




Book review

## Dust on the Throne: The Search for Buddhism in Modern India

By Douglas Ober. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2023, South Asia in Motion Collection, 394 pages, ISBN: 9781503635029 (hardcover); ISBN: 9781503635036 (paperback) \$32.00; ISBN: 9781503635777 (ebook).

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Every few years, a book comes along that demands an inordinate amount of underlining, exclamation points, and notes in the margin—all the way into the depths of its footnotes. Douglas Ober's *Dust on the Throne: The Search for Buddhism in Modern India* is likely to be such a book for many: a monograph crafted during a decade's research and published in 2023 by India's activist publishing house Navayana, as well as by Stanford University Press. Specialists with access to academic libraries will have already spotted its antecedent, Ober's 2017 dissertation. Here, he brings significant enhancements to his work, including a map and several photographs that give even more life to his already vivid and notably readable prose. In essence, the book is an extensive subcontinental history and theorization of modern Buddhism in India, with broad implications for related fields.

Ober upends the commonly held view that Buddhism all but disappeared from India sometime between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, through composite multi-regional and multi-linguistic evidence, including uninterrupted networks of pan-Asian pilgrimage in which India remained the “axis mundi of the Buddhist world” (6). The notion of Indian Buddhist demise has long been contested by dissenting historians, yet mostly in fragmented concerns about geography, timeframes, or seemingly isolated (and thus too easily discounted) religious activity. Weaving together a stunning amount of source material to reveal a broader pattern, Ober brings a wide-angle lens to the debate. He offers fresh analytical scrutiny to the unstable conceptual boundaries of “Indian” and of “Buddhist.” In his account, minority reports of crypto-Buddhist communities or of wandering Indian Vajrayana *mahasiddhas* practicing magic are no longer written off. The inconvenient truth of their presence exposes the anachronisms of ideas of modern national identity and religious authenticity being imposed on the past to determine who—and who does not—get to be Indian, or Buddhist. While institutions may have collapsed and Buddhists may have been suppressed, the tradition endured, changed, and even thrived, especially in the broader South Asian subcontinent. And, though Buddhism was pushed into the borderlands of modern-day India, Ober shows that it was not entirely absent from central and southern regions, either.

Ober does more than provide the receipts for his claims: he engages the reader in detective-like myth-busting, with evidence so glaring the reader is embarrassed to have previously entertained the fallacy. He excavates its co-construction, providing an intellectual archeology of gross inaccuracies, colonial ideologies, political motives, orientalist fantasies, and Protestant predilections for texts and monasticism. These elements,



coupled with the contemporaneous rise of novel Asian nationalist narratives, produced a useful fiction. Granted, fellow scholars had already deconstructed the myth of a heroic British discovery of an ancient Buddhist past supposedly neglected by Indians. Ober contributes much needed texture to this effort, inscribing the orientalist enterprise as but a phase of European entanglement in a broader historical arc of antagonism and mutual self-definition between Buddhism and brahmanism. His case for continuity and his simultaneous de-centering *and* inclusion of Europeans are some of his most innovative interventions in this historiography.

Beyond this, Ober recenters the contributions of Asians—Indians in particular—to Buddhism’s Indian resurgence, in a dizzying, long-form portrait of named and unnamed pandit savants, Sanskrit hobbyists, colonial bureaucrats, military officers, diasporic monastic missionaries, community organizers, explorer-spies, activist ascetics, Marxist Buddhist revolutionaries, Buddhophile Hindu nationalists, and more. Through the flourishing of Buddhist viharas, ceremonies, translations, and temples, Ober follows the money of industrialist philanthropists, the reports of intelligence officers, as well as the migration patterns of often low or outcaste Buddhist migrants. He also thoughtfully considers the thousands of Indian laborers (as depicted on the cover of the Stanford edition) who gave blood and sweat to the physical excavation and restoration of Buddhist sites. While Buddhism may have become an intellectual plaything for Europeans (to borrow an expression from Bhikkhu Bodhi), Ober shows how the stakes are high and personal for Indians. At a deeper level, Ober elegantly questions what it means to be disappeared and remembered, whether the past can ever truly die, and how it is reimagined in the present. In the nearly 150 years Ober examines, the pre-modern tradition could not return, yet Buddhism was indeed resurrected and reconfigured in the process of co-creating new meaning in a changing world.

Conscious of the structural limitations of his broad survey approach, as well as of his own linguistic lacunae, Ober cites the book’s innumerable collaborations. He makes explicit his use of the concept of unarchived histories (coined by the co-founder of subaltern studies, Gyanendra Pandey), as well as of place-making (creatively borrowed from the anthropologist Keith Basso). Down to his rationale for word choice and capitalization when addressing caste and religious identity (which we follow in this review), Ober treads with thoughtful humility. Along with this attention to method, Ober’s prose is as exquisite as it is approachable. He masterfully threads the needle between delighting an erudite readership and being accessible to a non-academic audience. He also maintains an even-keeled respect for the complexity of his subjects and their contribution to the Indian Buddhist project, including the more unlikable characters traversing British colonial history and Hindu religious nationalism, who might otherwise be caricatured or discounted. While this may irritate various constituencies, it is a mark of a courageous historian.

### Chapter Summary

In his introduction, Ober announces four key interventions he makes over the course of seven loosely chronological chapters. First, that Buddhism’s all but disappearance from India is a useful fiction, and he has the evidence to prove it. Second, that a mighty and eclectic array of Indians were leading actors in the resurgence of Buddhism in India. Third, that Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and his work were fruitions of a long and variegated historical arc, not a singular point of origin, as commonly asserted in Great Man histories of Buddhism. Fourth, that the revival of Buddhism in the colonial and postcolonial eras was a key component of modern Indian history, affecting nearly every political strand, from Hindu nationalism to Nehruvian secular democracy, from *dalit* anti-caste activism to Indian leftism. Any one of these four arguments would have warranted its own monograph. Yet, while Ober has highlighted these key points, the reader quickly discovers

that the book packs far more than four punches—and its subtle argumentation is not of the gratuitous punching genre at all.

Chapter one, “The Agony of Memory,” provides insight into the medieval period of Indian Buddhism’s weakening and vilification up through the early colonial encounter, tracing ample evidence of continued Buddhist activity and (anti)memory through a range of primary and indirect sources (Hindu scriptures, Tamil epics, scholarly writings, surveyors’ reports, letters, poems, songs, and more). Ober unconventionally includes antagonistic memories of Buddhists among Hindus as evidence of their endurance. As it was common to reprimand a misbehaving child by calling them a “darned Buddhist,” Buddhism must still have been significant! The chapter examines the popularity of a translation of Asvaghosa’s *Vajrasuchi*, published in 1835 on the condition of including a brahmanical rebuttal to its anti-caste rhetoric. While the work may have been instigated by a British diplomat considered one of the “subalterns of Orientalism” (39), it is but one of the innumerable artifacts depicting an uninterrupted conversation between Buddhism and brahmanism—a conversation in which colonialists became ensnared, exacerbating its ancient tensions.

Chapter two chronicles the emergence of Calcutta as a growing Buddhist hub, particularly the dramatic flip from negative valuations of Buddhism in mainstream Indian culture to growing interest and re-signification as the result of intense philological, academic, and archaeological activity, as well as new educational and census policies of the mid 1800s. Importantly, a Jain administrator crafted a new and widely-read history textbook in Hindi in which he marshalled a mix of Pali and modern sources to feature Buddhism, comparing the Buddha to Jesus and Abraham Lincoln. In this period, native historians and savants edited translations, producing new classics which would inhabit the collective imaginary of the revival for generations. Ober foregrounds generations of English-educated Indian intellectuals and operators too often uncredited or unnamed: collectors, epigraphists, draftspersons, photographers and laborers, all of whom powered the budding dreams of a new India through the excavation of its great Buddhist past. Entire peoples, too, were rediscovered. With native ethnographers leading the charge, at least one minority group in Bengal was re-classified as crypto-Buddhist, inspiring Arakanese monastics to reform the Buddhisms of the borderlands, and certain subaltern groups to later organize around their newly uncovered identity.

In chapter three, the metaphor of the banyan tree aptly illustrates the myriad intertwined organizations which energized and irrigated the resurgence of Buddhism in popular culture. It rebalances scholarship which has privileged the cosmopolitan and English-speaking Anagarika Dharmapala and the rarified atmosphere of the Maha Bodhi Society, to the detriment of significant players and networks rooted in other classes, regions, and linguistic realms. The ambivalent relationship between the Chittagonian bhikkhu Kripasaran (a child of migrant cultivators and the founder, in 1892, of the Bengal Buddhist Association) and his lay, originally Sinhalese neighbor in Calcutta Dharmapala, who had little regard for the “low-born” monastics on the fringes of the British and Burman empires, shows the way in which social stratifications complicated the revival movement. Moving to the south, the chapter explores the legacy of Iyothee Thass, a doctor born in Madras to an untouchable caste, who founded in 1898 the soon-to-be national network of the Shakya Buddhist Society and led a powerful self-respect movement. Long before Ambedkar developed his own history of dalits as having always been Buddhist, Thass was promoting a glorious indigenous Dravidian Buddhist identity, and the idea that untouchability arose out of the conflict between Buddhism and brahmanism. The chapter attentively chronicles these associations’ diverse and often competing articulations of Buddhism, as well as their complex dealings with Europeans, Americans, Japanese, and other members of the Indian intelligentsia (such as the social reformer and writer Rabindranath Tagor), all invested in the revival of Buddhism.

Chapter four turns to Hindus and modern Hinduism, key forces in the Buddhist revival. The charismatic mystic Swami Vivekananda refashioned Gautama as Hinduism’s rebel child. Liberals like M.K. Gandhi and

the Arya Samaj reformists upheld the Buddha as an exemplar of Hinduism in their efforts to modernize the tradition. Internationalists attempted to harness Buddhism's appeal (perhaps India's leading export) in the effort to expand Hinduism and avoid a partition with Burma. Finally, nationalists were keen to retrieve Buddhism's Indian-ness as a component of national identity while undercutting its bite. Dharmapala courted the proponents of this Hindutva-inspired Arya Dharma, as he rallied support seemingly by any means necessary for his cause to re-establish the Bodhgaya temple under new leadership. The chapter traces Buddhist collusions with the Hindu hard right through leadership appointments and networks of funding. The Birla industrialist family, closely connected to most powerful Hindu right-wing party, bankrolled countless construction and publishing projects benefiting Buddhists, often of a very different political persuasion. We witness a strategy of containment, dominant to this day in India, which renders Buddhism both visible and invisible. While enthusiasm for a Hindu Buddha helped lift a brahmanical stigma and contributed to renewed Buddhist prominence, it came at the cost of suppression. On the brink of Indian nationhood, this modern iteration of the brahmanization of Buddhism sought to appropriate and neutralize Buddhism's disruptive potency.

As a counterpoint, the fifth chapter, "The Snake and the Mongoose," paints a vibrant portrait of heterogenous Buddhist anti-caste movements, the emergence of *bahujan* Buddhism, and the Adi-Hindu current, the last of which combined elements of the anti-caste bhakti tradition and the veneration of poet-saints with a strong rejection of a Congress party deemed patronizing for its efforts to purify the "unclean." While "insecurities about the unravelling of Hindu-ness" (196) drove politics of financing-for-containment, soldiers of the *sasana* (activist missionary monastics), organic intellectuals, and grass-roots groups drew upon Buddhism to fuel a more revolutionary approach to debates about the future of India. We learn of the Malabar Buddhist Movement in Kerala and the conversion-reversions of *izhavas*, and of the Indian Buddhist Society, founded in Lucknow by the Bengali Bhikkhu Bodhananda, a key inspiration for Ambedkar. With uncommon skill, this brahmin-born, slum-dwelling monk united low caste and untouchable communities, as well as rallied and converted members of Lucknow's middle class. The chapter unpacks important cultural and hermeneutical differences between multiple regional and national players, and the further reorientations which Ambedkar brought to his own re-articulation of Buddhist teachings. This rebalances recent scholarly attention (Stroud 2023) given to the importance of American pragmatism and other Anglo-European strands of Ambedkar's thinking. While acknowledging these influences, here we see Ambedkar within a continuity of *Indian* Buddhist anti-caste thought and activism.

Chapter six, "When the Buddha Met Marx," offers an important corrective to prevalent theories of Buddhist modernism. These theories parse European ideological movements re-shaping a globalized Buddhism, but rarely attend to Marxism. Here we meet two contrasting prominent scholar-activists who trained and taught in the US and in Russia: Dharmananda Damodar Kosambi and Rahul Sankrityayan. While the former wrote mostly in Marathi and attempted to make Marxism more Buddhist, the latter wrote prolifically in Hindi in a quest to make Buddhism more Marxist. As academics who also wrote fiction, both were instrumental in building the popular imaginary and some of the material infrastructure of the Indian Buddhist revival. Kosambi remained loyal to Gandhi and a more humanistic socialism, while Sankrityayan took a hard left turn, deeming religious identity-building counterproductive and misguided. Despite obvious differences, they both "considered Buddhism to be at the forefront of a modern movement for inclusion, equality, and a life well lived" (33). Though Ambedkar took issue with each on various grounds, the chapter shows we cannot fully appreciate his own intellectual genealogy without them.

Finally, to the surprise of those expecting the book to culminate in an apotheosis starring Ambedkar, its last chapter, "The Buddha Nation," centers instead on India's first prime minister and the paradoxes of

“Nehruvian Buddhism.” It reevaluates the importance and impact of state sponsored Buddhism, on both the domestic and international fronts, through efforts to solidify pan-Asian solidarities and assert the Non-Alignment Movement during the Cold War. We meet a Nehru torn between the archetypes of the Buddha and Ashoka, that is to say, between his humanistic ideals and the realpolitik of statecraft. He eventually witnesses the failure of soft power Buddhism with the confrontational dalit mass conversions of 1956, the Dalai Lama’s exile in 1959, and the eruption of the Sino-Indian War in 1962. Arguably, the legacies of Gandhi, Nehru and Ambedkar have all been betrayed with the more recent rise of Hindutva. Nevertheless, traces of Nehruvian diplomacy—grounded in relic offerings, temple visits and the positioning of India as the homeland of Buddhism—endure.

### **Unfinished Business and Potential Impact**

Poignantly, Ober confesses to writing yet another his-story of Buddhism, given his struggles to locate and give voice to women within the Indian Buddhist revival movement. He notes the ideological deployment of gendered discourses when the femininities of Burmese Buddhist women are contrasted with those of Hindu women to denigrate Hinduism and extol Buddhism’s supposed progressivism, but this remains a male-driven rhetoric. The masculinist thrust so prevalent in modern Indian Buddhism remains under-theorized here, as elsewhere. Several prominent non-Indian women are included and problematized in *Dust on the Throne* (the Russian theosophist Helena Blavatsky, the British socialist Annie Besant, the Hawaiian philanthropist Mary Foster). One yearns, though, for more mentions of South Asian women engaged in the book’s complex web of relationships—if only to leave us with more questions, and perhaps an invitation to engage in what the cultural historian Sadiya Hartman calls critical fabulations.

Notwithstanding the charged politics of representation (consider the author’s nationality, race, and gender), and its likely controversial rightsizing of Ambedkar (revered by many as a Bodhisattva), many Indian Buddhists, especially those hailing from communities targeted in the current political climate, will likely welcome this book with delight and even vindication. It traces with meticulous care the longstanding stratagems of both liberal and fundamentalist Hindus to subsume Buddhism into a supremacist agenda. In April 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi presided over a large, state-sponsored, international Buddhist conference in Delhi, raising eyebrows among many Western observers. This was only paradoxical to the uninformed: as this book shows, Hindu nationalism has played a substantial role in the Buddhist revival, both helping and harming actual Buddhists. That an American historian is tracing these footprints and deconstructing this process may matter in a particular way to minority activists who have sought to marshal non-Indic support for their cause. The book will likely also be a welcome contribution to growing anti-caste movements in North America, as it helps untangle casteist theologies from their cloak of anti-imperialist discourse, and now also from DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) and religious freedom rhetoric. These, too, get coopted to defend the sanctity and innocence of caste stratification.

*Dust on the Throne* is also an important contribution to impassioned academic debates about the category of engaged Buddhism, which have evolved alongside fraught discussions about politics and dharma in living communities. Scholars Jessica Main, Rongdao Lai (2013), Paul Fuller (2022), and others have chipped away at the biases of post-war liberal scholarship in its arguably truncated curations and normative constructions. In particular, they have sought to reintegrate the end of the 1800s and the interwar period in Asia as a crucial timeframe for Buddhism’s genealogy on the global stage. They offer a more capacious framework for engagement, making analytical room for Buddhist ethno-nationalism, militarism, and imperialism. They also begin to theorize how underlying concerns about secularism (not just colonialism) provide a continuum between timeframes and right- and left-wing Buddhist political hermeneutics. Here we find significant

substantiation of their arguments in method and in substance: Hindu Buddhas, Marxist Buddhas, and many Buddhas in-between.

Regarding modern Buddhism, readers will inevitably compare *Dust on the Throne* to David McMahan's *The Making of Modern Buddhism* (2008), another publication that shook up the Buddhist studies scene and influenced larger discussions. Both scholars admit to drawing upon the work of many others and not bringing anything unheard of to the table, and yet their distinctive framing changed the field. Much scholarship on modern Buddhism since 2008, including McMahan's own subsequent work, is in some way a retort to, or a correction or elaboration of, his conceptualization of Buddhist modernism. I imagine Ober's work having a similar before-and-after effect, becoming an indispensable read for fans and critics alike. Both *The Making of Modern Buddhism* and *Dust on the Throne* contribute to challenging structural entrenchments of the Anglo-European academy which still treat textual and preferably pre-modern expressions of the tradition as most deserving of study. India's modern Buddhism is alive and well, and offers us much.

In this book, Ober has made a convincing case that Indians “were as much the ‘curators of the Buddha’ as their Western counterparts” (101)—a friendly corrective to Donald Lopez's (1995) famous anthology. As Ober states in his conclusion, he hopes his work will provoke long overdue conversations between scholars of modern India and those theorizing modern Buddhism, even if, on occasion, to dispute and correct his work. Readers should not, however, reduce *Dust on the Throne* to its apparent regional and religious specificity. While it helps us make more sense of 21<sup>st</sup> century Buddhism(s), it also leaves us pondering the role of religious imagination in our global political future. It is thus a gift to anyone reflecting on the human negotiations of memory, place, and imagination. While many will praise Ober's intellectual dexterity, analytical prowess and archival skills, there is a beating heart in this work, one of a traveler in time and space, bearing witness to actors and communities whose contributions and inner worlds have too long been denied to history.

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