The Buddhist Community In Modern India: Cultural Practices, Identity, And Social Transformation

Tapas Sing Nina

Ph.D. Scholar
History
Pondicherry University, Puducherry, India

Abstract: The Buddhist community in India, once a dominant force in the spiritual and cultural life of the subcontinent, has undergone a remarkable resurgence in the modern era. This paper explores the transformation of the Buddhist community in contemporary India, focusing on their cultural practices, identity, and social roles. The resurgence of Buddhism in India is closely tied to the efforts of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and his vision of a social and political revolution for marginalized communities, particularly Dalits. Through a combination of literature review, interviews, and fieldwork, this study provides insights into the cultural practices of the Buddhist community in modern India and how they continue to evolve in the face of socio-political challenges. The findings reveal that modern Buddhist practices not only adhere to traditional rituals but also emphasize social justice, equality, and collective identity.

Index Terms - Dalit, Transformation, Religion, Culture, Society

I. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism, originating in India around the 6th century BCE, once spread widely across the region before declining, especially after the 12th century. However, in the 20th century, particularly following India's independence, the Buddhist community has seen a revival, largely influenced by the Dalit movement led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism and his encouragement of millions of Dalits to follow suit marked a significant moment in the religious and cultural history of India. This research aims to explore how the Buddhist community in modern India has shaped its identity and cultural practices in the post-colonial era, especially as it engages with issues such as caste, social justice, and communal harmony.

II. Review of Literature:

Buddhism in Ancient and Medieval India: Historically, Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) in the 6th century BCE. It flourished across India for over a millennium before slowly fading from the subcontinent. Scholars such as Dutt (1956) and Smith (2002) have detailed the gradual decline of Buddhism in India, citing factors such as the rise of Hinduism, Islamic invasions, and the later colonial rule. The destruction of Buddhist monasteries and educational centers like Nalanda also contributed to its fall.

The Revival of Buddhism in Post-Colonial India: The revival of Buddhism in India in the 20th century, especially after the country's independence in 1947, is most strongly associated with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a Dalit leader and social reformer. Ambedkar's famous conversion to Buddhism in 1956 was a political and social act aimed at rejecting the caste system and embracing a more egalitarian faith. Scholars such as Omvedt (1994) and Gail (2002) have discussed how Ambedkar's vision of Buddhism as a path for Dalit empowerment

reshaped the identity of modern Indian Buddhists. His interpretation of Buddhism as a rational, ethical, and social doctrine has made a profound impact on the religious landscape of India.

Cultural Practices in Modern Buddhism: Modern Buddhist practices in India are marked by a fusion of traditional rituals and contemporary social concerns. Rituals such as Dhamma Chakra Pravartan Day, commemorating the Buddha's first sermon, and Buddha Jayanti, celebrating the birth of the Buddha, serve as important cultural touchstones for the community. Nehru (2008) notes that while traditional monastic practices are still maintained, there is a growing emphasis on lay practice, social activism, and the promotion of mindfulness and meditation, influenced by Western interpretations of Buddhism. Scholars like Sarma (2012) argue that modern Buddhist practices also reflect a desire for social change, community building, and resistance to caste-based discrimination.

Buddhism and Dalit Identity: The Dalit conversion to Buddhism is one of the most important developments in the religious history of modern India. Bhagwat (2001) and Prakash (2003) discuss how Buddhism became a tool for social liberation, offering Dalits an alternative to the oppressive structures of Hinduism. Ambedkar's Buddhism, in particular, emphasizes social equality and human dignity, making it a powerful force for Dalit identity formation. Chandra (2011) explores how this transformation has influenced Buddhist practices today, with an emphasis on the ethical principles of equality, justice, and rationalism that characterize Ambedkar's brand of Buddhism.

Interfaith Dialogue and Modern Buddhist Identity: Modern Buddhists in India are also involved in interfaith dialogue, seeking to foster peace and mutual understanding between different religious communities. Nina (2002) argues that Buddhism's ethical teachings provide common ground for dialogue, especially in a pluralistic society like India, where religious tensions often arise. Moreover, David (2010) has highlighted how Buddhist communities engage in humanitarian and social work, often collaborating with other faith groups to promote communal harmony.

III. Research Questions:

How have the cultural practices of the Buddhist community evolved since the post-independence period, particularly after the influence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar?

What role does Buddhism play in shaping the social and political lives of its followers, particularly in the context of caste-based discrimination?

How do modern Buddhist rituals in India balance traditional Buddhist teachings with contemporary social and political concerns?

How has the Dalit community used Buddhism as a tool for asserting identity and social justice?

What are the challenges and opportunities faced by the Buddhist community in modern India, especially in terms of interfaith relations and social transformation?

IV. Methodology:

Research Design: This study follows a qualitative research design to explore the lived experiences of the Buddhist community in India. The study adopts an ethnographic approach, combining fieldwork, interviews, and secondary data analysis. This methodology is particularly suited to understanding the cultural practices, beliefs, and social dynamics of the Buddhist community in India.

Data Collection:
Fieldwork: This research conducted field visits to Buddhist centers in Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar—regions with large Buddhist populations. Observations were made during major Buddhist festivals such as Dhamma Chakra Pravartan Day and Buddha Jayanti to understand the cultural significance of these events.

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants, including Buddhist monks, lay practitioners, community leaders, and scholars. The interviews focused on personal experiences with Buddhism, religious practices, and the social impact of Buddhism on Dalits and other marginalized groups.

Secondary Data: Extensive use was made of published books, articles, and historical records on Buddhism's role in modern India, particularly the work of scholars such as Omvedt (1994) and Bhagwat (2001). These secondary sources provided a historical and theoretical framework for the primary research findings.

Data Analysis:
The data collected from fieldwork and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. This method involved identifying key themes related to Buddhist cultural practices, identity formation, social activism, and the role of Buddhism in social justice movements. The findings were compared with existing literature to assess continuity and change in Buddhist practices and beliefs.

V. Results and Discussion:

Transformation of Buddhist Practices in Modern India: The revival of Buddhism in India has led to the transformation of several traditional Buddhist practices. While rituals such as meditation, prayer, and community gatherings are still widely practiced, there is a greater emphasis on social activism and education. Festivals like Dhamma Chakra Pravartan Day have become more than religious observances; they are social and political events that promote the values of equality and justice central to Dr. Ambedkar's teachings. The younger generation of Buddhists is also increasingly drawn to meditation practices, including those inspired by the Vipassana tradition, which has become popular across India.

Buddhism as a Social and Political Tool: The Dalit Buddhist community in India has used Buddhism as a means of empowerment. For many Dalits, converting to Buddhism is an act of resistance against the caste system. Ambedkar's teachings continue to inspire a sense of pride and solidarity within the Dalit Buddhist community. Buddhist organizations such as the Buddhist Society of India play an active role in advocating for the rights of Dalits, including through political participation and community development projects.

Cultural and Religious Identity: Modern Buddhist identity in India is deeply intertwined with the social struggles of Dalits. The cultural practices and rituals associated with Buddhism in India serve not only as a means of spiritual development but also as symbols of resistance against oppression. The emphasis on equality and justice in Buddhist teachings provides a platform for Dalits to assert their identity and challenge entrenched social hierarchies.

Interfaith Dialogue and Social Change: Buddhism's emphasis on peace, nonviolence, and compassion has made it a key player in interfaith dialogue in India. Buddhist communities are actively engaged in social work, often collaborating with other religious groups to promote communal harmony. The ethical teachings of Buddhism, rooted in karuna (compassion) and metta (loving-kindness), resonate with people across religious boundaries, making Buddhism an important force for social transformation in a pluralistic society.

VI. Conclusion:

The Buddhist community in modern India is characterized by a dynamic blend of traditional practices and contemporary social activism. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's reinterpretation of Buddhism as a means of social liberation for Dalits has left a lasting legacy on the community. Buddhist cultural practices in India continue to evolve, reflecting the community's engagement with issues of caste, equality, and social justice. As Buddhism continues to grow in India, its role in shaping social, political, and religious life remains significant.

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