Douglas Ober, *Dust on the Throne: The Search for Buddhism in Modern India*. New Delhi: Navayana, 2023. 392 pp. ISBN: 9788195539291

Did Buddhism ever die? Scholars have noted the death of Buddhism in India (23, 26) in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries. Yet, the living Buddhist practices such as pilgrimages, the existence of Vajrayana lineages, Buddhist Sanskrit learning or patronage of Buddhist monuments across India that these scholars do not account for, give the lie to this argument. In his book, Douglas Ober follows this forgotten trail of Buddhism through a subaltern historiography, scouting for traces in land grant plates, Buddhist monuments, pilgrimage records and in 'storehouses of memory' such as hagiographies, poetry, art, and iconography (41). He also explores scholarly engagement with Buddhist texts that continued despite the widely-held perception that Buddhism disappeared from India until its revival in the late nineteenth century. According to Ober, the fiction about Buddhism's death was made possible by a deliberate 'unarchiving' of selected histories (23) as well as a narrow territorialist lens for accounting for the history of Indian Buddhism.

As Donald Lopez (2007) and other leading Buddhist scholars remind us, Buddhism is a European construct of the 1830s and is not one but many practices. Ober's book skilfully demonstrates this point by showing that the main reason for the declaration of Buddhism's death was a narrow understanding of what constitutes Buddhism by limiting it to a reformist Pali great tradition, with some colonial and postcolonial scholars deciding which figures, practices, and texts were to be documented as Buddhist. For example, the sixteenth-century yogi Buddhagupta-natha, whose account is given in a seventeenth-century biography (*namthar*) is not commonly recognised as an 'authentic' Buddhist, for he was taught in both Buddhist and Shaivite traditions—even though Buddhagupta-natha in all possibility both claimed to be and was recognised as Buddhist in his time (29-30). Ober's book suggests that Buddhism's fate is not unlike that of other cultural traditions or literary cultures which are bereaved as dead, such as Sanskrit. Indologist Sheldon Pollock (2001: 415) shows how 'the death of Sanskrit' in India meant its disappearance as a vehicle of literary

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expression as a result of regionally diverse socio-political processes that could not be accommodated within a singular perspective. Ober's book too shows how Buddhism's fortunes fluctuated across the ages with Buddhist ideas alternately embraced or rejected as they became enmeshed in wider political currents that ranged from caste wars, and ideological battles, to colonial patronage, nationalism and cultural diplomacy.

Chapter One looks at how Indian scholars wrote about Buddhism through the examination of primary sources in Bengali, Odia, Sanskrit and Tamil. Contrary to the common understanding about Buddhism's disappearance, extant written corpora of manuscripts show that far from Buddhism being erased from intellectual life, it continued to be the subject of much debate and discussion among Indian (mostly Brahmin) literati until the nineteenth century. Sanskrit texts of the second to fifth centuries portrayed Buddhists as *pashandikas* (imposters) and *nastikas* (deniers) who denied the Vedas (Hindu scriptural texts) and the notion of a supreme god and the caste order (42). In the Vishnu Purana (a Hindu religious text composed in Sanskrit around the fourth-fifth century CE) Buddha is incorporated as the ninth avatar of Vishnu, who tricks the demons into following his instructions, thereby leading them to their doom—the message here is that those who follow the Buddha will self-destruct. In the later Puranas, written in the eighth to tenth centuries, when Buddhism was perceived as a reduced threat, the hostility to Buddhism is less marked (45). Eighth-century Vedantic philosopher Sankara, commonly but controversially regarded as being the one who destroyed Buddhism in India, denounced Buddhists, while popular Sanskrit dramas and vernacular devotional literature turned Buddhist monks, customs, dress and other practices into objects of contempt. Buddhism also appeared as Hinduism's other in the attitudes and vocabulary of 'Brahmanised' intellectuals (60). Buddhism continued to be Hinduism's radical other interlocutor throughout the fourteenth century, as Hindu *astikas* (affirmers of Vedic texts) engaged in oral and written debate with the arguments laid out in Buddhist commentaries they called *nastika* (critiques of Vedic texts). Ober argues though that the picture of Hinduism's othering of Buddhism that literary sources project is contested by archaeological sources that point instead to a history of religious pluralism (52). Either way, the focus on Buddhism in these sources suggests its continued existence in India.

The second chapter shows how the earlier denigrative view of Buddhism was revised by new interpretations provided by British and Indian archaeologists, epigraphists and draftsmen in the mid-nineteenth century, although colonial records often deny due credit to the Indian interlocutors by labelling them as 'babu', 'assistant', or 'pandit' (83). This chapter also focuses on the role of educational institutes and educators such as Raja Sivaprasad, who introduced the history of Buddhism, albeit with quite a few misrepresentations, into the Indian school curriculum through his history textbook *Itihas Timir Nashak* (1864). The textbook was also the first modern Hindi account of Buddha's life (68). Patronised by the colonial government's education departments, the book, despite its anti-Muslim tone, succeeded in reviving Buddhism in Indian public life and locating it within the nation's history. The Buddhist Text Society, which was founded by Bengali scholars Sarat Chandra Das and Rajendralal Mitra in 1892, similarly claimed Buddhism as India's own as is evidenced by the Society's declared aim to publish 'Sanskrit or Tibetan texts relating to Indian Buddhism, geography, and Indo-Aryan thought' (77). Das's work on Buddhism and his travel memoirs of Tibet, where he recounted encountering Sanskrit texts written in Tibetan script, additionally helped show how Buddhism connected India with the rest of Asia. Such Indian nationalist claims over Buddhism were facilitated by scholarly journals and organisations dealing with Buddhist studies such as Mahabodhi Society, Theosophical Society, Arya Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Bengal Buddhist Association, Bombay Buddha Society and others (102). This chapter also draws attention to the trans-regional academic networks that inspired different Buddhist scholars in India. For example, one of India's foremost Buddhist scholars, Rahul Sanskrityayan studied Pali in Vidyalankara Pirivena in Ceylon, while Dharmanand Kosambi, another important figure in India, studied in its sister institute, Vidyodara Pirivena in Sri Lanka.

The third chapter further develops this focus on trans-regional organisational networks that connected India, Asia, Europe and North America. Ober meticulously presents the life and career paths of well-known historical figures who travelled to India and shaped Buddhism's trajectory, such as the Theosophists duo Helena Blavatsky and Henry Olcott; Anagarika Dharmapala, a Christian-born Ceylonese and the co-founder of the Mahabodhi Society who also started the court case to reclaim the Maha Bodhi temple

from the priests of the dominant Shaivite Hindu tradition; and U Chandramani, the Arakanese monk who officiated during Ambedkar's mass conversion ritual. Ober also describes the contributions of Ayothee Thass, the Tamil Dalit propagator of Buddhism and founder of the Shakya Buddhist Society in Madras; and lesser-known interlocutors of Buddhism in India, such as Mahavir Singh, the wrestler who became a monk in Kushinagar, and Kripasaran from Chittagong, the founder of the Bengal Buddhist Association. All these figures were enmeshed in an interconnected web of domestic and transnational networks that not only included the movement of patrons, personnel, funds and texts but also pointed to the nexus of transnational circuits of migrant labour, capital flows, and state power that indirectly facilitated these networks that Ober terms 'Banyan Tree Buddhism' (106).

Chapter Four examines modern Hindu Brahminical appropriation of Buddhism, especially by the All India Hindu Maha Sabha, a Hindu nationalist organisation established in 1915. Such appropriations were motivated largely by fears about lower-caste groups withdrawing from the larger Hindu fold and converting en masse to Buddhism. Ober shows how Mahatma Gandhi too viewed Buddhism as part of Hinduism, and how the industrialist JK Birla, a devout Hindu and patron of the Hindu Mahasabha was also one of the foremost financiers of Buddhist institutions during the early- and mid-nineteenth century. Ober also shows the links that existed between the Maha Bodhi Society and the Hindu nationalist organisations like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and to Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the founder of the Hindu nationalist political party Bharatiya Jana Sangh that later morphed into the contemporary Hindu nationalist political party, Bharatiya Janata Party.

Chapters Five and Six show that the relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism was not without friction in late colonial and postcolonial India. For example, progressive and anti-caste groups put forward a revolutionary Buddhist ethos, one strand of which became manifest in the mass conversion of about half a million Dalits to Buddhism in 1956, led by B.R Ambedkar, architect of the Indian Constitution, and 'the undisputed national leader of India's Dalits' (183). Ambedkar had been preceded by anti-caste reformers across India who used Buddhist texts and ideas to critique the caste system in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

For example, in Pune, anti-caste educator, Jyotirao Phule published a Marathi translation of Ashwaghosha's *Vajrasuchi*, while in present-day Kerala, C. Krishnan, an advocate and activist born to the Izhava community edited the pro-Buddhist Malayalam newspaper *Mitavadi*. In Lucknow, the Indian Buddhist Society's founder, Bodhananda's 1930 publication, *Mool Bharatvasi* presented the thesis of sudras and Dalits as the original inhabitants of the country who needed to return to their Buddhist roots in order to be liberated from caste oppression. Led by charismatic individuals, these regional Buddhist movements typically lost their momentum after the leaders had passed.

The final chapter, a version of which was earlier published in the *Modern Asian Studies* (Ober 2019), documents India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru's admiration for Buddhism and its use for domestic consumption and national integration, especially of the Himalayan border areas. Ober further points to Nehru's use of Buddhism as a tool for cultural diplomacy and international relations (271). Like Ambedkar, Nehru too functioned in an international milieu that was largely receptive of Buddhist thought. This, coupled with his view of Buddhism as a scientific religion that combined reason and compassion, resulted in the Nehruvian state adopting many symbols of Buddhism as national imagery—the Dharmachakra in the national flag, lion seal of king Ashoka in government documentation, naming of public places with Buddhist names (e.g., Buddha Park, Gautama House)—and sponsoring Buddhist institutes of higher learning and renovating Buddhist monuments.

Ober skilfully and creatively weaves together the different chapters so that the book as a whole is a pleasure to read. It requires considerable mental agility to systematically arrange the enormous corpus of colonial and postcolonial texts written by European, English and Indian Buddhist scholars or amateur Buddhist philosophers into a coherent narrative, and it is to the author's credit that he manages to pull this off. Ober connects the dots across time and space and pieces together different parts from the past to convince the reader that it is important to follow the hidden journey of Buddhism in India in order to understand contemporary nationalist and anti-caste politics, so much so that one is tempted to term his book a Buddhist history of India, rather than a history of Buddhism in India. In other words, he mainstreams Buddhism.

Certain parts of the book left me a bit confused. For example, in the first chapter, Ober declares that he wishes to offer a non-Western

historiography of Buddhism, but his monograph is bookended by two events—it begins with the discovery of *Vajrasuchi*, a Sanskrit Buddhist manuscript attributed to the poet and philosopher Ashvaghosha, and ends in the year 1956, which marked the 2500th anniversary of Buddha's Mahaparinirvana or final passing. In highlighting British officer Lancelot Wilkinson's discovery of the *Vajrasuchi*, which sets the tone for the later resurgence of Buddhism as an anti-caste discourse, Ober unwittingly seems to privilege a Western role, despite an Indian interlocutor Subaji Bapu being involved. Further, this discovery and subsequent coinage of the neologism Buddhism in the 1830s is presented as resulting from the travels of a few European men—for example, Scottish botanist Francis Buchanan's physical stamina and penchant for travel led him to far off lands like Burma, Chittagong and Arakan borderlands and convinced him that the Buddha of these lands and that of Japan, Siam, Cambodia and India was the same (56). While Ober does stress that the role of the Indian native scholars who aided and accompanied Wilkinson and Buchanan should not be overlooked, I wonder how would he exactly define their relationship: collaboration, compliance, or co-working? My concern is that as long as these relations are couched as subordinate, it does not rescue Buddhism from the clutches of the Western restoration narrative.

The book is written in a popular style, making it accessible for a non-academic readership, and this, intentionally or otherwise, makes a case for the dispensability of excessive theorisation that tends to haunt much of social science writing. In this regard, I found the parts in the book about place making, which cite Keith Basso to talk about the 'revitalization of places' (35) somewhat unnecessary as they take away from the general style of the book, and raise more questions than answers about concepts of place-making.

This book is a textbook gem for all scholars doing research on India and Asia, Buddhist Studies and comparative religion. The way in which Ober is able to present his erudition in a comprehensive yet eminently readable narrative is surely an act to follow.

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