

Klaus K. Klostermaier
University of Manitoba, Winnipeg

BUDDHISM RE-EVALUATED BY PROMINENT 20TH CENTURY HINDUS

Introduction

By the 15th century, when Buddhism had all but disappeared from its homeland India, Hindu-Buddhist polemics, which were continued in scholarly circles, had degenerated into mere stereotype. Buddhism was equated with atheism, with nihilism and with contempt for the traditional ethos. Most of the authors who repeated and enlarged upon anti-Buddhist arguments as found in the Puranas and in the writings of the great Vedantacaryas never had an opportunity to encounter a Buddhist, let alone debate points of philosophy and religion with a Buddhist scholar.¹ Sheer inertia made Hindu scholastic texts perpetuate a debate which had long before become meaningless. Mere animosity made Hindu scholars use the term "Bauddha" as an invective to silence opinions other than their own, when they ran out of rational arguments to make their point.

Things changed in the 19th century. Not only did India experience a "Hindu Renaissance", with its native scholars regaining pride in their own tradition and with Western scholars eagerly studying India's glorious past, there also was a renaissance of Buddhism centered mainly on Sri Lanka and Burma, which spilled over into India. India began to take pride again in having been the cradle of Buddhism. It is not by accident that Bengali scholars took an early lead in creating renewed interest in Buddhism. Pockets of Buddhism had survived in Northwestern Bengal and in the Chittagong district. Bhikku Sangharaja, the spiritual preceptor of the King of Burma established formal links with the group around the great Tantrik master Tilopa in Pandita Vihara, Bengal. Young novices from Chittagong were invited to Burma

1. For background to this question see K. Klostermaier, "Hindu Views of Buddhism", in R. Amore, ed. *Developments in Buddhist Thought: Canadian Contributions to Buddhist Studies*, Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980, pp. 5-18.

to receive an education in Pali scriptures and thus a new tradition of Theravada Buddhism developed in the midst of Hindu-India.²

The Bengali scholars Rajendra Lal Mitra and Hara Prasad Sastri began to catalogue the rich treasures of Buddhist manuscripts in Nepal. Another Bengali, Sarat Chandra Das, travelled through Tibet and returned to India with numerous manuscripts from the ancient libraries in Lhasa. Sarat Chandra Das also became editor for several volumes of Buddhist Sanskrit literature for the newly established *Bibliotheca Indica*.³ In 1892 a Buddhist Text Society was founded in Calcutta which became instrumental in teaching Buddhism in India. Later a Department of Buddhist Studies was opened at the Government Sanskrit College in Calcutta. Satis Chandra Vidyabhusana, a great Hindu scholar whose *History of Indian Logic* is recognized as a standard work even now, was the first Indian to obtain an M.A. degree in Pali from Calcutta University in 1901. He continued his studies in Sri Lanka before being appointed Principal of the Government Sanskrit College in Calcutta, which has remained a major Centre for Buddhist scholarship in India. By the time Swami Vivekananda made his spectacular appearance at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago 1893 focussing the attention of the world on an attractive new version of Hinduism, Buddhism was no longer unknown in India and no longer an object of unqualified contempt for Hindus.

Swami Vivekananda, however, shows the ambivalence created by the survival of a stereotyped Hindu anti-Buddhism and the newly found pride of Indians to call "The Light of Asia"⁴ their own. He made the symbiosis and the complementarity of Hinduism and Buddhism the theme of his presentations:

Hinduism cannot live without Buddhism and Buddhism not without Hinduism....the Buddhists cannot stay without the brain and philosophy of the Brahmins, nor the Brahmin

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2. Dr. Nalinaksha Dutt, *The Gazetteer of India: Indian Union*, Vol. I, Delhi Government of India, 9165, pp. 452ff.
 3. P. V. Bapat, *2500 Years of Buddhism*, Delhi: Govt. of India, 1956, pp. 339ff.
 4. Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*, first published in 1879 an epic poem describing the life and work of Gautama Buddha, became for many Indians the first encounter with Buddha and Buddhism in a modern idiom.

without the heart of the Buddhist...Let us then join the wonderful intellect of the brahmin with the heart, the noble soul, the wonderful humanising power of the Great Master.⁵

By then, already, he developed the thesis that the Hindus alone had understood Buddha correctly, while the "so-called Buddhists" had misinterpreted his words. He also accused Buddhism of having been a destructive force in the history of India's religions. In a private letter to the Maharaja of Khetri, one of his supporters, he expressed himself quite strongly in this manner:

In spite of its wonderful moral strength, Buddhism was extremely iconoclastic and much of its force being spent in merely negative attempts it had to die out in the land of its birth, and what remained of it became full of superstitions and ceremonials, a hundred times cruder than those it was intended to suppress. Although it partially succeeded in putting down the animal sacrifices of the Veda, it filled the land with temples, images, symbols and bones of saints. Above all, in the mediæ of Aryans, Mongols and aborigines, which it created, it unconsciously lead the way to some of the hideous Vamacharas. This was especially the reason why this travesty of the teaching of the Great Master had to be driven out of India by Sri Sankara and his band of Sannyasins. Thus even the current of life set in motion by the greatest soul that ever wore a human form, the Bhagavan Buddha himself, became a miasmatic pool, and India had to wait for centuries until Sankara arose....⁶

Four themes, which became prominent in the re-evaluation of buddhism by Hindus in twentieth century India, can be found already in Vivekananda's statements:

1. Pride in "Bhagwan Buddha" as a son of India.
2. The claim that Buddhists had misunderstood Buddha and that one could accept Buddha and reject Buddhists.

5. *Selections from the Work of Swami Vivekananda*, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1962, p. 366.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 494 ff.

3. The assertion that Hinduism had, in fact, absorbed the essentials of the Buddha's teachings.
4. The notion that Buddhism had degenerated and had to be replaced by Vedānta.

I. Mahatma Gandhi: A Hindu Claiming the Buddha as His Own

In spite of a long and turbulent career in political life, and in spite of thousands of occasions where he had to express himself on the spot on matters of great significance, it would be hard to find any word in Mahatma Gandhi's utterances that are offensive to the faith of any believer. His deep respect for the founders of the great religions and the Truth contained in their teachings was genuine, and so we should not be surprised to find him talking about the Buddha in terms of highest respect and deep veneration. For him Gautama Buddha was not the founder of a new religion but a Reformer of Hinduism – like himself.⁷ And Hinduism embraced Buddhism, because "the Buddha himself was an Indian, not only an Indian, but a Hindu amongst Hindus".⁸ In a fairly long statement on Buddhism he said the following:

It is my deliberate opinion that the essential part of the teachings of the Buddha now forms an integral part of Hinduism. It is impossible for Hindu India today to retrace her steps and go behind the great reformation that Gautama effected in Hinduism.... What Hinduism did not assimilate of what passes as Buddhism today was not an essential part of the Buddha's life and his teachings.... It is my fixed opinion that....the teachings of the Buddha found its full fruition in India and it could not be otherwise, for Gautama was himself a Hindu of Hindus. He was saturated with the best that was in Hinduism, and he gave life to some of the teachings that were buried in the Vedas and which were overgrown with weeds.... The Buddha never rejected Hinduism, but he broadened its base. He gave it a new life and a new interpretation.⁹

7. *Young India* 1-12-1927

8. Mahadev Desai, *With Gandhiji in Ceylon*, p. 129.

9. *Young India* 24-11-1927.

Morning and evening services in Gandhi's Ashram in Wardha began with the Buddhist mantra: "Homage to all Buddhas", followed by two minutes of silent meditation.¹⁰

Gandhi also declared that he "owe(d) a great deal to the inspiration...from the life of the Enlightened One".¹¹ He specified: "The intellectual conception does not satisfy me... He was a praying Buddha. Look at his statues. Buddhism is one long prayer".¹² The Mahatma claimed Buddha not only as a Hindu among Hindus, but also as an associate in his campaign against untouchability and for *ahimsa*, non-violence, extending to all forms of life. "Great as the Buddha's contribution to humanity was in restoring God to His eternal place, in my opinion, greater still was his contribution to humanity in his exacting regard for all life, be it ever so low".¹³ And: "Gautama taught the world to treat even the lowest creatures as equal to himself. He held the life of even the crawling things of the earth to be as precious as his own".¹⁴ He anticipated modern ecologists' and animals rights advocates' arguments when declaring: "It is an arrogant assumption to say that the human beings are lords and masters of the lower creation. On the contrary, being endowed with greater things in life, they are trustees of the lower animal kingdom. And the great sage lived that truth in his own life".¹⁵

The abolition of untouchability without abolishing *varnasrama-dharma* – which Gandhi considered the cornerstone of Hinduism – was one of the great causes for which the Mahatma spent his life. He saw in Buddha a mighty ally. According to Gandhi, Buddha taught "that all that caste means today – as it meant in his time also – was wholly wrong. That is to say, he abolished every distinction of superiority and inferiority that was eating into the vitals of Hinduism. But he did not abolish *varnāśramadharma*. *Varṇa dharma* is not caste...."¹⁶ "While *varṇa* gives life, caste kills it and untouchability is the hatefulest expression of caste".¹⁷ Gandhi considered

10. *Asrama-Bhajanavali*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan Prakashan Mandira, 1922, pp. 11 & 14.

11. *Young India* 24-11-1927.

12. *Harijan* 19-8-1939.

13. *Young India* 24-11-1927.

14. *Young India* 8-12-1927.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Young India* 15-12-1927.

17. Mahadev Desai, *op. cit.* p. 138.

untouchability incompatible with Buddhism and a misinterpretation of *varṇadharma*. "You are denying Buddhism, you are denying humanity, so long as you regard a single man as untouchable".¹⁸

For Gandhi, the Buddha, like other great religious figures, was a man who sacrificed his life in the search for truth, a man who taught that "life is not a bundle of enjoyments, but a bundle of duties".¹⁹

II. Jawaharlal Nehru: A "Secular" Hindu's Fascination With Buddhism

Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of the Republic of India after India gained independence in 1947, the architect of the secular state of Bharat, more than once privately and publicly distanced himself from all religions. He grew up in a household that was nominally Hindu but did not participate in the rituals and festivities of its caste. He was drawn into politics because he believed in India's right to determine its own fate and he was convinced that, given the long history of inter-religious warfare in India, only a secular framework could offer stability and the foundation for economic cooperation and growth. At many occasions he denounced religion and religious people and found Gandhi's religiosity the most difficult part in him to understand and to accept. But he was not a mere pragmatist or a blinkered ideologist. He was a true humanist, sensitive and receptive for genuine values over and above the economical. He realized that he was a "strange mixture of East and West", equally at home in both, equally a stranger in both.²⁰

In his *Discovery of India* - a book written in Ahmadnagar Fort in 1942, during one of his many spells of imprisonment - Nehru devotes much room to a description of the rise of Buddhism, its teachings and its impact on Hinduism. Nehru was neither a professional Indologist nor a scholar of comparative religion and so he took most of his information out from standard works available to him, keeping his own comments to a minimum. What fascinated him was obviously

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Young India* 1-12-1927.

20. J. Nehru, *Autobiography*, originally published in 1936, Indian Ed.: Delhi: Allied Publ. 1962; Epilogue p. 596.

Buddha's "ideal of righteousness and discipline",²¹ his experiential access to truth and his rejecting the pieties of Hinduism in favour of intellectual search and moral practice.

He confesses that "the Buddha story attracted me even in early boyhood" and that Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia* "became one of my favourite books".²² He took an interest in visiting the places connected with Buddha's life. So, when he later travelled to Buddhist countries, he was curious to find out "what Buddhism had done to the people. How had it influenced them, what impress had it left on their minds and on their faces, how did they react to modern life?". He frankly admits:

There was much I did not like. The rational ethical doctrine had become overlaid with so much verbiage, so much ceremonial, canon law, so much, in spite of the Buddha, metaphysical doctrine and even magic. Despite Buddha's warning they had deified him, and his huge images, in the temples and elsewhere, looked down upon me and I wondered what he would have thought. Many of the monks were ignorant persons, rather conceited and demanding obeisance, if not to themselves, then to their vestments.²³

But Nehru was open enough not to be prejudiced by these flaws. He goes on saying:

I saw much also that I liked. There was an atmosphere of peaceful study and contemplation in some of the monasteries and the schools attached to them. There was a look of peace and calm on the faces of many of the monks, a dignity, a gentleness, an air of detachment and freedom from the cares of the world.

His critical mind, however, did not accept all this without asking: "Did all this accord with life to-day, or was it a mere escape from it? Could it not be fitted into life's ceaseless struggle and so tone down the vulgarity and acquisitiveness and violence that afflict us?"²⁴

21. J. Nehru: *The Discovery of India*, originally published in 1946, Ed. used: Meridian Books: London 1960, p. 117.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 119f.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

24. *Ibid.*

Much as he was able, on a certain level, to appreciate what Buddhism had done for humankind, he decided it was not for him:

The pessimism of Buddhism did not fit in with my approach to life, nor did the tendency to walk away from life and its problems. I was, somewhere at the back of my mind, a pagan with a pagan's liking for the exuberance of life and nature, and not very much averse to the conflicts that life provides.²⁵

Having said this, he somewhat backtracks and questions whether Buddhism really is passive and pessimistic, as many seem to have held. His own interpretation of the image of the Buddha, and the great success of Buddhism throughout so many centuries would belie such a view of Buddhism.²⁶ He sees "the whole spirit of Indian thought symbolized in the image of the Buddha" and behind his "still, unmoving features there is a passion and an emotion, strange and more powerful than the passions and emotions we have known. His eyes are closed but some power of the spirit looks out of them and a vital energy fills the frame."²⁷ He does perceive Buddha's actuality and relevance when he writes: "The ages roll by and Buddha seems not so far away, after all; his voice whispers in our ears and tells us not to run away from the struggle but, calm-eyed, to face it, and to see in life ever greater opportunities for growth and advancement."²⁸ By way of afterthought he adds: "...the nation and the race which can produce such a magnificent type must have deep reserves of wisdom and inner strength."²⁹

One could almost see a Jungian co-incidence in the fact that Nehru, fourteen years after writing these words, together with S. Radhakrishnan, the famous statesman-philosopher turned President of Bharat, presided over the celebrations of the Buddha Jayanti—the 2500th anniversary of Buddha's entry into *parinirvāṇa* according to the Sri Lankan tradition. Under their aegis the historic places

25. *Ibid.*

26. "The Buddha statue at Anuradhapura in Ceylon moved me greatly and a picture of it has been my companion for years. On the other hand some famous temples in South India, heavy with carving and detail, disturb me and fill me with unease". *The Discovery of India*, p. 241.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*

connected with Buddha's life were restored and Buddha celebrations were held all over the country. In an address before Seminar on Buddhism, held in New Delhi to conclude the celebrations, he said:

I believe that it is essentially through the message of the Buddha that we can look at our problems in the right perspective and draw back from conflict, and from competing with one another in the realm of conflict, violence and hatred. Every action has certain consequences. An evil action has evil consequences. That I believe is as good a law of nature as any physical or chemical law. If that is so, hatred, which is evil, must have evil consequences. Violence, which is evil, must have evil consequences, and indeed leads to the growth of violence. How then are we to escape from this vicious circle? I hope and believe that this year of the Parinirvana of the Buddha has led people to look deeper into those problems, and made them realize that they have to search for some kind of union between their day-to-day political, scientific, technological and other activities and a certain measure of spirituality.³⁰

That his role in this was not one of uninvolved routine became clear in some interviews, which he gave not much after these events to R.K. Karanja, editor of *Blitz*, a leftist journal in Bombay. Karanja expressed his surprise at some of Nehru's statements and asked him whether he had changed his mind on religion. And Nehru admitted: "Yes, I have changed". Again he cited Buddhism as a philosophy that appeared more acceptable to him than any other and Buddhism's potential to also bring about changes in politics and real life.³¹ Marie Seton, who apparently was a quite intimate friend of the Nehru family, repeatedly mentions in her biography *Panditji: A Portrait of Jawaharlal Nehru*, that Nehru had kept a number of Buddhist statues, which were presented to him by the Dalai Lama, on the mantelpiece of his Delhi home throughout his life, and that his living room was decorated with three large photographs of Buddha statues, which he apparently loved.³²

30. *Speeches 1953-1957*, pp. 430-1, "Valedictory Address at the Seminar on Buddhism", New Delhi, November 29, 1956.

31. R.K. Karanja, *The Mind of Nehru*, Bombay, 1964, p. 33.

32. New York: Taplinger, 1967, p. 454.

Nehru saw in the link which united Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi the spiritual bracket which had held India together over the ages:

... if we are to aim high, we should adhere to the high principles which have always formed the background of Indian thought from the days of the Buddha to our own day when Gandhiji showed us the path to right action. Greatness comes from vision, the tolerance of the spirit, compassion and an even temper which is not ruffled by ill fortune or good fortune..."³³

III. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar: Buddhism as Religion of Hope for the Untouchables

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, member of the first legislative assembly of the Republic of India created a stir noticed world-wide when on October 14, 1956, together with his wife and 75,000 of his followers he renounced Hinduism and was accepted into the Buddhist *sangha*.

A long story preceded that step and we have to retell at least parts of it, to make sense of that event and to place this Indian neo-Buddhist movement into its context.

A Mahar (member of a caste of untouchables in Maharashtra) himself, Ambedkar was one of the few who were given opportunities for higher education and who showed what these despised people were capable of, when treated as normal human beings.³⁴ He established himself as the leader of the Depressed Classes Conference, which first tried to achieve its objectives within the framework of Congress, but later left and antagonized Congress. From a co-worker of Gandhi in his fight against untouchability and a fellow-Congress member Ambedkar turned into a bitter enemy of Gandhi, accusing him of hypocrisy and of hostility towards the untouchables, by insisting on their remaining within the *varnāśramadharma*.³⁵ Under

33. *Speeches 1949-45* p. 103, Broadcast Dec. 31, 1952.

34. For background see: Chandra Bharill, *Social and Political Ideas of B.R. Ambedkar*, Jaipur: Aalekh Publications, 1977.

35. Cf. B. R. Ambedkar, *Mr. Gandhi and the Emancipation of the Untouchables*, Jullundur: Bheem Patrika Publications, 1943, and: *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, Bombay: Thacker & Co, 1945.

Ambedkar's leadership the Depressed Classes Conference, at a meeting in Yeola (Nasik) on October 13, 1935 decided to completely sever its links with Hinduism and seek affiliation with another religion. Eight hundred Harijans performed "the last rites" of Hinduism by burning publicly a copy of the *Manusmṛiti* and other Hindu sastras which sanction caste and untouchability.³⁶

Ambedkar saw in Buddhism rather than in Brahmanism the true and genuine tradition of India, a tradition which became perverted and corrupted through the selfishness of brahmins. He held the opinion that untouchability originated in the 4th century C. E. as a result of a power-struggle between Buddhism and Hinduism, the defeated Buddhists becoming outcastes in a newly revived state-supported Hinduism.³⁷ He also quite seriously suggested that the popular image of Vithoba in Pandharpur, Maharashtra, was an image of the Buddha. He concludes:

If we accept that the Broken Men were the followers of Buddhism and did not care to return to Brahmanism when it became triumphant over Buddhism as easily as other did,.... it explains why the Untouchables regard the Brahmins as inauspicious, do not employ them as their priests and do not even allow them to enter into their quarters. It also explains why the Broken Men came to be regarded as Untouchables. The Broken Men hated the Brahmins because the Brahmins were the enemies of Buddhism and the Brahmin imposed untouchability upon the Broken Men because they would not leave Buddhism.³⁸

Ambedkar did not become a Buddhist because he was convinced of the Four Noble Truth as the ultimate insight into reality or because he would accept Buddha as his Lord. In fact, he was considering converting together with his fellow untouchables to Christianity, before choosing to become a Buddhist. He decided for Buddhism, because it was an Indian tradition over against the foreign faith of Christianity.

36. C. Bharill, *op. cit.*, pp. 242ff describes in detail the events leading up to the Yeola (Nasik) declaration.

37. B.R. Ambedkar, *The Untouchables*, first published in 1948, Second Ed. by Prajnananda Thero, 1968, Sravasti: Jetavan Mahavihar.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 98f.

When he had declared his decision to leave the Hindu fold, the Sikh community extended an open invitation to him stating that "the Sikh religion is monotheistic and all-loving and provides for equal treatment of all its adherents".³⁹ Equally the Muslims made it known that they were ready to accept him and the Harijans, promising equality and full rights in political, social religious concerns.⁴⁰ The president of the Mahabhodi Society in Benares sent a telegram stating that "Among Buddhists there are no social or religious disabilities. We guarantee equal status to all converts. There is no caste distinction among us. We are willing to send workers."⁴¹ Like Gandhi, Ambedkar believed Buddhism to be helpful in the fight against untouchability. Unlike Gandhi, he did not believe that Hinduism had made Buddhism its own and that *varnāśramadhāra* was the solution of the problem. His adoption of Buddhism was accompanied by the statement: "I renounce Hinduism."⁴² Gandhi resented this step strongly: "It is unfortunate that Ambedkar had declared his resolve to abandon the Hindu religion. But conversion is not going to serve his purpose. Religion is not like a house or a coat which can be changed whenever one feels like it..."⁴³ When a Hindu missionary, Masurkar Maharaj asked him to desist from his conversion to Buddhism, Ambedkar declared that he would be willing to postpone his decision for a number of years under the following condition: an untouchable should be made Sankaracarya and a hundred Chitpavan Brahmins should every day bow down before him.⁴⁴

It took Ambedkar twenty years to carry out the decision taken in 1935. During this time he made an extensive study of the major religions, comparing especially Islam, Christianity and Hinduism with

39. Bharill, *op. cit.* p. 243.

40. *Ibid.* These invitations must have touched Dr. Ambedkar as rather ironic, having had to suffer in younger years – even after he had earned his degrees in U.S.A. and England – humiliation and contempt from the side of Muslims, Sikhs and Parsis on account of his untouchability.

41. Bharill, *op. cit.* p. 244.

42. D. Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Bombay: Popular Prakashan 1962, p. 497.

43. *Harijan*, 21-3-1936. Gandhi also opined: "...the millions of unsophisticated, illiterate Harijans will not listen to him and them who have disowned their ancestral faith; especially when it is remembered that their lives for good or evil are interwoven with those of caste-Hindus".

44. Bharill, *op. cit.* p. 245, ref. to C.K. Jigyasu. Dr. Baba Sahab Ambedkar Ka Jivan Sangarsh, Lucknow: Hindu Samaj Sudhar Karyalaya 1961, p. 126.

Buddhism, What appealed to Ambedkar was, that Buddha, in contrast to Jesus, Mohammed and the *avatars* of Hinduism, never claimed to be anything but a human being. "Jesus, Mohammed and Krishna claimed to themselves the roles of Moksadata. The Buddha was satisfied in playing the role of a Margadata".⁴⁵ Another distinctive feature of the Buddha was, that he did not claim infallibility for his teachings. He also felt that Hinduism as a religion did not consider morality central to its essence. By contrast Buddhism considered morality as integral to religion: "What God is to other religions, morality is to Buddha".⁴⁶ Besides *ahimsa*, nonviolence, a virtue extolled by Gandhi, the Buddha taught many other things. "He taught as part of his religion social freedom, intellectual freedom, economic freedom, and political freedom. He taught equality not only between man and man, but also between men and women".⁴⁷

Ambedkar could not fail to notice the attraction which Marxism had for Indian intellectuals and the claim of Marxism to be able to bring about the desired equality and freedom from the oppression of caste Hindus. He believed that ultimately the world would have to choose between Marxism and Buddhism.

In the present condition of the world, the conflict, whatever form it may take, will ultimately be between the Gospel of the Buddha and the Gospel of Karl Marx....Religions other than Buddhism concentrated on the problems of the soul and of worship but they forgot man.... But the Buddha alone, when pressed for his views on the soul, said, 'such discussions are unprofitable'. Nobody can prove the existence of the soul. I am concerned with man, righteousness between man and man.⁴⁸

Ambedkar worked for many years on a book that would present Buddhism in an understandable way to his followers. When *Buddha and His Dhamma*⁴⁹ finally appeared, it was severely criticized by Bhikku Jivaka from the Mahabodhi Society in Calcutta. The Buddhist

45. B. R. Ambedkar, *Buddha and the Future of His Religion*, quoted in Bharill, *op. cit.* p. 255.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 256.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 257.

48. A speech by Ambedkar quoted by Bharill, *op. cit.* p. 258.

49. Bombay: Siddhantha College Publications, 1957.

missionary found fault with Ambedkar's refutation of the notion of Karma, his views on *ahimsa* and his reducing the *dhamma* to a merely socio-political system, leaving out spiritual enlightenment. He also resented Ambedkar's expectations of Buddhist bhikkus being social workers instead of meditators. He concluded his damning critique by saying "The title should be changed from the misleading one, as the *Buddha and His Dhamma* to *Ambedkar and His Dhamma*, for he preaches non-dharma as Dharma for motives of political ambition and social reform",⁵⁰

That charge stuck. Orthodox Buddhists from Sri Lanka and Burma accused him of propagating "Ambedkarism" instead of "Neo-buddhism" He preferred to call himself a "Hindu-Protestant" rather than a member of the existing Buddhist *sangha*.⁵¹

Ambedkar had visions of an India turned Buddhist again, and if the growth of Buddhism in India had continued at the pace which it reached between the census of 1951 and 1961, a growth of more than 1500%, it would have come about in a matter of less than one generation. But growth stopped and membership in Ambedkar's Neo-Buddhism was fairly restricted to the Untouchables of Maharastra, who now form a group of people no longer Hindu but also not recognized by the more traditional Buddhists of Sri Lanka as Buddhists.⁵²

IV. Vir Savarkar: Buddhism as the Cause of the Downfall of India

Vir Savarkar, the foremost theoretician of the Hindu Mahasabha, the extreme Hindu political right wing, fighting for a "liberation" of India from its western-type democratic party system, developed in his *Essentials of Hindutva*⁵³ a view of the history of India and the role which Buddhism played in it quite opposite to that of any of

50. in: *Journal of the Mahabodhi Society*, Dec. 1959, p. 353.

51. Keer, *op. cit.* p. 462 and 495.

52. See Adele Fiske "Scheduled Caste Buddhist Organizations" in J. Michael Mahar (ed.) *The Untouchables in Contemporary India*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press 1972, p. 132-144 and A. Fiske "Buddhistische Bewegungen in Indien" in *Saeculum XX*, 2-14.

53. in: *Samagra Savarkar Wangmaya*; Hindu Rashtra Darshan, Poona: Maharastra Prantik Hindusabha, 1964, Vol. VI, pp. 1-91.

the predecessors mentioned. Typically, he introduces the subject by first dealing with the "Fall of Buddhism". The decline of Buddhism, Savarkar maintains, could not be explained by either the philosophical reaction which it provoked, nor the prevalence of "a loose and lazy promiscuous crowd of men and women who lived on others and spent what was not theirs on disreputable pursuits in life"⁵⁴, but by its unconcern for the political integrity of its domain. He sees the whole of Buddhism mirrored in an incident reported in the life of Buddha. After Buddha had left his home-country it was overrun by invaders and annexed. Buddha's gathering of a large number of fellow-Sakhyans into the *sangha* is viewed by Savarkar as his depriving his home-country "of its bravest and its best", making it an easy prey for war-like aggressors. Even worse: when news of the fall of the Sakhya republic was brought to him, it left him unconcerned. In later centuries, when the whole of India had become Buddhist, the fate of the Sakhya republic befell the whole country: it was raided and overrun by the Lichis and Huns, "whose barbarous violence could ill be soothed by the mealy mouthed formulas of *ahimsa* and spiritual brotherhood, and whose steel could ill be blunted by the soft palm leaves and rhymed charms."⁵⁵

Buddhist idealism, its attempt to lay the foundations of the Kingdom of Righteousness, was - in political and military terms - one big mistake.

Nobly did (Buddhist India) try to kill killing by getting killed - and at last found out that palm leaves at times are too fragile for steel! As long as the whole world was red in tooth and claw and the national and racial distinction so strong as to make men brutal, so long, if India had to live at all a life whether spiritual or political according to the right of her soul, she must not lose the strength born of national and racial cohesion,⁵⁶

Savarkar darkly hints at invasions of India that were supposed to have taken place under the leadership of Buddhists from other countries. To substantiate this claim of Buddhist subversion he has

54. *op. cit.* p. 12.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

to take refuge to some Puranic accounts, dark in themselves, made darker by Savarkar's interpretation.⁵⁷ Buddhist Universalism is what is so bad about Buddhism, so damaging to the national interest of the Hindus. Buddhist universalism is contrasted with Hindu nationalism: the Buddhists were people without a distinct identity. "Buddhism had its geographical centre of gravity nowhere..."⁵⁸

Surprisingly, after all this condemnation of Buddhism and its role in the history of India - a purely negative role, in the eyes of Savarkar - Savarkar pays his "Reverence to Buddha", professing to be as humble an admirer and an adorer of that great and holy *sangha* - the holiest the world has ever seen - as any of its initiated worshippers....And if these be our feelings for the *sangha* then what shall we say about its great Founder - the Buddha - the Enlightened? I, the humblest of the humble of mankind can dare to approach thee, Oh Tathagata - with no other offering but my utter humility and my utter emptiness.⁵⁹

In all humility Savarkar suggests that Buddha may have come too soon to be of any use to humankind in general and to Indian in particular.⁶⁰

Savarkar's historic reconstruction may be flawed and his opinion that Buddha should have waited a couple of aeons before preaching his *dharma* to the world may not make much historical sense, but he is correct in seeing and stating that the Buddhist ethos is diametrically opposed to the nationalist aspirations of the Hindu Mahasabha. Could we not turn the tables and say that such thinking is coming aeons too late and that universalism is a much more worthwhile goal than fanatical nationalism?

Conclusions

Buddhism today is numerically not strong in India and cannot hope to become a major force in the near future of India either. But there does not seem to be a way to avoid Buddhism: Hinduism's hate-love relationship with Buddhism continues and the issues which Buddhism threw up are still issues in present day India. The perspective has changed and the focus of controversy has shifted.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 22f.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Four prominent Indians of the 20th century have been singled out in his paper, all of them eminent public figures who dealt with Buddhism not out of some scholarly interest but in the context of their political concerns. They focus not on those themes which occupy the center of attention of professional Buddhologists - questions of history and texts, philosophical controversies and the understanding of the more sublime points of Buddhist teaching-but on aspects of Buddhism that have a bearing on present day social issues. Keeping that in mind it is quite amazing what a broad room is given in their writings to Buddha and Buddhism. That Buddhist orthodoxy as represented in the established sanghas of Sri Lanka and Burma did not agree with them, bothered them little. They had made a distinction between Buddha and his teaching and the Buddhist tradition, which they believed to be in contradiction of much of what Buddha had said and desired. They, however, do not agree among each other, either Gandhi believed that Buddhism had become part and parcel of the Hindu tradition, a continuing leaven of reform, to be applied to questions such as untouchability. Ambedkar, also believing that Buddhism did not tolerate untouchability, found it unavoidable to leave Hinduism in order to realize Buddhist social ideals. Nehru, who as Prime Minister of the recently independent India had the greatest responsibility of all, saw in Buddhism not so much a tool for social reform and political transformation but an expression of a humane and humanistic spirituality which modernity was in need of. Savarkar, like Vivekananda, was torn between admiration for 'India's Greatest Son' and contempt for what Buddhism stood for and did to Hinduism: for him, Buddhism was clearly inimical to Hinduism, not only in its historic conquest of Hindu - India, but also in its principles. Buddhist Universalism was incompatible with Hindu Nationalism, Buddhist disinterest in this world was opposed to the Hindu interest in power and control of society.

Buddhism, of course, is too large a phenomenon to allow anyone to claim it for him/herself and his/her particular interpretation. But could one not at least suggest, that-considering Buddha himself a prophet calling people to a life of sincerity and goodness and exposing the meaninglessness of ritual and observance of tradition-a correct interpretation of his message in the 20th century would consist in an affirmation of social justice and righteousness rather than in the pedantic following of a ritualised and formalized religious routine?