

Roots of Ambedkar Buddhism in Kanpur

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The foundation of Buddhism in Europe and the revival of Buddhism in India took place at approximately the same time. It is well known, that Europeans took an active part in stimulating and encouraging a renaissance of Buddhism in India, led by the Orientalist image of India as the cradle of one of the major world religions (King 1999: 147). On the other hand, the knowledge of Buddha as the great founder of an esoteric religion never subsided in Europe and was maintained even through the middle ages, miraculously to resurrect in the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1869) whose philosophy became quite popular in the 19th century. Schopenhauer set a philosophical trend for a generation of young Germans whose inner quest led a number of them to embrace Buddhism.

The resurrection of Buddhism in India at the end of the 19th century through Anagarika Dharmapala was a move to fence off Hinduism and to liberate the Buddhist places in India (Ahir 1991: 17). The foundation of the Mahabodhi Society in 1891 was directly connected with his effort to reclaim Bodhi Gaya for Buddhism, a still unfinished task. Although Anagarika Dharmapala was well aware of the downtrodden situation of the Dalit(s) of the time, the Mahabodhi Society mainly attracted upper-caste people (Das 1998: 13). When Dr Ambedkar embraced Buddhism in 1956, his understanding of *dharmma* was founded on a radical rejection of Hinduism and the caste system and a [222] critical evaluation of existing Buddhisms (Rodrigues 1993). Dr Ambedkar was, through the example of Hinduism and the caste system, painfully aware of the entanglement of religion and society; therefore, he intended to reconstruct Buddhism not only as a religion for the untouchables but as a humanist and social religion, which combined scientific understanding with universal truth. His Buddhism projected a religion for a modern, civic society (see Fuchs 2001).

But Dr Ambedkar was not the first to cast Buddhism for Dalit(s). Pandit Iyothee Thass founded the Indian Buddhist Association in 1890, which developed into a broad movement amongst Tamil Dalit(s) in South India till the 1950s. Ambedkar in his 20 year long quest for a new religion for the Dalit(s) was well aware of those developments, and tried to get in touch with most of the leaders. Fortunately, those regional and local developments of Buddhist thought amongst the Dalit(s) have recently become a focus of study (see Aloysius 1998). The following paper will be a contribution to those studies insofar, as it intends to present the biography of an early Buddhist and Arya Samaji who had considerable influence amongst Dalit(s) and backward class people in Kanpur. Although Acharya Ishvardatt Medharthi is only a local figure, he was for a short while in the 1940s Dr Am-

bedkar's Pali teacher. Besides, I will try to show how “Ambedkar Buddhism” developed amongst the Dalit(s) in Kanpur.¹

Arya Samaj and Gurukul Kangri

Acharya Ishvardatt Medharthi (1900-1971) belonged to a Gareria family of Kanpur. Garerias are shepherds and belong to the backward castes. He was born in the cantonment which was one of the three segments of Kanpur town in those days. At the turn of the nineteenth century Kanpur was a prosperous industrial town with leather and textile factories, oils mills and a thriving wholesale market. The major factories had been set up by the British, the wholesale and commodity market was in Indian hands, and Kanpur was one of the major railway junctions in north India.

Ishvardatt Medharthi's father joined the army to become a medical doctor; military medical education was an opening for [223] the backward and depressed classes, who could not afford the expensive English- medium medical colleges. Besides, there was less caste discrimination within the military. In exchange for the training they got, students had to commit to serve the army for a considerable period of time. In Dr Fakireram's case, it was a period of ten years. During that time he was stationed in Burma, away from his family. His eldest son, Ishvardatt, was born before the father joined the army, and grew up like a single child, spoiled and pampered, as his biographer remarks, as his younger brothers and sisters were born only after Dr Fakireram's return from Burma.² Within his family, he, as the eldest and considerably older than his younger sisters and brothers, had a very prominent position.

When Dr Fakireram left the army, he set up a clinic in one of the major thoroughfares in Kanpur, where the shopkeepers were Muslims and Hindus alike. Dr Fakireram found easy acceptance into the Kanpur Medical Association, which was dominated by the Rohatgis, Dr Murarilal and Dr Jawarharlal. They were stout Arya Samajis, leading Gandhians and Congress members. Dr Fakireram was an Arya Samaji himself, and he got along well with these leading families. Similar convictions and the common nationalist cause bridged gaps of decent. The Arya Samaj had been prominent in Kanpur since 1879, mainly amongst Banias and Kayasthas (Nevill 1909: 124). Their influence was strongly felt in Congress politics, the nationalist movement, and in the trade union movement. The different factions within the Arya Samaj were also reflected in Kanpur - the majority group promoted the foundation of the Dayanand Anglo Vedic College, which opened in 1911, but another faction was supporting Gurukul Kangri at Hardwar.

Gurukul Kangri was an educational reform school, set up by Swami Shraddhanand (Munshiram) in 1902 to counter the Dayanand Anglo Vedic College with a radical experiment of national Hindu education. Set up in the wilderness near Hardwar, one of the famous pilgrimage places in India, its

educational principles were based on simple living, strict discipline, and physical training. Shradhanand took a vehemently anti-Muslim stance in his emphasis on *shuddhi* and reconversion of Muslims [224] for the Hindu nation, which would enable them to fight colonialism. The purification of Hinduism from its evils such as caste and the understanding of the *varnashramadharma* as a merit based division of labour in society, allowed lower-caste boys entry into Gurukul Kangri. They were accepted, although not appreciated, and on principle, student's caste was not disclosed, and caste specific names were omitted. Anonymity in caste matters and an egalitarian discipline with physical training, handicrafts and housekeeping, established a strong positive identity amongst the students.

Dr Fakireram got his son admitted to Gurukul Kangri in 1908, and he stayed there for a whole period of fourteen years. Ishvardatt Medharthi studied science, English, Hindi, Sanskrit, and Pali, which was taught by a Buddhist monk from Ceylon (*Gurukula Samachar* 1914: 543). Although Shradhanand did not have a high appreciation for Buddhism, because he considered the *ahimsa* doctrine as effeminate, an inappropriate response to the Muslim or colonial onslaught, the Pali teachers certainly sowed the seeds from which Ishvardatt Medharthi's adoption of Buddhism developed in a later period of his life. Buddhism in Gurukul Kangri was considered to be on the same level as purified Hinduism as taught by the Arya Samaj. And even from Anagarika Dharmapala's visit to the school in 1914, it cannot be deduced that there was any prominent or specific Buddhist influence (Fischer-Tiné 2000: 17). The school drew considerable attention from the nationalist and reformist public and was visited by a number of prominent personalities, including Mahatma Gandhi.

Ishvardatt was an excellent student, who, according to his biographer, always came first in class. The name Medharthi, given to him at Kurukul Gangri, reflects his superior intellectual powers; *medha* means mental power, intelligence, and wisdom; *artha* means purpose, the full translation would be - a person who is capable of using his mental powers. The study of Pali apart, he excelled in Sanskrit, which he knew to recite flawlessly. Knowing very well that the study of Sanskrit was usually prohibited for *shudras* and, according to the *Ramayana* and the laws of Manu, severely punished, he took great pride in his scholarship. The approach to teaching at Gurukul Kangri was meant to integrate [225] the mental, intellectual, physical, and emotional aspects of the student's personality.

Ishvardatt Medharthi internalised the Gurukul Kangri doctrine of life reform - convictions, teachings, and beliefs should also transform everyday life and lead to a reformed society. Through the purification and rectification of religion and society, finally and eventually, liberation from colonialism would be attained. Life reform and learning were considered to be revolutionary acts, which

would transform the political realm as well. On the occasion of the convocation meeting, Ishvardatt Medharthi delivered an address on behalf of the students, while the principal, Swami Shraddhanand, gave a speech himself on the importance of inter-caste marriage. Ishvardatt Medharthi took the oath that he will also marry outside his caste. He was taking that oath by the feet of his guru (Mudit 2000: 2).

In 1922, Ishvardatt Medharthi passed out of school with the degree of *Vidyalkar*, which was not recognised by the British educational system, and so, only private schools would employ him. Anticipating this situation, his father bought land on the outskirts of Kanpur in 1915 and set up a school there in the name of Shri Dayanand Bharatiya Vidyalaya. He wanted his son to become its principal, but Ishvardatt turned down the offer. He only stayed in Kanpur for a couple of months, during which time he was introduced to leading Arya Samajis and worked for a while with Ganesh Shanker Vidyarthi, a well-known journalist and Gandhian, in the publication of his newspaper *Pratap*. Soon he left for Calcutta (now Kolkata) to take up a three-year course in Ayurvedic medicine. But even after completing his studies, he was not yet willing to settle down according to his father's wishes. For a year he became the private teacher of the sons of the raja of Mewar.

In 1928, he married on his own accord the highly educated principal of a girls' school in Indore. It was an inter-caste marriage, which sprang out of his convictions, that only inter-caste marriages could destroy the hold of the caste system. The seeds for that revolutionary act were planted at Gurukul Kangri, which "offended [226] his father, which ultimately lead to a court case between father and son"(ibid.:3).

But now only that, newly married Ishvardatt, serious about his political convictions, joined the Bardoli satyagraha of Sardar Vallabhai Patel in 1929, for which he was imprisoned for six months, but, unfortunately, we know very little of his revolutionary involvement. Just released from prison, he joined Gandhi's Civil Disobedience Campaign and lived for a while at the Sabarmati Ashram. He took part in the salt march at Dandi for which he got imprisoned for three years.

The Caste System Exposed

His return to Kanpur in 1933 must have been triumphal; his father reconciled with him, and even functioned as the editor of his first book *The Caste System Exposed* (Medharthi 1933), and the school at Munshipuram was finally handed over to him by Dr Fakireram. However, the political scene had changed considerably and he had missed the years of the political awakening of the Dalit(s), which were fermented and canalised not only through the presence of Swami Achhutanand (1879-1933),³ but also through the discussion of the role of the depressed classes within a future constitutional framework. Being a radical critic of the caste system, it completely escaped him that

Swami Achhutanand, a Dalit leader, had rejected the caste system as well. He even erroneously claimed that Swami Achhutanand wanted to get the Dalit(s) back into the Arya Samaj fold.

Medharthi's book was dedicated to Dr Ambedkar, whom he addresses as the "fearless leader of the youth". The book bore a radical title but had a less radical content. In his criticism of the caste system, Medharthi remains within the mould of Dayanand Saraswati's teachings. In his opinion, the Vedas only distinguish between *Aryans* and *Dasyus*. He regards the differentiation between the different *varnas* only as merit-based division of labour. Well aware of the burning of the *Manusmriti* by Dr Ambedkar in 1927 at the Mahad satyagraha, he attributed the rigidities of the caste system to Manu, claiming that the Vedas never propagated caste. Being an educated person, he repeatedly ridiculed the ignorant [227] Brahmins, who do not live up to their educational standards, who, to the contrary, work as water carriers, peons, cooks and shopkeepers. Rightly he critiqued that the existing division of labour was not based on merit; a learned Bhangi (a 'low' caste) would always remain a Bhangi, and would not be able to achieve social recognition.

Dr Ambedkar is praised, but not elaborated on, although he mentions that Ambedkar intends to change religion. The caste system is for him a 'poisonous creeper', which strangles the whole society; it creates disunity, which is the root cause of foreign domination. Nationalist and reformist arguments are applied together. Only when the caste system is abolished, can Hindus unite and their struggle against the colonial powers can be successful. Endlessly, he deals with names, surnames and family names as caste and identity markers; Brahmins should abolish their names as Sharma, Tiwari, Chatturvedi etc., so that they can not be identified as Brahmins. The abolition of caste is for him a prerequisite of modernity. Japan and Turkey, who also had caste like structures and graded inequality, have overcome them and as a consequence, had developed into modern, powerful, and independent nations. The three main objectives in this book are: one – the system of *varnvyavastha* should be abolished, because it cannot be based on the quality of work or occupation without the support of the king/government; two, all titles and names, which disclose caste, should be abolished; and three, inter-caste marriages between caste Hindus and *shudras* should be conducted.

The book contents a dedication by the "Honorable His Holiness 108 Shri Swami Bodhanandji Mahasthvir, President of the U.P. Demolisher of the Caste System Association":

I consider this book named *Exposure of Caste System* a very important one in the present circumstances. In this book the downfall of Hindus have been depicted truly. In fact as long as the caste system based on birth remains in practice, this country cannot make any development in any direction. Unless the Dalit(s) are emancipated, the hope of *swaraj* would be a dream. [...] It is a very interesting and informative book. It is a must for *shudras* and untouchables. I hope that every Sana-

thani cum Arya Samaji, Buddha, Jain, Sikh, old and new reformers receive it well and profit from it (*ibid.*: 7). [228]

Bodhanand's dedication shows, that the few Dalit and backward class intellectuals were part of a common discourse. The two men were in touch with each other, knew of each other's work and followed the same path in their endeavour to destroy the caste system. As Acharya Ishvardatt Medharthi had studied Pali at Gurukul Kangri, Buddha's teachings must have been well known to him, although his critique of the caste system does not reveal any critique of Hinduism; to the contrary, he considers the Vedas to be the mother of all religions. Besides, Kanpur and Lucknow, where Bodhanand resided, were close to each other, and a mutual exchange of people, goods, talents and ideas between these two towns had a long tradition.

Lucknow as a centre of Buddhism

Bodhanand Mahasthvir (1874-1952) was born as Mukund Prakash into a Bengali Brahmin family. As his parents left him an orphan, he was brought up by an aunt, who took him to Benares. He took an early interest in religious matters, which made him become a wandering monk, before he returned to Benares in 1896, just at the time of famine. Deeply impressed by the Christian missionaries' relief work, he wanted to convert to Christianity, but was stopped by Buddhists monks from Ceylon who happened to attend a Theosophical Conference in Benares at the time (Sathi 1961: 37). When he made Lucknow his home, he first stayed at a Hanuman temple, but got in touch with the Barua Buddhists who had established a *vihara* at La Touche Road in Lucknow in 1901. This was a branch of the Bauddh Dharmakura Vihara, founded by Kripasaran Mahasthvir in 1885 to serve the Barua Buddhists of Bengal. Lucknow had quite a number of them, and they were employed as cooks, mainly by the British. In Hyderabad, Shillong and Jamshedpur, other Barua *viharas* were set up as well (Das 1998: 20).

Mukund Prakash got ordained in 1914 in Calcutta on a boat on the Hooghly in the presence of Kripasaran Mahasthvir. Bodhanand saw himself as an advocate of the Dalit(s) and started preaching Buddhism in Lucknow. In 1916, he founded the *Bharatiye Buddh Samiti* and in 1925 he set up the Buddh [229] Vihara in Risaldar Park in Lucknow. This small monastery was to become a centre of learning, meetings and discussions. He gathered a circle of interested and educated backward-class men around him, who called themselves the "Nau Ratnas" (nine jewels). They were Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu, the founder of the *Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan* and a historian of the early Dalit movement, Rai Bahadur Ram Charan, Shiv Dayal Singh Chaurasia, Gauri Shanker Pal, and Chedi

Lal Sathi. Bodhanand's disciples rose to prominence in the Dalit movement, which they considered to encompass Untouchables and *shudra* castes.

Ideologically, Bodhanand was pursuing the same argument as Swami Achhutanand. For him, *shudras* and 'Untouchables' were the original inhabitants of India, who had been deprived of their land and enslaved, because they had been defenceless and peace loving. In his book *Mula Bharatavasi Aur Arya* ('Original Inhabitants and Aryans'), he elaborated on that argument. In 1928, he founded the *Mul Nivasi* or *Hindu Backward Classes League*, which gained a separate organisational form because of the British colonial policy, which considered depressed and backward classes as separate entities, very much to the dismay of Bodhanand and his followers, who out of tactical reasons succumbed to these organizational necessities (Kshisagar 1994: 403).

The spread of Buddhism went together with the propagation of self-respect and with a conversion drive, which was moulded in the *sant* tradition, counteracting the *shuddhi*-move of the Arya Samaj. Bodhanand wrote two important books, the first on Buddhist rituals called *Baudha Dvicharya* and the second book, about the life and teaching of the Buddha, was written together with Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu and published in 1932. The reception of Buddhism through and with the help of Bodhanand happened before Dr Ambedkar proclaimed that he was in search of a new religion suitable for Dalit(s). Equality, righteousness, non-violence and compassion were the main tenets of that new religion, which proved to be ideally suited for *shudras* and Untouchables.

Chandika Prasad Jigyasu with his press served as an author and publisher, and as the ideological spearhead of the movement, working Bodhanand's ideas into his own publications. This meant a [230] reworking of bhakti tenets under the Buddhist and *Adi Hindu* mould, bringing them into the broad stream of a newly developing Dalit consciousness. The influence of his BKP was great and its two-anna editions covered in a short, concise and cheap form all major Dalit topics; the press had a tremendous impact on the first generation literate Dalit(s) in urban areas of the United Provinces.

As Ambedkar's quest for religion lasted for more than 20 years, he took a keen interest to discuss religious matters with Bodhanand. They met on three occasions: In 1926. the Maharaja Sahu of Kolhapur had called for an "Indian Non-Brahmin Conference", where they met first. The second meeting took place in 1928 in Lucknow on the occasion of the meeting of the Simon Commission and the third in 1948 after his second marriage in Lucknow as well (Keer 1990: 404). Bodhanand's biographers mention that the two men discussed the *dhamma* and exchanged thoughts. There was mutual respect of each other's learning and a high appreciation on Dr Ambedkar's side for Bodhanand's undiluted fight for the Dalit cause. But Bodhanand did not withhold criticism, when he thought it necessary. He objected to Dr Ambedkar's second marriage because his wife was a Brahmin. He feared that this would split the movement.

Gyan Keto and Lokanath

Medharthi was a contemporary of Swami Achhutanand and he knew Bodhanand personally. Although in *The Caste System Exposed* he had not yet dared to break with Hinduism, the following years showed a considerable change in his thoughts. On the one hand he tried to conceptualise a universal religion, and on the other hand he intended to accommodate Buddhism with the *sant dharm*. This change of perspective was a reflection of Dr Ambedkar's announcement at the Yeola conference in 1935, that he will not die a Hindu. The threat to leave Hinduism and to convert to another religion instigated a lot of activity on behalf of the Hindu Mahasabha, Christianity, Sikhism and also Buddhism to draw Ambedkar over to these respective religions.

At what time Buddhism became dominant in Medharthi's thoughts is not yet known. Nevertheless, he was considered to be [231] a Buddhist in Indian and Ceylonese Buddhist circles, because his school was visited by two European Buddhist monks, most probably in 1937, and their names were engraved at the library building. The one was Lokanath, an American of Italian descent with the name of Salvatore. Lokanath's pamphlet dedicated to the Depressed Classes of India '*Buddhism Will Make You Free*' was published from his Harijan Publishing Society in Panadura, Ceylon. Dhananjay Keer describes how Lokanath met Dr Ambedkar:

The Buddhists, too, tried in their own way to capture him. One of their Missionaries, an Italian Monk by name Rev. Lokanath, who was founder of the Lokanath Buddhist Mission, came to Ambedkar's residence at Dadar on June 10, 1936. Clad in the robe of a priest and carrying a bowl and an umbrella, he interviewed Ambedkar and tried to persuade him to embrace Buddhism. After his talk with Ambedkar, the monk, in an interview to the Press, said that the leader of the Depressed Classes seemed to be impressed with the Buddhistic faith and promised to consider the question carefully, but had not given any definite reply. The Saviour – for the monk's original Italian name was Salvatore – said that he had reason to believe that Ambedkar would come round to his view and added that his own ambition was to convert all Harijans to Buddhism. The monk then went to Ceylon on a pilgrimage (Keer 1990: 276).

The biography of the German monk, Gyan Keto, alias Peter Schoenfeldt (1906-1984), is well known. He grew up in Berlin, where he visited the Buddhist Centre in Berlin-Frohnau, which had been established by the homoeopathic doctor Paul Dahlke in 1924 (Hecker 1996: 1). He got drawn to Buddhism through studying of Arthur Schopenhauer and went to Ceylon to become a Buddhist

monk at the monastery of Nyanatiloka, who was German as well – Anton Guerth (1878-1957). Nyanatiloka was the second European to be ordained into a Buddhist Burmese order in 1903 in Rangoon. In 1911 he set up Island Hermitage in Polgasduwa in Ceylon, which was to become a centre for European and American Buddhists, and which still exists today under the chairmanship of an American Buddhist abbot.

Peter Schoenfeldt arrived in Ceylon in 1936, where he was personally received by Nyanatiloka. After a short period as a [231] layman, he got the Pali Name of Nyana Khetto on his initiation. In 1937, he was sent on pilgrimage to visit the Buddhist sites in north India (Hecker 1997: 291-93). During his journey, together with Lokanath, he visited Medharthi's school in Buddhपुरी on the outskirts of Kanpur. When Medharthi took over the school from his father, he named it Bharatiya Ved Vidyalaya. Now, as an expression of his turning to Buddhism, he changed the name of the locality from Munshipuram to Buddhपुरी. On the occasion of the visit, Medharthi was initiated into Buddhism by these two monks. Lokanath offered a brass Buddha statue and Gyan Keto a marble one, which are still to be seen in the school.

Amongst the Buddhist community, there was a strong awareness of the spiritually and socially liberating qualities of Buddhism for the depressed and backward classes in India. Lokanath and Gyan Keto were not the only *bhikshus* to visit Kanpur at that time. In 1935, Bhikshu Uttam, who was a strong supporter of the Arya Samaj and the Jat Pat Todak Mandal, the branch of the Arya Samaj to abolish untouchability, came to Kanpur and made a vehement plea for the abolition of untouchability (*Vartman*, 16 May 1935). Buddhists of foreign origin, such as Lokanath and Gyan Keto, must have been aware of the religious, political, and social discourse which followed Dr Ambedkar's announcement to leave Hinduism. On 22 May 1936, the All Religious Conference was held at Lucknow. Dr Ambedkar could not attend but Jagjivan Ram, the Harijan Leaders on the side of the Congress, was there (*Pioneer*, 23 May 1936: 8). Muslim, Christian, Sikh, and Buddhist representatives presented the tenets of their respective religions in an effort to show the universal message to the untouchables.

Although the visit by Lokanath and Gyan Keto was a singular event, the involvement of other foreigners into the Dalit Buddhist cause is well-known. The German born American Paul Carus, for example became first president of the Indian Buddhist Association in south India. His book, *The Gospel of Buddha* (1894), is still widely sold in India. Until recently, only the contacts of international Buddhists with the nascent, *savarna* dominated Buddhism of the Mahabodhi society were known, but Lokanath's and Gyan Keto's visit to Buddhपुरी throws light on an early pre-Ambedkar Buddhist endeavour which was conceptualised as a religion of the oppressed. [233]

Buddhism and Sant Dharm

From 1933 on, when Ishvardatt took over the school, he moulded it according to Gurukul Kangri. His students were drawn from scheduled and backward castes, and it was the only school where they were taught Sanskrit at that time. The routine was strict, and there was a great emphasis on punctuality and discipline. Physical education, handicrafts, science, and languages were taught, and morning and evening prayers were conducted in the Arya Samaj tradition. The prayers were taken from Buddhism, Jainism, the Arya Samaj, Christianity and Islam. For the morning prayers, Medharthi called representatives of different faiths to conduct the service. He broke with the anti-Muslim stand of the Arya Samaj and he called a Muslim weaver to teach spinning to his students. This happened in a phase of his life when he was strongly attracted by the teachings of Kabir. He even wrote a booklet on Kabir, in which he praised the poet-saint's anti-Brahmin stand.

Caste differences were ignored and equality amongst the students was respected. In daily routine, all students had to draw water from the same bucket and did their own cleaning together. The students were only addressed by their first names; any names, which disclosed caste were forbidden. He even modelled the school on the *samgha*. To his favourite students—they were five altogether, like the first five disciples of Buddha—he gave names in analogy to the *upasampada* ceremony on entry into a Buddhist monastery.

His belief in religious universalism was strong; he believed that all religions preached non-violence, brotherhood, equality and compassion. He tried to reconcile Buddhism with the *sant* religion, which was prevalent amongst the Dalit(s) in Kanpur. In those days Kabir panthis, Shiv Narayan *sampradaya* and Raidasis were popular. Especially Medharthi's special veneration for Kabir made him reformulate his position away from his previous appreciation of the Vedas.

In his booklet 'The Primitives and Ancestors of India and the Sant Religion', published in 1939, he considered the Vedas as the unjust oppressive religion of the Aryan invaders. Fully adopting the [234] Adi Hindu ideology of those days, he stated that the 150 million *shudras*, Untouchables and primitive people of India, who were called Harijan, depressed, backward, or pre-Hindu, were the ancient rulers of the country. They had been trapped into slavery by the invading *Aryans*, and the tricolour of the Congress Party still represents the *savarna*, the twice born, omitting the *purvajana* as the "men born before" or "men of pre-historic age". Swami Achhutanand's *Adi Hindus* and Bodhanand's *Mulanivasis* were *purvajanas* for him.

Equating the *purvajanas* with *asuras*, he continued his argument in daring etymological moves. He claimed that the *asuras* were actually been named as such by the *Aryans*, because they did not use to drink *sura* (wine), whereas the Aryans ate meat and drank wine. In his creative etymology, *rak-*

shas, as the Untouchables were called, are the ones who saved others—*raksha karna*. The *purvajanas* lived an egalitarian life, there was no *varna* order amongst them and all were equal.

Then he juxtaposes the *sant* religion with the *brahmani* religion. In his opinion, the *sant* religion was the original religion of the *purvajana*, actually, the *sanatana dharma* in the understanding of the ancient. Sant dharm was consistent, universal, relied on the laws of nature, and was orally transmitted. It spread the message of equality, morality, and communism, was non-violent and preached compassion even for the enemy:

Lord Gautam Buddha has recognised all sants as *buddha*. The meaning of *buddha* is learned, i.e. all *sants* were learned scholars, this is why they were *buddha*. Lord Buddha has also not written a book. Whatever he said is orally transmitted and was written down by his disciples hundred years after his death. Lord Buddha was actually a follower of the *sant dharm*. His *Dhammapad* is not a revelation. His religion is tested on the grounds of intelligence and by the laws of nature. His is why he is the chief of all *sants*. Therefore, the followers of the *sant dharm* should pay special attention to the messages and preaching of Lord Buddha (Medharthi 1939: 11).

The scholarship of Lord Buddha and the sants was tested and in accordance with the laws of nature, a position Dr Ambedkar elaborated on in his conception of Buddhism as a religion for a modern, scientific society. Medharthi's formulations pointed in [235] the same direction, although his main emphasis was on the compatibility of Buddhism and the sant dharm.

Dr Ambedkar's visits to Kanpur.

Dr Ambedkar's visit to Buddhpuri was an extraordinary event. It was in the early 1940's and Ambedkar was secretary for state in the Viceroy's Council. There are clear recollections of that event⁴. Ambedkar even donated the school a Buddha statue, cast in cement, to be placed above the entrance. This visit had a private character and only very close followers of Dr Ambedkar were invited to accompany him. Among them was Gauri Shanker Ahervar, deputy depressed classes educational officer, a close follower of Swami Achhutanand and a great admirer of Dr Ambedkar.

In the mid-1940s, Medharthi was in close contact with Dr Ambedkar, visiting him at his Delhi residence over the weekend to give him Pali classes. Dr Ambedkar wrote a letter (dated 5 September 1945) on Medharthi's behalf to the governor of Uttar Pradesh, asking him to appoint Medharthi as a representative of the backward and scheduled castes on an eleven-member committee to reorganise Sanskrit studies in Uttar Pradesh, however, the appointment did not take place. Although there was close contact between the two, Medharthi did not become an Ambedkarite and the credit of pursu-

ing the policies of the Scheduled Caste Federation went to Ram Lal Sonkar, Tilok Chand Kuril, Pyare Lal Kuril, Gauri Shanker Ahervar, and Phooli Das Kuril. This visit to Buddhpuri is hardly known amongst the Dalit community because there was a much more prominent event, which overshadowed this visit. This was the second meeting of the Scheduled Caste Federation which took place in Kanpur on 29 January 1944.

In this speech at Kanpur (Das 1969: 77), Dr Ambedkar raised the point that the emancipation of the Untouchables was more important to him than the freedom of the country. He clearly saw the scheduled castes as the third group, on an even plane with Muslims and Hindus. Hinduism as the all pervasive, crippling and enslaving religion, which kept the scheduled castes in [236] subjugation, must be discarded and rejected. Again and again, he made a plea to fight casteism amongst the scheduled castes and he passionately put forward the argument that the scheduled caste movement needed unity, self-reliance, and organisational strength, and that women had to take an active part in it to make it a success.

Babasaheb's Conversion

Although Medharthi was an admirer and follower of Dr Ambedkar, he was a too independent to stick to one line. Fascinated by the martial rhetoric of Subhash Chandra Bose, and a freedom fighter himself, Medharthi joined the Forward Block of Sarat Bose, and he was in close contact with a small circle of journalists and former members of the Indian National Army for a couple of years.⁵ In 1947, he added Rashrapal Higher Secondary School to his Buddhpuri experiment. For that he had to take an M.A. from Dayanand Anglo-Vedic College in Kanpur as his Vidyalankar title was not recognised. He had to ask for special permission to wear a saffron robe, as the dress code was British.⁶ After independence he took an individualistic stand. Close contacts existed with Dr Munjee, the head of the Bahai congregation and a Sanskrit professor at DAV College. Amongst Dalit(s), he had good contacts with a number of Congress politicians who were with the Arya Samaj. Amongst them was Lalta Prasad Sonkar, a Khatik vegetable dealer, who became a member of the Legislative Council in 1952, and Dayal Das Dhusiya, who became a member of the Raja Sabha.

On Sundays, he used to go out with his disciples to perform *havans* -fire sacrifices. He found pleasure in using his knowledge of Sanskrit again. Posing as a Brahmin for the Dalit(s) was the beginning; he had also conducted Jagjivan Ram's second marriage to a woman from Kanpur in the Arya Samaj Hall of the Dhusiya at Coolie Bazar in 1935.⁷ As Medharthi's approach to religion was one of religious universalism and he had a great liking for *sant dharm*, he was part of a Dalit public which took great interest in philosophical and religious questions. As such, he wrote a foreword to Ram Chandra Kuril's book on Sant Ravidas, which was published in 1947 (Kuril 1950). [237]

Bodhanand in this respect was much more consistent. His downright rejection of the caste system and critique of Brahmanism made him reluctant to choose an Indian as his successor, because he feared a relapse into hierarchical thinking. His choice of a Ceylonese boy from a Buddhist family proved to be right. Bhante Pragyanand came to Lucknow as a young boy and became Bodhanand's successor after his death in 1952. Pragyanand was present at Dr Ambedkar's conversion on the 14 October 1956 in Nagpur. Medharthi went with his main disciple, Bhoj Dev Mudit, to attend the conversion. Beside them, there was little response from U.P., which was not a question of conviction or of community, because the Chamar considered themselves very much on par with the Mahar, but a question of policy, although the Burmese monk Mahasthvir Chandramani from Kushinagar presided over the ceremony.

Medharthi wept bitterly when he heard the news of Dr Ambedkar's demise; this was shocking news for all Dalit(s) in Kanpur. On hearing of it, they spontaneously took to the streets and organised solemn demonstrations. In 1957, Pragyanand held a mass conversion drive in Lucknow for 15 000 lay persons, a mammoth gathering and the biggest in those days in northern India. With the establishment of the Republican Party of India (RPI) in 1956, the bifurcation of the scheduled caste movement and backward caste movement ended. Many prominent backward caste leaders, such as Chedi Lal Sathi joined the RPI, Sathi himself to become its first president.

Bodhanand's disciples had taken *diksha* long before Dr Ambedkar. They knew of Medharthi but had distanced themselves from him, when Medharthi retired from his school in 1960 to lived in Hardwar in an *ashram*. His oldest disciple, Mudit, accompanied him. Medharthi again turned to the Arya Samaj and Vedic knowledge. The last years of his life he conducted vedic *yagyas* all over the country. He died in Jhansi on a train, on his way to Hyderabad. Unattended by his family, he was cremated according to Arya Samaj rites.

Ambedkar Buddhism in Kanpur

The Buddhपुरi school founded by Acharya Ishvardatt Medharthi is only remembered by a few old Dalit activists in Kanpur. After [238] Medharthi's death, a trust was formed in his name and one of his close disciples became the president. As the plot of land which belonged to the school was quite substantial, and plot prices rose because the area around Buddhपुरi got developed in the 1970s, the school started to become contested. Raids, court cases and political bickering was the unfortunate outcome of these developments. Medharthi's disciples tried to uphold the tradition, but unfortunately Bhoj Dev Mudit, an educationalist himself, had not become principal of the Buddhपुरi school. But he followed his master's lead, and converted to Buddhism in 1968 and set up a school on his own.

Buddhism in Kanpur had another strong adherent in Rajendranath Aherwar, the eldest son of Gauri Shanker Aherwar, who grew up in the Dalit tradition, combining Swami Achhutanand's heritage—the *sant* tradition of Raidas and Kabir—with Dr Ambedkar's tenets. Rajendranath joined the Republican Party and in 1961, he converted to Buddhism along with his whole family. In 1967, he founded the *Bharatiya Buddh Mahasabha-Kanpur Branch*. Rajendranath was in tune with Babasaheb's teachings of Buddhism, which had laid great emphasis on the lay element in Buddhism. He held regular meetings in different *mohallas*, usually on Sunday's, where he preached Buddhism and Dr Ambedkar's message. These were small gatherings, of a hundred people at the utmost.⁸ He also officiated at Buddhist weddings and life cycle ceremonies, and organized the four important Buddhist festivals Dr Ambedkar's Jayanti, Buddh Jayanti, Diksha Divas, and Dr Ambedkar Paranirvan Divas.

But the movement only gained momentum after the arrival of Dipankar, a Chamar *bhikshu*, who had been ordained in Agra, which had the oldest Buddhist *vihara*, established in March 1956 in Chhaki Pat, in which an urn with Dr Ambedkar's ashes is kept (Lynch 1969: 15). Dipankar had been orphaned at the age of six, and with poor relations, who were unwilling to support him, he became a 'street child', according to his narrative, roaming here and there until he became a *sadhu*. Down with malaria and hunger at the age of twenty-three, he attended a Buddhist wedding—just out of curiosity as he claimed. The *bhikshus* obviously saw the destitute condition he was in, "got hold of me, shaved my head and [239] put me up into their ashram" where he stayed for seven years until he got ordained at the age of thirty and was sent to Kanpur on mission in 1980. He was alone at the beginning, settling in the wilderness at Juhi, an outlying labour colony.⁹

The first years were tough and threatening. Dipankar went out to preach Buddhism, but few were willing to hear the message. His first public appearance was scheduled at a mass conversion drive in 1981 on Parade Grounds, organized by the Dalit Panthers in imitation of the Meenakshipuram conversions. This event had sparked off the activities of the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad – a Hindu fundamentalist organization) in U.P., where it specifically campaigned against conversions. Projected to take place on the 12 August 1981 in a move to define *svaraja*—independence for the Untouchables as independence from Hinduism—it was meant to give the options of Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, and Sikhism to Kanpur's Dalit(s).

A young lawyer, Rahulan Ambawadekar, was the force behind the momentous event. A fervent admirer of Dr Ambedkar, he had joined the RPI and converted to Buddhism at the age of sixteen. But as the RPI in U.P. was literally finished in 1971, weakened through splits and absorbed by the Congress, there was a political vacuum in Scheduled Castes' politics, which he meant to fill (Mendelsohn and Vicziany 1998: 225). Travelling widely in Maharashtra, he got in touch with the Ma-

harashtrian Dalit Panthers, and in April 1981, Rahulan founded the Dalit Panthers - U.P. Branch, and proclaimed as first spectacular move the mass conversion for 15 000 Dalit(s) on Parade Ground. The move was banned and Rahulan had to go underground, but it got wide press coverage and had a mobilising effect on the younger generation. Only after the banned mass conversion drive of the Dalit Panthers was the term “Dalit” used in self-reference amongst the politicized Untouchables.

The 1980s were a time when the Dalit movement in Kanpur gained a self-assertive dimension, also quite often at the edge of legality. It was the time when Kanchi Ram set up the Bahujan Samaj Party, which stood for the first time for state elections in 1984 from Kanpur. One important event was the land-clearing move for the establishment of the Buddh *vihara* in Juhi; communal [240] land was appropriated for the purpose. This had a mobilising effect insofar as the action was illegal, and it attracted a great number of Dalit(s). The land was later officially allotted to them by the Nagar Nigam. The laying of the foundation stone in 1988 was the final move in a long process since Dipankar’s arrival. It signified the establishment of Ambedkar Buddhism in Kanpur.

Dipankar presides over marriages and life cycle rites and he preaches *dhamma*, although his priestly role has become more prominent. This has developed contrary to Dr Ambedkar’s intentions; he had envisaged a theological role for *bhikshus* and ceremonial functions for laypersons. Kanpur’s local patrons are Government officers and businessmen, who accumulate merit and public recognition by giving freely to the *bhikshus* and the *vihara*. They also invest in decoration on specific Dalit festivals, and they organise communal weddings. On these occasions, gifts bearing the name of the donor, are distributed. Recently, Thai Buddhists donated a huge Buddha statue for the *vihara* and international Buddhism continues to play a significant role in local movements.

Conclusion

Acharya Ishvardatt Medharthi’s cast of Buddhism was very specific. Arthur Niehoff, an American political scientist who did his fieldwork amongst Kanpur’s factory workers in 1953/54 rightly observed:

There is one Buddhist temple in Kanpur, built about forty years ago. But it was a product of the intellectual element of the population, having been founded by a wealthy convert to Buddhism. Many of these laborers knew the temple but they did not go there to worship (1959: 70).

The Buddhपुरi school did not become a centre of Buddhism in Kanpur because Medharthi confined himself to the school, his students, and a small circle of educated Dalit(s) and intellectuals. Strong

willed and of an independent nature, he did not blend well with his family, associates, and the re-nascent Buddhist movement in Lucknow. This was a question of temperament and not of conviction. [241]

In his writings he tried to amalgamate the prevalent themes of his times, which was the rejection of *varnashramadharma* and of the caste system. In his daring move to bridge between sant religion and Buddhism, he amalgamated Buddhism with *sant dharm* and countered the two as the *purvajana* oral tradition of the original inhabitants of India, to Aryan Vedic scriptures. He was not alone in this endeavour: Chandrika Prasad Jigyasu did the same.

Dalit reception of Buddhism took various forms even before Dr Ambedkar. We gradually come to learn about the different linkages between Dalit groups and international Buddhism. Madam Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott of the Theosophical Society were instrumental in calling Anagarika Dharmapala to India. Paul Carus became the first president of the Indian Buddhist Association, which was founded by Tamil Dalit Buddhists. Rahul Sankritayana and Anand Badant Kaushalyayan, who are considered to be the fathers of North Indian Dalit Buddhism,¹⁰ stayed with Bertha Dahlke, the sister of the first German Buddhist Paul Dahlke, in Berlin in 1932 (Hecker 1997: 57).

In 1935, after Dr Ambedkar's announcement to leave Hinduism, he was approached by various leaders of different denominations and faiths. Meetings were held to discuss the question of Dalit religion and the pros and cons of conversion. The visit of the Italian Buddhist monk Lokanath, and of the German Buddhist monk, Gyan Keto, to the Arya Ved Vidyalaya in Buddhpuri must be seen in this context. They knew of Medharthi's school and Lokanath, with his Buddhist Mission, especially addressed Dalit(s) in an effort to convert them to Buddhism.

Although Dr Ambedkar was loosely in contact with Medharthi for a few years, Medharthi never became part of the Scheduled Caste Federation or the Republican Party in Kanpur. This cannot be attributed to his caste background, because after independence the bifurcation between scheduled castes and backward class movement was given up, and many backward-class people took up responsible positions in the RPI like Chedi Lal Sathi, who became president of the RPI in U.P., and, later, chairperson of the U.P. Backward Class Commission. Till the 80s, Buddhism was for the educated Dalit(s) in Kanpur an individual quest. It became a mass movement when it was linked with assertive Dalit politics, [242] first by the Dalit Panthers in the 1980s and through the BSP and Mayawati's short but poignant rule in U.P in the 1990s. But Acharya Ishvardatt Medharthi is not forgotten: Bhoj Dev Mudit, his main disciple organised a centenary celebration on 25th June 2000 in Kanpur to keep alive Medharthi's legacy.

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- ¹ The term Ambedkar Buddhism is a deliberate choice because the Dalit(s) employ it to designate the Buddhist movement, which started with Dr Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism.
- ² I am grateful to Bhoj Dev Mudit, who was Acharya Ishwardatt Medharthi's main disciple for all the information he gave me on the life of his guru. Bhoj Dev Mudit also wrote a short biographical sketch on his master. He was also kind enough to share his memories with me during several interviews in 1999 and 2000.
- ³ Achhutanand means the blissful untouched in the meaning of non polluted, see: (Khare 1984: 84).
- ⁴ According to another source, the visit took place on 14 May 1943 (Rivariya 2002: 49).
- ⁵ Communication from Manwati Arya, INA freedom fighter on 23 December 2000.
- ⁶ Interview with Babu Lal Nishad who even recollects that Sant Lal of the Jat Pat Todak Mandal visited the Buddhपुरी school, Interview on 20 October 1999 .
- ⁷ Interview with Shambunath Dhusiya on 2 February 2001.
- ⁸ Interview with Rajendranath Aherwar on 22 February 2000.
- ⁹ Interview with Dipankar on 21 September 1999.
- ¹⁰ Interview with Dr Angane Lal on 16 February 2000.