

Fifth Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Annual Lecture

**BUDDHIST RELIGION AND
INDOGENOUS CULTURE**

Some Historical Observations in Regard to Modern
Myths on New and Old Indian Buddhism

Delivered by

EDMUND WEBER

Johann Wolfgang Goethe University
Frankfurt, Germany



**Dr. Ambedkar Chair in Sociology
Centre for the Study of Social Systems
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110 067**

Fifth Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Annual Lecture

BUDDHIST RELIGION AND INDOGENOUS CULTURE

Some Historical Observations in Regard to Modern
Myths on New and Old Indian Buddhism

Delivered by

EDMUND WEBER

Johann Wolfgang Goethe University
Frankfurt, Germany



Dr. Ambedkar Chair in Sociology
Centre for the Study of Social Systems
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110 067

Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Annual Lecture
**BUDDHIST RELIGION AND
INDOGENOUS CULTURE**
Some Historical Observations in Regard to Modern
Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Annual Lecture

First Edition, 2004

Copies 300

© Dr. Ambedkar Chair, J.N.U., New Delhi.

Published by
Prof. Nandu Ram for Dr. Ambedkar Chair in Sociology
Centre for the Study of Social Systems
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi -110 067.

Laser Typeset by
Muskan Art & Graphics
Delhi

Printed at
Nice Printing Press, Delhi

Mahayana and Theravada along with the given time and space. This gave birth to Buddhism—initially accepted a distinct religion but much later a sect of Hinduism. Not only that but a number of vested interests crept in and interpreted the thoughts and philosophy of the Buddha according to their needs and desires. They also moved with their interpretations even to the extent that they interpolated certain degrees of mysticism in the thoughts and the philosophy of the Buddha. Their such interpretations in the culmination or rather closeness of Buddhism with Hinduism. It is this closeness that has prompted not only Prof. Edward Weber but many earlier German indologists to provide reinforcement

PREFACE

A generally accepted view about the Buddha and his teachings and philosophy is that having born, a little more than 2500 years ago, in a princely Kshatriya family of king Suddhodana and queen Mahamaya, Siddhartha, who later became the Buddha after attaining Enlightenment, left in search of the ultimate truth at a tender age even if he was married and had a son. After bewilderment, deceit and illusive state of mind for few years, he ultimately got Enlightenment at an early age in his life at a place known as Bodh Gaya in the State of Bihar. He delivered his first sermon at Sarnath, near Varanasi city. Having spent a few years in disseminating his thoughts with his followers—the monks, a few elites including his opponents, the laity or commoners—keen to understand the truth of life, including misery, its causes and its resolution, he finally attained *Mahaparinirvana*, in a relatively younger age, at Kushinara—now Kushinagar in eastern Uttar Pradesh. It is, however, an acknowledged fact that the Buddha never founded his Dhamma or Religion, based on his realisation of truth of life, though he encouraged to set up the *viharas* or monasteries for the monks for undertaking the *vipasana*, disseminating their thoughts and taking the needed rest in their daily routine.

Notwithstanding the various intricacies of his thoughts and philosophy especially at the level of their perceptions and interpretations, the commonly held view is that such perceptions and interpretations got rigidified and even stratified, after the Buddha, in the institutional forms of

4 Buddhist Religion and Indogenous Culture

Mahayana and *Heenyana* alongwith the given time and space. This gave birth to Buddhism—initially accepted a distinct religion but much later a sect of Hinduism. Not only that but a number of vested interests crept in and interpreted the thoughts and philosophy of the Buddha according to their needs and desires. They also moved with their interpretations even to the extent that they interpolated certain degrees of mysticism in the thoughts and the philosophy of the Buddha. Their such interpretations also resulted in the culmination, or rather, closeness of Buddhism with Hinduism. It is this closeness that has prompted not only Prof. Edmund Weber but many earlier German indologists to provide reinforcement to the adherents of Hinduism in developing an expansionist attitude and treating Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism as its sects.

To be more specific, in the Fifth Dr. Ambedkar Memorial Annual Lecture held on 28 February 2001 Prof. Edmund Weber of Germany has provided some historical observations relating to the modern myths on old and new forms of Buddhism in India. Reflecting on some of the myths on the old form of Buddhism, he has tried to formulate another myth which traces root of Buddhism in the ancient Hindu culture. But one may find such myth unfounded when one looks at the origin and growth of both the Buddhism and Hinduism in the chronological fashion. Similarly, his myth about the new form of Buddhism, as understood and interpreted by Dr. Ambedkar, is the result of Ambedkar's political reactions to Hinduism. This myth again may not be tenable especially if one reads Ambedkar's *Buddha and His Dhamma* as a religious doctrine rather than his political venom to Hinduism. Anyway, a scholar is free to provide his/her own interpretations of a phenomenon or an institution. I am sure the text of this lecture, being made available now in published form, is bound to generate sharp reactions among the readers.

October 14, 2004

Nandu Ram
Dr. Ambedkar Chair
Professor of Sociology

BUDDHIST RELIGION AND INDOGENOUS CULTURE

Some Historical Observations in Regard to Modern Myths on New and Old Indian Buddhism

Edmund Weber

Introduction

Modern religions tend to separate one from another in order to safeguard allegedly their identity against the so-called alien religions. It is indeed a catastrophe that modern religions were misused as means of social separation, aggression and fanaticism: the economy and even politics are more integrating the mankind than modern religions. That splitting function of religions is a very modern phenomenon. The traditionally protected more or less regional or caste religions have come under an extreme pressure by the extreme mobilization of modern individuals: the globalization has granted the traditional religions to enter into competition with one and another. In a very helpless attempt, traditional religions are trying to maintain their particularity. Instead of legitimating by rational communication, they prefer isolationism, and impute modern mentality and practice to history of their own.

6 Buddhist Religion and Indigenous Culture

The logics of such a pseudo-historization of the present violate the past and covers up the present.

Therefore, I want to discuss the following two questions:

Is the modern Neo-Buddhism of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956) closer to the Old Indian Buddhism or to the modern Indian Dharma-religions? Is the Old Indian Buddhism more kindred to the modern Buddhists than to the Old Indian Buddhism?

Ambedkar's Neo-Buddhism and the Indigenous Culture

Ambedkar's turn to Buddhism was a consequence of *political* reasons. In his view, the Indian National Congress (INC) was incapable and too reluctant to change the living conditions of the Untouchables. According to him, the INC was ready to give the Muslims a lot of advantages but refused to concede the same to the Hindu Untouchables. Therefore, Savarnas of all religions remained in power. Although Ambedkar identified the Hindu Savarnas as the most powerful enemy of the Untouchables in India because they were the vast majority of that dominating castes, he nevertheless kept in a decided manner a firm hold on the Indigenous Dharma that he called Dhamma or even 'Hindu Culture'.*

Therefore, Islam and Christianity were absolutely out of question as serious alternatives for the Dalits. Even comparing himself with Moses "Who liberated his people from slavery" and highly respecting Jesus Christ; nevertheless Ambedkar was repelled by the Christians because they "never fought for the removal of social injustice", and they themselves practiced in southern India the Savarna system. Ambedkar especially took exception to the fact that those Untouchables who converted to Christianity became "selfish and self-centred." "They don't care a snap of their finger what becomes of their former caste associates." The Christian converts even denied their jati associates; they were contemptible traitors

* This is entirely the author's view, and the Dr. Ambedkar Chair in Sociology J.N.U., New Delhi does not endorse it in absence of the authentic references or sources of such statement.

of their caste association. Therefore, he did not want any increase of the number of such Christians. In addition, the increase of Christians would only reinforce the power of the British colonialism. The Muslim—like the Christians an Adharmic people— should leave the Dharmic India and settle in a separate Pakistan.*

Ambedkar's choice finally fell to Buddhism for three reasons. He said: "I prefer Buddhism because it gives three principles in combination which no other religion does. Buddhism teaches Prajna (understanding against superstition and super-naturalism), Karama (love) and Samata (equality). This is what man wants for a good and happy life." That picture of Buddhism is nothing else but an idealizing construction for political reasons, devoid of any historical and actual evidence.

However, his new Buddhism was a progressive, more or less atheistic, national and liberal ideology, favouring a scientific *weltanschauung*, solidarity of the whole society and equal chances for everybody. We see an ideology of Enlightenment, positive Nationalism and Bourgeois Individualism, all principles that the Savarnas of all religions were rejecting. In order to maintain their privileges, they favoured and are still favouring the strategy: no education for the masses, keeping them to castes and denying the individual equal opportunities by reasons of birth. Therefore, the basic reason of Ambedkar's conversion was not so much a religious but a social and political one. His main intention consisted in developing the worldly emancipation of the Untouchables.

His Mahars (his own caste fellows) mostly had not any relation to Buddhism before their conversion. They followed Ambedkar for reasons of personal loyalty and social and economic hopes only. In such a way, a convert explained: "We became Buddhists because Dr. Ambedkar told us so." Another one confessed: "I had no other incentive but blind love for

* Such a wild inference is not found at all in writings and speeches of Dr. Ambedkar —Dr. Ambedkar Chair, J.N.U., New Delhi.

Ambedkar and the people. This is true for many." An third one said: "I got thinking about economic and social betterment and then I just followed Ambedkar to Buddhism." However, even if Ambedkar's program aimed at the worldly betterment, at first the ideological oppression of the Dalits had to be destroyed. Becoming Neo-Buddhists meant the liberation from the Savarnic deformation of the Hindu Dharma. For the benefit of their exploitative aims, they had extinguished the basic commandment of karuna from the Hindu Dharma. On the other hand, facing the numerical reality that the vast majority of the Untouchables were religious Hindus, Ambedkar propagated a religious conversion that did not hurt the heart of Hindu culture, the Dharma. His pro-Dharmic strategy included the exclusion of Islam and Christianity as acceptable Dalit possibilities.

Ambedkar also joined the Indian Buddhism because of its actual non-existence. By this he could solve three difficult problems:

1. Under any circumstances did not Ambedkar want to separate his movement from the Indogenous Dharma; therefore, his reason for choosing Buddhism as religious alternative was his strong attachment to the Hindu Culture.
2. Since there did not actually exist any ritually pure Buddhist castes in India any more, in case of conversion Ambedkar did not have to reckon on any caste conflict with Buddhist Savarnas. Therefore, if for example, Ambedkar would have tried to preach his Neo-Buddhism to the Singhalese Buddhist Dalits of Sri Lanka, he would have been immediately made fail by the Buddhist high caste Goyigama jatis.
3. Although Ambedkar interpreted Buddhism in a very unusual way, he had not even to fear any religious conflict since a powerful Buddhist orthodoxy did not exist in India.

Ambedkar's decision to convert to the Buddhist wing of the Indogenous Dharma and his decisive rejection of any religion

of non-Indian origin, on one hand, and the absence of any remarkable mass conversion to Islam or Christianity since his conversion, on the other, had been a historical success of the Indian Dharma (which) nobody was expecting before.

Even when Ambedkar was reflecting the possibility to join Sikhism in the beginning, he made a clear statement that only a religion of the Hindu culture could be an alternative for the depressed castes: "Looking at these alternative faiths purely from the standpoint of Hindus, which is the best—Islam Christianity or Sikhism? Obviously, Sikhism is the best." By this choice, they have not to leave the Hindu culture: "If the Depressed Classes join Islam or Christianity, they not only go out of Hindu religion, but they also go out of Hindu Culture. On the other hand, if they become Sikhs they remain within Hindu culture." He ironically added, that his option for the Sikhism was "by no means a small advantage to the Hindus."

No doubt, Ambedkar's historic choice was clear vote for the Indogenous Dharma culture. In spite of his vehement attacks on the Hindu Savarna he never planned to eradicate the Indogenous or—using Ambedkar's and the Hindutvavadis' term—Hindu Culture or as I would say the non-Savarnic Hindu Dharma. Indeed, it is not wrong to say that Ambedkar prevented the Hindu Dalit masses from leaving the Indogenous Dharma and becoming Adharmic Christians or Muslims. He did more. He tied the Dalits to the Dharma and excluded all the Adharmic Christian and Muslim Dalits from the Dalit solidarity. Here, we see that Dharma was the highest value of Ambedkar and only such a Dalit was acceptable for him who belonged to the Dharma fold.

Let us summarize. Ambedkar started a social movement, which will most effectively get rid of the socially grounded deformation of the Dharma in future. Reason is that his movement basically agrees with all those Hindus who were engaged in maintaining the Indogenous culture, the non-Savarnic Dharma, and who tried to reach this aim through a *social revolution*, that is, the eradication of untouchability and the whole caste system. Although Ambedkar created a substantially new Buddhism, he did never cut off the relation

to the common Indian world. A separation of Ambedkar from the Dharma fold is unhistorical. Perhaps Ambedkar was nearer to the common Dharma but the Old Buddhism.

Old Indian Buddhism and Indigenous Culture

The Old Indian Buddhism is as well seen in sharp contrast or even contradiction to the common Indian culture of its time. This interpretation seems to be ideologically motivated in order to demonstrate the modernity of Buddhism and the obscurantism of Hinduism.

According to the ideology, Buddhism is atheistic, anti-Brahmanic and egalitarian; and Hinduism is idolatrous, brahmanized and casteistic. Let us have a look at that Old Indian Buddhism which so often is used today as ideological weapon against the Hindus at all.

Buddha and the Myth of His Atheism

The gods, the glowing devas and suras were always on Siddharta's side. According to Buddhist tradition, Siddharta himself was a celestial being. It is reported in the very popular *Lalitavistara* (Ernst Waldschmidt: *Die Legenden des Buddha* [publ. by the Tibetan Centre, Hamburg, 1991] that, before his incarnation, the Bodhisattva was in the heaven of the Tushita-gods and functioned as their guru. When the time for a new Buddhahood had come, the gods of the 10000 worlds gathered together and asked the Bodhisattva to go down to earth, become a human being and thus attain salvation. The gods even selected an appropriate family for the Buddha-to-be and he was thus born as the son of Suddhodana and Maya. In reality, Siddharta was "the highest god of the gods", the way he himself admitted it.

It is not surprising that gods and nagas took a special care of the child who was born in the grove of the goddess Lumbini. The Brahmana Asita prophesied the Buddhahood straightway. When he became an enlightened one, the gods rejoiced. He rejected the tempter Mara, who sought to persuade him not to reveal his teaching. However, only Brahma managed to break Buddha's silence. It was owing to Brahma, the highest

god of the Barahmanas, that the uncertain Buddha was brought about to set in motion the wheel of knowledge. According to this Buddhist tradition, it is thanks to the gods and, in a broader sense to the Brahmanas who joined Siddharta straightway in big numbers, that Buddhism originated at all and that Buddha addressed the people and made the path of salvation accessible to them as well.

Helmuth von Glasenapp, the most famous and even in India celebrated German indologist, in one of his monographs treats the subject of the Buddhist notions of devas. The original title of that book was *Buddhism and the Idea of God: The Buddhist doctrine of supranatural beings and powers and their parallels in the history of religions* (1954). However, the most popular edition of this book posthumously got the misleading title *Der Buddhismus—eine atheistische Religion* (Publ. by the atheistic Sczesny Publishing House, Munchen, 1966). Here, we see how the Western ideology of the alleged Buddhist atheism did not hesitate to twist the basic research of the most famous German indologist to mean just the opposite. It is indeed shocking too that the well-known German buddhologist Heinz Bechert has been the co-editor of that book.

At the very beginning of his work, Helmuth von Glasenapp mentions Candalakappa's theological conversation. The young Brahmana Sangarava asked Buddha, "Are there any Gods?" and Buddha answered to him straight way, "There are Gods. This is a fact that I have come to know. One agrees on that in the whole world." Glasenapp comments on this episode explicitly by saying that, "These texts confirm unambiguously and authoritatively that Buddhists had believed in the existence of Gods (devas)".

Glasenapp summarizes the early Buddhist theology in the following way: 1. Gods help in need. They give worldly property and protection. 2. They secure the moral world order by rewarding good and punishing evil. 3. They act as moral critics of dissolute Bhikkhus helping them to go back on the right way. 4. Finally, they praise Buddha's glory and pay him homage constantly. Glasenapp comments on this original Buddhist belief in gods with the help of the sociological insight

that adherents of Buddha and those of Brahmanic teachings and cults have never lived isolated from each other. Glasenapp comes to the unambiguous conclusion: "For the assumption that polytheism has arisen only later with them (the Buddhist-author's remark) one cannot bring forward any proof whatsoever."

The early Buddhist theology shows clearly that the gods were highly respected and enthusiastically worshipped by the Buddhists. The statement that Buddhism is an atheistic and, in this way, presumably an enlightened and rational religion does not apply to the early period either. However, which gods worshipped the early Buddhists? Did they worship the gods of the lower castes or the Dalits? They worshipped the gods of the higher castes, the Vedic gods. The gods of the lower caste people, like for example Shiva, were always a thorn in their flesh to them and to the non-Buddhist high castes too.

Buddha and Myth of His Anti-Brahmanism

Buddha founded a monastic order for a religious elite. To the sangha belonged only Bhikkhus and Shramanas (and nuns), a small group of coenobitical religious people who used to wander about in the beginning. Later on, however, they lived in feudal monasteries under the protection of kings and supported by donations on the part of wealthy lay people. The sangharamas came to be mighty feudal powers, equal to the Hindu and Christian monasteries in the Indian and non-Indian world. They supported themselves not so much through ritual begging but through collected feudal tax.

Budhha's own sangha differed from the worldly Sakiya sangha in the issue of caste. He opened his order also to Sakiya and to Brahmanas. In this way, he threw a bridge from the Kshatriyas' class across the Brahmanas' one. According to Buddha, the Brahmanas were in the mundane society lower than the Kshatriyas on the grounds of lack of caste purity: the Brahmanas were practicing caste mixing with the Kshatriyas. In the same time, it was exactly the Brahmanas who did not observe the caste restrictions strictly and mixed with other

Kshatriyas. Despite this mundane abrogation of the Brahmanas, Buddha accepted them in his order. In this way, Sakiyas and Brahmanas were equal in the monastic sangha. This positive relation to a Brahmanic fully valid membership in the order dismisses an anti—Brahminic orientation of the Buddhist religious community.

Wolfgang Schumann (*Der historische Buddha: Leben und Lehre des Gotama*, München, 1992) has statistically proven that almost all of Buddha's disciples were high caste people and that the Brahmanas comprised the majority of the sangha.

Buddha and the Myth of His Anti-casteism

Buddha tells about the earlier Buddhas in the so-called *Mahapadana Suttanta—Great Sermon about the Legends (Buddha—Die Lehre des Erhabenen, Aus dem pali Kanon ausgewählt und übertragen von Paul Dahlke, München (1960))*. He refers to their membership of (high) caste as the first characteristic of their full enlightenment. According to this report, the Buddhas belonged to all the high castes, to the Kshatriyas and Brahmanas. Buddha says proudly about himself, "And now I, the Fully Enlightened, was born a warrior and have come from the caste of warriors, o monks."

However, to Siddharta and the monks that listened to him, not only the varna, the hierarchical class but also the jati, the clan and the family respectively were of substantial importance. For example, he tells about Buddha Vipassi that he belonged to the Kondanna clan; about himself, Siddharta reports that he is a Kshatriya and was born in the Gotama clan. Not only his clan but also his parents' name and place of residence is stated, probably in order to prove Buddha's necessary high mundane birth. The text shows that they were all Rajas and Brahmanas. Thus, Siddharta tells that Buddha Vipassi's father was a raja, a king, called Bandhuma and his mother was Queen Bandhumati. And Buddha Kakusandha's father was a Brahmana called Aggidatta and his mother was a Brahmana woman called Visakha. The point of naming of the caste membership of both parents is clear: all Buddhas come not only from high but also from pure castes. Even though

the different castes of the parents were so high, it is absolutely unthinkable for them to have been conceived in a mixed marriage.

Buddha and the Pro-Dalit Myth

The standpoint which caste a Buddha should belong to has not been revised in Buddhism up to the present day. It is dogmatized in the *Lalitavistara* in the following way: a Bodhisattva can by no means come from lower or even mixed caste: "After all Bodhisattvas were not born in despised lineage, among pariahs, in families of pipe or cart makers, or mixed castes." Instead, in perfect harmony with the *Great sermon about the Legends*, it was said that: "The Bodhisattvas appear only in two kinds of lineage, the one of the Brahmanas and of the warriors (Kshatriya)." In which of the two high castes they were born depended on the fact that which of the two had the better reputation at that particular moment. "When the Brahmins are especially respected on earth, they were born in a lineage of Brahmins, when the warriors play a greater role, they appear in a noble family." According to Buddha, at his time the Kshatriyas were above the impure Brahmanas. That is why, only a Kshatriya can get the Buddhahship.

"Today the nobility has priority in the world, therefore the Bodhisattvas were born in a noble family."

Worldly reputation defines the Buddha's caste, not the moral qualification of the family or the caste. Lower castes have never had the chance to consider Buddha among them because they do not have a good reputation. The Bodhisattva explains to the gods that he should be born only in a family of a noble birth and caste. Furthermore, the family ought to have procreated only in a direct line and on the man's side, and adoption is impossible. Otherwise, blood purity would not be guaranteed. The blood purity of the family is so essential that the father-to-be Suddhodana says: "King Suddhaodana is pure on the side of the mother and father and was born in a respected family." For the old Indian Buddhists like the author of the *Lalitavistara*, it was unthinkable that somebody

belonging to a lower caste or even a Dalit could become a Buddha. But it was no problem for the early Buddhists that Buddha could come from a Brahmana's caste. If they had been decisive opponents of the Brahmanas and the way the traditional and modern Buddhist ideology assumes, they would not have left the genealogies of the early Buddhas without a commentary.

The preference of the Kshatriyas and the Brahmanas in Old Buddhism leaves no place for doubts. Buddha and the so-called impure castes were entirely separated from each other. A Buddha had nothing to deal with the Dalits. The Dalits were unworthy of Buddha.

Conclusion

Consequently, the interpretation of Buddha as a radical social reformer or even as a liberator of the Dalits is an unhistorical backward projection of modern problems to the past. Respected by the Brahmanas and gods, the Buddha was capable of finding his own personal path to salvation within the social and religious milieu of the Gangetic valley of his time. The personal liberation from the worldly attachment was his goal, not the planned and consistent improvement of material and social relations. It is indeed astonishing how a religious figure, who favoured high caste people and was detached from the world, should be a leader of low castes and untouchables and solve their present and worldly miseries.

Emperor Ashoka's Re-Establishment of Brahmanism and of the Cult of Gods

The Re-Establishment of the Buddhist Cult of Brahmanas

The early Buddhist respect of the Brahmanas, who were not Shramanas, monks, is manifested in the so-called Rock Edicts (*Ashokan Inscriptions*, ed. by Radhagovinda Basak, Calcutta, 1995) of the Maurya emperor Priyadarshi Ashokavardhana (273/2-232 BC). In his edict from Dhauri (Orissa), the emperor teaches his civil servants and judges to urge the subjects to be generous not only towards friends

and relatives but also towards holy men. The official servants and judges should teach the subjects: "charity to friends, acquaintances and relatives and to Brahmanas and Shramanas is an excellent thing." It is striking enough that Brahmanas are even mentioned in an edict of a Buddhist emperor. But it is really surprising that it names the Brahmanas, who have been presumably discarded by Buddha, even before the Shramanas, the monks. In the edict from Jaugada (Orissa), this positive evaluation of the Brahmanas on the part of Gods' Beloved get even more evident. He proclaims openly: for a long time, for many centuries sacrificed of lives, injuries of the creatures, neglect of relatives and Barahmanas have increased. Consequently, a sign of the lasting decline of Dharma was not only the increase of sacrifice but also the despise of Brahmanas ascribed to the Buddhists by the Western Buddhist ideology! However, The Gods' Beloved, Priyadarshi proclaims a new true Dharma, which had not happened for centuries, so that it can come into being again: "abstention from sacrificial slaughter of lives, avoidance of injury to creatures, respect towards Brahmanas and Sharananas," etc.

Ashoka did not consider the Brahmanas responsible for the sacrifice. In his opinion, they were an essential of culture of Dharma that rejected sacrifice. The re-establishment of this culture was identical to Ashoka with the re-establishment of the Brahmanas' reputation. In a further edict, the emperor reminds that he has introduced a "Dharma-mahamatras" anew. Their task should be to take care of the general welfare of the population, including the one of the Brahmanas. The Brahmanas, and not the Shramanas, are mentioned in the really long list of those to be taken care of. The renewal of the cult of Brahmanas by the Buddhist ruler Ashoka was not a tactical move that the God's Beloved had to make because of political reasons. Rather, this restitution of Brahmanism was the result of Ashoka's understanding of the Buddhist Dharma. Protests from Buddhist monks against this increase of value of the Brahmanas are not recorded.

In the 9th rock edict, which deals with religious rituals, Ashoka divides the ceremonies in two groups. The first group

performs the usual technical rites that need to be observed during illness, marriage, birth and journey. The second one comprises of the so-called Dharma ceremonies. Though one should observe on principle all ceremonies, the first group is considered to bring less merit. While the meritorious effect of the first group is uncertain and refers only to this world, the action of the second group is completely different: "Even if it (a particular Dharma ceremony—the author) cannot accomplish that (desired) end in this world, it produces endless merit in the world after." Social ethical action like the fair treatment of slaves and servants, worship of gurus, abstention (from injuries) of living creatures, and generosity towards ascetic and "brahmanas" belong to these Dharma ceremonies. Consequently, the governmental and societal security of the Brahmanas belongs to the social and ethical fundamental principles of Ashoka's Buddhism.

Old Indian Buddhism did not abolish the societal priority and governmental protection of Brahmanism; it was even re-established by Ashoka after centuries of neglect. The cult of Brahmanas did not constitute a criterion of difference between Buddhism and Hinduism, but an essential common ground.

Ashoka's Re-Establishment of the Buddhist Cult of Gods

Even the honorary title of Raja Priyadarshi, *devanam priyasya*, Gods' Beloved, shows that the professed Buddhist was not only no atheist or quite impartial to the Gods but, on the contrary, a friend and promoter of their worship. He had a message carved out on his rock edicts that the godless epoch had come to an end during his rule. This message was not surprising at all to his contemporaries: "Upto this time the gods in Jambdvipa (India) had remained un-mixed or un-associated with men; they now have become associated (with men)." The gods were not mixed with men any more. Thanks to the promotion of the cult of gods by the Buddhist emperor, the gods associated closely with men anew. Consequently, Ashoka not only believed in the gods and was loved by them in his state-post. He was trying very hard to introduce again the lost faith in the gods and to bring the gods closer to men.

Summary: Ashoka's Reform

Ashoka saw his rule as the beginning of the re-establishment of the reign of Dharma and was devoted to Buddha. Moreover, he effectuated a restitution of the worship of gods and Brahmanas. To him, gods and Brahmanas were not contradictory to Buddhism. They were an essential pillars of a society defined by Bauddha Dharma. One seeks in vain for Buddhism that is atheistic and opposed to the Brahmanas during Ashoka's time.

**Buddhism and Caste System in the Middle Ages:
A Methodological Conflict of Modern Myth and
Archaeological Research**

To credit Hinduism or its predecessors with the introduction of the caste system and to declare this social system a dividing mark to Buddhism does not reflect the Indian and entire Indo-Asian historical and modern reality. The way we see it today, the caste system represents a basic social form that has survived throughout centuries. Wherever it had become established, it was not overcome by any religion. It asserted itself against every religion, no matter whether a religious system acknowledged or ignored the caste system, approved it or discarded it ideologically. But the Western notion of caste liberty of Buddhism has such a strong effect that even Indian historians are not ready to give up the Buddhist ideology, although their own research has brought forward the proof of an opposite viewpoint.

Bimal Chandra Mohapatra (*Buddhism and Socio-Economic Life of Eastern India*, New Delhi, 1995) offers an example of this issue. In his famous study of the relation of Buddhism to social economy in East India of the Middle Ages period, he shows that the Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism in Orissa have been enjoying the royal protection of the Bhaumakara dynasty since the 8th century. The founder of the royal house, Kshemankaradeva (ruled from 736 to 756) was converted by a Tibetan monk. He even received the title *paramopasakanugata*, i.e., a successor of the greatest worshipper of Buddha. The author refers to this highly respected royal Buddhist layman

in dismay: "Though Kshemankaradeva was a staunch follower of Buddhism, he established four orders (castes) in their proper place." In order to explain his surprise at the fact that a Buddhist ruler had introduced the caste system, Mohapatra adds the well-known Western notion of the supposed animosity of Buddhism towards caste. He projects the consequences of this prejudice on the king: "Buddhism which was against caste system could not prevail upon him regarding this matter." His further inferences show the fatality of the Buddhist ideology: "Here we find an interesting example of a Buddhist ruler propagating the caste system, disregarding the Buddhist teachings." As a historian, Mohapatra recognizes the historical facts precisely: "this king was a proponent of the caste system. But the historian gets in the realm of fantasy, when he measures this actual and normal Buddhist attitude against his private dream of Buddhism.

It is clear that Mohapatra needs to take refuge in such a way of looking at the situation. He cannot bring forward any proof of the fact that Buddhists have rebelled against the caste system in Orissa or elsewhere or, furthermore, that a Buddhist ruler has abolished caste. It follows that he cannot declare the behaviour of the kings of Orissa as a deviatory precedent. Instead of finally revising the notion of the Buddhist animosity to caste as a historian and on the basis of his own very excellent archaeological research, he renders a very important social and historical alteration process to an unexplainable problem for the sake of retention of an unhistorical image of Buddhism. Mohapatra's non-ideological interpretation of this process could have contributed decisively to a general historical theory of the Indian caste system.

The same explanatory problem is to be found also in Mohapatra's valuable study of Bengal. He shows in detail that in Bengal the strict Buddhist Pala kings were fanatical defenders of the caste system: "It is significant to note that even though the Palas were Buddhists, the orthodox system of caste was upheld as an ideal by the kings. From the epigraphic records we came to know that Dharmapala, though a follower of Buddhism, maintained the rules of castes and

religious order in strict conformity to the holy." Though Mohapatra states about the presumable and ideologically founded contradiction, he attempts to provide an almost grotesque explanation that has not been proven anywhere, not even by him. "This example shows that the personal religious belief of the ruler did not influence the policy of the state, which was based on the time-honored precept and conventions." This explanation has not been supported by any sources; it has even been dismissed by the sources that were brought forward by Mohapatra himself.

On the basis of his research, one could state straight away that the kings of Orissa were the ones to really introduce and propagate the caste system, the Bengali Rajas defended it firmly. If their Buddhist monks and gurus had recommended to them to abolish the caste system, the way Western Buddhist ideology suggests, they would not have introduced, propagated and defended it. It is recorded nowhere that monks and gurus have required from the rulers to abolish the caste system. Moreover, Mohapatra confirms the theory that the caste system was social order that could not be shaken by any religion, not even by Buddhism. He refers to the laws of Manu with the explanatory sentence that the caste-friendly policy of the Bengali Rajas "was based on the time-honoured precepts and conventions." In this case, he means that the presumably anti-caste Buddhism had entirely failed socio-politically and that the Buddhist kings had to practice Brahmanic caste policy against their personal conscience, in order to survive.

Mohapatra's study has shown, however, that in regard of religion, the caste system was neutral. Buddhism has never questioned this societal system (in Sri Lanka until the present day). Furthermore, it has propagated it, may be it has even contributed decisively to its spreading across the whole of India.

In any case, Mohapatra understands this argument, which is fundamental for the research on caste, purely apologetically. It has to be excused to the Buddhist ideology that a pious Buddhist king has introduced the presumably Brahmanic caste

system. However, he rejects this apologetic thesis with his own historical finding that king Kshemankaradeva introduced the caste system which had never before, in a proper manner, existed in Orissa. Consequently, he could not have applied it opportunistically. The simultaneous introduction and defending of the caste system, which Mohapatra regards to be Brahmanic, and of Buddhism by the state did not represent a religious contradiction for the Indian Bauddhas. This was the case because the caste system was obviously the most successful form of the Dharma of society to the ruling classes. In this, they did not differ from the other Indian religions. The power of Western Buddhist ideology, which propagates the thesis of the supposed opposition of Buddhism to caste without any proof, is so strong that Mohapatra does not undertake a revision of the inappropriate image of Buddhism despite his research that proves the opposite.

Summary: Old Buddhism

Besides Buddha, the Old Buddhism of India worshipped the gods, Brahmanas and Shramanas. It accepted the caste system and introduced it even itself. A Buddha could be either a pure Kshatriya or a pure Brahmana, yet he could not be a low caste member and by no means a Dalit. The more we study the reality of the Old Buddhism, the more we discover that it is so extremely related to its contemporary culture and co-religions and indeed very far from the modern thinking, working and feeling. At the same time, people who are against one and another today are nevertheless brothers and sisters compared to the old Kshatriyas of the arrogant and racist Sakiya tribe.

Concluding Remarks

Taking into consideration the diachronic and synchronic principle of historiography, we can summarize our observations as follows:

First, the Old Buddhism was closer to its non-Buddhist Indian contemporaries than to the atheistic anti-Brahmanic, anti-caste

and pro-Dalit modern counterparts. Second, Ambedkar favoured the Indogenous Dharma as the highest value of his model of society. All his Dharmic contemporaries should give up the caste orientation and become equal, joint and enlightened citizens of an undivided Dharmic Nation. That idea made him more kindred to his Hindu modernist contemporaries than Old Buddhism.

REFERENCES

- Ahir, D.C. (1991), *Buddhism is Modern India* (ed.).
Ambedkar, B.R. (1989), *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*.
Vakil (1991), *Gandhi-Ambedkar Dispute*
Wilkinson, T.S. and M.M. Thomas (1972), *Ambedkar and the Neo-Buddhist Movement* (ed).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Edmund Weber is Professor of Comparative Religion at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University (presently at the University of Frankfurt), Frankfurt, Germany. He is the editor of the *Journal of Religious Culture* and *Studia Irenica* (published on the internet). He has published a number of articles in journals and edited books. Some of his articles published in the *Journal of Religious Culture* are: Ambedkar's Neo-Buddhism and its relationship with the Hindu Dharma (1998), Buddha Dharma vs. Hindu Dharma: studies for the problem of the difference and convergence of Buddhism and Hinduism (2000), and Buddhism: Is it Atheistic and anti-caste religion? Decay Ideology and Historical Reality of the Ancient Indian Buddha Dharma (2001).