

# India: Buddhism's long fight against brahminism and caste

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**'Dust on the Throne' focusses on grossly overlooked aspects of Buddhism in Southasia and beyond, highlighting casteless and anti-caste legacies connecting ancient and modern Buddhists**

Southasia has since many millennia been a multilinguistic, multicultural and multireligious region. The forerunners of many of its classical languages existed in the Subcontinent before the arrival and predominance of Indo-Aryan languages, as did the cultures and societies that engendered them. Yet the historical and cultural imagination of the region remains disproportionately fixated on Sanskrit, Vedic religion and other features of what we now know as brahminism – all of which, as an ever-increasing tide of evidence suggests, arrived in the Subcontinent via migration of Indo-Aryan groups roughly around the time of the Indus Valley Civilisation's decline. Many linguistic and historical studies point to socio-cultural turmoil resulting from this migration and the penetration of brahminical culture into diverse regions, moving from western Southasia into North India, South India and Southeast Asia. Brahminism's adverse impacts have led to profound historical reconfigurations in the ancient, medieval and modern periods. Nonetheless, our critical understanding of brahminism and its attendant casteism, as well as of the casteless and anti-caste resistance to it from Southasians in diverse linguistic and cultural regions, remains limited.

There are many reasons hindering a deeper understanding of this issue. The discipline of Southasian Studies, for instance, in Southasia and in the West, is largely constrained by brahmin-centrism: that is, it takes for granted the centrality that brahmins have assumed in much of the Subcontinent, and the marginalisation they have imposed on the many communities they have othered by birth, language, regional origin and class, as well as by privileging brahminical deities, texts, institutions and practices over all others. The results – such as caste segregation, gendered inequalities and caste-based accumulation of wealth – have not been adequately examined so far.

A large part of the problem is that brahmin-centric sources and perspectives continue to enjoy primacy. This is because Southasian Studies is largely in the hands of either brahmin or white researchers who collude in maintaining their control over teaching, research projects and institutions. This has led to a lack of thinking against and beyond brahmin-centrism, and an effective moratorium on unravelling the histories of caste-free and anti-caste communities that have existed in opposition to and despite the violence of brahminism and casteism. It is still quite rare to find publications on Southasia that engage with casteless and anti-caste communities, their cultures, religions, economies and histories. Even as caste-marginalised, non-brahmin scholars and perspectives fight for more room, the intellectual crisis of brahmin-centricism in Southasian humanities and social sciences looks set to persist for years to come.

*Dust on the Throne: The Search for Buddhism in Modern India*, an erudite study by the historian Douglas Ober, is an exception to the brahmin-centric trend, and an outstanding intervention for many reasons. Right from its thoughtful title – which captures the deep history and “revival” of the

region's Buddhist past – the book tells us a different story than the brahmin-centric narratives of so much other scholarship. Ober shows how the widespread notion that Buddhism in the Subcontinent had died by the thirteenth century or earlier, and showed no trace of life into the modern period, is at most a “useful fiction”, if not a foolish conclusion outright. *Dust on the Throne* demonstrates the ways Buddhism has thrived through its “rich tapestry of localized traditions across Asia – worshipping *fo* (Buddha in Chinese), *hotoke* (Japanese), *sangay* (Tibetan), *samana Gotam* (Thai), and many more.”

Ober demystifies how Buddhism came to be endowed with unbroken legacies in the Subcontinent, outlining its long and uninterrupted presence in Nepal, Chittagong, Kozhikode, Sri Lanka and beyond. He also delves into crucial episodes in recent Southasian history that have not received due critical study. For instance, he looks at how the newly independent India, in 1947, incorporated into its flag the *dharmachakra* of the Buddhist emperor Ashoka, overlooking M K Gandhi's preferred spinning wheel. As its chronological stopping point, the book looks at the coincident events of 1956, when nearly half a million “dalits” converted to Buddhism led by B R Ambedkar and the Indian prime minister, the Congress leader Jawaharlal Nehru, orchestrated a year-long celebration honouring “2,500 Years of Buddhism”. *Dust on the Throne* reveals that this was not done with the motive of ushering in a postcolonial Buddhist India, or because the Indian nationalist movement and Congress party were committed to resurrecting Buddhism as an ancient Indian religion. Rather, it was for geo-political reasons, to gain international status as the cradle of an ancient religion, and to project an image of India and the Congress as champions of non-violence and pacifism. There was also something murkier at play: Buddhism was subordinated and co-opted in the popularisation of a brahmin-centric and caste-segregated Hinduism.

Irrespective of the violence of brahmin-centric canonisation and brahminical censorship, modern Buddhism remains archived in diverse ways that are waiting to be unearthed, as ‘Dust on the Throne’ itself evidences.

*Dust on the Throne* also shows how colonial Europeans played a vital role in reconstructing the history of ancient Buddhism in Southasia. Numerous Buddhist architectural structures and their epigraphs, as well as sacred places such as Bodh Gaya, Sarnath and Sanchi, were all re-discovered due to the zeal of colonial archaeologists and scholars, as was the history of Ashoka and his empire. Without such efforts, Ashokan symbols and the Buddhist significance they carry would not have reached the postcolonial state's flag and the Indian government's seal.

However, Ober points out, the colonial British state also used archaeology to justify its exploitative presence in the Subcontinent. It indulged in vociferous propaganda that the colonialists, through their re-discoveries, revived a religion considered “extinct” in India for hundreds of years. Ober refutes such views, showing how they were based on an understanding of Buddhism in terms of Christian history. Although accounts of this nature recognise Buddhism as a religion that “fought against a caste-obsessed brahmanical priesthood”, they fail to fully appreciate the historical transformations it brought about. Such an approach undermines Buddhism's continued relevance in diverse regions and communities, especially in Southasia.

Ober is forthright when he describes “the erasure of dalit voices in South Asian historiography”. This is all the more egregious when it is so often caste-oppressed Southasians who have imbibed, retained and passed on Buddhist legacies and histories through generations, whether the predominant brahmin-centric scholarship recognises this or not. *Dust on the Throne* demonstrates how the Buddhist “revival” in modern times was “not a singular monolithic movement”. It urges readers to engage with the diversity of Buddhism in and beyond the Subcontinent, and it is the

histories of this diversity that the book unfurls.

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*Dust on the Throne* confirms that understanding modern Buddhism in India, and across the Subcontinent, requires seeing clearly the religion's casteless and anti-caste aspects, which in fact are inseparable from it. It is in such values that Buddhism's regional diversity as well as its transregional presence in Southasia are rooted. Ober writes that Buddhism in India serves as "a symbol for all anti-brahmanical identities." Influenced by multidisciplinary scholarship, Ober also urges readers to keep in mind the "place-worlds" of Buddhists in order to learn about the diversity of Buddhism in modern Southasia.

*Dust on the Throne* points to two major reasons why multiple regional and linguistic communities in India took to Buddhism during various periods, especially in modern India. First, the casteist violence of brahminical groups was a crucial factor that inclined many Indians to Buddhism. Such Indians imbibed their Buddhist principles from multilingual Southasian sources in Pali, Tamil, Sanskrit and so on, learning these languages and turning themselves into polyglots for this purpose. Historically, Buddhism's inclusiveness and humanism has always stood in contrast to brahminical practices of birth-based segregation and bodily violence. Thus, the emergence of Buddhist polyglots in modern India is directly intertwined with the struggle against brahminism and casteism.

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Second, caste-oppressed Indians' sense of castelessness saw them naturally gravitate to Buddhism. The casteless memories and histories of many regional and linguistic communities are reinforced by their organic internalisation of Buddhist ethical values. Ober, true to the existing scholarship on casteless and anti-caste Buddhist movements in India, analyses the rise of casteless Tamils in southern India in the modern period. Although it is not openly stated, this Tamil Buddhist movement serves as a starting point to learn about polyglot casteless and anti-caste Buddhist movements in Lucknow, Kozhikode, Chittagong and other places, as well as other movements that are yet to be studied.

Tamil Buddhism was a pathbreaking movement in modern India. From its emergence in the late nineteenth century, it stood for raceless, caste-free and gender-sensitive individual and collective well-being. It was borderless in its orientation, and thus engaged with Buddhists not just from elsewhere in India, but also Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Southeast Asia and beyond. Tamil Buddhism spearheaded the assertion that since untouchability and caste were the inventions and impositions of brahmins, caste-oppressed Tamils never belonged to brahminism or Hinduism. Tamil Buddhists rejected caste identities of all kinds and reclaimed their casteless and anti-caste ways of life from earlier times, engaging with diverse regional and linguistic histories to understand the past unravelling of Buddhist cultures and the history of caste-oppressed communities.

A widely prevalent, casteless Buddhist history emerged in and through the work of the anti-caste thinker Iyothée Thass. Thass – who died in 1914, and whose work was only unearthed by scholars in the 1990s – converted to Buddhism and urged other caste-oppressed people to follow him. His writings reconstructed the indigeneity of Tamil Buddhists, including a casteless Tamil Buddhist identity preceding the arrival of brahmins and the onslaught of caste oppression. Building on such ideas of caste-critical scholarship, Ober writes, "For Shakya Buddhists i.e., Tamil Buddhists,

Buddhism was part of an ancient 'indigenous' Dravidian culture that preceded the 'foreign' Vedic tradition." Ober also presents a brilliant analysis of the interlinkages between Thass, the theosophist turned Buddhist Henry Steel Olcott, and the scholar and writer P Lakshmi Narasu.

Another figure that Ober examines is the monk-activist Bodhananda, hitherto only partially known. *Dust on the Throne* shows how he became an ex-brahmin by turning to Buddhism, and established the Indian Buddhist Society in 1916 in what was then the United Provinces, and is now Uttar Pradesh. The act of joining the society meant, for any person, demonstrating one's "anti-caste commitment".

Bodhananda established a Buddhist vihara in Lucknow and produced a range of literature on both political and religious topics. Ober states that his 1930 publication *Mool Bharatvasi aur Arya* (The Original Inhabitants of India and Aryans) brought together diverse caste-oppressed workers and underclass Indians in Lucknow during the late colonial and postcolonial periods. The society was yet another Buddhist movement which stood for "having one's own indigenous history and society being governed by its own social mores and values," other examples of which are "found across the subcontinent."

Bodhananda and the Indian Buddhist Society not only struggled against brahminism and the push towards Sanskritisation as a "deeply demeaning and patronizing" trend, but also took up the tasks of political mobilisation, education and the "revival of their ancient past" – that is, of a "pre-Aryan" Buddhist life. Even as Bodhananda enabled the reconstruction of Buddhism in Uttar Pradesh and the coming together of caste-marginalised communities, he kept up a critique of "how the brahmins erased and appropriated almost every aspect of Buddhist culture and history," Ober writes, "thereby plunging it into 'the ocean of non-remembrance.'"

Ober also highlights Buddhist pasts and influences among the Ezhava community of Kerala. In 1903, the spiritual leader Narayana Guru founded the Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam, an influential Advaita religious movement largely representing the Ezhavas that has Buddhist ideas at its core. C Krishnan, editor of the popular Malayalam newspaper *Mitavadi*, broke away from this group and organised the All-Kerala Buddhist Conference in 1925. This was followed, in 1927, with the establishment of Kozhikode's first Buddhist temple. Ober shows how Malayali Buddhists critiqued the "first three varnas" of the caste hierarchy, which oppressed and othered indigenous Malayalis and Indians, categorising them as "low-caste" and "untouchable". In contrast, the Kerala Buddhist Association was inclusive, and initiated "brahmins, Anirs, Thiyyas [Ezhavas], Christians, men, and women" into Buddhism so that they could become caste-free. Above all, the Ezhavas, who were not much different from the Malayalis who were oppressed as untouchables, were inspired to reconstruct and revert to their "original Buddhist identity" by rejecting brahminism and Hinduism. However, as Ober traces, starting in the 1930s the Kerala Buddhist Association and the Maha Bodhi Association, which worked closely with other Southasian Buddhist institutions and societies, were decimated by Hindu patrons who co-opted Buddhism as just an aspect of Hinduism.

*Dust on the Throne* also unfurls the history behind a thriving community of "a million-plus Bengali-speaking Buddhists in Chittagong", in what is now southeast Bangladesh. They were earlier followers of Buddhist tantrism and later of "Pali aesthetics" that interlinked the Bengali-speaking communities of Chittagong with Arakanese monks from what is now Myanmar, and also others from beyond. The book tells the story of the Chakma queen Kalindi and her visionary collaboration with Theravada monks. Engaging with the archives of the Scottish surgeon and botanist Francis Buchanan, Ober observes that "the Buddha of Burma was the same as the Buddha of India, and that of Siam, Cambodia, China, Cochinchina, Japan, and Tonkin." In 1887, one Krishna Chandra Chowdhury, a businessman and government inspector from the Barua community, established the oldest Buddhist organisation of colonial India – the Cattagram Bauddha Samiti, or Chittagong

Buddhist Association. It still exists as the Bangladesh Buddhist Association today. Although the group primarily comprised Bengali-speaking Chakmas, Maghs and Baruas, it was inclusive towards diverse linguistic communities of Southasia and Southeast Asia that embraced Buddhism.

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Regarding postcolonial Buddhism in India, Ober unfolds the significant roles played by the antecedents of the anti-caste icon B R Ambedkar. In Ambedkar’s view, it was because of their ancient Buddhist identity that indigenous Indians were subordinated as untouchables by brahmins, and also because of their habit of eating beef. (This latter point is debatable: as the historian D N Jha has shown in *The Myth of the Holy Cow*, brahmins were once beef-eaters themselves.) Ober presents a meticulous analysis of how brahmins abhor the Buddha’s worldly rationalism, which interrogates the regressive and dehumanising brahminical mythologies of caste and casteism. This shows well why Iyothee Thass and Ambedkar are rightful descendants of the caste-free traditions of Buddhism.

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*Dust on the Throne* engages with the conundrum around Buddhist movements and societal economic transformation. Ober does a phenomenal analysis of how Buddhists in the Subcontinent and across Asia took to not just the pacifist individual and collective transformation espoused by the religion, but also committed to democratic redistribution of wealth as one of its crucial components. The book shows how some Indian Buddhists in the colonial period were influenced by Karl Marx as much as the Buddha. Such Buddhist Marxists, or Marxist Buddhists, were committed to seeing the commonalities and convergences between Marxism, socialism and Buddhism. They provided a radical revision of Buddhism even as they took on “corrupt brahmin priests, greedy banias, belligerent mullahs, and Christian capitalists.” By engaging critically with them, *Dust on the Throne* fills a gap in the scholarship on Buddhist modernism, particularly when it comes to the influence of Marxism.

The lawyer M N Singaravelu was an exemplary Buddhist Marxist. Ober writes, “Singaravelu’s smooth transition from a Tamil Buddhist to a labour activist and communist provides an early glimpse into the ongoing negotiation between Buddhism and Marxism as a liberating force in the colonial period.” Singaravelu, even after he announced himself as a communist and established the Workers and Peasants Party of India, did not have problems engaging with the Tamil Buddhist movement or the Maha Bodhi Society, co-founded by the Sinhalese Buddhist missionary Anagarika Dharmapala. This is because he found much common ground between Buddhism and Marxism. But Singaravelu eventually fell away from the Tamil Buddhist movement – perhaps, Ober writes, due to his connections with Dharmapala and the Indian National Congress. Iyothee Thass, meanwhile, found fault with the Maha Bodhi Society and its leadership, including Dharmapala and Singaravelu, noting that its anti-caste commitment was questionable as caste epithets such as “paraiyar” remained in circulation in such Buddhist organisations, continuing the denigration of the caste-marginalised Tamils who participated in them.

It is to its credit that *Dust on the Throne* also provides a close analysis of the polymath Damodar Dharmananda Kosambi, a pioneering advocate of “vernacular Buddhism”, “Buddhist socialism” and the “Maharashtrian Buddhist public”. Like Bodhananda, Kosambi became an ex-brahmin and chose the path of a *bhikkhu*, or monk. In addition to knowing Marathi and Sanskrit, Kosambi mastered Pali to learn more about Buddhism from old materials in the language, and this drive also pushed him to

collaborate with Ceylonese, Burmese, American and Russian Buddhists. Crucially, after imbibing all these global Buddhist influences, the bhikkhu could not resist the ideas of socialism. Kosambi became an advocate of “democratic Buddhist Socialism”, in which he built on the commonalities between Buddhism and socialism such as collective decision-making and common ownership of property, which is especially prevalent in Buddhist monastic communities.

In the 1930s, Ober shows, Kosambi suffered twin disillusionments: first, due to the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin’s draconian measures against Marxists and socialists inclined to Buddhism; and second, because of M K Gandhi’s dominance of the Indian National Congress and betrayal of the poor underclasses. Kosambi’s *Indian Civilization and Non-Violence* rejected both Gandhi’s “non-violent” philosophy and the reformist Hinduism of the brahmin-centric Arya Samaj and Congress leaders such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Instead, Kosambi recommended Soviet-Bolshevik methods for liberating the poor and underclasses of India. But, Ober writes, Kosambi “avoids the unnecessary bloodshed of the Bolsheviks by welding the Buddha’s doctrine of non-violence” with “the wisdom of socialists”.

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Another famous Buddhist Marxist was Rahul Sankrityayan, a prolific writer of scholarly essays as well as novels. He mobilised the Hindi-speaking world towards “Buddhist scientific tendencies” and the “atheistic humanism” of Buddhism. Ober writes that Sankrityayan, who also became a bhikkhu, unpacked Buddhism’s scientific tendencies. Sankrityayan’s travels to learn about Buddhism in Southasia and beyond enabled him to move towards Buddhist dialectics, like Kosambi. Nevertheless, “By the time that Sankrityayan left Russia in 1939, his perspective on Buddhism had moved past Kosambi’s ‘Buddhist socialism’ to be more proximate to the strict Soviet orthodoxy.” Sankrityayan joined peasant movements in Bihar, but did not give up his “early Buddhist impulse against the Vedas and brahmanical interests.”

Ober emphasises that Sankrityayan produced works on Buddhist dialectics and a Hindi biography of the Buddha focussed on his rationality, critique of caste, teachings of self-dependence or self-reliance, and vision of absolute communism inside the *sangha*, or the Buddhist monastic order. Interestingly, Sankrityayan viewed caste from a class perspective.

Here it is important to ask whether Buddhism can be seen merely as a matter of religious or cultural transformation. In their rejection of brahminism, Buddhists could see the rapacious economic exploitation inherent in caste power, and in the domineering caste groups of the vertical brahminical order. The Buddhist critique of the human misery that results from violent caste-based accumulation of wealth by self-privileging caste and race groups has always been part of multiple Buddhist denominations in the Subcontinent and elsewhere in Asia. For instance, Tamil Buddhists initiated the land-to-the-tiller movement in colonial India, and first worked out a clear affirmative-action programme aimed at keeping any one caste group from usurping the benefits of colonial modernity. They wanted multiple religio-cultural and anti-caste communities to claim their due share by removing the brahmins from their dominant position in the British-brahmin raj. This same idea became central to the non-brahmin Justice Party in the Madras Presidency, which influenced the Dravidian movement that later won and still enjoys political primacy in Tamil Nadu.

Buddhism appears to have offered a more convincing economic vision to its followers than Marxism. Those degraded and dispossessed of the fruits of their labour, denied a fair share of production and

wealth through birth-based caste segregation, could embrace Buddhism as part of their cultural, religious and historical identity, in opposition to the dehumanisation of an alien brahminism. In the ideal of the collective well-being of the sangha is a repudiation of the practice of unequal accumulation by individual castes.

Understanding modern Buddhism in India, and across the Subcontinent, requires seeing clearly the religion's casteless and anti-caste aspects, which in fact are inseparable from it.

As *Dust on the Throne* shows, a Marxism that does not respond to the cultural and economic concerns of caste-oppressed people will continue to fail in the Subcontinent. There are plenty of brahmin Marxists who remain irrelevant to the liberation movements of caste-oppressed and race-oppressed people, and who have failed to achieve any meaningful societal transformation. Becoming ex-brahmins is not their concern, since their brahmin identity helps them retain accumulated power and wealth as their ancestors did in precolonial, colonial and postcolonial Southasia.

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Considering the resurgence of Buddhism in modern colonial India, particularly in what Ober describes as the "brahminized regions of the subcontinent", it was only a matter of time before self-privileging caste groups became wary of its success. In response, they began what *Dust on the Throne* convincingly shows to be an effort at brahminising Buddhism. Many brahminical organisations masqueraded as promoters of Buddhism while co-opting caste-free and anti-caste Buddhist movements in many regions and languages as ostensible manifestations of Hinduism's diversity. This attempt to neutralise Buddhism as an antidote to brahminism is most clearly exemplified by the claim, still common today, that the Buddha was a Hindu or an avatar of a Hindu god, and that Buddhism was nothing but a denomination of Hinduism.

*Dust on the Throne* analyses one such brahminical organisation, the All-India Hindu Mahasabha, a Hindu nationalist group formed in 1915. The Birlas, capitalists from the bania castes who amassed their massive wealth under British colonialism, were crucial votaries of the Mahasabha and its agenda of disseminating "Hindu" ideas and practices. They were also at the forefront of sponsoring Buddhist monasteries and publications, and also international Buddhist conferences. They attached one major condition to their sponsorships: Buddhists had to declare that the Buddha was a "Hindu". Through such co-option, the Birlas warded off Buddhism's threat to caste and casteism, and so to the caste-based accumulation of wealth by brahmin and especially bania groups. Not surprisingly, Gandhi, himself a descendant of bania capitalists, and Nehru, a descendant of brahmins, enthusiastically to colluded with the Hindu Mahasabha on this.

Ober further shows how J K Birla and other bania capitalists upheld their Hinduness by exercising caste power in civil, state, religious and academic institutions. The Birlas sponsored and established many brahminical temples as well as Buddhist viharas, pilgrim guesthouses and so on, which strengthened the supremacy of brahmin-centric cultural and social bodies. Meanwhile, they colluded with the colonial state to gain favourable and flexible policies which would nurture their brahminical interests. In addition, the Birlas pushed their brahminical agendas via educational projects. The Hindu Mahasabha's brahmin-male leaders promoted a "Hindu revival" through academic institutions such as Banaras Hindu University.

The Birlas were clearly against caste-free and anti-caste Buddhism. But they were willing to sponsor the uplift of "untouchables" if they remained "Hindu", while continuing to back Aryan

aggrandisement. Visvabandhu Shastri, a brahmin Mahasabha representative, during a trip to Japan in the 1930s, was vociferous in asserting the “‘Arya Dharma’ or ‘the unity of spirit underlying the different Asiatic peoples in Indo-China, Manchuoukuo [sic], Japan, Penang, Siam, Burma and India.’” For brahmin leaders of the Mahasabha and bania capitalists, the Buddha was also an “Aryan” and “Sanatani” – that is, a member of the exclusionary brahminical religio-cultural structure.

The Mahasabha’s brahmin “experts” were no different from their brahmin predecessors. *Dust on the Throne* shows how brahmins were annoyed by the ancient and mediaeval Buddhist texts re-discovered in colonial times, which provided unequivocal critiques of brahmin power. Ober unveils how the nineteenth-century astronomer Subaji Bapu, as a “Hindoo” and a “brahman”, could not hold back “long buried animosities” against Buddhism, and so exposed his scholarly pretence and hollowness. Likewise, Raja Sivaprasad, a brahmin expert on Buddhism, found Buddhist non-violent pacifism too timid, and thus anticipated brahmin right-wing writers such as V D Savarkar, the founding father of Hindutva, who upheld brahmin-centrism and caste segregation.

*Dust on the Throne* contributes to a critical understanding of many brahminical religious claims and writings, as well as caste identities and practices that were enforced by the so-called “Hindu” institutions that mushroomed under the British colonial state, particularly from the late nineteenth century onwards. Ober shows the intricacies of how “‘Hindu-ness’ or Hindutva came to represent a combination of territorial, racial, religious, cultural characteristics,” and how these ideas were nothing but “the aggressive posturing of the new Hindu nationalist movement”. Under such a brahminical lens, Buddhists were seen as caste-free and anti-caste “disavowers of the Vaidika Dharma and Sanatan Dharma” – that is, the brahmin-male-centric doctrine that endorsed a monolithic religion of the Vedas. It is evident that Hinduism, Hindutva, Sanatan Dharma and Vaidika Dharma all stood for brahmin-centrism, the thriving of brahmins and the subordination of others in vertical segregation forever. Under such codification, the indigenous people who did not belong to the brahmin race, religion and culture were violently subjugated as “untouchables”. They, and all women, were seen as secondary to brahmin men.

The attempt to neutralise Buddhism as an antidote to brahminism is most clearly exemplified by the claim that the Buddha was a Hindu or an avatar of a Hindu god, and that Buddhism was nothing but a denomination of Hinduism.

The Arya Samaj of the philosopher Dayanand Saraswati, supposedly a reformist movement, was no less aggressive in its anti-Buddhist and anti-Jain aggression. Arya Samajists were not anti-caste, and only infused new meanings into caste as believers of the brahminical Vedic texts. *Dust on the Throne* demystifies numerous so-called philosophers’ role in the making of “Aryanized Hinduism” under British colonialism. Take, for instance, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, a brahmin philosopher who went on to serve as the president of India. Ober notes how he argued that “Buddha was a Hindu and his teachings were derived from the Upanishads,” and thus “the Radhakrishnan–Sanatan Dharma view of Buddhism came to dominate.” Ober also illuminates how this mirrored what “the brahmanical castes had done more than a millennium before.”

Ober also uncovers how the fabricated notion of Aryavarta – “the sacred territory of the Aryans” or “India’s Empire of Dharma”, spanning northwestern India and the Gangetic plains in brahminical texts – was aggressively backed and financed by the self-privileging castes. These caste groups, now masquerading as “Hindus,” established brahminical deity-based temples that were meant to inundate the multi-religious, casteless and anti-caste cultural spaces of Southasia with systems and symbols of caste-based spatial segregation. For example, at a temple rest house dedicated to the deity Buddhadev in Kushinagar, an ancient Buddhist site in present-day Uttar Pradesh, a plaque on



the outer wall declares that "All Hindu pilgrims (including Harijans [dalits]), i.e., followers of Sanatan Dharma, Arya Samajists, Jains, Sikhs and Buddhists etc. are in the Dharamshala subject to the standing orders of the Dharamshala committee." Further, another plaque declares, "'Arya Dharmists' (*arya dharmi*) include Buddhist peoples from China, Japan, Siam, Burma, Tibet, Lanka, Indochina," thus pushing the idea that even "Buddhists *outside* India were also Hindus."

*Dust on the Throne* shows how brahmin academics' propagation of Eastern spirituality and "Swadeshi Internationalism" has also contributed to brahminical expansionism. For instance, Ober writes, the Indian historian and "Greater India ideologue" Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, a brahmin, declared that India was "the home of the master-race" and had brought the "'heterogenous mass of [South-East Asia's] barbarians within the pale of civilization, a task which the Chinese, their next-door neighbours, had hitherto failed to accomplish.'" Likewise, the Greater India scholar S C Mukherjee, also a brahmin, vented, "only by resuscitating this ancient Arya Dharma could India regain its cherished place in the world." Indian revolutionaries like Rash Behari Bose, a key figure in planning the Ghaddar Mutiny, wrote to V D Savarkar arguing for the creation of "a Hindu bloc extending from the Indian Ocean up to the Pacific Ocean ... creating solidarity among the Eastern races."

Paradoxically, some Buddhist institutions also embraced such brahminical "Hindu" claims. The Theosophical Society of Adyar in Madras, established by Henry Steel Olcott and the mystic Madame Blavatsky, functioned as an agency for legitimising these brahminical claims across the Subcontinent. Olcott went on to assert that the Theosophical Society would unveil "the ancient trunks of Indian brahmanism and Buddhism" and also bring about "the *combination* of 'Eastern' spiritual truths and 'Western' material technologies." Ober writes that Anagarika Dharmapala, a theosophist before he became a bhikkhu and established the Maha Bodhi Society, asserted that "Buddhists were also Hindus." Unsurprisingly, Tamil Buddhists rejected Dharmapala's frivolous claims.

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Significantly, Ober does not overlook the interconnections between Buddhism and the problems of caste and casteism. This is unlike religious studies of Hinduism or linguistic studies of Sanskrit or most of Southasian Studies and Postcolonial Studies in general. Without a critical perspective on caste, these disciplines continue to function as brahminical propaganda and favour the unethical and undemocratic predominance of brahmins in academic and intellectual circles. For scholars who continue in this vein, the gruesome consequences of caste and casteism, the birth-based spatial and occupational segregation prevalent in so much of the Subcontinent, the dispossession and decimation of people through untouchability, are considered too trivial to engage with.

*Dust on the Throne* convincingly reveals how, true to its past, Buddhism in modern India operates in opposition to brahminism. Ober exposes that most "Indian leftists and liberal caste Hindus", as well as Indian leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru, "believed that caste would disappear after the 'progress' of 'modernity' and economic socialist reforms. The annihilation of caste, in other words, played no role in Nehru's vision of resuscitating Buddhism." Conversely, Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism, "rather than giving further energy to Nehru's secularized Buddhism, ... cut to the very foundations of this oppression and, in doing so, re-emphasized the historical antagonism between brahminism and Buddhism, Hindus and Buddhists."

Historically, Buddhism's inclusiveness and humanism has always stood in contrast to brahminical practices of birth-based segregation and bodily violence.

It is also important to discuss certain discordant aspects of the book. Ober does not engage with crucial scholarship on gender and modern Buddhism – omissions that the author rightly and apologetically admits to. *Dust on the Throne* begins with an argument that Buddhism suffers from the politics of “un-archived histories,” with the many non-archival sources that compose its history being “marginalised, ignored, disenfranchised and pushed out of reference or recall.” To take just one instance of this, the journalist Mukul Sharma, in *Caste and Nature: Dalits and Indian Environmental Politics*, points out that “several Dalit publications have articulated Buddhist traditions, especially the teachings and practices of Buddha, to explain their relationship with nature” – yet these have not been taken seriously due to brahminical dehistoricisation.

Still, we need to ask: is modern Buddhism un-archived? Surely it is not. In the modern period, through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many caste-oppressed women and men were writers, editors and publishers, producing work on Buddhism and myriad other topics. The presence of modern Buddhist polyglots and their many writings and publications go against the assertion. The larger problem is the prejudiced ignorance and wilful neglect of these sources by the brahmin and white specialists who still dominate scholarship on Southasia. Irrespective of the violence of brahmin-centric canonisation and brahminical censorship, modern Buddhism remains archived in diverse ways that are waiting to be unearthed, as *Dust on the Throne* itself evidences.

For a book that unveils the casteless and anti-caste histories of Buddhism in Asia, it is strange that *Dust on the Throne* begins with an assertion about unarchived histories by a brahmin male historian, Gyanendra Pandey. Instead of giving the spotlight to yet another brahmin male scholar, it would have been better to hold up Buddhist feminist figures such as Swapneswari Amball. Amball was the editor of a women’s magazine – *Tamil Maadu*, or Tamil Woman – as well as the manager of a widows’ home. She was also a close associate of Iyothee Thass, and in 1907 carried an editorial in *Tamil Maadu* on the publication of *The Tamilian*, a publication that Thass founded that year. Amball was a regular contributor to a section called ‘Lady’s Column’ in *The Tamilian*, looking at themes such as sexuality and widow-remarriage and fighting against child marriage – all things anathema to brahminical patriarchy.

Ober rightly emphasises that “being Buddhist was at the forefront of one’s non-Hindu caste-free identity,” but it is problematic when he categorises casteless and anti-caste modern Buddhists as “dalit Buddhists”. This term is unpopular among many modern Buddhists and their descendants in Southasia and overseas. As a category, “dalit” is used to talk about caste marginality, inequality and oppression, particularly since it gained renewed popularity in the 1990s. Casteless and anti-caste modern Buddhists have critiqued all caste epithets imposed on them, including “paraiyar”, “depressed classes”, “untouchables” and so on. Considering that “dalit” stands for the “depressed”, it is not convincing or ethical to portray people who see themselves as inheritors of casteless and anti-caste Buddhism through this category.

When Ambedkar converted to Buddhism, he did not view such conversion as meant only for those categorised as “dalits”. Instead, the postcolonial Buddhist movement he set off is meant to serve as an antidote to caste in general, eroding the power of groups riding high on their exclusionary brahminism and Hinduism. Seeing Ambedkar’s 1956 conversion as a “dalit conversion”, as *Dust on the Throne* does, could problematically reduce it into an act of “dalit Buddhism”. Ambedkar would likely not have welcomed this prefix, or have viewed himself as the “undisputed national leader of India’s dalits.” This undermines what Ober himself observes at one point: that “Ambedkar’s Buddhism was moving towards an enlightened national identity for all Indians and not just dalits.” In talking about “dalit Ambedkarites”, “dalit Buddhist thought”, “dalit Buddhist revolution”, “Tamil dalits” and so on – including the oxymoronic “dalit Buddhism” – *Dust on the Throne* undercuts the erudite complexity of caste-free and anti-caste Buddhism.

In all fairness, one must take note of the author's lower-case usage in "dalit" to mark his reservations about this category. Given the sensitivity with which Ober has engaged with vernacular casteless and anti-caste Buddhism in modern Southasia, perhaps he was inclined to register the voice of some Ambedkarite Buddhists who identify themselves as dalit Buddhists - but who seem to overlook the fact that Ambedkar did not use the word "dalit" anywhere in his 22 vows of Buddhist conversion. The category "dalit Buddhism" does not do justice to Ambedkar's sweeping call to resist brahminism and Hinduism, and to re-construct and re-assert the positive memory and history of casteless and anti-caste Indian vernacular communities.

It is this larger project spearheaded by Ambedkar that is the need of the hour. In India, the dignity and equality of all women, men and children remains a distant dream even 75 years after the country attained independence from British rule, promising freedom for all its citizens. The same is true elsewhere in the Subcontinent, including in other countries that suffered under colonial rule. Instead, in very many places, we are seeing an escalation of gruesome casteism and bodily violence against religious and other minorities, and renewed efforts to erase their indigenous memories and histories. In these times, Douglas Ober's *Dust on the Throne* serves as a reminder to the world about the resilient continuities of ancient and modern Buddhism, in Southasia and beyond.

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**P.S.**

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