INTRODUCTION

Buddhism in the Making of Modern India

In India of the 1940s and 1950s, democracy was itself the revolution. After two centuries of oppressive and unjust colonial rule and thousands of years of monarchical rule before that, the makers and thinkers of the newly minted republic thought democracy to be the appropriate political form with the possibility of peaceful revolutionary change embodied within it. After the tremendous violence of the Second World War, the spectre of the atom bombs in Japan and the brutal massacres accompanying the partition of the Indian colony into India and Pakistan, many felt it necessary to enact a peaceful revolution. Democracy was to be the means and end of that peaceful revolution. In order, however, to make sense of and to justify what seemed at first glance to be an imported political form, Indian thinkers dug deep to find native resources that could help the process of democratization of the polity. A striking solution was located in that ancient faith that was not quite separate from the universe of Hindu thought but which contained an attractive history of subversion and dissent against upper-caste Vedic religion, that heterodox 6th-century BCE sect of Buddhism. In the last century of British rule, the struggle to produce an appropriate Buddhism for a modern nation reveals a secret history undergirding the rise of the republic itself in 1950. Buddhism played its own role in the making of modern India just as both Buddhism and India were in-the-making.

In the following pages, I present to you an intellectual genealogy of Buddhism in modern India. Like all modern religions on the subcontinent, Buddhism too was reimagined and reconfigured in the 19th and 20th centuries in the context of British colonialism. In the historiography of modern South Asia, Hinduism and Islam have got the lion's share of

attention.[1] Buddhism's story is unique for the extent of its re-imagination in India, where its followers were insignificant in number and politically marginalized. A host of British and European orientalists, archaeologists and Indologists are credited with discovering 'Buddhism' and India's Buddhist heritage in this period.[2] And yet Indian and more broadly South and Southeast Asian activists, pilgrims, politicians, *bhikkhu*s (Buddhist monks and mendicants) and scholars contributed immensely to the re-emergence of Buddhism and grappled with Buddhist ideas and history

[1] See, for example, P. K. Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012, third edition); Vasudha Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Tradition: Bharatendu Harischandra and Nineteenth-Century Benares* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010, second edition); Sandria Freitag, *Collective Action and Community: Public Arenas and the Emergence of Communalism in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Mushirul Hasan, *Nationalism and Communal Politics in India, 1885–1930* (Delhi: Manohar, 1994); Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam since 1850* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); Peter Van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

[2] See, for example, Philip Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); J. Jeffrey Franklin, *The Lotus and the Lion: Buddhism and the British Empire* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008); Charles Allen, *The Search for the Buddha: The Men Who Discovered India's Lost Religion* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2002). Broadly, these texts fall into the category of 'the British discovery of Buddhism', though their emphases vary. Almond suggests that the late Victorian fascination with Buddhism is worthy of study in its own right and stemmed from a dissatisfaction with the Church as well as the tremendous interest in the strange and peculiar orient that had nonetheless produced so worthy a figure of religion as the Buddha. Almond is interested in how Buddhism was imaginatively constituted in late Victorian England and the kinds of discourse around it. J. Jeffrey Franklin too is interested in how Buddhism came to pervade Victorian thought, suggesting that while Victorian Buddhism was very much about the Victorians, at the same time they left their self-image open to 'reconstruction by other races, cultures, and religions'. That is, the colonial experience left Britain susceptible to a 'counter invasion' by the east. Charles Allen argues that much of the early orientalist work by British officer-scholars in India engaged with Buddhism and with the discovery of its texts and sites.

in their various social and political projects. For practising Buddhists in broader South Asia, an older conception of monkhood was declared to be outmoded and a new figure of the bhikkhu erected as more worldly, activist and nationalist, occasionally violently so. Consequently, the tale of modern Buddhism is peppered with figures who crossed colonial territories and oceans and reconfigured the maps to argue for Buddhism's universalism, its global history, its kinship with ideas of democracy and socialism, and its support of movements for social justice as a kind of 'socially engaged religion' and 'a doctrine of love and fellowship'. This book is about these people, their ideas and their political projects.

But there was a very material side to Buddhism in this period too. Scholars wrote new histories of Buddhism, archaeologists unearthed Buddhist remains and relics, and philologists traced the movement of Buddhism across Asia following textual and linguistic trails. This set the stage for a new material culture around Buddhism. This period is marked by the tremendous circulation of Buddhist relics, artefacts, models of temples and other Buddhist things. There emerged a new sense of Buddhist place best represented by the emerging pilgrimage circuit of places associated historically with the Buddha and Indian Buddhism. This was also a time of significant building activity including new Buddhist temples, rest houses, site museums, parks, commemorative monuments and Buddhist statues. While discussing Buddhism in the making of modern India and modern India in the making of Buddhism we must take into account the role of this new Buddhist material culture.

Ancient, historical Buddhism, in turn, provided a language and a vocabulary for the discussion of modern political, social and religious ideas and issues. Whether it be the idea of *nibbana*[3] (release or salvation), *dukkha* (human suffering), communal ownership of property and the role of bhikkhus (mendicants), values of compassion and *maitrii* (fellowship and love) or Buddhist spirituality or *dhamma*[4] (religion or moral order), Buddhist ideas were debated and discussed in terms of their modern relevance. This was not without its dissenters, but for the most part, Buddhism found an audience in India and abroad and became in this period a 'veiled' presence in public life.

[3] *Nibbana* is the Pali word for the Sanskrit *nirvana*.

[4] *Dhamma* is the Buddhist and Pali word for the Sanskrit *dharma*.

There is another side to this acceptance of Buddhism as a means for difficult discussions and that is its global aspect. In other words, this story is not merely an Indian story though the central focus is on how Buddhism returns to the land of its birth and how the land of its birth reconfigures Buddhism. In recounting this history, however, I move between two geographical spaces—'modern India' and 'modern South Asia'. Over the 25 years after 1947, the modern nation states of India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Sri Lanka and Myanmar emerged out of the ashes of the Indian colony (more or less). In the period after 1947, and two generations of South Asians later, the memory of a subcontinent without international borders has dimmed. For instance, the memory of Myanmar's, or colonial Burma's, connection with India is largely forgotten. New scholarship will likely re-establish what Sana Aiyar calls 'the South Asian history' of Burma, but suffice it to say here that through Buddhism we can probe significant links between colonial Burma and colonial India and immediately after independence in 1948 and 1947 respectively.[5] Indian links with Sri Lanka, or colonial Ceylon, too are dominated in the Indian public imagination by anti-Tamil violence, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and India's involvement in Sri Lanka's protracted civil war in the late 1980s. Here again, this study of Buddhism in modern India establishes a different sort of connection and exchange between the two countries. We must remember that it was in conjunction with the activities of a range of Buddhist activists, East and Southeast Asian pilgrims and bhikkhus and *bhikkhuni*s (Buddhist nuns), colonial archaeologists, scholars of Indology, popular writers and the Theosophists that a Buddhism emerged that could do the nation-building and *dalit* emancipatory work that Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, and B. R. Ambedkar, the chief draftsman of the Indian Constitution, and others wished it to do. Nehru was somewhat oblivious to how important this constellation of actors from other Asian, some future non-aligned, countries played in his own understanding of Buddhism. Ambedkar was more aware of the larger South and Southeast Asian context of Buddhism and drew from its intellectual legacy in significant ways. If Buddhism emerged in India as the religion of democracy, it did so in the context of this rich field of exchange,

[5] Christopher Emmrich, Justin McQuade, Sana Aiyar and Thibaut d'Hubert, 'Towards a Burma-inclusive South Asian Studies: A Roundtable', *Modern Asian Studies* 57, no. 1 (January 2023): 283–320.

activism and ideation beyond what national histories contained within 20th-century national boundaries would have us believe.

THE COLONIAL CONTEXT

Ceylon, Burma and India were, for most of the period under consideration, British colonies. This colonial context laid the groundwork for the rise of modern Indian Buddhism in a number of ways. First, colonial scholarship provided a clear sense of origins. India's historical role in Buddhism, while always intuited,[6] was now elevated to the realm of fact. India was where the Buddha was born, where he attained Enlightenment, where he preached his famous sermons and performed miracles and, finally, where he passed into *mahaparinibbana*, that is, where he died.[7] It was also in India where the original sacred texts of Buddhism, in Sanskrit, were written. Colonial scholarship transformed the Buddha from a legendary, mythological figure to a historical personage. Second, with India now placed firmly at the heart of the new sacred geography, colonial scholars and archaeologists plotted the route by which Buddhism left India's shores and travelled to East and Southeast Asia, creating a tangible idea of a Buddhist world. They were scripting from the very beginning a kind of non-national, universal religion or 'world religion', according to Tomoko Masuzawa, that was accessible to those who could read ancient Buddhist texts.[8]

[6] Pilgrims from Tibet, Southeast and East Asia had been coming to India for centuries to visit sites associated with the Buddha. The famous Chinese pilgrimage accounts of Faxian in the 5th century CE and Yijing in the 8th century CE mention different Indian sites associated with Buddhism. Tibetans and Southeast Asian Buddhists too had a historical sense of the Indian origins of Buddhism prior to the modern period. In the 19th century, however, the Indian origins of the Buddha and the sites associated with his life were confirmed as 'fact', with various kinds of historical, literary and archaeological evidence being cited to support these claims.

[7] To be clear, these facts are still occasionally disputed. For example, in 2011, a major English national newspaper in India reported on claims by archaeologists in the state of Odisha that the birthplace of the Buddha lay in Kapileshwar, a village outside the state capital Bhubaneshwar. See https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/odisha/2011/aug/25/buddhas-birth-traced-to-orissa-284471.html (accessed on 12 December 2023).

[8] See Tomoko Masuzawa, 'Buddhism, a World Religion', *The Invention of World Religions or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, 121–146

Third, with Buddhism's secular history plotted, various inscriptions and texts deciphered and translated, and Buddhist sites unearthed, new historical figures emerged from the light cast upon them. These included the Buddha himself, a number of his disciples and royal propagators, including the all-important figure of the 3rd-century BCE Mauryan emperor Ashoka. These new historical personalities were taken up by Buddhist activists, nationalists and internationalists. Moreover, colonial scholarship and documentation resulted in the 'empiricization' of Buddhism. From a 'fuzzy community', the exact numbers of followers of Buddhism were known, as were exact routes and texts; Buddhist statues, images and artefacts were dated.

Then there was the new network of colonial educational institutions that were not only critical nodes for the spread of this new empirical and historically knowable Buddhism but also mediated the rise of an indigenous class of educated people (mostly men) with a presence in emerging colonial public spheres. From this broader class emerged an important sub-class of colonial intellectuals who were trained in western disciplines and even sometimes in western institutions in England and elsewhere but who sought out the best of Indian history with which to build a confident selfhood. This was also a period that witnessed the tremendous efflorescence of printed texts of various kinds, ranging from pamphlets, periodicals and books to translations and reprints of religious scripture and ephemera. The new indigenous educated classes around the Buddhist world made deft and prolific use of this print technology. The production and circulation of Buddhist print in turn facilitated the rise of public spheres. Members of the public could access these texts both through their increased literacy and through various kinds of performances, such as public readings of excerpts of texts. These texts travelled widely as the publishing industry grew in England and the colonies.

But colonialism presented many opportunities for another kind of travel both within the large Indian colony and around the Buddhist world—of people, pilgrims, adventurers, scholars and seekers of various kinds. Colonialism, arguably, resulted in a greater awareness of the world while eroding traditional injunctions against travel by sea (for example, the Hindu

(Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005). Masuzawa argues that Buddhism attained exalted status in the European academy as a 'world religion' on the grounds of a 'pure Buddhism' that was only accessible to European scholars who could read the ancient texts of Buddhism. This pure Buddhism was contrasted with the Buddhism in practice in Asia, which was deemed corrupted.

injunction against crossing the *kaala paani*, or 'black sea'). Finally, ideas of anti-colonialism generated new networks around the British empire and beyond and provided a context for exchanges of all kinds, including around Buddhism and Buddhist ideas. Towards the end of the period, in India, the anti-colonial movement was an important factor in the 'nationalization' of Buddhism, which was plucked from universal ownership as a world religion and recast as a specifically Indian phenomenon.

The colonial context gave rise to similar movements to revive or reform other religions in its colonies around the world. According to Christopher Bayly, the 19th century is often mistakenly seen as a time when, under the influence of European Enlightenment, ideas, science and secular thought parted ways with religion.[9] On the contrary, while 19th-century thinkers often struggled with and remained ambivalent about the separation between reason and religion, thinkers in colonial Asia focused squarely on religion and its modern possibilities. Hindu, Confucian, Islamic and Buddhist reformers around Asia repeatedly argued that their religions contained rational and philosophical elements, condemning along the way superstition, corrupt priests and magic, and a range of social and cultural practices that derived their legitimacy from religion. Great religions made a major comeback, according to Bayly, after 1815—a comeback marked by its global scale and unprecedented efforts at proselytization. In the new quasi-competitive atmosphere, as the world's religions came into conversation with each other, religions acquired new lives, new meanings and new flocks while their votaries made new efforts at translatability.

In this regard, the role of scholarship, both textual and archaeological, on religions played an important role. The impetus and momentum for this new scholarship—and it was wholly new in its form, concerns and objectives—lay initially in colonial metropoles. Though the role of native informants cannot be denied, the tremendous efforts at translating and understanding 'eastern' religions through the disciplines of history, philology and religious studies were, initially, carried out in the emerging European academy in England, France, Germany and elsewhere. Masuzawa suggests that this kind of work by European scholars be seen in the backdrop of the emergence of a discourse on 'world religions' at a time when 'world religions' were being thought about

[9] See C. A. Bayly, 'Empires of Religion', in *The Birth of the Modern World: 1780–1914* (Oxford, Carlton, Malden: Blackwell, 2004), 326–374.

in empirical terms with exact origins, textual practices, geospatial aspects and secular histories being identified.[10] Buddhism, in fact, was the first non-Semitic religion to be named and placed in the category of 'world religion'. By the late 19th century, however, South and Southeast Asians were taking up this scholarship in unanticipated ways. Moreover, the Victorian-era British fascination with Buddhism and the rise of publishing gave to the world one of its first publishing sensations—Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*, an ode to the Buddha in verse, which was taken up in Buddhist and Hindu Asia in consequential ways, as we shall see.

VISIONS OF BUDDHIST COMMUNITY

Now, while Buddhism on the Indian subcontinent had an ancient history as 19th- and 20th-century archaeology and textual study revealed, modern Buddhism in India was in part new. I say this with great caution and while acknowledging scholars who have pointed us to the rich sphere of pre-modern Buddhist politics and exchange across South, Southeast and East Asia. As I show in the chapters of this book, modern Buddhism in India was in significant ways an invented tradition, whether it be Buddhist pilgrimage, Buddhist celebrations like Waisakh Day or Buddha Purnima or Jayanti, or elements of Buddhist ceremonial and Buddhist conversion. This was because Buddhism was, at the behest of various Buddhist activists and thinkers in this period, responding to a new world and its various issues—from colonialism and nationalism to social justice and socialism. Starting with the Ceylonese Buddhist activist Anagarika Dharmapala's idea of a Buddhist world, to the Bengali educated middle class' spiritualized modernity, to Jawaharlal Nehru's civil religion, to the anti-caste and socialist ideas of Iyothee Thass, Dharmanand Kosambi and Rahul Sankrityayan, and, finally, in Ambedkar's dhamma for democracy, Buddhism was pulled in sometimes divergent, sometimes converging directions. It is not that Buddhism was put to purely instrumental use, however. Many of these people reflected and wrote deeply on Buddhism and displayed in their actions and choices a commitment to Buddhism. In the attempt to provide a new moral underpinning to a nation reeling from a violent colonial history, Buddhism was both a civil religion and

[10] See Masuzawa, *The Inventions of World Religions*, 10.

a forerunner to the engaged Buddhism of Southeast Asia. It was shaped as a religion of democracy and social justice.

It was also during this period a faith in search of its community. There were pockets of Buddhist practitioners in the Himalayas. There were also Buddhists in a corner of Bengal that bordered Buddhist Burma, Chittagong. India was surrounded on three sides by primarily Buddhist societies—Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan in the north, China in the north and northeast, Burma to the east and southeast, and Ceylon to the south. Ladakh, which was part of the Kashmir kingdom under Dogra rule, and Sikkim, under Namgyal rule, also had significant Buddhist communities. But these were primarily on the Himalayan frontier and had greater cultural and religious connection with Tibet than with India. India was dominated by Hinduism and Islam, and in the 19th century, both became dominant political communities on the subcontinent. As activists sought to rally a Buddhist community in modern India, a fascinating set of possibilities arose, each with its own complexities.

Anagarika Dharmapala, whom I consider the most important Buddhist modernizer of this period, wished to create and lead an international community of Buddhists and unite the Buddhist world. This project necessitated his acceptance of doctrinal and regional difference, and yet his drive to create a Buddhist world also had its homogenizing tendencies as he sought to bring it together around the control of the Mahabodhi temple at Bodh Gaya, Buddhist pilgrimage, Buddhist relics and elements of Buddhist ceremonial. Around the same time, he was engaged in an important conversation with Swami Vivekananda, who as the consummate Hindu modernizer was also attempting to bring together a community of Hindus around ideas and practices of modern Vedanta. The Bengali middle and upper classes took up Buddhism for their own projects and efforts at community-building, in particular through the establishment of, or participation in, numerous research societies, social-reform organizations or study circles. These left important legacies, both tangible in terms of their published work and less tangible in terms of strands of discussion and ideas in Calcutta's prolific colonial public sphere.

A diverse South, Southeast and East Asian community of Buddhists travelled to India in unprecedented numbers in this period and played a crucial role in the development of the Buddhist pilgrimage centres. Often, these bhikkhus, bhikkhunis and lay pilgrims introduced locals and other travellers to Buddhism and the Buddhist heritage of India. The relics of

Buddha and his disciples created their own audience across Buddhist Asia as they travelled prolifically in this period. Changing Buddhist practices and the escalation of the Mahabodhi temple issue had their own role to play in interesting this international community. Capitalizing on international Buddhist reverence for relics, Jawaharlal Nehru, as the first prime minister of India, sent Buddhist relics off on tours of Buddhist South and Southeast Asia. His relic diplomacy was meant to bolster his non-aligned programme. But he also made deft use of relics for his own domestic audience as the relics toured the Indian Buddhist Himalayas as part of his nation-building efforts. Nehru often adopted a distinctly nationalist language and spoke of Buddhism and the Buddha as Indian contributions to the world and offered it up to his domestic audience as a kind of civil religion for the national community. Here he met with pushback from Hindutva ideologue V. D. Savarkar, whose primary goal was the maintenance of Hindu unity inclusive of Buddhists, building a Hindu community as a national community and a return to a martial Hindu masculinity.

A significant number of thinkers and activists in this period recast Buddhist community as lower-caste or dalit community, and as a foundation for a socialist society. New histories of dalits and lower-caste communities argued that they were the original Buddhists who were discriminated against by invading or victorious brahmins. A number of activists also argued that Buddhism was compatible with and indeed a forerunner to modern socialism and could at the very least provide a moral foundation for a future socialist society. But in the end, Buddhism found its political community via B. R. Ambedkar's dalit conversion. Ambedkar had been the chief architect of India's Constitution, through which India became a republic in 1950. While he had multiple interests and agendas, he invested enormous intellectual resources and organizational energy into Buddhism and Buddhist conversion. He insisted that Buddhism was democracy's dhamma, the very foundation and basis of political democracy and democratic social life in independent India.

BUDDHIST MODERNISM IN COLONIAL SOUTH ASIA

David McMahan's investigation into Buddhist modernism in the west argues that Asian Buddhists had as much of a role to play in its fashioning