

Douglas Ober

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

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The fact that Bodh Gaya is now a global destination, always teeming with Buddhist devotees, can make its ruined and neglected state as reported in an 1886 newspaper article by Sir Edwin Arnold (1832–1904) difficult to imagine. But the lament over the sorry state of the place where the Buddha became enlightened by the author of the popular poem “Light of Asia” (1879) has often been described as a major catalyst for reviving Buddhist activity there. This includes even the drawn-out battle that developed over ownership of the temple after the Sri Lankan Angarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) struggled against local Hindu authority. Such emphasis on the actions of Anglophone elites is typical of the approach used to recount Buddhism’s resurgence in South Asia, as Douglas Ober points out in *Dust on the Throne: The Search for Buddhism in Modern India*. Ober effectively challenges this approach by presenting an almost dizzying array of details about how individuals in South Asia engaged with Buddhism over the last two centuries. What emerges in his study is a clear sense of shifting and developing networks in which Buddhism helped to unsettle an established status quo, undermining any simple view that India is essentially truest as a place of Hinduism.

In his introduction, Ober usefully outlines four interventions, contending that: (1) the theory of Buddhism’s “disappearance” from the subcontinent is little more than useful fiction, which allowed a complicated situation to be largely ignored; (2) while it is true that Buddhist institutions declined in the subcontinent, even the much discussed colonial revival was in fact led as much by Indians and other Asians as it was Europeans; (3) India’s modern Buddhist revival began one hundred years earlier than that which is frequently designated (i.e., 1956 when the Indian government celebrated “2,500 years of Buddhism” and when B. R. Ambedkar [1891–1956] led many converts to the dhamma); (4) there is too little awareness of how the Buddhist revival contributed to shape modern Indian history, ranging from the emergence of Hindu nationalism and Hindu reform movements, to Dalit and anticaste activism, Indian leftism, and Nehruvian secular democracy.

The book is organized in a broadly chronological manner, where distinct aspects of developing networks are explored in seven individual chapters. Ober traces Buddhism’s resurgence beginning in the nineteenth century, demonstrating that much occurred

before Dr. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956 along with almost five hundred thousand followers, the moment often credited with the inception of Buddhism's renewal in South Asia. The view offered is riveting on many levels, revealing varying intentions as Buddhism focused the energies of many individuals drawn out of the shadows by Ober who wished to revive or sometimes suppress it. This view firmly displaces one of an indigenous population largely unfamiliar with and uninterested in the Buddhist material and tradition, with sharply drawn characters making very specific efforts of intervention.

A concern to be raised about Ober's otherwise fine study is how to define what constitutes the disappearance of Buddhism in India, the central premise that his project confronts and means to prove false. Is it to be designated by the end of institutional monastic practice, removing Buddhism as a significant force in the complex religious landscape of the subcontinent? Or does it embrace the complete disappearance of any form or awareness of Buddhism there? For such consideration, how do we avoid making Buddhism a dead normative tradition? One way is to register as carefully as we can the changing nature of its influence as the power earlier wielded by monastic players developed in new ways and with different agents. Despite some targeted studies such as that by Arthur McKeown (2018) that demonstrate how some Buddhist practice continued in South Asia after the thirteenth century, there is no question that this activity is much diminished from earlier times. While some might see Ober's protest as disingenuous, the great value of his stance is how it reminds us that all activity of Buddhism should not be evaluated only in religious terms. Ober's approach allows us to consider the ramifications of religion and those who employ it in ways that include more than what might be called normal religious activity. It is an exciting perspective, especially if we move away from focusing just on matters of "continuation." Buddhism then becomes a factor in South Asia after the thirteenth century that could be recreated, recalled, or reengaged.

Ober draws upon the concept of "un-archived histories," as introduced by the historian Gyanendra Pandey (2013). By scrutinizing broader categories of evidence in material that has been marginalized and ignored, Ober builds a robust view of Buddhism's continued presence in the subcontinent. He ably demonstrates the faulty nature of a narrative that has largely focused on the role of outsiders (administrators, archaeologists, and scholars who were principally British) for initiating the rediscovery and redevelopment of the Buddhist homeland. Without ignoring those efforts, Ober complicates the story by delineating the diverse nature of actions by individuals across South Asia, creating a fuller view of overlapping connections. We learn much about even relatively well-studied figures such as Angarika Dharmapala when put into networks of interaction with others. The well-known founding by Dharmapala of the Maha Bodhi Society chapter in Calcutta, for instance, was actually preceded in 1887 by the Chittagong Buddhist Association by Krishna Chandra Chowdhury (1844–1910). There was also the Bengal Buddhist Association founded in Calcutta in 1892 by Kripasan Mahathera (1865–1926). Ober is especially effective in charting the increasing activity in the early twentieth century, comparing the many efforts to branches of the banyan tree that appear as separate trees but actually stem from a single trunk. Likewise, his exploration of how the modern Hindu appropriation of Buddhism and the Buddha has had various consequences, brings together at certain moments conflicting trends and individuals. He continues in later chapters to chart diverse intentions as, for instance, how labeling Buddhism as Hinduism was also sometimes a rhetorical strategy, as done by the Punjabi advocate Pandit Sheo

Narain (c. 1860–1936), who incorporated Buddha’s teaching alongside those of Krishna, Christ, and Muhammad to highlight religious brotherhood.

An example of the useful broadening Ober achieves with even known material begins in his first chapter, “The Agony of Memory,” in a discussion of a short Buddhist manuscript, the *Vajrasuchi*, whose publication in 1839 was prompted by a British diplomat, Lancelot Wilkinson (1804–41). The text has garnered attention in religious studies, especially for questions of its authenticity and attribution to the early Buddhist scholar Ashvaghosa. But Ober emphasizes its long-lived popularity among those with anticaste sentiments that demonstrates the vibrant regard for such treatises, which is made all the more interesting for the inclusion in the publication of a rebuttal by Wilkinson’s Sanskrit tutor, Pandit Subaji Bapu (dates unknown).

Another example of how Ober highlights the ramifications of certain actions occurs in his second chapter, “Dispelling Darkness,” where he describes the considerable presence of Buddhism in what became a widely used, nineteenth-century school textbook in India, despite the unease it caused to some readers. Titled *Itihās Timirnasak* (*itihās timirnāśak*) or *History as the Dispeller of Darkness*, it was composed in Hindi by Raja Sivaprasad (1823–95), who recorded that he found British histories of India and the Purana accounts inadequate. His promotion of the study of the past as necessary for improvement embraced a significant focus on Buddhism and the life of the Buddha, even characterizing the early tradition as a popular protest movement.

Ober repeatedly identifies the marked concern for social reform and anticaste activism as seen in his discussion of P. Lakshmi Narasu (1861–1934) and Iyothee Thass (1845–1914), two interesting leaders that significantly but differently promoted the work of the Shakya Buddhist Society in Madras. Thass wrote in Tamil, while Narasu was more broadly educated and connected with a wider range of audiences. Narasu’s writing often emphasized how Buddhism was important for contemporary problems, and Ober points out that Ambedkar in 1948 called Narasu’s *The Essence of Buddhism* (1907) the best book of Buddhism. Ober’s sensitivity to anticaste activism when considering how Buddhism was deployed in the last two centuries is particularly welcome for testifying to an interreligious awareness within India that deserves to be better known. The book will no doubt be useful to scholars and students in a range of disciplines, but the narrative is compelling enough to engage even general readers. *Dust on the Throne* opens up a path that can lead to many further discoveries and connections, making it a timely book as increasing authoritarian actions throughout the world work to suppress a sense of complexity in the past.

REFERENCES

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