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# BURNING REFUGE: SPIRITUAL AND POLITICAL LIBERATION IN THE NAVAYANA BUDDHIST MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how the Theravada Buddhist scriptures in the Pali Canon support B. R. Ambedkar's Navayana Buddhist movement in their struggle to eradicate caste and gender-based discrimination in the social, political, and legal spheres. Among these teachings are passages that record the stories of low caste and female disciples who free themselves from all fetters, spiritual and political. This paper focuses on the verses of Awakening by early Buddhist nun Puṇṇikā Therī in the *Therī Apadāna* and *Therīgāthā*, recognized for having realized full enlightenment on par with males. An ancestor of Navayana Buddhists, she was born low caste and female and is an inspiration for this movement's advocacy for the equality of all people in the contemporary context. From the onset, women have actively advocated in this regard for themselves and their communities. Their socially engaged grassroots Buddhist approach emphasizes the inseparable link between spiritual and political liberation on individual and communal levels. The Buddha's simile in AN 10.51 aptly expresses the impetus for this movement: a wholesome desire for liberation from suffering as a burning fire consuming all obstacles and a refuge, both temporal and ultimate.[1]

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[1] This article is based on a talk given at the March 2024 Conference: Burning Refuge: Social and Political Liberation, Harvard University, US.

## INTRODUCTION

In *the Buddha and His Dhamma*, B. R. Ambedkar draws on the Theravada Buddhist scriptures, the Pali Canon, as a support for his grassroots movement for spiritual and political liberation (Ambedkar 2011, chapter 3). These passages contain the record of low caste and female disciples of the Buddha who free themselves from all fetters, spiritual and political. An outstanding example of a female monastic gaining liberation is the life and path to Awakening of early Buddhist nun Puṇṇikā, born low caste and female, yet recognized for having realized Enlightenment[1] on par with upper caste males. At the same time, she freed herself from a social-political system in ancient India that bound her to indentured slavery because of her caste and gender. Although not overtly political in its aim, the subtext is indirectly political in this regard. She empowers Dalit, especially women, to recognize their equality and dignity in challenging internalized and external oppression in religious, socio-political and legal spheres. For this reason, she has been recognized by the contemporary Navayana Buddhist community (Dalit History Month 2019). Puṇṇikā's ancestors were Indigenous tribal peoples of Dravidian descent (Murcott 2006, 190-91). Her modern-day descendants include low caste peoples, including the Dalit, a self-designation meaning 'the broken or oppressed' people (Mukerji 2020). They are legally defined in modern democratic India as Scheduled Castes and Tribal Aboriginal Peoples (Mendelsohn and Vicziany, 1998). Here, the term caste refers to multiple intersecting oppressions of gender, race, ethnicity, social and economic status (Bhikkhu Anālayo 2020). In a recent United Nations report, Beena Pallical says that her Dalit community continues to experience inter-generational trauma and systemic violence, especially toward women and girls in urban and rural areas, despite Indian Democratic Constitutional legal reforms (United Nations 2021; Pan 2022; Rege 2020, Shingal 2015, Sabharwal and Sonalkar 2015, AIDMAM 2018).

In the contemporary context, some perceive Dalit as a political identity in their struggle for human rights, although they are converts to Buddhism (Menšiková 2023). Others identify as members of Navayana Buddhism or the Ambedkarite movement to establish their conversion as being incompatible with the caste system (Menšiková 2023). Additionally, the term *Bahujan*, a Pali word also used by Ambedkar, means "the majority" and conveys the grassroots solidarity of Shudra, Dalit, and Indigenous persons (Soundara-rajan 2022, 38). This term also refers to People of Color in the diasporic context with parallel histories of oppression and resistance, such as African Americans and Indigenous communities (Soundararajan 2022, 38). In the post-colonial and post-Ambedkar context, the Dalit have struggled to realize their international right to self-determination,[2] challenging systemic violence that has historical, socio-political, and religious roots with the establishment of Brahmanism in India.[3] Thus, the politics of how to situate oneself within

[1] Nibbāna as the goal is the eradication of greed, hatred, and delusion (AN 3.55).

[2] The right of peoples to self-determination is their right to determine their political status and pursue their economic, social, and cultural development in accordance with the UN Charter, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Summers 2023).

[3] Brahmanism is based on pre-Buddhist scriptures of the priestly class dated 1500 BCE in northwestern India. The codification of their status and privileges was essential for maintaining social and political authority on the grounds of hereditary status. The social political and religious hierarchy of caste was based on this system (Barman 2023, 7-9, 10).

a dominant Brahman-ruled democratic Indian polity (Verma 2022), and within the context of religious pluralism, continues to be complex (Sonowal and Ashok 2023, 545). I will use the terms Navayana Buddhist and Dalit fluidly depending upon the context.

Ambedkar and the Navayana Buddhist movement can be situated within what is broadly referred to as socially engaged Buddhism. The latter is a broad term encompassing multiple forms of principled, compassionate, and nonviolent Buddhist action in modern Asian and non-Asian contexts.[4] It draws on traditional teachings and practices in responding to suffering through both spiritual and political means, as it is experienced on individual and communal levels (King 2023, 2516). This paper discusses how traditional Buddhist teachings and practices inform the Navayana Buddhist movement in their struggle to eradicate caste and gender-based discrimination. This entails an interdisciplinary, feminist hermeneutic methodology applied to traditional Buddhist teachings in the Pali Canon and how they inform socio-political concerns and gender issues in this context.

The grassroots movement established by Ambedkar initiated an intergenerational mass conversion to Buddhism in 1956 to escape and eventually eradicate deeply rooted social, political and religious caste stigma (Queen 1996, Sonowal 2023, Kumar 2019). The conversion to Buddhism continues to be met with opposition because it challenges the dominant Brahmanic orthodoxy in India that has intensified in the postcolonial context (Pawar and Moon 2014, 332; Guru 2020). Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhist teachings from the Pali Canon established a new vehicle which he named Navayana Buddhism (Menšiková 2023, 71). This linked spiritual and political liberation and challenged gender and caste-based oppression with historical, socio-political and religious origins (Pawar and Moon 2014, 27, 253; Pradeshi 2020). Ambedkar's analysis of the historical development of caste and gender sheds light on how the hierarchical classification of peoples based on racial, ethnic, socio-political and economic status became justified by Brahminism and codified in the *Manusmṛti* (Doniger and Smith 1991, Ambedkar 2014d). The latter conflated racial and ethnic characteristics and hereditary status with moral and spiritual purity to safeguard a social-political hierarchy justified by Brahman orthodoxy as the ruling priestly class. Later, British and Christian colonialism reinforced the pre-colonial perceptions of caste and gender that informed state policy of divide and rule (Barman 2023, 3-4). Because of the link between the historical development of gender and caste-based discrimination, Ambedkar held that the progress of the Dalit community could only be measured by the degree of progress that women achieved (Pradeshi 2020, 139).

With the end of British colonialism in India, Ambedkar became a co-architect of the Indian Constitution, stressing democratic legal protection of human rights guided by the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity (Queen 2024, 296). He emphasized, however, that Buddhist ethics indigenous to India are the basis for these democratic principles and could eradicate the deeply entrenched caste system and gender discrimination (Ambedkar 2002, 58-9). In de-conditioning internalized social attitudes about inferiority and superiority based on caste and gender, early Buddhism was positioned to be supportive of the eradication of both external (systemic violence endemic in the caste system) and internalized oppression (negative social views based on caste and gender) in this movement. As Shantabai Dani recalls, "Ambedkar

[4] This is distinct from ethno-nationalism and one's social duty to protect the Buddhadhamma and sangha (DN 26, Bartholomeusz 2002).

gave us identity, self-respect, independence, and the strength to fight injustice" (Pawar and Moon 2014, 246). Thus, Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhist teachings emphasizes the equality of all persons as a source of empowerment and a catalyst for social and political advocacy to eradicate systemic violence. Of particular significance is the advocacy of Dalit[5] or Navayana Buddhist women in this movement at the local, national and international levels as agents of transformation. Their struggle to change deeply entrenched systemic oppression that violates their basic human rights is, for many, supported by the Buddha's teachings of egalitarianism (Soundararajan 2022, 37-8). As Kumud Pawde confirms, spiritual and political are deeply connected in their struggle for liberation, individual and communal (Dudley 2019, 77-84). The Buddha's simile in AN 10.51 expresses the impetus for this movement as *saṃvega*, a spiritual urgency and refuge akin to being on fire with the wholesome desire to realize liberation from suffering, temporal and ultimate.

To clarify how these issues are interconnected, this article discusses: 1) the Buddha's teachings in the Pali Canon, including the verses of Awakening by Puṇṇikā Therī that, 2) support the socially engaged Navayana Buddhist movement established by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in eradicating caste and gender-based discrimination, and 3) how this informs contemporary Navayana Buddhist women's advocacy for spiritual and political liberation for themselves and their communities.

## I Buddhist Teachings on Gender and Caste in the Pali Canon

This article begins with an examination of relevant texts contained within the Pali Canon by exploring gender and caste, and how these relate to the egalitarian view promoted by Ambedkar and the Navayana Buddhist movement. In the *Gotamī Sutta*, for example, the Buddha says that women are capable of the highest level of spiritual realization (AN 8:51, Bhikkhu Anālayo 2022, 5). However, this confirmation, which permitted his maternal aunt Mahājāpati Gotamī to join the Buddha's early monastic community and to ordain as the first nun, was then followed by a prediction that the Buddha's teachings would decline as a result (Anālayo 2016, 149; Dhammananda 2010, 151). Additionally, there were eight special rules (*garud-hammas*) establishing the status of male over female monastics not based on seniority but gender (Hüsken 2010). Given the radical nature of female monasticism at that time, which went against Brahminic law and conventions (Blackstone 2013, 217), these provisional regulations would protect ordained women—who were socially viewed as escaping their gender and caste-based duties —from violence and punishment from others in the lay community (Dhammananda 2010, 154). Thus, the Buddha placed the female monastics under the guidance and protection of male monastics (Anālayo 2016, 11-12; Dhammananda 2010, 154; Garling 2016, 242; Collett 2021, 32; Collett 2010). These inconsistencies have given rise to diverse interpretations that have led some scholars to question both the egalitarian nature and authenticity of these texts (Dhammananda 2015; Appleton 2011, 43-44; Hüsken 2010). As Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā (formerly, Dr. Chatsumarn Kabilsingh) explains, despite these challenging issues informing gender equity

[5] See Pan 2021, Chapter 3: "Ambedkar's call to Dalit women as the frontiers of 'change' instilled hope in the women in her community that by educating their next generation, converting to Buddhism, and participating in movements, the overall condition of the Dalits would improve." This is compared to African American Womanism as "a commitment 'to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female'… Understood through solidarity, 'Dalit woman' then is identified as a collective, politicized 'self'."

in the monastic and lay sangha, the Buddha was the first feminist because of his support of women's spiritual development (2010, 153; Gruszewska 2025, 116). For example, the Buddha asked Mahājāpati Gotamī to display her attainments and dispel others' doubts before she entered *Parinibbāna* (Analayo 2022, 20-23). Elsewhere, the verses of Soma Therī in the *Bhikkhunī-Samyutta* point to the relative nature of all social conventions (including caste), perceptions and concepts designating male and female: When the mind is well concentrated and insight is steady and sees correctly into Dhamma, what does it matter if one is a man or woman? (*Samyutta Nikaya* V.2). This teaching is relevant for our discussion as it illustrates another aspect of the egalitarian nature of the Buddha's teachings. For Ambedkar, and the Navayana Buddhist movement, the latter supports political agency and legal advocacy to eradicate caste and gender-based discrimination.

In the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* (DN 16) the Buddha bestows monastic and lay people with the responsibility to continue the *Buddhasasana* for the benefit of future generations (Dhammananda, 2015, 159). This supports Ambedkar's emphasis on the important role of lay people in teaching Dhamma with the aim of yoking individual and social liberation from suffering (Bhatewara and Bradley 2012, 72-3; Ambedkar 2002c, 218). This emphasis is based on the Buddha's path as a bodhisatta perfecting the *parami* for countless lives before his Enlightenment (Bodhi 2013). In AN 4.96-99, benefiting oneself and others is encouraged as the highest path. Ambedkar encouraged this approach for Navayana Buddhists and chose representations of the Buddha with open eyes to witness and alleviate the suffering in an active teaching role rather than with closed eyes in a passive meditative stance (Queen 2018, 166). This differs from the solitary, monastic, world renouncing emphasis in some Theravada interpretations and texts (Bhatewara and Bradley 2012, 72-3; Appleton, 2011). Alleviating social suffering as an extension of Buddhadhamma is true, for example, of Maha Ghosananda (Weiner 2003) and Phra Prayudh Payutto. The latter contrasts Buddhadhamma with secular human rights activism, the latter often being motivated by what he refers to as "unskillful drives,"[6] the resulting behavior of which is too aggressive to obtain the required result (Payutto 1994, 8-11, 70-1). Although human rights advocacy is necessary as a provisional measure for coping with conflict in the world, he says, it is based on divisive ways of thinking that cannot ultimately eradicate suffering (*dukkha*) as the Buddha taught. For Ambedkar, Buddhadhamma is a way to cultivate inner transformation as a support for political agency. Both are needed to cultivate internal and external conditions for realizing the dignity and rights of the Dalit and hence are mutually supportive.

Also significant to Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism was the Buddha's teachings on refusing caste distinctions in the early monastic community. For example, in the *Vasala Sutta* (SN1.7) the Buddha says, "One is noble not by birth, but by wholesome actions." Supporting this scriptural passage is another from the *Upajjatthana Sutta* (AN5.57) that says we are born of and heir to our actions of body, speech and mind wholesome and unwholesome. Ambedkar emphasized this aspect of kamma, namely, that every person regardless of caste or gender equally bears the fruits of their individual wholesome and unwholesome deeds (Deokar 2020, 91, 106, 108). However, some traditional Buddhist interpretations of kamma justify caste and gender oppression and institutionalize systemic inequalities as the result of past unwholesome actions (Sirimanne 2016, 279; Tsomo 2013, 660; Khuankaew 2008). In the latter interpretation, present experience

[6] In Buddhism, these are the unwholesome roots (or kilesa) of greed, hatred and delusion that give rise to suffering.

is often solely determined by past actions, positive or negative, as a pre-determined fate. Some Buddhist teachings in the Pali Canon state that a low or female rebirth is a karmic punishment; others emphasize the potential for all, regardless of caste and gender, to realize Enlightenment (Appleton 2014, 3, 12, 112). The latter is true of Puṇṇikā Therī, and other low caste and female disciples of the Buddha. Here the emphasis is on the present life and how we can create change and influence future kamma (Khuankaew 2008). Ambedkar held that Buddha as *Maha Karunika* (the Great Compassionate One) would never have supported a doctrine of kamma justifying the suffering of the Dalit as a pre-determined fate. Thus, he emphasized caste and gender discrimination as a historical and socio-political phenomenon (King 2017, 174). Ouyporn Khuankaew explains that the suffering experienced as a result of systemic violence is not a product of individual kamma, action, or misfortune but a result of societal structures and social kamma (2008; cf. King 2009, 162). The latter clearly points to the collective intentional action beyond the individual.

In the suttas, the Buddha defines kamma as intentional or volitional action (AN6.63) and as a moral law of cause and effect governing our actions of body, speech and mind. This would include intentional action and allows the possibility of mitigating the effect of an unwholesome action afterward. Additionally, not all experience is the result of kamma. For example, the latter would not apply to physical or natural laws (*utu niyama*), like that of gravity or the evaporation of water which are outside the moral law and are not informed by volition (Narada Mahathera 2013). By contrast, the *Dhammapada* explains that mental intention or volition preceding all mental states and physical actions, wholesome and unwholesome, gives rise to corresponding effects just as the wheel following the foot of an ox (*Dhammapada*, verse 1-2).

Kamma may be contextualized within the context of the Buddha's first sermon *Dhammacakkap-pavatana Sutta*, which focused on the prognosis and cure for the human condition: suffering (*dukkha*) and its cessation (*niroda*) (SN 56.11). The noble eightfold path (*ariya aṭṭhaṅgika magga*) is the means to this end. Kamma as cause and effect must also be understood within the context of this teaching. Consequently, right mindfulness (*sammā sati*), supported by eightfold path factors which include right effort (*sammā vayāmmā*), right action (*sammā-kammanta*) and right view (*sammā ditthī*) are an intentional training that gradually eradicates the inner unwholesome roots (*kilesa*) causing suffering and harm for self and others: greed (*lobha*), ill will (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). From a socially engaged Buddhist perspective, this path of training supports social liberation because, by gradually eradicating the causes for suffering within oneself, one is at the same time doing so for others. In the *Abhisandha Sutta* (AN 8.39), for example, mind-fulness is cultivated in daily life as five lay ethical trainings or precepts offering freedom from fear, danger, and oppression and as a gift and protection of one another in community (AN8.39). Thus, the Buddha taught the relational and interdependent nature of Awakening, individual and communal, guided by non-harming (SN 47.19). Additionally, right mindfulness supports the cultivation of the wholesome boundless attitudes of good will (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*) (see AN 3.65). These are referred to as *brāhmāvihāra*, literally divine dwelling places or mental states motivating action to alleviate suffering, our own and that of others. In AN 3.77, kamma includes intentional actions that are described as the field, consciousness as the seed, and craving as the moisture that ripens in the future. By cultivating the causes and conditions toward gradually decreasing the unwholesome, and cultivating the wholesome, the goal as cessation of dukkha is possible. Thus, kamma is dynamic and changing, rather than static and determined, making positive change on the individual and communal levels always possible.

It is this aspect of the Buddha's teaching on kamma that Ambedkar emphasized to transform the mental attitude of Dalit to agents of individual and social change. He says: "Freedom of mind is the real freedom. We shape our lives through our choices and actions. The *Dhammapada* asserts that we are masters of ourselves, capable of liberation or self-imposed bondage" (Ambedkar 2006). This passage supports Dalit agency to transform oneself and community by cultivating the Buddhist teachings in this way. Engaged social action then becomes an extension of one's commitment to Buddhadhamma. Thus, Ambedkar emphasized this aspect of the Buddha's teachings to challenge the view of kamma justifying gender and caste-based suffering and oppression (King 2017, 179-181). As the Buddha says in the *Acintita Sutta* (AN4.77), the precise working out of the results of kamma is an imponderable because it is not fixed due to the complexity of ripening as a result of function, order, time and place (Bodhi, 201). Similarly, the training based on the Buddha's teachings gradually transforms the quality of our intentions and actions in a wholesome way. This would include deconditioning internalized negative and unwholesome social conditioning about one's gender and caste. The cultivation of this inner transformation and freedom is a catalyst for social liberation and informs one's actions in the community as an agent for change. By emphasizing the importance of Buddhadhamma as the basis and impetus for transforming individual and communal suffering, Ambedkar held that gradually ameliorating the social-political and legal conditions of the Dalit community would be possible (Bhatewara and Bradley 2012, 72-3).

## II Liberation Temporal and Ultimate: The Story of Puṇṇikā Therī

The scriptural passages we have discussed from the Pali Canon—although sometimes inconsistent—support caste and gender-based equality and are as relevant now as they were in the time of the Buddha. These teachings inform the trajectory of Puṇṇikā Therī's path of spiritual Awakening recorded in the *Therī Apadāna*[7] and *Therīgāthā*.[8] In the *Paramatthadīpanī*, the monk Dhammapala recorded that Puṇṇikā was born a daughter of low caste indentured servants in the household of the wealthy brahman Anāthapiṇḍika, a devoted lay disciple of the Buddha (Murcott 2006, 18-19, 190-91). It is recorded that she lived in the city of Savitthi, now in modern-day Uttar Pradesh. Upon hearing the Buddha's sermon on the *Lion's Roar* (MN11), she spontaneously realized the first level of Awakening (*sotāpanna*) (Murcott 2006, 190-91).

In both the *Apadāna* and *Therīgāthā*, Puṇṇikā teaches the Dhamma to a Brahmin who converts as a result; this was a radical and dangerous act in light of the strict code of conduct regulating the relations between low and high caste persons in ancient India (Barman 2023, 3-4). As a person who was born as a low caste, indentured female servant, she realized full Awakening under extraordinary circumstances. At the same time, she was also freed from a social political system in ancient India that bound her to indentured slavery because of her caste and gender. Although not overtly political in its aim, the subtext is indirectly political in this regard. It is also important that Puṇṇikā Therī realized full Awakening in an early Buddhist

[7] The *Apadānapāli: Legends of the Buddhist Saints* is a collection of life stories attributed to Gautama Buddha and early Buddhist monastics (Jonathan S. Walters English translation, 2022).

[8] Translated as the *Verses of the Elder Nuns*, 3rd century BCE in the *Khuddaka Nikaya* as a collection of Enlightenment verses attributed to early Buddhist nuns; the Paramatthadīpanī by the monk Dharmapala records details of each nun.

community that was not—as Reiko Ohnuma and Gabriel Ellis explain—casteless or gender equal—even though this was envisioned by the Buddha (Ohnuma 2013, 51, 57; Ellis 2019, 68; Anālayo 2020, 2286). Informally, these internalized socially conditioned biases continued to create conflict among the monastic and lay sangha. For example, the entry of women into the Buddha's early community, and the subsequent support of nuns, was a source of tension among the Buddha's disciples during his life and after his death (Anālayo 2016, 122-146). This was true of the relationship between Mahakassapa the Elder who often opposed the nuns, and Ananda who supported them (Ohnuma, 50).

Consistent with the pattern of the *Apadāna*, Puṇṇikā begins by narrating her former lives under previous Buddhas, including both the virtuous and unwholesome actions she performed and their consequences (Walters 2022). As a virtuous and learned nun in her previous life, Puṇṇikā says that despite her devotion and knowledge of the Buddha's teachings, she was also arrogant; this caused her to despise others, resulting in unwholesome (*akusala*) kamma and her rebirth as a female indentured servant. This view has, for didactic purposes, the aim of teaching others that unwholesome actions lead to unwholesome results. However, this retrogressive view of kamma must be held with wise discernment and without justifying oppression and suffering as a predetermined fate that cannot be changed. As recorded in the *Therī Apadāna*, Puṇṇikā teaches the dhamma to a Brahmin. This is a radical act transgressing caste laws later codified in the *Manusmṛti* (Doniger and Smith, 1991). Punnikā asks him what fear drives his attempt to ward off pollution by ritually washing himself. There may be a hidden subtext here—as it was and is not uncommon for Brahmins to sexually exploit low-caste women. The context of this event also suggests an intimacy between them that would be otherwise inappropriate: namely, for a Brahmin to be seen by a low caste servant during his ritual bathing, to offer her his robe, and to be instructed by her in spiritual matters. Indentured slaves would be severely punished or killed if found in these circumstances. The roles of teacher and student reverse the traditional hierarchical roles of gender and caste in Brahminical orthodoxy. She instructs him on what the Buddha says of reliance on the three refuges (Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha) and cultivating the five lay precepts (sīla) in daily life rather than clinging to rites and rituals (*sīlabbata-parāmāsa*) as a way of purifying unwholesome actions. The Brahmin is transformed by Puṇṇikā's dhamma teaching and becomes a disciple of the Buddha. The context of the dialogue and its outcome are an example of the radical inner transformation of negative social conditioning that informs caste and gender-based prejudices. As Shura Darapuri explains in the contemporary context, the conceits of superiority and inferiority are socially conditioned caste delusions separating people in terms of social status. For Dalit, this internalization of negative conditioning leads to unhealthy mental and physical health issues (Darapuri, 2010, 142-43) and a deep sense of powerlessness, isolation and shame (Soundararajan 2022, 19).

Puṇṇikā Therī then describes her gradual Awakening as a monastic, and through her training in ethics, meditation, and wisdom in the final verses of the *Apadāna*: her realization of "the divine ear and eye," "mastery of others' hearts" and her own, and the cessation of the defilements of greed, hatred and delusion. She confirms her realization of this path by saying: "My defilements are [now] burnt up… Like elephants with broken chains, [I am free]." Thus, breaking free of what bound her to the cycle of suffering (*samsara*) was both inner freedom and freedom from the socio-political system that oppressed her. Although her goal as a nun was not to eradicate systemic violence, she nonetheless was able to rise above this as

a member of the monastic sangha. Her life and teaching are an inspiration that empowers women and marginalized people by emphasizing equality, dignity and the conditioned, impermanent nature of gender or caste. This resonates with the encouragement of Venerable Ananda to a nun who was discouraged in her practice: if another (monk) can achieve liberation then why not you? Having relied on the conceit of being equal to them to realize liberation, conceit is eventually abandoned (AN4.159). For this reason, Ambedkar turned to the narratives of low caste and female disciples of the Buddha and the Buddhist teachings in the Pali Canon—and we can include the example of Puṇṇikā—as a support for the Navayana Buddhist movement in their social and political struggle to eradicate gender and caste-based discrimination.

## III The Contemporary Navayana Buddhist Movement and Women

The Buddha's core teaching on the four noble truths, namely, suffering and the path to end suffering, is re-contextualized by Ambedkar by yoking individual and social liberation (Ambedkar 2011). From the onset, he called for Navayana Buddhists to educate for liberation, agitate for equality, and organize for democratic community (Queen 2021, 2024). These three activities are means by which to realize Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, and to empower Dalit agency for individual and communal liberation. Additionally, he emphasized the critical link between the liberation of individual Navayana Buddhist women and that of their community, encouraging their mobilization toward this end (Pawar and Moon 2014, 157-166). Ambedkar connected the historical, political, and social institutionalization of the caste system (Kumar 2020, 248-50) with the systemic oppression of women (Pawar and Moon 2014, 27; Pradeshi 2020; Kumar 2019, 108). From the beginning, he also supported the Depressed Classes Women's mobilization, action, and conferences, urging women to challenge gender and caste based discriminatory laws and customs. This had a significant impact on gender equality addressed in the Indian Constitution and other legal reforms to the present day (Ghosal 2022).

Ambedkar established twenty-two pledges, which included renouncing Brahmanism, affirmed the Buddha's teachings and the equality of all beings, the five lay precepts, mindfulness, lovingkindness and non-harming (Pawar and Moon 2014, 187-8). As Parbatabai Meshram explains, Ambedkar's Buddhist teachings were a catalyst for "the feeling of self-respect [that] was awakened in our minds" (Pawar and Moon 2014, 274). This was expressed in her Buddhist religious songs to inspire others in community: "Brothers and sisters, come to Buddha's place. It is time for prayers. Fold your hands together, bow down your head… Pay attention to every word, so that your world will be liberated… Let your self-respect awaken, Do not ask for charity… Get ready to serve the people" (Pawar and Moon 2014, 276). Here the virtues of service and dedication to Buddhadhamma, as well as agency, yoke spiritual and political liberation to eradicate suffering, both temporal and ultimate. As Urmila Pawar explains, "the Buddhist religion is the path to self-respect, progress, uplift. It is the religion that will make our future bright… We are not now living a parasitical life. We are self-respecting and self-reliant" (Zelliott, 1992, 100).

Navayana Buddhist teachings are also practiced in the midst of religious pluralism (Menšiková 2023, 70; Deo 2022; Sonowal and Ashok 2023, 505, 525). Sometimes the women draw on the Hindu faith, which they may have been born into, and are surrounded by in their daily lives (Pawar and Moon 2014,

297, 309; Zelliott 1992, 95, 102). Others like Chandrika Ramteke have a deep commitment to the Buddhist teachings as a way of personal and social transformation by observing lay precepts and lunar observance days, dhamma study and practice and social service. This includes pilgrimages, lay ordination, group retreats, commemorating the first mass conversion of 1956 and those that followed, as well as the birth and passing of Ambedkar and the Buddha (Sonowal and Ashok 2023, 515; Zelliott 2015, 368-9; Zelliott 1992; Pawar and Moon 2014, 309). After Ambedkar's death, some members of his community also began attending vipassana courses taught by S. N. Goenka and later became members and lay ordained members of the Triratna Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayak Gan (TBMSG). Currently, there are many local Navayana Buddhist organizations in India that continue Ambedkar's legacy and include the Buddhist Society of India and the Dr. Ambedkar Foundation. Navayana Buddhist women are active in these organizations as lay teachers, and in leadership roles as educators and in community development (Barsagade and Meshram 2015).

As leaders and teachers of the Ambedkar Social Movement, Rajesh and Usha Bauddh explain, social activism and liberation are more effective if they have a basis in the Buddha's teachings and practices (Queen 2023). These spiritual practices focus the mind, dispel unwholesome internalized views, foster wholesome attitudes, and support lives directed toward the liberation of individual and social suffering. However, the contemporary Navayana Buddhist movement also continues to realize spiritual and political liberation in diverse ways. Their active participation in socio-political and legal spheres, as well as public narratives define them as subjects and agents of history by challenging caste and gender-based discrimination within and outside of their communities (Rege 2020b, AIDMAM 2018). These public narratives are important in articulating shared intergenerational trauma, in helping women overcome their own alienation and oppression, and in defining their aspirations for freedom and dignity (Mahadevan, 2020, 320; Guru, 2020).

Navayana Buddhism emphasizes personal freedom through study and practice of the Buddha's teachings as interpreted by Ambedkar, combined with social reform by way of nonviolent struggle for human rights (Queen 2024, 297). Ambedkar says, "The aim of our movement is to achieve freedom, social, economic and religious, for the untouchable. So far as untouchables are concerned, this freedom cannot be achieved except through conversion to Buddhism" (Das 2011, 21). His interpretation of early Buddhist teachings emphasizes that their sole aim was the welfare of persons and society (Singh, 2011). In *Buddha and the Future of His Religion*, Ambedkar rejected the otherworldly and dogmatic aspects of Buddhism that do not include social welfare and liberation as a goal (Mukerji 2020, 482). From the onset, Navayana Buddhist women were encouraged to take leadership and to empower themselves and others toward a better future. For example, the first Bhikkhuni Laxmibai Naik, vowed as a former Dalit lay woman to serve society and work toward the liberation of her people in the villages as a social activist and by teaching the Buddhadhamma (Pawar and Moon 2014, 216-18). Similarly, Bhikkhuni Chandrasheela explains this deep, mutual connection between individual and social liberation: "My living is pure and follows the principles of Gautama Buddha… one can lead a good life and gain mental peace by doing social service and […] complet[ing] the work of Babasaheb Ambedkar" (Pawar and Moon 2014, 346-7). As lay Buddhist Nalinitai Ladke explains, this social activism as a spiritual pursuit was a way to realize people's enlightenment, both spiritual and political, for herself and others in her community (Pawar and Moon 2014, 268).

Each year, on March 19th Empowerment Day (*Mahad Satyagraha)* commemorates the nonviolent rally led by Dr. Ambedkar to drink from a Brahmin water reservoir (Pawar and Moon 2014, 25; Kumar 2020, 110). Dalits asserted their moral and legal right to clean water, which was later made law. This was as much an impetus toward individual as a communal liberation, these being inextricably bound (Pawar and Moon 2014, 253). This act of political self-determination was yoked to spiritual liberation emphasizing the equality of all people. Seetabai Thakar inspires solidarity with a bhajan (a devotional song): "Come let us praise the son of Ramji together, the one who made us drink the water of Chavdaar tank in Mahaad, breaking all chains in satyagraha" (Pawar and Moon 2014, 300). The simile of breaking all chains used by Puṇṇikā to describe her Awakening is used here to describe a political act of liberation that is profoundly spiritual.

As Kumud Pawde explains: "Ultimately, political power belongs in religious conversion… Otherwise, we cannot fight this injustice… Buddha says that every person has human rights. Am I not a human being?" (Dudley 2019, 78-84). For her, conversion to Buddhism meant embracing the Dhamma teachings as a catalyst for inner and social transformation, and liberation from internalized oppression (of the negative judgements and views about her as a woman and as Dalit). Conversion also empowered her in challenging, through political advocacy, gender and caste based systemic violence that denies Dalit and women in her community basic human rights. As a founding member of the National Federation of Dalit Women (NFDW), Pawde actively challenged the systemic violence experienced by Dalit women (Guru 2020; Pawar and Moon 2014, 264). However, she also acknowledges her privilege as a member of the educated elite which has served to distance her from the grassroots (Deo 2022, 3). Although some are empowered in their political struggle for human rights by the Buddha's teachings, others are not. Some have chosen to be agents of change as Christian and secular Dalit feminist activists, such as Ruth Manorama who works alongside Dalit women of diverse faith communities.[9] This activism takes the form of continued national and international initiatives and resulting documents at The Hague, the United Nations, UN Women, feminist non-profit organizations like the AIDMAM Collective, and the 2025 Commission on the Status of Women. Dalit Buddhist women are among those participating in a broader spectrum of solidarity, empowerment and alliances across religious and national differences (Smith 2008; Guru 2020; AIDMAM 2018).

In a broader context, Chand Sirimanne says that while social and legal reforms are essential, Buddhist teachings can ultimately uproot the internalized social conditioning of both oppressors and oppressed regarding all forms of discrimination including gender and caste (Sirimanne 2016, 280-1). For this reason, Ambedkar held that Buddhadhamma was the catalyst for individual and social liberation. However, Dalit human rights advocacy in the legal and political spheres is also distinct from Navayana Buddhism as a religion. The latter offers guidelines for an ethical life governed by the moral law of cause and effect with the goal of Nibbāna, while the former is based on a democratic and secular legal system protecting the rights and freedoms of people, and groups (minorities or peoples) to ensure substantive equality (Keown 2002, 192; King 2002, 135-6). In effect, human rights in the legal and political sphere aim at balance and inclusion of rights for all members of society regardless of caste and gender. While these discourses are mutually supportive and necessary, as Ambedkar held, they are also distinct.

[9] See "Right Livelihood Award Recipient Ruth Manorama."

Thus, Navayana Buddhist women are empowered by the Buddhist teachings, but have also had to advocate for their human rights in the legal sphere at the local, national, and international levels. In this regard, Buddhist teachings can support but cannot of themselves "transform their pain into power" (Naronakar 2022, 9). In the contemporary context, some Dalit women emphasize political activism and regard Ambedkar as an inspiration and guide in their struggle for human rights (Queen 2018, 163). For them, no religious affiliation—including Buddhist—provides the necessary means to achieve this end, namely, being legally and politically equal in dignity and rights. This differs from Ambedkar's vision, which emphasized that individual and social liberation was more effective with the support of the Buddha's teachings and practices.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, B. R. Ambedkar draws on those Buddhist teachings in the Pali Canon that support the contemporary Navayana Buddhist movement in eradicating caste and gender based systemic violence in religious, political, and legal spheres. As discussed, early Buddhist nun Puṇṇikā Therī and her path to Enlightenment offers an example that empowers the Dalit community, especially women, by emphasizing equality and dignity not based on the socially conditioned norms of caste and gender. This illustrates how sources in the tradition can support their goal toward individual and social liberation from suffering as both a spiritual and political endeavor.

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