

Buddhist Normativity as Emancipatory Praxis: Anti-Caste Cultural Assertion and Social Justice in Contemporary India

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Abstract: *Buddhism, beyond its outlook as a religion and philosophy, has multiple dimensions and meanings, particularly in the form of social actions with a universal and egalitarian appeal. The social justice movements in India, primarily based on anti-caste ideals, seek to employ Buddhism as a means to escape the caste hierarchy. This article examines the role of Buddhist normativity in building a resistance movement for social transformation in the theoretical realm and explores its praxis, especially in the form of the creation of alternative cultural spaces through neo-Buddhist mobilisation in contemporary India. While analysing the instrumentality of Buddhist philosophy in achieving freedom and equality in a caste-bound society with a special focus on anti-caste cultural assertions in India, this study seeks to redefine the idea and operationalisation of the concept of social justice from the vantage point of Buddhist principles. The article further substantiates the theoretical proposition of Buddhism's instrumentality in reclaiming a just social order, drawing on in-depth interviews with people from marginalised castes who primarily engage with Buddhism as a social action.*

Keywords: Buddhism, Social Justice, Normativity, Anti-Caste, Social Action, India.

INTRODUCTION

The movement for social justice, with its long history of resistance against caste inequalities and discrimination, holds a significant place in contemporary India. The genealogy of this movement can be traced back to the existence of an exploitative and discriminatory caste system. Caste structures deeply embedded in Hinduism perpetuate hierarchy and domination based on birth (Jodhka, 2012, p. 2). Caste inequalities, in today's time, exist in myriad forms, including untouchability, violence, rape, menial occupation, etc. (Chatterjee and Ursula, 1994, p. 17). Simultaneously, resistance against caste has also developed over time with multiple dimensions. Although Buddhism has emerged as a major anti-caste philosophy, its instrumentality as an antidote to social inequalities and injustices has not been adequately explored in society. In this context, this article revisits the role of Buddhist normativity in defining anti-caste resistance and social justice by enabling the creation of an alternative cultural space. This study explores the lived practices of people from marginalised castes who engage with Buddhism as a social action, and how they apply Buddhist normative ideas in their everyday lives to transform social structures into safe spaces that foster dignity and self-respect.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted within the interpretivist epistemological framework, which holds that knowledge is produced through the subjective comprehension of lived practices and the experiences of individuals. In conformity with the latter, a phenomenological research design is adopted in the study to understand the practical application of Buddhist principles of social justice through cultural assertions by anti-caste activists and practitioners. Participants in the study were selected through purposive and snowball sampling. They are individuals directly engaged in Buddhist social action, including Ambedkarite Buddhists, members of Buddhist organisations, monks, and other activists involved in Buddhist mobilisation at the grassroots level. Fifteen participants were interviewed to understand their activities and alternative cultural assertions. In-depth interviews were conducted because the study focused on experiential depth rather than numerical strength or statistical representativeness. The study identified patterns from the data using thematic analysis. The collected data were analysed within the theoretical framework of engaged

Buddhism and social justice. All participants were informed about the objective of the study, and verbal consent was obtained. Participants' identities were kept anonymous in the study.

CONTOURS OF ANTI-CASTE RESISTANCE IN COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL INDIA

Resistance against caste began in a more organised and collective way during colonial rule in India, owing to colonial modernity based on reason (Deshpande, 2011, p. 1319), Christian missionary activism (Lankina and Lullit, 2013, p. 129), and mass mobilisation by leaders from marginalised sections (Jayant 2022). Efforts of anti-caste leaders, particularly Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, during colonial times, culminated in more desirable, equitable outcomes in the form of representation, dignity, and other opportunities that were hitherto denied to the marginalised sections due to social hierarchy based on caste (Audi, 1989).

The end of colonial administration and the adoption of a modern constitutional document ensuring equality and freedom to everyone irrespective of their social identities ushered in a new era of the social justice movement in India. Along with the continuity of colonial practices of representation and affirmative actions for marginalised sections in a more evolved and elaborate form (Suri, 1994, p. 37), the movement adopted a new language of constitutional modernity and morality with multifaceted collective resistance. The mobilisation for social justice in post-independent India, with a different nature and course of action across the country due to cultural differences and regional variations, demanded an equal distribution of material resources and other primary human goods, including dignity and self-respect. One of the significant mass mobilisations to resist caste inequalities occurred in the socio-religious realm. Many people sought asylum in religious conversion to be freed from caste discrimination and prejudices, with the realisation that transformation in the political and economic domain through state support is inadequate in bringing many changes in the lives of marginalised sections in India. Consequently, the adoption of Buddhism emerged as the most popular method in the socio-religious domain to escape casteism and the socially ill practices associated with it. Eventually, many people from marginalised sections in India increasingly perceived Buddhism as a way of emancipation.

TRACING THE BUDDHIST PATH OF LIBERATION THROUGH THE TRAJECTORY OF ANTI-CASTE MOVEMENT

The movement of resistance premised upon the principles of Buddhism in India essentially means the mobilisation of marginalised people against the caste system. The Buddhist movement as an anti-caste campaign has been popularised by the most prominent anti-caste leader, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, with a huge influence on millions of marginalized communities who were suffering from caste humiliation. His conversion of half a million people into Buddhism in 1956 marked one of the significant developments in the anti-caste movement in India. Ambedkar gave a new outlook to Buddhism by redefining the traditional version, and his interpretation has widely come to be known as *Navayana* Buddhism. It is otherwise

called as 'neo-Buddhism' (Ahir, 1996, pp. 31-32). Just one day after his conversion, Ambedkar gave a speech during *Buddha Dhamma Deeksha* on 15 October 1956 at Deeksha Bhoomi, Nagpur. While emphasising the reason for his conversion and highlighting equality in Buddhism in his speech, he opined that "people will lose their caste and become equal when they join Buddha Sangh"(quoted in Meshram, 2021, p. 160).

There were many other anti-caste activists such as Wamanrao Godbole, a contemporary of Ambedkar, who actively engaged in the historical event of conversion. Many Buddhist associations, such as *Mahabodhi* society and *Buddhadat* society, were created to resist caste through Buddhist philosophy (Meshram, 2021, pp. 7-21). After Ambedkar's death, millions of people followed his path and embraced Buddhism as a resistance movement against caste. The mass gathering at Deekashabhoomi in Nagpur every year, to commemorate the historic conversion on 14 October 1956 led by Ambedkar, fathoms the depth of Buddhist mobilisation among the marginalised sections in contemporary India. Buddhism, as an alternative way of life with multifaceted dimensions, has become a guiding light for many people from marginalised sections to shape the social, cultural, and political aspects of their life.

LOCATING THE IDEA OF SOCIAL JUSTICE IN BUDDHIST NORMATIVITY

The concept of social justice has been defined and articulated in varied ways across the globe owing to the existence of different forms of discrimination against marginalised communities of different regions. While Western countries conceptualise social justice around experiences of inequalities, primarily in the form of race, class, and gender, the countries of the South Asian region, especially India, place the social identity of caste as a central element of social justice discourse. In other words, scholars who conceptualised social justice in the Indian context have primarily emphasised caste as a central factor in their analysis in which they sought to develop and articulate social justice, unlike the race-based societies of the West. For instance, Guru (2018), in his analysis of the conundrum of caste, argued that social justice, having a timeless essence and universal relevance, performs the discursive function of reducing the tension between liberty and equality and ensures that marginalised communities access the principle of equality. He further contended that social justice, which extracts its essence and purpose from 'nature-generated and man-induced' justice, must be advanced through the intervention of the state. In the discourse of social justice, the symbiotic relationship between individual interest and institutional well-being is very important, as the latter gives a concrete expression to the abstract principle of social justice (Guru, 2018, pp. 3-6). Scholarly works on social justice in India revolved around themes like legal jurisprudence and constitutional rights (Dangwal, 1997; Shah, 1998; Mendelsohn, 2014); socio-political mobilisation and distributive justice (Diwakar, 1998); social citizenship and social inclusion (Oommen, 2014); and administrative, activist, and public policy discourse (Krishnan, 2018). Socio-constitutional approach with an emphasis on affirmative actions (Sandanshiv 1986), and multi-dimensional facets related to different agencies including individual, family, community, and nation (Jatava, 1998). However, it is

significant to theorise the concept of social justice in the Indian context, with an emphasis on Buddhist epistemology informed by the anti-caste movement as its praxis. A synthesis of Buddhist normative values with the socio-cultural inequalities of caste, power differentiation, and marginality provides a new Buddhist perspective of social justice.

In India, as evident in the conversion movement, the cause of social equality is sought to be achieved through the application of Buddhist normative ideals. Buddhism embraces individuals as equals with agency and choice. Buddhism and Buddhist teachings emerged in India as an oppositional force against the Brahmanical Hindu system that validates caste hierarchy. The face-off between Buddhism and Hinduism in the history of India, as Ambedkar termed it, is a tussle between revolutions and counter-revolutions. By abolishing old caste identities, Buddhism provided a new life for those enslaved in caste ghettos. By challenging caste and Hindu structures, Buddhism challenged the existing social hierarchy. In this context, it is stated that “the Buddha sweeps aside all claims to sacred superiority based on birth, ritual performance or esoteric knowledges” (Swaris, 2011, p. 254).

Buddhism ascribes the concept of social justice to a radical nature by gaining equality through establishing a new system of common good replacing the old and existing one. Resistance against caste was not sought by reforming the structures within Hinduism, but rather establishing a new way to be followed to be free from Hindu caste structures. Buddha called the new way of life as *Dhamma*. By emphasising the biological unity of the human race, Buddha challenged the Brahmanical notion that inequality is pre-ordained (Balaramamoorthy, 1970, p. 42).

Buddhist advocacy of non-violence, kindness, love, and affection constitutes a moral explanation for establishing an egalitarian social order (Eppsteiner, 1985).19). While finding the problems of the human mind, such as greed, hatred, and delusion, Buddha proposed generosity, loving-kindness, and wisdom as anti-dotes to those issues (Green, 2004, p. 78). Most caste inequalities that often take violent forms can be resisted by endorsing the Buddhist path to love and non-violence. Buddhist practice, as a means of attaining peace, adds another dimension to the discourse on social justice. Another Buddhist concept of *Sangha*, a collective group of people co-existing together without any separating borders of caste, colour, creed, and region, symbolises the normative values of equality and fraternity. *Sangha* and its admittances are significant. All individuals are considered equal in *Sangha*. People lose their caste identities and become equal when they join *the Sanghas* (Gellner, 2004, p. 157).

Buddhism also lays out the path to emancipation by advocating and ensuring equal educational opportunities for everyone. It has made knowledge accessible to every section along with developing common man’s language by critiquing the intricate language of knowledge used by the social elites to maintain their hegemony. The Buddhist idea of education is holistic and normative. One of the major aspects of social justice is the emphasis upon dignity and rights of individuals to freedom and opportunity that are reflected in Buddhist teachings (Chew, 2004, p. 37). Thus,

by endorsing the normative values of equality and freedom through philosophical teachings and by being the foundational philosophy of the anti-caste movement, Buddhism became a co-terminus with social justice.

REFLECTIONS OF BUDDHIST ANTI-CASTE RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

In contemporary India, Buddhism has been sought as a means of promoting social equality and justice in myriad ways.

Replacement of Hindu Customs with Buddhist Rituals

Buddhism as an alternative cultural life is adopted in every aspect of life, from marriage to death rituals. For instance, in a Buddhist wedding—a ritual that is widely performed among the Scheduled Caste communities in contemporary India—vows are exchanged in front of portraits of the Buddha and Ambedkar, in contrast to the Hindu rituals of *Havan* and *Saptapadi*. The Buddhist wedding ceremony is easy, simple, and short with a meager expenditure. Buddhist priests, popularly known as *Bhante*, ask the family to arrange candles, flowers, portraits, and a table covered with white clothes, and charge nothing except what the family offers voluntarily as remuneration. One of the *Bhantes* (monks) who performed several marriage ceremonies, more specifically in Uttar Pradesh, one of the northern states of India, has opined that

*“The consciousness among people from the marginalised section is rising slowly. They are relinquishing Hindu rituals and adopting Buddhist customs to escape the caste system. It has also helped in boosting their moral confidence and consolidating the resistance against the hegemony of Brahmanical rituals and customs.”*¹¹

Rituals related to death have also undergone Buddhist transformations in contemporary India. According to Buddhist tradition, the body is simply cremated without any intricate *pooja* (ritual) or prayers. A post-cremation ceremony was also held, with the deceased’s portraits placed near those of Buddha and Ambedkar. People, including the deceased’s close relatives and neighbours, gather at home and are asked to light candles and pay their respect by offering flowers in front of all the portraits displayed on white clothes. Following that, *Bhante explains* to the audience the significance of rituals and the logical explanation of life and death. The *Bhante* who performs the death rituals in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India, explained that

*“It is important to explain to the people that life and death are the realities. There was nothing permanent. The realisation of this Buddhist principle will not only help them to survive their personal agony but also the social evils of superstition and irrationality.”*¹²

Buddhist rituals as an alternative to Hindu tradition are rampant all over India today. Buddhist rituals are neither identical nor homogeneous across India. It also blends local customs and traditions that align with science and reason. There are no rigid rules or regulations for performing such rituals. The attitude of Buddhist monks towards performing rituals is different from their counterparts in other religions, including Hinduism. They see it as a social duty rather than a profession (Shinde, 2023).

Conservation and Restoration of Buddhist Sites in Today's India

As a social justice project and anti-caste symbolism, many people associated with Buddhism are promoting Buddhist *viharas* across India. For instance, a *Bhante*—who has been instrumental in Buddhist institution building in Nagpur—highlighted the changing landscape of Buddhist movement and its impacts in contemporary India and stated that “modern movements like the Maha Bodhi Society have played a vital role in recovering, conserving, and restoring important Buddhist sites like Bodhi Gaya”¹³. He further added that the

*“Navayana Buddhist movement provided a pathway for Dalits, formerly considered untouchables, to reject the caste system and assert their identity and authority. While Ambedkar’s ambitious goals may not have been fully realised, the movement remains a positive influence in certain regions and has seen continued growth, particularly among Scheduled Castes.”*¹⁴

A Buddhist activist who was associated with the development of *Buddhavanam*, a rich 273-acre Buddhist heritage centre near Nagarjuna Sagar in Telangana, one of the states in the southern part of India, stated that

*“People from marginalised sections are increasingly following the path of Buddhism. However, there is an urgent need for government intervention to protect Buddhist sites and values. Because Buddhism and Buddhist movement have played a pivotal role in easing the lives of many downtrodden people who were haunted by caste humiliation and discrimination.”*¹⁵

Institutes and projects that promote Buddhist teachings across India, such as Nagarjuna Trainini Institute in Maharashtra and *Buddhavanam* project in Telangana, among others, are a manifestation of engaged Buddhism that applies Buddhist principles and values for promoting social justice and equality.

Formation of Buddhist Cultural Groups and Anti-Caste Assertion

Contemporary India has also witnessed the formation of many Buddhist cultural groups that seek to bring about transformation through music, drama, and other cultural forms. They perform on every occasion, such as *Buddha Purnima* and *Ambedkar Jayanti*, and raise their voices against caste oppression through Buddhist songs in several public spaces in India including universities. For instance, *Jai Bhim Kala Manch*, associated with a student organisation in New Delhi, seeks to exert Buddhist assertions through cultural programmes. One of the activists of the organisation has stated that

*“the Buddhist cultural assertion as an alternative to the mainstream Hindu caste domination has been consolidated in university spaces through the performance of songs and other visual arts that unapologetically rebuke the caste hierarchy and oppression. The Buddhist student assertion is impactful in terms of forming a collective sense that ensured emotional and psychological security to the students from marginalised sections.”*¹⁶

The anti-caste movement in contemporary India thus often takes the form of Buddhist assertions in various ways and in varied public spaces. The process of conversion to Buddhism and the adoption of Buddhist rituals among the downtrodden castes in India are consistent, though slow.

CONCLUSION

Buddhism in India, transcending the traditional boundaries of religion, has become instrumental in redefining the idea of social justice by enabling people to come out of the hierarchical caste structures. Buddhism, as a foundational philosophy of the anti-caste movement, has brought many changes in contemporary India, such as equal educational opportunities, cultural revival, community building, social awareness, and political mobilisation. However, the mobilisation of Buddhism as a means of social justice is still confined to a minuscule mass at the grassroots level, with no approval from or encouragement by the state. The growth of the Buddhist movement and philosophy is directly proportional to the growth of social justice ideals in India. Buddhist ideals and norms have transcended the conventional dominant social and cultural hierarchy and offered a ray of hope to millions of socially downtrodden people. Therefore, it is important to envision social justice by promoting the principles and ideals outlined and underlined by Buddhist philosophies and movements. Buddhism, as many of the respondents say, has become an integral part of the many people who belong to marginalised sections.

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Notes

(Endnotes)

1. Interview conducted in Amroha, Uttar Pradesh, India, in December 2025.
2. Interview conducted in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India in March 2025.
3. Interview conducted in Nagpur, Maharashtra, India in October 2025.
4. Interview conducted in Nagpur, Maharashtra, India in October 2025.
5. Interview conducted in Hyderabad, India in May 2025.
6. Interview conducted in New Delhi, India in November 2025.