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Reviving Buddhism in Western India: Pluralism and Cultural Hybridization in the Ambedkarite Buddhist Movement(s)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the contemporary forms and internal diversity of Ambedkarite Buddhism, tracing its origins to B. R. Ambedkar's mass conversion movement in 1956. Based on field research conducted in Maharashtra and analysis of both primary and secondary sources, it examines how Ambedkarite Buddhism, as understood by many of its followers today, has been shaped by ongoing—and often competing—processes of legitimization, cultural bricolage, and hybridization. These dynamics inform debates over authenticity, reinterpretations of Buddhist symbols and practices, and the negotiation of collective identities and their boundaries. The article argues that while these processes have produced a wide spectrum of cultural forms—reflecting tensions between personal spiritual reform and collective social transformation—they have also contributed to the adaptability of Ambedkarite Buddhism within both local and global contexts.

Keywords: Cultural hybridity; Ambedkarite Buddhism; anti-caste movements; activism; postcolonialism; Maharashtra

Buddhism in India, although it has a long and rich history in most of its territory, was almost non-existent in its “lived” and practiced form until the second half of the 20th century. When in the 1950s the famous social reformer, politician and economist B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) called for a mass conversion

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of Dalits¹ to Buddhism, a distinct form of Dalit activism and tradition began to emerge, commonly referred to as the “Dalit Buddhist movement” or “Navayana Buddhism”.² This movement was conceived as a socio-political protest against caste-based oppression, particularly ascribed to the religious and cultural institutions of Brahmanism and Hinduism, and consequently revived Buddhism in India. Embracing Buddhism was envisioned as a pragmatic pathway toward emancipation and empowerment for Dalit—and more broadly Bahujan³—communities, offering a new space for self-respect, dignity, and identity beyond the confines of caste. Ambedkar’s rationale for embracing Buddhism drew, among other factors, from his interpretation of it as a rational, moral, and socially oriented philosophy, one that had historically stood in opposition to Brahmanical dominance in India.⁴

Ambedkar’s emphasis on public conversion as a collective act introduced a powerful dimension to Dalit strategies of resistance and self-assertion. Following the ideas and activities of the Maharashtrian social reformer Jyotirao Phule (1827–1890) and his consistent critique of Hindu institutions of caste and religion,⁵ Ambedkar challenged Brahmanical religious authority and the sacredness of castes.⁶ He himself publicly converted to Buddhism with several hundred

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- 1 The Marathi term *dalita* refers to a broad social category that includes hundreds of castes across India historically subjected to systemic discrimination, exclusion, and violence, primarily due to notions of ritual impurity associated with their social status. In the context of this article, however, I employ the term specifically to denote those communities officially recognized by the Indian government as belonging to the Scheduled Castes (SCs).
 - 2 Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (Manohar, 2001).
 - 3 The term *Bahujan* is translated from Pali as “the majority” and is used for addressing the population of the Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), Other Backward Classes (OBCs), as well as several other religious minorities and disadvantaged communities. It was promoted by social and political reformer Kanshiram as a political category for the larger masses.
 - 4 Gail Omvedt, *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste* (Sage India, 2003); Martin Fuchs, “Dhamma and the Common Good: Religion as Problem and Answer: Ambedkar’s Critical Theory of Social Relationality,” in *Religious Interactions in Modern India*, eds. Martin Fuchs and Vasudha Dalmia (Oxford University Press, 2019).
 - 5 Rosalind O’Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).
 - 6 Phule, although he drew from Christian debates, never urged for conversion to Christianity, nor did he ever convert. He employed Christian missionary arguments to assess the Hindu religion and brahmanical religious authority, which were, according to him, responsible for the material and educational deprivation of the lower castes. His focus was on the reinterpretation of mythological figures such as King Bali (or Christ and Buddha) as heroes protecting “the weak from the oppressive authority” represented by the brahmins (O’Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology*, 137). After Phule’s death, many other activists in Maharashtra were inspired by his activities and became involved in Dalit emancipation efforts, among them reformers such as Vitthal Ramji Shinde, Bhaurao Patil, Gopalbaba Walangkar, Janba Kamble, and the famous Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur, who supported not only anti-caste social reforms but also many promising Dalit intellectuals such as B. R. Ambedkar (Badri Narayan, *Kanshiram: Leader of the Dalits* [Penguin Books Limited, 2014], 4–5).

thousand followers on October 16, 1956, in Nagpur and invited the Burmese *bhikkhu* (ordained monk) Mahasthaveer Chandramani to oversee the ceremony. During the event, he pronounced 22 vows of his own making, which directly addressed the relationship between Buddhism and Hindu religion and aimed for the rejection of local Hindu religious practices.⁷ However, following his sudden death in December 1956, the spread of the Buddhist movement remained largely confined to Western India (Maharashtra, in particular), its point of origin. While Ambedkar's legacy as a political leader is acknowledged across Dalit communities throughout India, and many, as a sign of respect and admiration to his vision, identify as Ambedkarites, his call for conversion has predominantly resonated within those historically identified with the Mahar caste.

Anti-caste sentiments in India have a long history, with various practices of the reinterpretation or strict rejection of religious symbols and praxis associated with maintaining the caste hierarchy. Ambedkar was not the first reformer using conversion to point to the link between caste discrimination and Hindu customs. In Dalit narratives of resistance, the relationship of local Indian religious traditions to the intricacy of caste, religiosity, and the Hindu belief in the sacredness of castes was crucial as one of the major themes spread across regions and time. Diverse strategies emerging from everyday opposition to, and the subversion of caste relationships and boundaries gave rise to numerous local movements—often following oppositional approaches to anti-caste resistance. Among the most influential that utilized the relationship between caste and religion were the *bhakti traditions*, whose practices to some extent challenged Hindu social structures but professed what Jon Keune refers to as “bhakti strategic ambiguity”;⁸ *Dalit Christian and Muslim conversion movements*, which were often criticized for maintaining caste hierarchies,⁹ or the political mobilization led by *Kanshiram* (1934–2006)¹⁰ and his strategy to reinterpret Dalit religiosity through the revitalization of Dalit icons.¹¹ The many strategies adopted by anti-caste reformers¹²

7 Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Fighting the Indian Caste System* (Columbia University Press, 2005), 134–35.

8 Maren Bellwinkel-Schempp, “From Bhakti to Buddhism: Ravidas and Ambedkar,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 23 (2007): 2177–83; Jon Keune, *Shared Devotion, Shared Food: Equality and the Bhakti-Caste Question in Western India* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

9 Rowena Robinson and Sathianathan Clarke, eds., *Religious Conversion in India: Modes, Motivations, and Meanings* (Oxford University Press, 2003); Rowena Robinson and Joseph Marianus Kujur, eds., *Margins of Faith: Dalit and Tribal Christianity in India* (Sage Publications Ltd, 2010).

10 An important social reformer and anti-caste activist from Punjab (active mostly in the state of Uttar Pradesh), established the use of the concept *Bahujan Samaj*—“majority community”—as a political term for the unification and mobilisation of all the Indian marginalised classes and castes.

11 Narayan, *Kanshiram: Leader of the Dalits*.

12 Among others, these include Ayyankali (1863–1941) and Narayana Guru (1856–1928) from Kerala, or Periyar E. V. Ramasamy (1879–1973) and Thol. Thirumavalavan (1962–) as leaders of Dravidian movements in Tamil Nadu.

were not merely imported but also often interwoven with enduring local practices of rich Dalit religiosity. Their differences, not only in terms of strategy but also in terms of their interaction with local customs, became a base on which boundaries between movements and hindrances in their cooperation arose.

This was the case also for the divergence between Dalits and Bahujans, who adopted Buddhism and movements which pursued alternative routes to social mobility and emancipation. Their division has also become increasingly evident in relation to activities of other marginalized communities who reinterpret caste identity in affirmative terms, drawing on ancestral pride narratives often aligned with nationalist discourses,¹³ which many Buddhists view as incompatible with conversion.¹⁴ Despite the continued intensification of Dalit empowerment strategies across the country, Ambedkarite Buddhism has remained a vibrant yet regionally-concentrated form of identification and protest, embraced by a relatively limited segment of the Indian population.

According to the 2011 Census of India, approximately 68% of the country's Buddhist population belong to the Scheduled Castes, with the vast majority—around 77%—residing in Maharashtra. While official census data show that the number of individuals identifying as Buddhists more than tripled between 1951 and 2011, their overall proportion within the Indian population has consistently remained below 1%. Within Maharashtra, roughly 80% of Buddhists are classified as Scheduled Castes, and in approximately 95% their familial lineage is directly linked to the Mahar caste. To contextualize these figures further: according to the numbers from Census 2011, nearly 59% of all Buddhists in India trace their ancestry to the Mahar community in Maharashtra.

These statistics underscore two interconnected points. First, contemporary Indian Buddhism is overwhelmingly rooted in Dalit communities, particularly within Western India. It is therefore plausible to assume that this form of Buddhism is, to a significant extent, informed by Ambedkar's interpretation of the tradition and his broader socio-political legacy. However, while the Mahar community accounts for the majority, the remaining portion of Indian Buddhists (41%) come from other caste backgrounds and regional contexts. This diversity suggests significant variation in how Buddhism is interpreted, practiced, and mobilized in anti-caste activism—variation that is further shaped by factors such as rural-urban divides, generational shifts, and differing levels of education.

This leads to a second and more conceptual point: the difficulty of defining Ambedkarite Buddhism—or the Ambedkarite Buddhist movement—as a single, unified entity. As I will argue in this text, what is commonly referred to

13 Badri Narayan, *Republic of Hindutva: How the Sangh Is Reshaping Indian Democracy* (Penguin, 2021).

14 See culturalization of castes in Balmurli Natrajan, *The Culturalization of Caste in India: Identity and Inequality in a Multicultural Age* (Routledge, 2013).

as “Ambedkarite Buddhism” encompasses a wide spectrum of practices, ideologies, and interpretations, some of which may be internally divergent or even contradictory. Much like other broad religious or social traditions, Ambedkarite Buddhism is characterized by internal competing plurality and the absence of a centralized leadership or hierarchical structure. Following Ambedkar’s death on the 6th of December 1956—only shortly after the mass conversion ceremony in Nagpur—many among the newly converted Buddhists, particularly from Mahar communities, found themselves in unfamiliar territory. The movement lacked a clearly designated successor, and the very foundations of the Buddhist tradition were largely unknown and often inaccessible, especially to Buddhists residing in rural areas. Knowledge concerning Buddhist doctrines, practices, and history was largely concentrated within specific organizations, some of which were based outside of Maharashtra—for instance, the *Maha Bodhi Society*. Moreover, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*,¹⁵ Ambedkar’s interpretation of Buddhism and a key text for understanding his approach, had not yet been published or made available in translations to local languages.

Although during India’s independence movement, Buddhist symbols and references had increasingly been incorporated into the broader discourse of nation-building, the understanding of Buddhism differed substantially not only among members of different social classes, castes, and territories, but also within the state apparatus responsible for its implementation. As Douglas Ober notes,¹⁶ interpretations of India’s Buddhist past and its newly reimagined heritage varied significantly among members of the political elite—such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajendra Prasad, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, Syama Prasad Mookerjee, and B. R. Ambedkar. Their respective readings of Buddhism ranged from Nehru’s vision of a secular, modernist framework for the Indian nation to Radhakrishnan’s positioning of Buddhism as a derivative of Hinduism.¹⁷ Ober’s contextual analysis of how knowledge of Buddhism was framed and disseminated during the colonial and early postcolonial periods illustrates the plurality of discourses and competing agendas that shaped the political and cultural field in the 1950s and 1960s:

This was not a cabinet with a singular vision of the religion but one whose members spoke of competing Buddhisms—disparate interpretations that catered to different audiences. While the gathering of so many Indian politicians invested in Buddhist discourses may appear to be a conscious decision, it should not be read in such a manner. Instead, this was large-

15 B. R. Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (Siddhartha College Publications, 1957).

16 Douglas Ober, *Dust on the Throne: The Search for Buddhism in Modern India* (Stanford University Press, 2023).

17 Ober, *Dust on the Throne*, 252–77.



ly a symptom of a colonial age when Buddhist thought and history had a profound influence on the Indian populace, whatever one's political affiliations, caste, class, religion, or gender.¹⁸

It was into this highly heterogeneous landscape that the newly converted Buddhists stepped after 1956, carrying with them prior conceptions of Buddhism as well as local customs and cultural practices.

This article follows the line of pluralism and diversity in the cultural reinterpretation of Buddhism specifically among Ambedkarites in Maharashtra, analysing some of the major processes that have led to its formation as of today. By analysing a combination of rich secondary and primary literature, with a strong emphasis on field research conducted in Maharashtra (Mumbai, Nagpur, and Kolhapur) during Autumn 2017 and Spring 2023, I aim to demonstrate how Ambedkarite Buddhism as understood by many of its followers today was shaped by ongoing (and often competing) processes of legitimization, cultural bricolage, and cultural hybridization. These dynamics further contributed to the multiplicity of ways in which individuals relate to and negotiate with the tradition in the context of their everyday lives.

Paths to Reclaiming Buddhist Heritage: Processes of Legitimization, Cultural Bricolage and Hybridization

As Ambedkar's conversion movement gradually revived Buddhism in India, it simultaneously facilitated the emergence of a new collective identity among Ambedkarite Buddhists. In this process, numerous cultural elements—symbols, narratives, imagery, practices, and conceptual frameworks historically linked to Buddhism—were both adopted and, at times, reinterpreted. From the early stages of Dalit conversion movements, the engagement with Buddhist history—understood as a rediscovered heritage newly accessible to these communities—played a central role in legitimizing and shaping their collective identification as Buddhists. This turn toward Buddhism as India's long-overlooked legacy can be traced back to nineteenth-century scholarship, both Western and Indian, though often filtered through Orientalist and colonial views. The framing of Buddhism as both an Indian and a universal religion was heavily influenced by Western academic interests in Indian traditions, accompanied by normative assumptions about religion, textual authority, and historical authenticity. Richard King, in his work on Orientalism and religion, illustrates how such reinterpretations shaped the modern understanding of Buddhism. These included romanticizing the Buddha as a reformist similar to Martin Luther, locating the "essence" of the tradition in selectively chosen texts, and contrasting an idealized "original" or "pristine"

18 Ober, *Dust on the Throne*, 261–62.

form of Buddhism with contemporary South Asian practices.¹⁹ Ambedkarite Buddhism entered into dialogue with these prior reinterpretations, and the first generations of Ambedkarite Buddhists in the 1950s actively employed various strategies to insert themselves into Buddhist historical narratives and to substantiate their claims to a broader Indian past.

One such strategy of *legitimation* is what Gary M. Tartakov refers to as the reimagining of Buddhist motifs and symbols within Ambedkarite visual culture.²⁰ As noted earlier, the incorporation of Buddhist imagery was already underway in post-independence India, where symbols such as the *dhammacakka* on the national flag or the Lion Capital of Sarnath—associated with Emperor Ashoka—were adopted to forge links between the modern nation-state and its ancient past. This symbolic revival was accompanied by the restoration of key Buddhist sites, the establishment of new institutions, the translation and dissemination of canonical texts, and public celebrations of *Buddha Jayanti* (Buddha's birth).²¹

For Ambedkarite Buddhists, however, these cultural symbols were mobilized not only as representations of a desired future of *Prabuddha Bharat* (Enlightened India)²² but also as legitimizing connections to a prestigious and authoritative Indian past. Ancient temples, sculptures, manuscripts, and monuments—many regarded as surpassing their Hindu counterparts in their cultural significance, prestige, and antiquity—were reclaimed as part of their heritage.²³ Moreover, the adoption of Buddhism opened pathways for Ambedkarite organizations to engage with transnational Buddhist networks. Affiliations with institutions and communities in Japan, Taiwan, Thailand, Burma, Great Britain, and the United States provided access to valuable social, cultural, and economic capital. These international connections played a crucial role in supporting the development of Ambedkarite educational and religious infrastructure, while also strengthening ties between anti-caste movements within India and their global counterparts.

Another important mode of legitimization within Ambedkarite Buddhism lies in the re-narration of Dalit identity within the framework of Buddhist history.

19 Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'the Mystic East'* (Routledge, 2009), 143–48.

20 Gary Michael Tartakov, "Art and Identity: The Rise of a New Buddhist Imagery," in *Speaking Truth to Power: Religion, Caste and the Subaltern Question in India*, eds. Manu Bhagavan and Anne Feldhaus (Oxford University Press, 2010).

21 Ober, *Dust on the Throne*, 252–54.

22 Ambedkar's vision of an Enlightened India shaped by the ideals of the European Enlightenment and the ethical-philosophical legacy of the Buddhist tradition. *Prabuddha Bharat* was also the title of a newspaper initiated by Ambedkar, which was in circulation from February 4, 1956, until December of the same year. The publication was renewed in 2018.

23 Tartakov, "Art and Identity," 182–84. This includes the Ajanta and Ellora caves and temples, the ancient stupas of Sanchi and Amaravati, and the Ambedkarite struggle over the Mahabodhi temple in Bodhi Gaya.

One aspect of this concerns the reinterpretation of early Buddhism through the lens of anti-caste discourse, a perspective deeply embedded both in Ambedkar's own writings and in contemporary Ambedkarite Buddhist narratives. The attitude of the Buddha and the early sangha towards caste hierarchy has long been the subject of scholarly inquiry. Yet, as scholars such as Gail Omvedt have noted, there remains no scholarly consensus on whether the Buddha explicitly rejected the caste and varna order—particularly given the complexities of projecting the concept of caste onto the socio-historical context of 5th century BCE India—or whether his critique was directed more narrowly at the claims to supremacy made by Brahmins.²⁴ For Ambedkarite Buddhists, however, this issue is unequivocally resolved: drawing on Ambedkar's interpretation, the Buddha is regarded as an anti-caste revolutionary, and Buddhism itself as an anti-caste tradition committed to the emancipation and empowerment of the oppressed.²⁵ Beyond this anti-caste reinterpretation, the re-narration of Buddhist history also involves the articulation of alternative origin stories rooted in Buddhist mythology. In these narratives, specific communities—such as the Mahars and various tribal groups in the Nagpur region—trace their lineage back to the “Naga” people, imagined as the original adherents of Buddhism and thus as rightful inheritors of its legacy.²⁶

As outlined above, the relationship between Ambedkarite Buddhists and Buddhist heritage is layered and multifaceted, entangled with the ways in which Dalit communities negotiate their historical identity and sense of belonging. At this point, I want to draw attention to two interconnected processes that have shaped Ambedkarite Buddhism across multiple dimensions—cultural bricolage and hybridization. Although both terms share a great part of the focus on cultural transmission and its subsequent de-contextualization and re-contextualization, I use them to differentiate between adaptation represented by bricolage and the battleground of cultures mixing one cultural feature with another, represented by hybridization.

The first, as previously argued, is what Claude Lévi-Strauss terms *cultural bricolage*. Derived from the French notion of “do-it-yourself,” bricolage emphasizes the creative agency involved in assembling heterogeneous cultural elements into new, contextually meaningful forms.²⁷ Through de-contextual-

24 Gail Omvedt, *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste* (Sage India, 2003), 17–18, 128–34.

25 B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches Volume No. 17, Part 2* (Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2013), 97–108; B. R. Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches Volume No. 3* (Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2019), 153, 363.

26 Omvedt, *Buddhism in India*, 155; Umesh Bagade, “The Buddhist Past as a Cultural Conflict: Ambedkar's Exhumation of Indian History,” in *Classical Buddhism, Neo-Buddhism and the Question of Caste* (Routledge India, 2020), 171.

27 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (The University of Chicago Press, 1966).

ization and re-contextualization, “[an] item is lifted out of its original setting and modified to fit its new environment”.²⁸ This abstract concept may help to comprehend Ambedkar’s intellectual synthesis, wherein he drew upon diverse interpretations of Buddhist orthodoxy alongside Marxist theory and Western modernist views on religion to construct the foundational framework of Navayana Buddhism.

Ambedkar’s interpretation of *dhamma* was deeply shaped by his positive approach to key ideals of Western modernity—particularly secularism, rationalism, pragmatism, and democratic ethics—which he aligned with his reading of the Buddhist tradition. For Ambedkar, the foundation of *dhamma* lay in morality and reason, and he explicitly advocated for a dynamic and context-sensitive approach to doctrine, asserting that a follower of Buddhism should be “free to modify or even to abandon any of his teachings if it was found that at a given time and in given circumstances they do not apply”.²⁹ This perspective informed Ambedkar’s liberal reinterpretation of foundational Buddhist concepts, including the Four Noble Truths, *kamma*, *avihimsa*, and *samsara*.³⁰

Ambedkar’s reformulation of these ideas provoked strong reactions, particularly from already established Buddhist schools, which found his positions to be radical, provocative, and overly individualistic.³¹ In subsequent scholarship, efforts have been made to trace both the canonical sources from which Ambedkar may have drawn and the distinctive strategies he employed in reworking them. Adele Fiske and Christoph Emmrich, for instance, have examined *The Buddha and His Dhamma* in relation to Pali sources, noting that Ambedkar deliberately demythologized the texts by excluding references to “miracles, deities, demons, heaven and hell, even arahantship” and “doctrines related to rebirth”.³² In their comparative analysis, they highlight Ambedkar’s substitution of devotional language—for example, replacing “worship of the Buddha” with “paying respect”—and his shift in emphasis from ritual and monastic discipline toward an ethical and social vision of Buddhism. Their findings suggest that Ambedkar’s engagement with Pali scripture

28 Andreas Ackermann, “Cultural Hybridity: Between Metaphor and Empiricism,” in *Conceptualizing Cultural Hybridization: A Transdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Philipp Wolfgang Stockhammer (Springer, 2012), 21.

29 Ambedkar, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar ... No. 17, Part 2*, 98.

30 B. R. Ambedkar advocated for the use of Pali terminology in place of Sanskrit when referring to key Buddhist concepts—such as *kamma* (action or deed), *avihimsa* (non-cruelty or nonviolence), and *samsara* (the continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth).

31 Valerian Rodrigues, “Making a Tradition Critical: Ambedkar’s Reading of Buddhism,” in *Dalit Movements and the Meanings of Labour in India*, ed. Peter G. Robb (OUP India, 1997), 300–1.

32 Adele Fiske and Christoph Emmrich, “The Use of Buddhist Scriptures in B.R. Ambedkar’s *The Buddha and His Dhamma*,” in *Reconstructing the World: Dr Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, ed. Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz (OUP India, 2004), 102, 106.

was highly selective and served his broader aim of redefining religion as a system “without God, soul, life after death, ritual, and ceremony”.³³

Nevertheless, as Pradeep P. Gokhale has argued, Ambedkar’s reinterpretations were not without precedent.³⁴ Diverse Buddhist schools have long offered divergent and often contradictory readings of the Buddha’s teachings. Moreover, many Buddhist communities across South and Southeast Asia underwent significant transformations under colonial rule from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. These transformations frequently involved processes of rationalization and institutional reform, leading to the demythologization of traditional beliefs, an increased emphasis on ethical practice, and new forms of engagement with modernity.³⁵ Juliane Schober, drawing on Bruno Latour’s theory of modernity, describes these shifts in terms of “translation” and “purification”—mechanisms through which Buddhist communities adapted to changing historical and colonial conditions.³⁶

Ambedkar’s rationalist and social reconfiguration of Buddhism, then, was not entirely anomalous within the broader historical field. In fact, similar reinterpretations had already emerged in colonial India and Sri Lanka. One of Ambedkar’s intellectual predecessors, P. L. Narasu (1861–1934), advanced a vision of Buddhism as a rational, anti-caste moral system in his influential work *The Essence of Buddhism*.³⁷ Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933), a key figure in the Buddhist revival and co-founder of the *Maha Bodhi Society* in 1891, likewise emphasized Buddhism’s ethical and social dimensions, inspiring many Dalit communities—particularly in Tamil Nadu—to consider conversion. His activism, often in cooperation with the *Theosophical Society*, contributed to the restoration of important Buddhist sites such as Bodh Gaya, Kushinara, and Sarnath.³⁸ Another major figure in the Tamil anti-caste movement, Iyothee Thass (1845–1914), also turned to Buddhism, founding the *Sakya Buddhist Society* in Madras as a means of envisioning a caste-free society.³⁹

33 Fiske and Emmrich, “The Use of Buddhist Scriptures,” 109.

34 Pradeep P. Gokhale, “Universal Consequentialism: A Note on B.R. Ambedkar’s Reconstruction of Buddhism with Special Reference to Religion, Morality, and Spirituality,” in *Reconstructing the World: Dr Ambedkar and Buddhism in India*, ed. Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Beltz (OUP India, 2004), 122.

35 Juliane Schober, “Modern Buddhist Conjunctions in Southeast Asia,” in *Buddhism in the Modern World*, ed. David L. McMahan (Routledge, 2012); King, *Orientalism and Religion*.

36 Schober, “Modern Buddhist Conjunctions,” 12.

37 Lakshmi P. Narasu, *The Essence of Buddhism* (Srinivasa Varadachari & Co., 1907).

38 Balkrishna Govind Gokhale, “Theravada Buddhism and Modernization: Anagarika Dharmapala and B.R. Ambedkar,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 34, no. 1 (1999): 33–45, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156852199X00158>.

39 Malarvizhi Jayanth, “Literary Criticism as a Critique of Caste: Ayothee Thass and the Tamil Buddhist Past,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 54, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989417710066>.

Thus, by the time Ambedkar began to articulate his vision of Buddhism, the intellectual and political landscape was already filled with efforts to revitalize and reinterpret the tradition through secular, rationalist, and anti-caste lenses. These reformist movements were not only responses to colonial powers but also critical engagements with both Christian missionary discourse and the Orientalist search for a cultural alternative.⁴⁰ Ambedkar's selective adaptation and reconstruction of Buddhist ideas in dialogue with global modernity and the lived realities of Dalit communities was part of an ongoing, multi-layered process by which Buddhism was being reimagined and recontextualized—especially in the context of Western India.

The second process, closely related to bricolage, is the concept of *cultural hybridization*.⁴¹ Cultural hybridity in the context of subaltern postcolonial studies is constitutive through “tensions, violence and unequal power conditions” while “the new cultural traits are not intended for permanence, because the inherent tensions render sustainable innovations impossible”.⁴² In this sense, Buddhist tradition in India underwent cultural hybridization through colonial and imperialist discourses on religion which were not only integrated into South Asian Buddhist imagery and practices—often in a reciprocal fashion—but also influenced Ambedkar's reinterpretation of Buddhist thought. Subsequently, when Ambedkarite Buddhism was introduced to Dalit communities on a mass scale, it became further entangled with local understandings of tradition, absorbing aspects of caste-specific and ethnic cultural practices, and negotiated against the majority of Hindu practices and customs.

On the basis of my own fieldwork conducted in both urban and rural Maharashtra in 2017,⁴³ I argued that one of the underlying tensions constituting hybridity arose from Ambedkar's explicit rejection of ritualism and devotional forms of worship—an orientation already articulated in the vows undertaken during the *diksha* ceremony. Ambedkar's rationalist conception of religion at times stands in contrast to the ritual and festive practices traditionally observed in the villages, many of which remain intertwined with Hindu cultural frameworks and serve important functions in connecting kinship networks and community life. This dissonance often leads to either a further distancing of Ambedkarite Buddhists from broader village society—particularly when they refrained from participating in local festivities—or to the negotiation and adaptation of ritual forms within

40 Martin Baumann, “Modernist Interpretations of Buddhism in Europe,” in *Buddhism in the Modern World*, ed. David L. McMahan (Routledge, 2012).

41 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994).

42 Hans Peter Hahn, “Circulating Objects and the Power of Hybridization as a Localizing Strategy,” in *Conceptualizing Cultural Hybridization: A Transdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Philipp Wolfgang Stockhammer (Springer, 2012), 35.

43 Tereza Menšíková, “Negotiating Boundaries Between ‘Religious’ and ‘Secular’: A Struggle for the Sense of Collectivity Among Ambedkarite Buddhists in Maharashtra,” *Journal of Global Buddhism* 24, no. 2 (2023): 64–82, <https://doi.org/10.26034/ju.jgb.2023.3840>.

Buddhist households and community settings. In many cases, this negotiation resulted in the partial retention and reconfiguration of earlier cultural practices.⁴⁴

Elements drawn from local traditions, Ambedkarite Buddhism, and other Buddhist streams were selectively separated or creatively merged, and the outcomes of such merging gave rise to new cultural forms that engaged with Dalit collective memory and traditions. These included, for example, the continuation of domestic devotional acts such as performing Hindu-style pujas or venerating family ancestors alongside images of the Buddha and Ambedkar, as well as the adoption of new Buddhist practices such as the chanting of Tibetan mantras or participation in Vipassana meditation retreats. In this way, Ambedkarite religious life reflects an ongoing negotiation between historical rupture and cultural continuity oriented both toward preserving ties to the Buddhist past, its colonial and postcolonial understanding, and reimagined Indian modernity.

Naturally, hybridisation is not limited to the cultural practices of communities associated with Buddhism, but is present across diverse backgrounds throughout India. In Maharashtra, various cultural encounters were often facilitated by migration into urban areas, colonial interventions, orientalist and missionary activities, the establishment of cultural centres such as Phule's *Satyashodhak Samaj* (Truth-Seeking Society), and the free movement of traders and local artists. The widespread illiteracy among Indian communities and the long-standing exclusion of "lower" castes from formal education made it hard to preserve the long-term memory and histories of Dalit communities in any form other than oral tradition. Therefore, the expression of emotions, ideas, and everyday experiences—as well as participation in collective resistance against oppression—was preserved and continuously transmitted through folk songs, recited poems, stories, and theatre performances across Indian villages (see, for example, the traditions of *tamasha*, *powada*, and *lavani*). These cultural forms are considered a fertile ground for immense hybridity and creativity, from which Dalit activism for human rights gradually emerged and extended even to remote parts of India.⁴⁵

The result of these interwoven processes of hybridization and bricolage in the case of Ambedkarite Buddhism is the wide and competing spectrum of practices and expressions visible today. However, this proliferation of forms—further amplified by globalization and the increasing accessibility of transnational Buddhist influences—has generated debates concerning the "purity" or authenticity of

44 Timothy Fitzgerald, "Ambedkar Buddhism in Maharashtra," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 31, no. 2 (1997): 225–51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/006996697031002003>; Menšíková, "Negotiating Boundaries," 73–4.

45 Brahma Prakash, *Cultural Labour: Conceptualizing the 'Folk Performance' in India* (Oxford University Press, 2019); Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonies* (Zubaan Books, 2006).

practice. At its core, this debate revolves around questions of boundary-making: who is to be regarded as a “true” Buddhist and a “proper” Ambedkarite?

A rare insight into these contemporary debates is offered by *Navayana Buddhism: Dhamma Revolution in Theory and Practice*, published by the Shared Mirror Publishing House.⁴⁶ Drawing on ethnographic observation and interviews, the authors delineate two dominant orientations or “branches” within the current Ambedkarite Buddhist movement. The first is grounded almost exclusively in Ambedkar’s *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, eschewing ritual, meditation, and the mythological or spiritual dimensions of Buddhist tradition. For these practitioners, Buddhism is primarily a rational, modern philosophy directed toward social revolution and Dalit liberation. In contrast, the second orientation places far greater emphasis on traditional Buddhist practices, including chanting sutras, studying Pali, performing rituals, and engaging in Vipassana meditation. According to the authors, this group is often criticized by the former for what is perceived as an excessive focus on spiritual practice and a departure from Ambedkar’s emancipatory vision.⁴⁷

Interviews with figures such as Padmashri Namdeo Dhasal and Raju Kadam further underscore this point, noting growing concerns that Ambedkarite Buddhism is shifting away from its foundational commitment to social transformation, and is instead being reduced to devotional practices such as the recitation of *Trisharan Panchsheel*, the burning of incense, and ritual prostrations.⁴⁸ Among these various practices, it is the increasing centrality of Vipassana meditation that appears to generate the most pronounced divisions within the community (more detail in the next chapter).

Such tensions were already articulated in Gopal Guru’s influential 1991 article, in which he accused the *Triratna Buddhist Community* (formerly Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha), one of the largest Buddhist organizations in Maharashtra, of spiritualizing Ambedkar’s legacy.⁴⁹ In response, one of the organization’s senior leaders, Dhammachari Lokamitra, published a rebuttal, contending that Guru had misunderstood the role of meditation, lacked adequate information about the organization’s broader activities, and had reduced Buddhism to a political instrument while disregarding its ethical and philosophical foundations.⁵⁰ This exchange led to a further reply by Guru, in which he reaffirmed his critique and

46 Shaileshkumar Darokar et al., *Navayana Buddhism: Context, Debates and Theories* (Shared Mirror, 2022).

47 Darokar et al., *Navayana Buddhism*, 55–7.

48 Darokar et al., *Navayana Buddhism*, 58–61.

49 Gopal Guru, “Hinduisation of Ambedkar in Maharashtra,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 7 (1991): 339–41.

50 Dhammachari Lokamitra, “Ambedkar and Buddhism,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 20 (1991): 1303–4.

expanded upon it by asserting that “TBMSG’s activities lead to the killing of political initiative of ‘dalits’ who are trying to confront the state and other communal forces not through the meditation but on the street, well outside the four walls of Dhyana Sadhana class room.”⁵¹

The sharp polemical exchange between Guru and Lokamitra—both of whom claim to derive legitimacy from their interpretation of Ambedkar’s original vision—reflects broader tensions within the contemporary Ambedkarite Buddhist movement. Each accuses the other of misreading Ambedkar’s writings and, in doing so, of distorting or even betraying his legacy. At the heart of this dispute lies the persistent question of authenticity. For Guru and others who reject ritualism, such essentialist claims are seen as necessary acts of defence—particularly against what they perceive as the Hinduization (or Saffronisation) of Ambedkar’s image and the Brahmanization of Buddhism, as advanced by neo-Vedantic thinkers.⁵² Such narratives are propagated by the leading Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Hindu far-right paramilitary organisation Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), placing Ambedkar among the leading figures of Hindu nationalism (Savarkar and Hedgewar), while seeking to attract and subsequently assimilate Dalit communities into the Hindu fold.⁵³

This controversy is, in many respects, emblematic of deeper currents within the present-day Ambedkarite movement, which continues to wrestle with questions of internal boundary formation and the balance between reformist individualism and collective political mobilization. The tension between more individualized expressions of Ambedkarite Buddhism and more overtly collective, activist-oriented forms often becomes apparent in differing attitudes toward participation in the public political sphere. To explore this further, I will examine examples that highlight divergent reinterpretations of Buddhism on the case of the *Triratna Buddhist Community* and *The Buddhist Society of India*.

Organized Buddhism in Maharashtra: A Case Study

This case study is based on fieldwork conducted in Nagpur and Mumbai in 2023, during which I carried out formal interviews with three key figures from the *Triratna Buddhist Community* and one from *The Buddhist Society of India*, engaged in numerous informal conversations with Ambedkarite practitioners, and participated in their public events and communal gatherings—particularly those centred around the Nagaloka campus in Nagpur. Given that my interviews were conducted with younger Ambedkarite Buddhists, most of whom were educated,

51 Gopal Guru, “Appropriating Ambedkar,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 27/28 (1991): 1697–99.

52 King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 144.

53 Narayan, *Republic of Hindutva*.

some communicating in English, it is reasonable to infer that the majority of my communication partners were part of India's emerging middle class. This demographic is typically characterized by higher education, English proficiency, and an urban residential base, often linked to academic or professional pursuits. Due to the limited duration of my research, the following reflections do not claim to constitute an ethnographic study in the full sense. Rather than offering a comprehensive analysis of the organization's institutional structure or doctrinal orientation, my aim here is to explore how its members and representatives deal with the plural interpretations of the Buddhist tradition present among Ambedkarites and their possible confrontations and tensions that are typical of postcolonial hybridity.

The Triratna Buddhist Community—originally established in 1967 in the United Kingdom under the name *Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayaka Gana* (TBMSG)—was founded by Dennis Lingwood, better known by his dhamma name Sangharakshita. Today, it ranks among the largest Buddhist organizations in the UK and has developed significant ties with India, especially in urban centres such as Pune and Nagpur, where its most prominent sites, the Manuski Centre and Nagaloka, are situated. Triratna's interpretation of Buddhism is often characterized as a modernist, soteriological synthesis, drawing on elements from various Theravada and Mahayana traditions as adapted in Western contexts.⁵⁴ Its internal structure is organized around *mitras* (friends of the community) and *dhammacharis/dhammacharinis*, who have undergone formal ordination into the community.

In India, Triratna maintains close connections with Ambedkarite Buddhists, largely through Sangharakshita's historical links to B. R. Ambedkar, whom he met while travelling as a Theravada monk. In the early 1990s, the Triratna community acquired land near Nagpur, where it developed the Nagaloka campus—a substantial complex featuring the Nagarjuna Training Institute, residential buildings, lecture halls, meditation centres, and a statue of the Walking Buddha. The campus has become a hub for Ambedkarite Buddhists interested in deepening their engagement with Buddhist philosophy and practice. It hosts annual events such as winter schools, lectures, retreats, and youth conventions, with a particular focus on serving the Dalit-Bahujan and Adivasi communities. The Nagarjuna Training Institute, central to the campus, offers Bachelor's degrees in Buddhism and Ambedkarite Thought and provides free training to students from

54 Martin Baumann, "Working in the Right Spirit: The Application of Buddhist Right Livelihood in the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order," *Journal of Buddhist Ethics* 5 (1998): 120–43, <https://fid4sa-repository.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/124/>; Timothy Fitzgerald, "Buddhism in Maharashtra: A Tri-Partite Analysis - Research Report," in *Dr Ambedkar, Buddhism and Social Change*, ed. A.K. Narain and D.C. Ahir (Buddhist World Press, 2017).



marginalized backgrounds across India.⁵⁵ The establishment of the campus was made possible through the efforts of Sangharakshita and Dhammachari Lokamitra, with significant support from Western charities such as the Karuna Trust and Bahujan Hitay, along with backing from international Buddhist schools.

I visited the Nagaloka campus in February 2023 during the *International Buddhist Youth Convention*—a significant annual gathering that brings together Europe-based members of the Triratna community and Ambedkarite Buddhists from across India. This week-long convention provides a rare opportunity for direct exchange between groups that, while sharing a common interest in Buddhism and Ambedkar’s legacy, often differ in orientation and emphasis. The 2023 convention, attended by approximately 70 participants, was thematically grounded in the idea of “Building the Buddha’s Land.” Each day began with early morning meditation, followed by lectures delivered by local dhammacharis, group discussions, and an afternoon programme featuring additional lectures, workshops, and panel conversations. The day concluded with collective puja (devotional practices) held in the central Buddha Surya Vihar Hall.

Throughout the convention, a key theme emerged: while the ideal of bodhisattvahood held significance for both Indian and Western participants, their understandings diverged in important ways. European members, many of whom were well-versed in Buddhist teachings as interpreted by Sangharakshita, were often encountering Ambedkar’s writings and the realities of caste-based discrimination for the first time. In contrast, Indian participants, particularly Ambedkarites, came with a deep familiarity with Ambedkar’s thought but limited exposure to Sangharakshita’s teachings, unless they had a long-standing affiliation with the institute. This divergence led to a degree of ambivalence among Ambedkarite participants, many of whom expressed limited interest in becoming formally ordained as dhammacharis or dhammacharinis. These differing orientations often surfaced most clearly in two areas of practice: meditation and political activism.

As Hennigar observed in her ethnographic research at Nagaloka, the role of meditation—particularly vipassana—within Ambedkar’s vision of Prabuddha Bharat (an Enlightened India) was a point of contention for some Ambedkarite students. For them, meditation was viewed as peripheral, and in some cases even contradictory, to the central mission of Ambedkarite Buddhism, which they understood as focused on structural transformation and the eradication of caste.⁵⁶ By contrast, Triratna members from Europe emphasized meditation as essential to personal development. The 2023 convention tried to reconcile these perspectives by framing the theme in dual terms: the “inner purification” of the indi-

55 Mallory Hennigar, “Building Ambedkar’s India: Nagaloka Centre as a Microcosm of Prabuddha Bharat,” *South Asian History and Culture* 14, no. 1 (2023): 77–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2022.2159121>.

56 Hennigar, “Building Ambedkar’s India,” 80–2.

vidual and the “outer transformation” of society through altruistic action. Yet conversations with participants revealed persistent differences in how this duality was interpreted. European practitioners tended to advocate for the idea that self-transformation (through ethical conduct, mindfulness, and scriptural study) leads to broader societal change. In contrast, Ambedkarite Buddhists stressed the necessity of direct political and social engagement—such as building libraries, providing education and legal assistance, and resisting caste oppression.

Although my time at the convention was limited, it became clear from repeated conversations with Indian Triratna members and students of the Nagarjuna Institute that this tension—between a “reformist” individual path and a “revolutionary” collective project—remains a central theme within the Ambedkarite Buddhist movement.

A second, related axis of tension concerns the negotiation between private religious practice and public political engagement. As Guru famously argued, the political initiative of Dalits is carried out not through meditative withdrawal but “on the streets”.⁵⁷ Triratna, by contrast, as Fitzgerald notes, tends to refrain from explicitly political involvement—an orientation that continues to characterize the organization today, even though Nagaloka members acknowledge the growing pressure from political actors at local and national levels.⁵⁸ This apolitical stance limits participation in demonstrations, rallies, or political mobilizations. Given the inextricable entanglement of caste with political structures in India, this position has sparked debate among Ambedkarite Buddhists, particularly in light of the decline of political parties claiming Ambedkar’s legacy, such as the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). During the convention, discussions among Ambedkarites from different Indian states reflected this complexity. Contentious debates arose over figures like Kanshiram and his relation to Ambedkarite Buddhism, as well as over potential alignments with Communist parties.⁵⁹ While Ambedkarites

57 Guru, “Appropriating Ambedkar,” 1698.

58 Fitzgerald, “Buddhism in Maharashtra,” 24.

59 Dalit-Bahujan politics usually align with Marxist and communist groups and parties in terms of addressing socio-economic inequalities and aiming for emancipation of the marginalized. However, this collaboration often exists on the periphery due to disagreements between anti-caste movements and “leftist” groups about the importance of caste versus a class struggle (Hugo Gorringe, “Dalit Politics: Untouchability, Identity, and Assertion,” in eds. Atul Kohli and Perna Singh, *Routledge Handbook of Indian Politics* [Routledge, 2012]). This applies also to the relationship between communists and Ambedkarite Buddhists. Ambedkar himself voiced concerns regarding the adoption of communism to fight caste inequalities and discrimination in his book *Buddha or Karl Marx* (1957) and publicly denounced the communists as preying on the issue of untouchability for their political needs and ambitions (Jayashree B. Gokhale-Turner, “The Dalit Panthers and the Radicalisation of the Untouchables,” *The Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 17 no. 1 [1979], 78–9.).



from Maharashtra generally rejected these associations, participants from Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh viewed them as potentially productive. Nevertheless, the controversy surrounding political engagement often led to these discussions being prematurely concluded, despite the otherwise cordial atmosphere of the convention.

Within this contested discursive space, the relationship between the individual, society, and the means of social transformation emerges as a crucial, and at times divisive topic. It highlights a fundamental tension between efforts to sustain the revolutionary impulse of Ambedkarite Buddhism and the increasing influence of a more individualistically-framed, globally-inflected Buddhist modernism. That said, it is important to avoid overgeneralizing from this limited study, as the broader Ambedkarite Buddhist population is far more diverse and complex than what can be captured in this small-scale inquiry.

Beyond Triratna, Maharashtra is home to numerous other Ambedkarite Buddhist organizations, the most influential being *The Buddhist Society of India* (Bharatiya Bauddha Mahasabha, BSI), established by B. R. Ambedkar himself in 1955. Headquartered at Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Bhavan in Mumbai, the organization is traditionally led by members of the Ambedkar family. As of 2023–2024, its National President was Meeratai Yashwant Ambedkar, Ambedkar's daughter-in-law, with Bhimrao Yashwant Ambedkar, his grandson, serving as Working President. In our interview, Bhimrao Yashwant Ambedkar argued that one of the BSI's principal goals is to organize Buddhist networks and conversion ceremonies both within India and internationally—in countries such as Thailand, Vietnam, South Korea, and Japan—often accompanied by the installation of statues of Ambedkar. The BSI manages important sites such as Chaityabhoomi and Rajgruha, operates Milind and Siddharth Colleges, publishes books and journals, ordains bhikkhus (*bauddhacharis*), and oversees the construction of viharas and educational institutions.

In contrast to Triratna, The Buddhist Society of India engages openly in political activities, frequently organizing events that feature figures like Prakash Ambedkar of the Bharipa Bahujan Mahasangh (BBM) or displaying images of Kumari Mayawati of the BSP. Despite their shared commitment to Ambedkarite Buddhism, interaction between Triratna and the BSI remains limited. Yet, one narrative that circulates among Triratna members at Nagaloka attempts to symbolically bridge this divide. According to this story, Ambedkar personally invited Sangharakshita to conduct the historic *diksha* ceremony on October 16, 1956, but Sangharakshita declined, recommending bhikkhu Chandramani instead. This version, recorded in Sangharakshita's book *Ambedkar and Buddhism*,⁶⁰ contrasts with another narrative recounted to me by Ambedkarite Buddhists in Mumbai,

60 Sangharakshita, *Ambedkar and Buddhism* (Motilal Banarsidass, 2006), 20.

in which Sangharakshita offered his services by himself and was declined by Ambedkar. Bhimrao Yashwant Ambedkar dismissed Sangharakshita's account as fabricated. Regardless of which version is historically accurate, these competing stories illustrate the ways in which Buddhist organizations mobilize different interpretations of Buddhist histories to assert legitimacy and continuity within the Ambedkarite tradition.

As argued in this text, the processes of legitimization, cultural bricolage embedded in Ambedkarite Buddhism, and hybridity through which its pluralist reinterpretations are relived in the lives of Ambedkarites co-create the ever-branching cultural background of Dalit activism in India. These competing interpretations coexist side by side, connected by their relation to the legacy of B. R. Ambedkar and anti-caste and ethnic histories. However, the idea of cultural purity and authenticity over which some of the Ambedkarite branches compete in order to gain more legitimacy represents an unattainable perspective. As Hans Hahn notes, hybridity draws its power from combining cultural traits from different sources and thus challenging existing power relations relying on the idea of purity.⁶¹ Cultural hybridity is symptomatic of the highly globalised and interconnected world in which anti-caste movements navigate, form their networks, and aspire to social change,⁶² and despite the challenges that the emergent plurality may represent for unification of the anti-caste struggle, its strength lies in rejection of the ideology of "purity", not in the understanding of "purity" as a source of legitimacy.

Ambedkarite Buddhism continues to expand both within and beyond India, driven by transnational networks and diasporic initiatives. One notable example is the community established in Miskolc (previously Sajókaza), Hungary, by Tibor Derdák and János Orsós, who were introduced to Buddhism during a visit to Nagpur.⁶³ In 2007, they founded a Buddhist community around the Dr. Ambedkar High School, comprised primarily of Roma converts.⁶⁴ Elsewhere, Ambedkarite Buddhists in countries such as the UK and the United States have built collabora-

61 Hahn, "Circulating Objects and the Power of Hybridization," 39.

62 Alberto Melucci, "Identity and Difference in a Globalised World," in *Debating Cultural Hybridity Multicultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism*, eds. Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015).

63 Jekatyerina Dunajeva and Patrick Ciaschi, "Alternative Education and Roma Empowerment: A Case Study of the Dr. Ambedkar Buddhist School in Sajókaza, Hungary," *The Indian Journal of Social Work*, 78, no. 1 (2017).

64 Similarly to the Dr. Ambedkar High School, the Előrelépés Vocational School in Erdőtelek, run by the Ambedkarite Buddhist community, draws from Ambedkarite movements and the legacy of B. R. Ambedkar in its efforts to lower discrimination against Roma in Hungary (more in Andria D. Timmer, "5. Decentralization, Centralization and Minority Education in Hungary," in *Another Way: Decentralization, Democratization and the Global Politics of Community-Based Schooling*, eds. Rebecca Clothey and Kai Heidemann (Brill, 2019).



tive networks—including the *Ambedkar Association of North America* (ANNA), the *Boston Study Group*, the *Ambedkarite Buddhist Association of Texas*, and the *Federation of Ambedkarite Buddhist Organizations* in the UK—that actively support Buddhist movements in India through financial, social, and logistical assistance. Backed by further engagement from Buddhist communities in Taiwan, Japan, and other countries, these global alliances continue to empower Ambedkarite Buddhists in their ongoing struggle against caste oppression.

Conclusion

Ambedkarite Buddhism stands as a complex and evolving tradition shaped by ongoing processes of legitimization, cultural transmission, and its de-contextualization and re-contextualization. Based on Ambedkar's rationalist and anti-caste reading of Buddhism, it has become a vehicle for Dalit self-assertion, though one marked by internal plurality and tension from at times conflicting interpretations of its cultural aspects, practices, and collective identities. As this article has shown, the tradition is marked by significant internal diversity—reflected in competing interpretations of Buddhist orthodoxy, practices, political engagement, and what precisely it means for a follower to be an Ambedkarite Buddhist. Through fieldwork and textual analysis, I have argued that the lived experience of Ambedkarite Buddhism today is shaped by three interrelated processes: legitimization, cultural bricolage, and hybridization. These concepts help explain how Dalit communities have creatively adapted Ambedkar's vision by integrating elements from Buddhist, local, and global traditions. The idea of cultural purity, often used to measure legitimacy within Ambedkarite internal debates, is ultimately unsustainable in the face of cultural hybridity, whose strength lies precisely in its challenge to purity as a source of authority. In this sense, Ambedkarite Buddhism's continued hybridity, despite fragmentation, reflects its capacity to adapt and respond to the changing needs of marginalized communities in India and beyond.