

An Overview of India's Buddhist Movement

by Vishvapani

According to the 2001 census there are 7.95 million Buddhists in India out of a population of 1 billion, making it the country's fifth-largest religion. The true figure is far higher - between 20-30 million, but many do not register as Buddhists for fear of losing government concessions that are due to low-status Hindus.

"We have 405 New-Buddhists in our village, 69 from the Matang community, they say there were only 105 of us in 1991 and in 2001 census, we are not there. This means we don't get any relief or benefit from government. We are supposed to get 20 per cent of the Panchayat budget of Rs. 3 lakh per year".

– Census wipes out dalits in Maharashtra , Mandar Phanse , CNN-IBN

These Buddhists include a number of groups. There are scattered survivors of the period when Buddhism flourished in India such as the Baruas of Assam, Chakmas of Bengal, the Saraks of Orissa and the Himalayan Buddhists of North-East India; there are also ethnic overlaps from Nepal, Thailand and Burma, such as Tamangs and Sherpas there are converts who have been influenced by the Maha Bodhi Society, the Dalai Lama and so on; and there are refugee Tibetan Buddhists in different settlements.

Finally there are the followers of Dr. Ambedkar, who constitute over 90% India's Buddhists. Dr Ambedkar was the unquestioned leader of the dalits: people considered 'untouchable' under the Hindu caste system. He converted to Buddhism in 1956 with many of his followers, and the events of Autumn 2006 represent a development of his movement on the 50th anniversary of its inception.

One reason for the current interest in Buddhism is the success of those who became Buddhists in the past. 72.7% have a basic education compared with the national average of 52.21% and the community is increasingly confident, self reliant and free from negative social norms. The new Buddhists refuse to work within the ritually polluting duties traditionally associated with their caste, such as handling dead bodies: a strategy that works when people are able to find alternative employment outside the village. However, even if new Buddhists are successful in joining ritually more or less neutral professions, they are looked down.

It is hard to overstate the continuing importance of Dr Ambedkar - Babasaheb to his followers -- within this community. He is seen as a 'bodhisattva' – a compassionate being on the path to Enlightenment and revered second only to the Buddha. Statues and

pictures of Dr Ambedkar are seen everywhere in New Buddhist communities, where people greet one another with “Jai Bhim”, meaning, ‘Victory to Bhimrao Ambedkar’. Invocations of Dr Ambedkar are even added to traditional Buddhist chants and rituals.

Dr Ambedkar died only six weeks after his conversion in Nagpur and the Buddhist movement lost momentum at a crucial point in its history. Conversion ceremonies in other major Indian cities that were planned to follow the Nagpur event failed to take place. Following his death, the Ambedkarite movement was divided and lacked direction, and there were few Buddhist teachers to educate the millions of followers in the new faith.

Nonetheless, a substantial Buddhist movement has grown up. Its focus is the central Indian state of Maharashtra, and Nagpur is its heart. This is where Dr. Ambedkar took initiation on October 14th, 1956 along with his 380,000 followers. Other significant New Buddhist communities are found in Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh. For details of the conversion ceremony in Hyderabad, AP, on 14th October see the previous post. Further large ceremonies are planned in Karnataka, Bihar, Kerala, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Gujarat, Orissa, and Rajasthan.

In Maharashtra, the conversion movement has been largely confined to the Mahar sub-caste, to which Dr Ambedkar himself belonged. Now it is spreading to other Maharashtrian communities. A confederation of 40 tribal communities, numbering at least half-a-million are embracing Buddhism (see http://ambedkar2006.blogspot.com/2006_10_04_ambedkar2006_archive.html), and many members of the Matung sub-caste are doing the same.

Conversion ceremonies are regular occurrences, prompting anti-Buddhist measures by some state governments (see <http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=42,3191,0,0,1,0> for details of such measures in Gujarat). But Dr Ambedkar’s movement is at last coming of age, as Saddhananda Fulzele, who organised the 1956 Nagpur ceremony and for many years has been the Chairman of Nagpur’s Dr Ambedkar College, told me this week, ‘Fifty years is not a long time in the history of a religious movement.’ Dr Ambedkar’s prestige continues to grow 50 years after his death, his works are being translated into regional languages, many young people are discovering his work for the first time, and there is increasing interaction with Buddhists from outside India. ‘Dr Ambedkar is more powerful dead than alive,’ Fulzele commented.

At a time of deep disillusionment with political solutions to India’s problems, the true contribution of Dr Ambedkar, who framed the country’s constitution, is becoming

clearer. Through his political achievements and the foundation of the Buddhist conversion movement he offered a path for India's lower classes that contains great depth that is deeply in sympathy with the teachings of Buddhism. Large sections of India's 200 million 'scheduled castes' (i.e. those considered untouchable under Hinduism), and many members of the 500 million lower (or 'depressed' castes, are now looking seriously at Dr Ambedkar and considering following his example by adopting the Buddhist faith.

Information from Jambudvipa Trust