmanical social and political dominance? It is clear from the writings of B. R. Ambedkar that this Mahar leader (famous also for his role in political negotiations with the British during the pre-Independence period and in the creation of a constitution for independent India) *did* choose to emphasize the distinction between a Brahmanical and an Indic cultural sphere. Ambedkar's oeuvre, furthermore, shows that he too saw Indic culture as a source from which to develop criticisms of the dominant Brahmanical caste structure. However, in contrast to the ideological focus of the Lucknow Chamars described by Khare, Ambedkar's primary focus is not criticism of the Brahmanical system with intent to change that system of social relations through emphasis on a shared and encompassing Indic morality. Instead, Ambedkar uses a polemical critique of Brahmanical religio-social dominance as the foundation upon which to develop an Indic-based alternative to the Brahmanical social order. This alternative is, significantly, designed to *coexist* with, rather than displace, Brahmanical Hinduism. Ambedkar's historical view of Brahmanical-Buddhist relations and his discussion of religion, morality, social welfare and nationalism reflect this strikingly different strategy for the mobilization of Untouchables.

Ambedkar's vision of two coexisting religious traditions is reflected in his view of the history of Buddhism and Untouchability, and in his view that the social and moral function of religion is the creation of communal identity. Ambedkar develops a history of Buddhism in India which highlights the teaching of Gotama Śākyamuni as an indigenous Indian cultural response ("Indic" in Khare's terms) to "degraded" Aryan society. The dominant society at the time of Gotama Śākyamuni was, according to Ambedkar, a Brahmanical Aryan community suffering from social, religious and spiritual degradation. The Buddha's teaching, initially a "religious revolution," became a social and political revolution exemplified by equal opportunity for low-caste individuals and women as well as equal

access to education.<sup>13</sup> The Buddhist “revolution” was also marked by a challenge to the infallibility of the Vedas and a revision of regnant conceptions of *kamma* (Skt. *karma*).<sup>14</sup>

Ambedkar depicts a history of “mortal conflict” between Buddhism and Brahmanism. When today’s Untouchables’ ancestors, described as a single tribe separated from other communities only on tribal grounds, adopted Buddhism they did not revere Brahmins or employ them as priests. They even “regarded them as impure.” The self-imposed isolation of these Buddhists angered the Brahmins, who responded by preaching “against them contempt and hatred with the result that [they] came to be regarded as Untouchables.”<sup>15</sup> At this stage then, presumably pre-Aśoka (although Ambedkar’s chronology is unclear), untouchability was assigned to an isolated tribe of Buddhists on the basis of religious competition. Subsequently, however, the Mauryan empire marked the pinnacle of Buddhist authority in political and religious spheres. That the Brahmins “lived as the suppressed and Depressed Classes” during this period is shown, Ambedkar claims, by Asoka’s restriction of sacrificial activity.<sup>16</sup> Brahmanical subordination to the Buddhist Mauryan empire was followed, according to Ambedkar, by a Brahmanical revolution waged by Brahmins against the principles of Buddhism which had “been accepted and followed by the masses as the way of life.”<sup>17</sup> Buddhist principles were so well established at this point that Brahmin challengers were forced to promulgate *Manusmṛti* in order to “embody” the principles of this Brahmanical revolution. For Ambedkar, the redaction of this text marks a crucial shift in the Brahmanical understanding of hierarchy, associated with the transition from Brahmanical to Hindu social identity. *Manusmṛti* codifies a newly hereditary caste system, distinct from the more flexible *varṇa* system which characterized pre-Buddhist Aryan society, and represents the antithesis of the Buddhist Mauryan social order.<sup>18</sup> After the “Brahmanical revolution,” as Brahmins attempted to counter Buddhist principles established during the Mauryan empire, Buddhist Untouchables were further stigmatized on the basis of meat-eating. Brahmins, realizing the power of Buddhist ideals, attempted to challenge Buddhism by adopting an extreme form of Buddhist



asceticism as standard behavior. Buddhists, by now Buddhist Untouchables, continued meat-eating since, in their peripheral relationship to Brahmin village life, they did not kill the animals and could therefore preserve the Buddhist precept of *ahimsa*, or non-injury to sentient beings.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to the Lucknow Chamar ideology depicted by Khare, Ambedkar's history of Buddhism and untouchability in tension with Brahmanism and Hinduism shows a decided emphasis on the formation of social identity through *collective* historical experiences. Where Lucknow Chamars refer to a lineage of ascetics drawn from several Indian religious traditions, Ambedkar stresses the continued historical identity of isolable and competing social groups. Instead of developing a sustained critique of Brahmanical hierarchy with reference to an array of moral exemplars representative of broader Indic values, Ambedkar locates a specifiable Buddhist tradition and community in historical time in order to show Untouchables that their disadvantaged position stems from a clearly demarcated religious identity prior to the institutionalization of a hereditary caste order linked to a discourse on ritual purity. Thus, while Chamar ideology attempts to show the moral inconsistency of the Brahmanical Hindu hierarchy within Indic categories, Ambedkar does not recognize the Brahmanical order as a moral system by criticizing it in Buddhist terms. This stems from his view that the Brahmanical social order, at least after the promulgation of *Manusmṛti*, represents an inherently immoral manipulation of mass obedience to religious sanction in order to safeguard the interests of Brahmin elites. It is also the natural extension of Ambedkar's historical view of distinctive religious traditions that do not participate in any broader shared system of religious or moral principles.

Ambedkar's apparent commitment to the formulation of a collective, tribal, history for Buddhist Untouchables can be clarified with reference to his views on kinship and the social and psychological importance of ancestral identity. Arguing that the only way for Untouchables to end their social isolation is to "establish kinship with and get themselves incorporated into another community," Ambedkar (acknowledging a debt to Robertson Smith) elaborates the benefits of kinship:

From the point of view of the group, kinship calls for a feeling that one is first and foremost a member of the group and not merely an individual. From the point of view of the individual, the advantages of his kinship with the group are no less and no different than those which accrue to a member of the family...Kinship makes the community take responsibility for vindicating the wrong done to a member...It is kinship which generates generosity and invokes its moral indignation which is necessary to redress a wrong...Kinship with another community is the best insurance which the Untouchable can effect against Hindu tyranny and Hindu oppression.<sup>20</sup>

In order to establish kinship, the members must all conceive themselves to be "sprung from one ancestor and as having in their veins one blood." It does not, however, matter whether this is in fact the case, since at this later stage of human evolution religion, rather than blood relations, establishes kinship bonds. Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhist history thus establishes the historical basis for Untouchables' kinship with non-Indian Buddhists and depicts a return to Buddhism as a return to familial identity.<sup>21</sup> Kinship bonds, established through shared religious identification, are thus expected to strengthen Untouchables' position with respect to other social groups within a broader Indian social order. Such bonds, however, while they are significant in providing the impetus to redress social inequities suffered by Untouchables, are insufficient for the creation and maintenance of a specifically Untouchable social and ethical order. Other aspects of religion, as understood by Ambedkar, guarantee this latter goal. Ambedkar understands religion as the promulgation of an "ideal scheme" which aims to transform the social order into a moral one.<sup>22</sup> Religion is equated with fraternity and defined by social rather than supernatural relations. Ambedkar defines the moral order toward which religion aims as one that maintains human unity and social equality.<sup>23</sup> Equality is linked to a particular notion of individuality, understood as the ability to choose one's own social relations, an act denied, argues Ambedkar, by the

hereditary caste order and, presumably, by a social order in which kinship determines identity.<sup>24</sup> Only the status of morality as a religious value safeguards the “growth of the individual” in a context of equality.<sup>25</sup>

A moral community is formed out of shared religious identification because religion serves as a social force. “Those who deny the importance of religion,” writes Ambedkar, “fail to realize how great is the potency and sanction that lies behind a religious ideal as compound [*sic*] with that of a purely secular ideal.”<sup>26</sup> Secular law, Ambedkar declared in a 1954 All India Radio broadcast, may be broken by anyone, while religion must be respected by all.<sup>27</sup> Ambedkar’s understanding of religion’s social force relies explicitly upon his reading of Durkheim, which leads him to state that religiousness is characterized by both by its “sacral” and by its social character.<sup>28</sup> Although Ambedkar does not detail the relationship between collective experience and the creation of “the sacred” it is clear that he sees social experience as a source of “the sacred” and as the site where individual awareness of religious sanction is expressed. Religious sanction, for Ambedkar, relies upon shared social experience and such shared experience is limited to equal individuals within the moral community of religious kin established by commensality and the adoption of a common ancestral tradition. Religion itself, as a social mechanism, also creates a moral community consisting in relations of equality and individuality among its members. Although this morality is intracommunal and so cannot by itself produce intercommunal justice, the moral value of equality and individuality help give community members the ability to assert themselves intercommunally.

### *Ambedkar’s Buddhism: A “New Vehicle”*

This understanding of religion and its role in the creation of a moral social order makes it clear that Ambedkar’s 1956 conversion to Buddhism aimed to develop a community of neo-Buddhist righteousness coexistent with other religious communities in post Independence India.<sup>29</sup> Further evidence of this attitude toward

conversion is visible in Ambedkar's discussion of the relationship between the conversion of Mahar Untouchables under his leadership and the strength of an Indian nation. In 1936, shortly after the famous declaration that he would not die a Hindu, Ambedkar conceded that

what the consequences of conversion will be to the country as a whole is well worth bearing in mind. Conversion to Islam or Christianity will denationalise the Depressed Classes. If they go to Islam, the number of Muslims will be doubled...and the danger of Muslim domination also becomes real. If they go to Christianity...it will strengthen the hold of Britain on the country.<sup>30</sup>

On the eve of conversion Ambedkar described his choice of Buddhism as the least harmful route for the country since Buddhism is "a part and parcel of Bharatiya Culture." "I have taken care," he declared, "that my conversion will not harm the tradition of the culture and history of this land."<sup>31</sup> Elsewhere Ambedkar sharply delineated between religious and civil status, stating that while kinship holds a community together it is citizenship which binds a society.<sup>32</sup> His realistic assessment of continued social inequality also reflects this religious-civil distinction:

The Depressed Classes may not be able to overthrow inequities to which they are being subjected. But they have made up their mind not to tolerate a religion that will lend its support to the continuance of these inequities.<sup>33</sup>

Ambedkar thus places an interpretation of Buddhism in relation to several other views on social identity and social order. To guarantee morality within the Untouchable community, as well as a strong response to extra-communal forces, Ambedkar's Buddhist history emphasizes collective historical experience and religious distinctiveness within Indian cultural history. His choice to emphasize the indigenous, or Indic, nature of Buddhism is, like that evidenced by Lucknow Chamar ideology, an attempt to mobilize

Indian cultural resources for social change. Ambedkar's decision to build a separate Buddhist moral community rather than to attempt alteration of Brahmanical ideology through the mobilization of shared moral values reflects Ambedkar's distinctive awareness of the relationship between national pluralism and religious identity and his choice to separate inter- and intracommunal relations.

Ambedkar's complex response to the problem of forging a new identity for the Mahar community requires a particular vision of Buddhism. What is the view of traditional Buddhism upon which Ambedkar draws and from where does it emerge? In the first place, it is important to note that Ambedkar distinguishes between historical Buddhism, existing forms of Buddhism at the time of his conversion and the Buddhist ideals to which he converted and which he was determined to spread. He develops the term "*navayāna*" for the latter, a Buddhist tradition appropriate for communities in the twentieth century. This "new vehicle" was understood as a direct expression of the "prior tradition" and "pristine purity" of "early" Buddhism, thus allowed Ambedkar to skirt the distinction between Theravāda and Mahāyāna.<sup>34</sup> Ambedkar's *navayāna* included some noticeably recent influences which might be called modernist.<sup>35</sup> He charged contemporary monks to adopt Christian forms of social action and argued that successful propagation of Buddhist *dhamma* (Skt. *dharma*) required a "Buddhist Bible."<sup>36</sup>

I have shown that Ambedkar depicted ancient Buddhism as a "religious revolution," a social reform movement which redressed inequalities in caste and gender relations. To support his view, Ambedkar interprets key Buddhist concepts to link them more closely to a vision of Buddhist social reform. A Buddhist view of *kamma*, for instance, is depicted as a Buddhist revision of a Brahmanical philosophical position to transform the latter into a principle more conducive to social change. While the idea of *kamma*, "as formulated by the Brahmins, thought the Buddha, was calculated to sap the spirit of revolt completely," presumably by providing an explanation of social inequality, the Buddha revised the concept to cover only group (rather than individual) responsibility and restricted the efficacy of karmic processes to a single lifetime.<sup>37</sup>

Further, Ambedkar understands the Buddha's teaching that everything is characterized by *dukkha*, or unsatisfactoriness, as referring specifically to interpersonal relations. In one instance Ambedkar presents a dialogue in which the Buddha teaches that the root of *dukkha* is class conflict and asserts elsewhere that "the Buddha's conception of *Dukkha* is material."<sup>38</sup> *Nibbāna* (Skt. *nirvāna*) the state or process which describes enlightenment, is considered a precursor for moral action in the world and explicitly associated with a non-monastic lifestyle. *Nibbāna* "means enough control over passion so as to enable one to walk on the path of righteousness."<sup>39</sup> Ambedkar's interpretation of *dukkha* and *nibbāna* implies that moral action, for which *nibbāna* is preparation, will rectify the material suffering of inequality. Ambedkar sees a concern for human welfare (defined generally with reference to non-violence and social equality) as a central teaching of Buddhism and associates such welfare with rationality. For instance, Ambedkar explains his principles for distinguishing between Buddhist *dhamma* and dangerous Brahmanical views:

Anything therefore which is rational and logical, other things being equal, may be taken to be the word of the Buddha...The Buddha never cared to enter into a discussion which was not profitable for man's welfare. Therefore anything attributed to the Buddha which did not relate to man's welfare cannot be accepted to be the word of the Buddha.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, Ambedkar articulates a view in which feelings of individual self-worth and moral responsibility are both generated and sustained by the forces of kinship and religious sanction. Kinship itself provides the psychological strength with which to recognize and redress social inequality. This strength does not, however, proceed simply from a sense of unity. It is engendered also by the intracommunal values of equality and individuality which are protected by religious sanction. Ambedkar's vision of ancient Buddhism as a tradition of egalitarian social reform and his exegesis of key Buddhist concepts are clearly crucial to his belief that

Buddhism would, indeed, protect such values. Although Ambedkar does not explicitly link these views to political mobilization, it appears from his continued involvement in political affairs as well as his views on citizenship and nationalism that Buddhist individuals, fortified by the forces of religious kinship, are expected to contest social inequality in the political arena rather than in an arena of shared morality.<sup>41</sup>

### *Ambedkar's Buddhism Reconsidered*

Interpreters of Ambedkar's views on Buddhism as a tradition of social reform and rationality adopt one of two general attitudes, both of which obscure the historically conditioned nature of Ambedkar's historical vision. Some scholars accept Ambedkar's vision of Buddhist social reform as unremarkable, depicting a natural affinity between Ambedkar's interpretation and historical Buddhism in the development of Mahar ideology. Janet Contursi, for instance, in her analysis of Dalit resistance to caste Hindus in a Pune slum, simply states that:

The Buddha provided one of the earliest critiques of orthodox Brahmanism, which for centuries propagated social and spiritual inferiority of women and the lower castes. The Buddha attempted to counter Brahmanism with a philosophy of spiritual equality and a notion of atheistic morality as the essence of social and religious duty. Ambedkar coupled these aspects of the Buddha's philosophy with an emphasis on rationalism to create a vision of a secular, egalitarian society.<sup>42</sup>

Owen Lynch proceeds similarly, concluding that "Buddhism was truly Indian, yet it was also ideologically consistent with [the Untouchables'] goal of mobility and the new ideas they had come to accept."<sup>43</sup>

Eleanor Zelliot seems at times to adopt Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhist history without question, as when she follows a comment on Ambedkar's biography of the Buddha with a description of Buddhism as "egalitarian."<sup>44</sup> On another occasion, however, in a piece co-authored with Joanna Macy, Zelliot stresses the distance between Ambedkar's vision and what they call "traditional Buddhism."

As a scholar of political theory and a champion of the downtrodden, Ambedkar *projected* upon the Dhamma his own faith in rationalism and his over-riding concern for social reform.

...

Given the drive for equality that motivated Ambedkar to lead his people into Buddhism, it is clear why he interpreted the Dhamma in social terms. That this social emphasis led [*sic*] to exclude or distort some teaching, fundamental to traditional and canonical Buddhism is understandable...<sup>45</sup>

This stance is notable for its sympathy to Ambedkar's position and motivations and for its postulation of a stable "traditional" Buddhism. More recently, Timothy Fitzgerald has attempted a more subtle reflection on Ambedkar's failure to "give an adequate account of traditional Buddhism." After helpfully detailing specific areas in which Ambedkar's final work (published posthumously), *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, fails to follow standard Buddhist metaphysical positions, Fitzgerald concludes that "there is nothing distinctively Buddhist about the exposition given in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*...And all of the key concepts of traditional Buddhism have been fudged over, so that one cannot legitimately hold that there is any serious *re-interpretation* of traditional Buddhism in this book."<sup>46</sup>

Neither view of "traditional" Buddhism—as a social reform movement or as some other stable entity interpreted (or misinterpreted) from a social reform perspective—is historically accurate. It is now clear that, although Pali Buddhist literature includes responses (sometimes satiric) to Brahmanical ideas and social institutions,



depictions of the Buddha as a radical social reformer are inaccurate.<sup>47</sup> Although caste and gender are not depicted as absolute barriers to soteriological goals, neither gender nor caste relations appears to have been substantially refashioned in society at large in response to Buddhist teachings.<sup>48</sup> The alternative view is also untenable. As the recent work of so-called post-Orientalist historians and anthropologists so clearly indicates, it is no longer possible to ignore the historically conditioned quality of a term like "Buddhism." Deconstructing many of the foundational categories and assumptions of scholarship on South Asia and other colonized cultural areas, these scholars have detailed the many ways in which nineteenth and early twentieth century contact between European colonialists and Asian peoples resulted in the creation of still dominant notions of "religion," "ethnic identity" and "nationalism."<sup>49</sup> Such studies have also indicated the ways in which these notions, forged in the crucible of colonialism influenced by Enlightenment and Romantic philosophies, have been used by contemporary South Asians to develop local and national identities.<sup>50</sup>

In other words, the Buddhist "tradition" upon which Ambedkar drew in his formulation of Buddhist history and philosophy appropriate to the Mahar community was itself the product of interpretation. This point, now a commonplace in discussions of "modern" Theravāda Buddhism, has until now eluded treatments of Untouchables' conversion. As Philip Almond has clearly shown, interpretations of Buddhism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century frequently stressed the rational and atheistic character of Buddhism, as well as the purity of its "original" (understood as that represented by Pali sources) teaching. The Buddha was often depicted as a social reformer, especially as a Luther-like figure attempting to root out superstition and idolatry.<sup>51</sup> Such views of Buddhism (now termed "Orientalist") influenced many of the translations from Pali texts available during Ambedkar's era, as well as much of the secondary literature. Furthermore, Ambedkar's South and Southeast Asian partners in discussions of Buddhism and its potential revival were members of a generation educated under these same Orientalist influences. Ambedkar had clear ties to the Maha Bodhi Society (itself

partly the product of Orientalist agenda in what was then Ceylon) and, from his youth, was exposed to works by a growing number of South Indian intellectuals interested in Buddhist philosophy.

### ***Conclusion***

I argue, then, that Ambedkar adopts the interpretations of Buddhism dominant during his lifetime and subjects this “constructed” vision to further refinement by creating a conceptual tapestry woven from diverse strands. Ambedkar thus linked the Buddhism of his day—rational, atheistic and bent on reform—to other ideas crucial to his vision—“religion,” “morality,” “kinship” and “nation.” This interpretation of Ambedkar’s views also offers, I would suggest, an important corrective to the post-Orientalist emphasis on the colonialist-colonized relationship as the chief site of “constructed” traditions. Such scholarship has critically enlarged our understanding of the colonial experience by analyzing the ways in which colonized cultures were (re)conceptualized and essentialized by imperial scholars and civil servants. As a result, we have been forced to confront a politics of representation which has outlived the specific context of colonial domination. However, in the necessarily insistent attempt to document such processes, post-Orientalist scholars have restricted their vision to the conceptual products of colonialist-colonized contact. This, unfortunately, creates an argument from silence which suggests that re-presenting cultural traditions, and “constructing” them in the process, is an activity limited to Western minds and politics. This implies in turn a certain dearth of creativity on the part of those colonized.<sup>52</sup> Ambedkar’s Buddhist history thus provides a striking reminder that South Asians informed by their own visions further refined the “constructed” products of Orientalism.

## Notes

1. I am grateful to Dominic Lopes, Steven Collins and Frank Reynolds for their responses to an earlier draft of this paper. I have consciously chosen to read broadly in Ambedkar's work, covering much of his career and examining published works and posthumously published manuscripts. I try to understand these works as a conceptual whole, leaving aside an analysis of the relationship between individual works and external political events, as well as an analysis of the audience to which Ambedkar directed each piece. Although my approach necessarily "flattens" the textual evidence of Ambedkar's career, I believe that it is appropriate, although by no means exhaustive, to focus on the relations among key ideas present in Ambedkar's immense oeuvre. For an accessible introduction to Ambedkar's life and work see Sangharakshita (1986). The classic biography of Ambedkar is Keer's (1962). An attempt to link more closely the development of Ambedkar's views on conversion to those on constitutional reform should examine his attitude toward "state religion" (see Ambedkar (1989) and Ramteke (1983).

2. See Ling (1980), Lynch (1969) and Zelliott (1977, 1978)).

3. I understand "ideology" to mean self-reflective principles expressed through speech or action. See Appadurai (1986), Collins (1989) and Inden (1986a) for criticisms of the "holistic" view and alternative analytical perspectives.

4. Khare (1984), pp. 141-2.

5. Khare (1984), p. 17. See also Ling (1980).

6. Khare (1984), p. 23. See also Inden (1986a), p. 768.

7. Khare (1984), p. 25.

8. I am not concerned here with an evaluation of Khare's quite Dumontian description of Brahmin-ascetic tension as a structural feature of Indian culture, or with an analysis of the way Khare's description of the ascetic as individual appears to reflect some of Dumont's views.

9. Khare (1984), p. 59.

10. Ibid. p. 24.

11. Ibid. p. 59.

12. Ibid. ch. 2-3.
13. Ambedkar (1987), pp. 153, 221-2.
14. Ambedkar (1957), p. 89.
15. Ambedkar (1969), pp. 44, 96.
16. Ambedkar (1987a), p. 268).
17. Ibid. p. 274.
18. Ibid. pp. 285-6.
19. Ambedkar (1961), p. 47.
20. Ambedkar (1989), pp. 414-5
21. Ibid. pp. 416-7.
22. Ambedkar (1987a), p. 6.
23. Ramteke (1983), p. 184 and Ambedkar (1989), p. 407.
24. Ambedkar (1989), p. 260.
25. Ambedkar (1957), p. 325.
26. Ambedkar (1987a), p. 23.
27. Ramteke (1983), p. 184.
28. Ambedkar (1989), p. 179.
29. The adjective "neo-Buddhist" is appropriate given Ambedkar's own use of the term "*navaydha*." See below.
30. Quoted in Ramteke (1983), p. 127.
31. Quoted in Ramteke (1983), p. 191.
32. Ambedkar (1989), p. 416.

33. Ibid, p. 383.

34. Ramteke (1983), p. 169 and Sangharakshita (1986), p. 131.

35. See Gombrich and Obeyesekere (1988) and Queen (1991) for a comparative, Sri Lankan, case.

36. Keer (1962), p. 503 and Ramteke (1983), p. 108.

37. Ambedkar (1957), pp. 91, 243.

38. Ibid. pp. 57-8, 511.

39. Ibid. pp. 237-8.

40. Ibid. p. 35 1.

41. I do not mean to imply that the choice of arena presents a stark opposition between moral and political contestation. As Khare's study shows, political mobilization may be buttressed by the perceived power of shared moral values.

42. Contursi (1989), pp. 447-8-

43. Lynch (1969), p. 98.

44. Zelliott (1978), p. 97.

45. Zelliott and Macy (1980), pp. 134, 142, emphasis added.

46. Fitzgerald (1989), p. 66, original emphasis.

47. In the *Agganna-Suttanta*, for instance, Brahmanical supremacy is graphically disputed (by pointing out the undeniably human attributes of Brahmin women) *without* questioning the existence of caste structures themselves.

48. See Gombrich (1988) and Sponberg (1992).

49. For instance, see Inden (1986b) and Guha (1989).

50. For instance, see Kemper (1991) and Spencer (1990).

51. Almond (1988), ch. 3-4. Almond notes, however, that interpretations of the Buddha as social reformer varied with changes in the European political climate.

He argues that some scholars, notably Oldenberg, moved away from a reformist interpretation when that view appeared dangerously close to Victorian socialism (1988, pp. 75-6).

52. I am grateful to Sheldon Pollock for suggestive comments and questions in this regard.

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