

Yet Another English ‘Gift’: The Role of English *Bhikkhus* in Indian Dalit  
Buddhist Conversions (1970-2000)<sup>i</sup>

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*Too clever British...now credited with so many imperial patents*  
*Nicholas Dirks*

What I am about to narrate is a small story of modern Buddhism in the land of its birth, India. It forms part of a macro narrative of the global revival of Buddhism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, also the era of high modern capitalist-colonialist adventures around the world. The story line, though historically significant, is, at first blush, simple. It tells us how, a decade after India’s independence in 1947, a group of oppressed untouchable castes from western India – the Mahars - liberated themselves from the horrors of the Hindu caste-system by converting to Buddhism. The narrative gets a little complicated as we read on, especially when refracted through the lens of the history of British colonialism in India. For we discover that, after the initial enthusiasm of Conversion had faded somewhat, Buddhism actually became a way of living

for these Mahar converts almost two decades later through the indefatigable agency of an Order of *English* monks who have their primary base in Birmingham and Norfolk. What could have been a straightforward instance of Buddhist liberation movement – or *Dhamma* Revolution as it is called in many accounts of modern Buddhism - in Asia now takes on the narrative burden of yet another Indo-British encounter with all the political and cultural complexity that the latter entails. I would like to clarify right away that, the title of this paper notwithstanding, the reader is not about to encounter yet another instance of postcolonial rhetorical cant wherein is asserted the proposition that the English have had the gumption to not only recycle and patent Buddhism in their name, but also to reintroduce it in the land of its birth from where it was shamefully driven away a few centuries ago. There is no simplistic suggestion that the Buddhist revival in late modern India is yet another “English gift” bequeathed to the subcontinent like the railways, the postal system, pantaloons, parliamentary democracy, cricket and Christianity – all metonyms of modern/Western civilization. In fact, as any serious student of colonial India would attest, there is a long history to the ironical rhetorical force underscoring the notion of the “English gift” of modernity and civilization to India. At the very least the British Indian colonial experience was a transactional, interactive, dialogic process that incorporated as many power-driven political and psychological battles as it did the wondrous joy and angst of personal and cultural friendship and collaboration. In other words, it transgressed colonial polarities even as the “racialized languages and conceits of late nineteenth century imperial world-systems”<sup>iii</sup> asserted them in categorical terms. England’s coming into modernity would have been unthinkable without its colonial experience in India and elsewhere. Any narrative of Indo-British encounter, whether colonial or postcolonial or late modern, cannot help but contain these complex, often burdensome, interpretive modalities.

This paper is an attempt to unravel some of the complexities of one such Indo-British encounter in two methodologically distinct ways - one through a delineation of the historical specificities of that encounter in the context of dalit Buddhist conversions, the other through an interpretive reading of affects generated by the encounter as represented in the memoirs of two English monks who spent many years working among ex-untouchable neo-Buddhists in the Indian state of Maharashtra in the nineteen-eighties and nineties. Accordingly, the paper has two core sections. The first section is a view from above that lays before the reader a brief history of the Conversion event held in 1956 and its immediate aftermath. It especially foregrounds the role of the English monk, Dennis Lingwood (Sangharakshita), in taking Buddhism to the dalit masses in the years following the dalit leader, Dr Ambedkar’s, death. The following section provides a

close up as it were of the weal and woe of dalit Buddhist modes of living through interpretive readings of empathetic life-writing narratives of two English monks ordained under Sangharakshita's Western Buddhist Order. These works are *But Little Dust* (1990) by Hilary Blakiston (Padmasuri), and *Jai Bhim! Dispatches From a Peaceful Revolution* (1988) by Terry Pilchik (Nagabodhi). Both spent many years in the eighties and nineties in rural and semi-urban India preaching and teaching Buddhism to dalits, initiating conversion ceremonies, doing community work and, in effect, bringing Buddhism back to its land of birth.

### **The Post-Ambedkar Scenario: Sangharakshita and the formation of TBMSG**

It is a fact not too well known except among scholars of Indian social and religious history that, from mid-twentieth century onwards, the untouchable castes of India – dalits as they are called – rallied in unprecedented ways round one remarkable leader who rose from their midst. His name was Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. Ambedkar's fight against untouchability and his mobilization of dalits in Maharashtra through the early and middle years of the twentieth century, culminated in a conversion ceremony of these oppressed people to Buddhism on 14 October 1956. It was a fulfillment of Ambedkar's promise made two decades prior to this event that he would not die a Hindu. Son of a Mahar school master and a brilliant student who had the opportunity to do his graduate studies in Columbia and the London School of Economics due to the affectionate patronage of a royal personage, Ambedkar was singularly suited to take up the cause of untouchability and its eradication in the era of high nationalism. In his negotiations with upper caste nationalist leaders like Gandhi, Nehru and Patel, Ambedkar quickly realized that the withdrawal of British rule from India would not necessarily mean liberation for untouchable castes under the new Hindu upper-caste hegemony; this notwithstanding constitutional measures that outlawed untouchability and other caste-related discriminatory practices. The result was that he sought escape from the Hindu fold and redemption for his untouchable brethren in Buddhism. It was Ambedkar's re-imagining and re-invention of lower caste and untouchable identity, both through his conversion to Buddhism and his mythographic tracts that critiqued hegemonic Hindu ways of writing about India's past, that gave the term 'dalit' – connoting the oppressed – the power and resonance it has today.

The 1956 dalit Buddhist conversion has been documented as the single largest mass conversion event in human history. Almost four hundred thousand people participated in it. Ambedkar himself died six weeks later. He did not exactly leave behind a group of dedicated Buddhist workers who would take Buddhism deep into the humble, impoverished and itinerant lives of the

new converts. Most of the newly converted leaders were social and political activists who were more concerned with extracting concessions for the dalits/neo-Buddhists from the postcolonial State than in learning, imbibing and preaching Buddhist modes of living. The task of actually taking Buddhism to the dalit masses was primarily<sup>iii</sup> carried out by a community of English *bhikkhus* under the leadership of Venerable Sangharakshita (Dennis Lingwood) who formed the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) in England in the late sixties after having spent twenty-five years as a Buddhist monk in India. Sangharakshita had played an important role in Ambedkar's decision to lead his community out of the Hindu fold<sup>iv</sup>. In the 1970s he directed the FWBO's attention to dalit India. Since then the Indian counterpart of this organization, *Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha Sahayak Gana* (TBMSG – literally 'The Association of Friends of the Buddhist Order of the Three Realms') has maintained close links with thousands of neo-Buddhist groups, especially in western India. Its activities range the gamut from social welfare to spiritual awakening. As a result of both the impetus provided by Ambedkar and the work carried out by Sangharakshita and his Western Buddhist Order, there are now over 7 million Buddhists in India - a remarkable revival of an extant ancient faith through Indo-British collaboration.

Ambedkar appeared to have foreseen the importance of the participation of Buddhist monks from around the world in attempts to revive Buddhism in India. Not many it seemed were willing to come to India and actually work among its untouchable masses. Sangharakshita seemed an exception. He had already spent many years in India and had acquainted himself with Ambedkar's writings on dalit issues. In 1950, in a letter responding to Sangharakshita's appreciation of his famous essay in the Buddhist journal *Mahabodhi*, "The Buddha and the Future of his Religion", Ambedkar wrote to the English monk:

I am glad you liked my article.... You have my permission to translate it and print it in any language you please.... Great responsibility lies on the shoulders of the Bhikkhus if this attempt at the revival of Buddhism is to be a success. They must be more active than they have been. They must come out of their shell and be in the first rank of the fighting forces. I am glad that you have started the Y.M.B.A at Kalimpong. You should be more active than that<sup>v</sup>.

This was Ambedkar's first ever correspondence with Sangharakshita. Little did Ambedkar know, how 'active' Sangharakshita would be in reviving Buddhism among dalit masses in the decades that followed the dalit leader's death. What is known, of course, (primarily through Sangharakshita's extensive writings and his collection of letters and documents in his personal library at his base, Madhyamaloka, in Birmingham), is the fact that as Ambedkar grew to know

the English monk better, he appreciated the latter's commitment to a more critically engaged Buddhism that did not at the same time dilute the cardinal precepts of Buddhist thought. It was a mutually sustaining relationship with both looking for ways to make Buddhism speak to social and spiritual needs of people in the modern age. When Ambedkar set a date for his Conversion ceremony, he invited Sangharakshita to conduct the initiation. Sangharakshita, however, refused in deference to the stature of India's senior most Buddhist monk, U Chandramani, who he felt should lead the ceremony. Ambedkar accepted his advice.

Sangharakshita could not attend the 1956 conversion ceremony due to his commitments at the Kalimpong Young Men's Buddhist Association<sup>vi</sup>. But quite by chance, a few weeks later, he happened to be visiting dalit Buddhists in Nagpur when he heard the news of Ambedkar's death. The scenes of grief and mourning that he witnessed following the dissemination of this news moved him so much that he spent the next few days comforting the Buddhist community. Nagpur, after all, had hosted the first dalit Buddhist conversion ceremony just six weeks back. The demoralized new Buddhists whom Sangharakshita now encountered were desperately in need of a new spiritual leader after Ambedkar and for the days that followed, Sangharakshita donned that mantle. A prominent dalit Buddhist described the significance of English bhikkhu's presence to dalits in these terms:

At that moment we didn't want to hear about politics or anything of that sort. People were very much afraid that Babasaheb's<sup>vii</sup> death might be some kind of punishment. There was a conversion, yes? And then suddenly, there was a death, yes? People had great fear. They wanted more than anything to be given some confidence in the Dhamma.<sup>viii</sup>

Sangharakshita addressed a memorial service to Ambedkar where he exhorted them to bear the responsibility of their spiritual rebirth as Buddhists with grace and dignity and assured them that Ambedkar would continue to live in them. By his own account, Sangharakshita addressed almost two hundred thousand dalits in the four days that he spent in Nagpur. The Indian Buddhist Society in Nagpur described his presence there at that critical juncture as a 'miracle'<sup>ix</sup>. In Sangharakshita's own words, his 'link' with the dalit Buddhists in Maharashtra and with Ambedkar's legacy was 'destined to endure' (1986: 27).

In the decade that followed, he spent most of his time travelling around dalit Buddhist strongholds in western India. His experiences with the Ambedkarite Buddhists and with Ambedkar's vision of a socially engaged Buddhism was a huge source of inspiration when he

eventually decided to break away from the Buddhist Order in North Hampstead, London, to form his own Order of Western Buddhists - FWBO - in Norfolk and Birmingham in 1964. But it wasn't until more than a decade later, in 1979, that he formalized his Order's relationship with dalit Buddhists in Maharashtra with the formation of TBMSG led by the powerhouse of a Bhikkhu, Dharmachari Lokamitra (Jeremy Goody), in Pune. Lokamitra saw himself as the implementer of Sangharakshita's 'India Vision' and throughout the eighties worked ceaselessly toward establishing TBMSG as a social and spiritual site of redemption and renewal for the ex-untouchables. Dharmachari Nagabodhi (Terry Pilchik), another Order member of FWBO, writes of Lokamitra's commitment to his Dhamma work:

He was investing himself unstintingly in something he believed in.... There was nothing one-dimensional or fragmented about his spiritual life; because he put the whole of himself into it, he never felt the need – as some of us did – to break off for a while and establish contact with his 'neglected selves'. They were all in there, fighting for a cause.... He never took a day off; never enjoyed a holiday; his energy welled uninterruptedly up and out.<sup>x</sup>

As a result of Lokamitra's indefatigable mobilization of ex-untouchables in Maharashtra, the TBMSG is currently managed entirely by dalit Buddhists. Lokamitra serves in an advisory capacity as President. It consists of mainly two wings, one that manages Dharma work and the other that looks after social welfare activities. The latter is called *Bahujan Hitay*.

The TBMSG attempts to combine Ambedkar's vision of a socially engaged Buddhism with Sangharakshita's commitment to a historically researched and spiritually relevant Buddhism that could speak to an increasingly globalized world. Scholars of Asian Buddhist practices have noted the latter's departures from traditional Buddhism, two significant among which include establishment of an Order that is neither strictly lay nor monastic (but can include both)<sup>xi</sup> and an eclectic drawing of core beliefs and practices from all three schools Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana without giving prominence to one or the other<sup>xii</sup>. There were two core practices that Sangharakshita saw as fundamental to being a Buddhist: one, the act of going for refuge to the Three Jewels, the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha, and two, the cultivation of ethical conduct, meditative practice and wisdom through dharma study. The act of 'going for refuge' could only be effective if the cultivation of morality, meditation and wisdom became part of everyday living for the aspiring Buddhist. Within such a scheme, the Ambedkarite movement's humanist vision of a Buddhism oriented to social and material upliftment of dalits - the vision that inspires activities carried out by *Bahujan Hitay* - could be considered as a component of

‘ethical conduct’ mentioned above, but it did not exhaust all dimensions of life as a dalit Buddhist. TBMSG’s many social welfare programmes - which include the public health and educational activities of *Bahujan Hitay* – ought to be seen within this larger *dharmic* or spiritual framework. As Sangharakshita noted a few years ago, albeit in a different context, “the *Bodhisattva* ideal (of postponing one’s own liberation for others)’ ought *not* to be ‘equated with the secular concept of social service’”.<sup>xiii</sup>

The Buddhist modes of living that the dalits of Maharashtra have imbibed over these three decades are thus an outcome of a deep spiritual collaboration between the vision of an ex-untouchable Indian and an English seeker of truth and salvation who established the first and the largest order of Buddhists in the Western world. As Alan Sponberg writes in his sociological account of the TBMSG, the dalit Buddhist revolution is constituted of an intricate mix of “spiritual inspiration, cross-cultural fertilization and modernization”.<sup>xiv</sup> The memoirs of the two English monks that I now go on to examine in the following section play out the thematic fragments of this small history of Buddhism in the subcontinent through an interrogation of their own selves in such history-making.

### **Interlocuting with Dalit Buddhism: Padmasuri and Nagabodhi**

Padmasuri is the ordained name of an English woman, Hilary Blakiston, who grew up as the daughter of an Anglican clergyman in Buckinghamshire and later in the midlands. *But Little Dust* (henceforth BLD) is the title of her memoirs of travel to India in the nineteen-eighties to work among dalit Buddhists in the western Indian state of Maharashtra. Nagabodhi is a former BBC correspondent, who as Terry Pilchik met Sangharakshita in 1970 when the Sixties’ counter-culture movement had begun to lose some of its revolutionary itch in England and when many of its catatonically dazed participants had begun to be attracted less to mind-altering drugs than to life-enhancing syncretic Buddhist ways of living that Sangharakshita’s fledgling FWBO promised. It did not take him long to become an active ordained member of the Order. Having joined it in its early years, he was, in fact, privy to a form of the movement now totally lost, in his words, “an uneasy mixture of ‘straights’ culled from the old Buddhist world and ‘hippies’” (50). The two early retreats of FWBO he participated in veered uneasily between traditional Buddhist and New Age practices “combining meditation, talks, yoga, karate and devotional practices with a variety of fringe activities such as Gestalt, encounter groups, dream therapy, rolfing sessions and of course, love-ins” (50-51). Just when he was beginning to feel that this could turn out to be yet another counter-culture experience that would burn him out, the spiritual energy of

Sangharakshita spoke to him in new ways as he saw this monk's vision morph into a deeper social engagement with India's new ex-untouchable Buddhists. We saw some of that history in an earlier section of this paper. Pilchik found himself exhilarated at the prospect of participating in a late modern revival of Buddhism in the land of its birth. *Jai Bhim! Dispatches from a Peaceful Revolution* (henceforth JB) is an account of his experience of living in India in the Eighties among dalit Buddhists.

Both Blakiston and Pilchik talk of the distinctiveness of this experience in terms of an existential break with former modes of living as a Buddhist in England. Buddhism in England was primarily directed at the goal of self-realization and enhancement of one's spiritual being through good conduct and intense meditation practice. For Blakiston it was a way out of God-centred Christianity with its theistic strictures on sin and redemption: "The discovery was very exciting.... Buddhism seemed to offer a path which Christianity did not. It wasn't asking me to believe in a God, as the creator of the world and humankind. Having never deeply questioned my own beliefs in God as a child or adolescent, it came as quite a surprise that I could so easily give Him up. But I did, and have never looked back since" (5). As for Pilchik, Buddhism came to him as an answer when he was at that stage in his development where he could not tell whether the "spiritual life" was something "organic", or something he had to "impose" on himself (45). It told him that an individual could evolve towards Enlightenment through consciously applied effort. In other words, it involved both spontaneous orientation and labour. After his ordination, his work involved giving talks and teaching meditation at Buddhist centers around the UK, in his words "offering the Dhamma to people who wanted a little peace of mind or a cure for insomnia" or some others who had a strange "mystical experience" or had been stirred by a book on Tibetan Buddhism by Lobsang Rampa (239). The contrast with semi-urban and rural dalit Buddhist India could have been more marked.

Their experience among dalits in India through the Eighties and Nineties challenged their evolving spiritual selves by plunging them into a domain of activity in the midst of some of the most socially and culturally disadvantaged peoples in the world – India's ex-untouchable castes who have through millennia suffered the degradation of being considered polluting and sub-human by Hindu upper-caste populations. Blakiston, trained as a nurse and midwife, arrived there with another doctor to set up a medical center in one of the most impoverished dalit Buddhist slum localities in Pune – Dapodi. A few years later, when the Indian State began clamping down on visas to medical aid workers, she transformed herself into a *Dhamma* worker and teacher and

travelled extensively in rural Maharashtra, organizing retreats, meditation classes, lecture sessions and ordinations. Terry Pilchik came as a member of Sangharakshita's entourage and travelled to dalit Buddhist communities in interior Maharashtra, to places that, in his words, one wouldn't find in holiday brochures or even on a map: "Daund, Kurdu Wadi, Ahmednagar, Sangamner, Nanded, Osmanabad" (108).

Participating in life as a practicing Buddhist in dalit India was for both a spiritual experience of dizzying cross-cultural disorientation and reorientation. It was not just a plunge from the individualism of their previous Buddhist experiences in England to a more communitarian ethos of engaged *praxis*. What it called for was nothing short of a translation of their vision of an evolving authentic and ennobling Buddhist self in terms of a metaphoric of friendship and connectedness – both communal and historical. Thus, Blakiston describes the momentousness of her Indian sojourn in terms of experiencing Buddhism in a cultural ambience closest to the Buddha's own (30) and considers, as we shall see shortly, her friendships with numerous dalit Buddhist women as central to her life as a Buddhist. Pilchik with great insight and poignancy describes the life-world of dalit Buddhists, even as he ponders the nature of his own participation in their quiet spiritual revolution:

They are poor, uneducated.... Even as they sit listening, their bodies express an air of physically ingrained humility. Most of them have known hard lives, some of them heartbreaking ones. They need prosperity, material comfort and ease; they need the self-respect that a bit of worldly success could bring. And they still need to win a few political battles. But they have also struggled out of a trap that ensnares most of the world: they have thrown away their gods and forsaken superstition. They know that life holds greater purpose than placid obedience to some divine plan. Then again, because they are poor, culturally isolated people, they are relatively untainted by the notion that life is about little more than consuming, about acquiring and heaping up material treasures. They are a community of people with freedom and just a little time to think things out for themselves (128).

It is no coincidence that both use the form of the "memoir" to describe the many dimensions of their connectedness with dalit Buddhists. This particular species of life-writing, which allows for the fragmentary or the episodic in terms of narrative, is a very apt mode in which to reflect on the processes of self-making at any particular historical juncture, and especially one that is of deep ethical significance to the narrator. I would like to push the cross-cultural imperatives of this paper a little further and suggest that the memoir allows us to record our memory tracks at a time

when forces of history compel us to situate ourselves in intricate webs of communicative action with interpretive communities vastly different from our own. Or to use Charles Taylor's terminology, when we feel ethically compelled to orient ourselves in moral space<sup>xv</sup> through points of reference that are truly removed from our own lived experiences. Such moments are marked by anxiety and a gamut of other affects. The deployment of memoir as narrative form allows us to project these on to the historical stage and make them "public", so to say. As Paul Ricoeur reminds us in his deep philosophical reflections on narrative and temporality, narrative time is by its very nature "public" time, the time of "interaction", the time of "being-with-others".<sup>xvi</sup> There are, thus, two things being suggested here to make a case for the memoir form deployed by Blakiston and Pilchik: one, that it is used successfully to track the performance of their selves in Buddhism's history of its revival in late modern India, and two, that it is particularly suited to record and make public their experience of the vicissitudes of cross-cultural spiritual friendships and other modes of intersubjective enactments across a gamut of cultural fields. What follows is a brief illustration of the two-pronged argument just made.

### *Performing Selves in History*

One of the first things that strikes the reader about both the texts under discussion, BLD and JB, is a pervasive reflexivity about the deep *historical* significance of their respective spiritual journeys. Not only are Blakiston and Pilchik conscious of being part of a momentous project that would revive Buddhism in India, the land of its origins – what Blakiston early on wryly dubs a "coals to Newcastle" enterprise (2) – they are also very wary of their "Englishness" as a possible hurdle, given India's British colonial legacy. This latter makes them especially careful in their dealings with dalits, and they make painstaking efforts to project themselves, not as a superior race out to save hapless natives, not as missionaries out to propagate the best route to salvation, but as co-travellers along with the dalits on Buddha's Eightfold Noble Path. As Blakiston says:

I wasn't in India just to offer my nursing skills; I wasn't there just to patronize those less fortunate than myself, nor merely to be a representative of conventional aid from a rich country to a poor country; I wasn't there as a missionary to convert people to Buddhism, for...those with whom I worked were already Buddhists. Dr. Ambedkar had given them a new vision of social and spiritual development (179).

She also talks of her change of residence from an elite Anglo-Indian locality to a slum colony on the outskirts of Pune where she rented a room so that she could be closer to her dalit friends and co-workers. She repeatedly expresses her deep disapproval of her Anglo-Indian landlady's contempt for dalits and other Indians in general.

Some of the most evocative passages in these memoirs consist of descriptions of sublime moments of elevation, joy and gratitude experienced by these monks for being part of a spiritual history of the subcontinent spanning two and a half millennia. Blakiston, along with a few other monks from Sangharakshita's Order, oversaw the construction of a Retreat Centre at the foot of the hills containing the famous Bhaja caves – a site of ancient Buddhist ruins – in Maharashtra. A sense of wonder overwhelms her as she contemplates her meditative practice in a timeless continuum with that of nuns and monks of yore:

The silvery moon shone high above, silhouetting the ancient Buddhist caves of Bhaja in whose shadow we sat, caves where two thousand years ago monks, or may be even nuns, had once lived and practiced, caves where the Dharma had once flourished. Here we sat and the Dharma flourished once again.... In silence we lifted the lamp and climbed the steps to our shrine room. In silence we meditated. In silence we rolled out our beds, turned down the wick, and went to sleep (135-6).

No less stunning to them, especially in their early days in India, was the discovery of a complete absence, except among dalit Buddhists, of Buddhism and Buddhist practices in the wider Indian community. Terry Pilchik describes an occasion where some villagers were absolutely dumbstruck on witnessing a few Buddhist monks, Pilchik included, circumambulating a shrine, chanting mantras in Pali. And this in a country that otherwise witnesses spectacular instances of religious excess almost every other day! Pilchik cannot help but conclude: "So far as I could see, Buddhism was as alien to the average Indian as would a Navajo rain-dance on the streets of New York or London" (21). The transformation that these monks (along with other members of their Order) wrought on India's spiritual/religious landscape was, thus, nothing short of being historically spectacular. As mentioned in an early part of this paper, as a result of the combined energies of the Ambedkarite dalit Buddhist movement and the Sangharakshita-led global Buddhist revival, India now has over 7 million practicing Buddhists.

Blakiston describes her active role in 1987 in the ordination of two dalit women, Vimalasuri and Jnanasuri, as a high point in her spiritual evolution as a practicing Buddhist. Her narrative acquires dimensions of a gendered history from this point on. The ordained women along with Blakiston herself were revolutionizing Buddhist history in more ways than one. The ordination of women has been a controversial issue within various schools of Buddhism<sup>xvii</sup>. Sangharakshita, however, had no problems with it within the modernizing framework of his Order. But this was the first time that dalit *women* – bearers of the double burden of caste and gender discrimination

within an inherently hierarchical society - were being inducted into the Order. What was even more unusual in this case was that the ordination ceremony was to be conducted by women members of FWBO – by Blakiston and two other Order members from England. Lastly, the site of the ordination ceremony was also the site that carried relics of ancient Buddhist practice in the land of its birth. All in all, it was a sublime tableau of both spiritual reinscription and revolution, the ancient and the modern clasping each other in a divine spectacle that left the narrator humbled even as she contemplated her own participation in it:

From the mound I gazed up at the caves of Bhaja.... I was struck by a charge of history, carried by a wave that came from the Buddha himself two thousand and five hundred years ago to the monks and nuns who had once lived and practiced in those very caves...from all the great Sages down to my own teacher, and to this momentous present, when two Indian women were about to commit themselves to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. In that moment I experienced the revival of Buddhism as a mighty, boundless, potent force.... I felt unequivocally humbled, yet unusually calm, in the light of this majestic tradition (170).

*Practicing Unbounded Love: Cross-Cultural Spiritual Friendships*

The Buddha once told his disciple, Ananda, that friendship was the whole of spiritual life. A very important aspect of the meditative practice followed by Buddhists around the world is the cultivation of “*metta bhavana*” or the cultivation of the feeling of universal loving kindness and compassion for each and every human being. *Metta* is the Pali version of the Sanskrit *Mitra* which literally means “friend”. In the two memoirs under discussion, friendships across vast cultural barriers features as a very important motif. Broadly the contents of the two texts are structured around two main components of the 8-fold Noble Path. They include the “Path of Vision” and the “Path of Transformation” and Pilchik, in fact, calls the two sections of his book, “Vision” and “Transformation” respectively. In both narratives, the latter component consists almost entirely of accounts of friendships that both Blakiston and Pilchik develop with dalit Buddhists in Maharashtra. Pilchik, in fact, begins his narrative with an account of his bonding with two young Buddhist men, Sanjay and Ashok Kamble. The rest of the narrative is a flashback to his previous visit when he had met Ashok’s father, an ardent Ambedkarite, and when he found himself involved in modes of socially engaged Buddhist *praxis* that wrenched his being out of his comfort zone in England. The title of his book, *Jai Bhim*, is actually a mode of greeting among dalit Buddhists, “*Bhim*” being a shortened version of Ambedkar’s first name, “Bhimrao”. In using

this greeting as not only the title for his memoir, but also as concluding words to his book, Pilchik heralds and celebrates his inclusion in a circle of Ambedkar and Buddha inspired friendship.

Hilary Blakiston in BLD painstakingly narrates the many stages through which her friendships with women such as Sushila, Malati, Manorama, Mrs Diwal and Vimalasuri evolved in the decade that she spent in India. Some helped as translators/interpreters, others as medical aid workers and still others came into her life as fellow travellers on the Noble Buddhist path. The fact that they came from some of the most oppressed sections of Indian society did not make things easier in the early stages. There were vast class and cultural barriers to be overcome, irritating attempts at being shown off as an exotic white woman to be countered, living in the midst of unspeakable squalor and poverty to be endured, and, not the least, a reawakening of spirits battered through millennia of caste oppression to be heroically attempted. But as Mrs Diwal puts it, “like rice absorbing water in which it is cooked” (135) they absorbed the Dharma together – this English woman from the Midlands and the dalit women from the heart of Maharashtra. Metaphors of “opening out towards”, “going forth”, “connecting”, all connoting different modes of intersubjectivity and bonding across barriers, are scattered throughout the narrative.

Blakiston’s *metta bhavana*, or feeling of compassion and loving kindness towards these women reaches its culmination in her experience of her best friend Vimalasuri’s ordination. Vimalasuri, born as Nirmala Karat, led a life of utter material deprivation – the address of her makeshift shack in one of Bombay’s largest slum colonies read “Plot No X, The Pipeline, Andheri, Bombay” (173) - that was compounded by severe caste and gender discrimination. And yet when Blakiston met her for the first time her “eyes glinted with vitality” and she appeared “awestruck like a child” (172). What ensued was an extraordinary friendship in which “what they held in common was far greater than their differences of background” (77):

We travelled together to many a town or village on every type of Indian conveyance: train, bus, rickshaw, bullock cart; we ate together from the same plate, we shared each others’ saris, wore each others’ bangles, carried each others’ luggage...she kneaded and rolled the chapatti dough while I cooked the chapattis...we worked in harmony. (178)

When Blakiston as Dharmacharini Padmaduri ordained Nirmala as Vimalasuri, she felt it was the most natural culmination of their *maitri*, and experienced for the first time “the State Sublime” which the Buddha talks of as the “mindfulness of boundless love” in *Karaneya Metta Sutta*. The chant exhorts those in meditation to practice “unbounded love for all the world/Above, below,

across, in every way/Love unobstructed, void of enmity<sup>xviii</sup>. Blakiston feels it apt to conclude this memoir of her experience of Buddhism in India with this account of an astonishing Indo-British friendship.

I draw this paper to a close by deliberately foregrounding Blakiston's discovery, through her dalit Indian experience, of the full dialogic reality of her evolving Buddhist self. Through this late modern account of a cross-cultural spiritual friendship, that no doubt has a pre-history in colonialism and religious conversion in the context of Indo-British relations, I want to open up the possibility of readings accounts of religious exchanges between peoples and cultures outside the dominant paradigm of the colonial-missionary nexus. This calls for readings of self-making or subject formation that do not give primary explanatory privilege to differential power relations. It involves probing the limits of Foucauldian and/or postcolonial theoretical frameworks in reading historical events I have just described. This does not mean turning a blind eye to the horrors of colonial missionary enterprises or to inequities of current global geopolitics that no doubt cast their shadows on every small human endeavour to connect with and care for others. But it does mean also looking for theoretical/philosophical models that conceive of agency and subjectivity through an ethics of care and recognition. Levinas and Charles Taylor immediately come to mind. And it is with an invocation the latter's notion of the self being oriented in an intersubjective moral space over and above a socio-political field of power that I want to end this paper:

What I am as a self, my identity, is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me... We are all framed by what we see as universally valid commitments...and also what we understand as particular identifications.... One cannot be a self on one's own. I am only a self in relation to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation-partners who were essential to my achieving self-definition; in another in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of languages of self-understanding.... A self exists only within what I call 'webs of interlocution'<sup>xix</sup> (1989: 34-36).

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<sup>i</sup> This paper was presented at the 15<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in Canberra 29 June-2 July 2004. It has been peer-reviewed and appears on the conference Proceedings website by permission of the author who retains copyright. The paper may be downloaded for fair use under the Copyright act (1954), its later amendments and other relevant legislation.

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- <sup>ii</sup> Nicholas Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001, p 6.
- <sup>iii</sup> Buddhist monks from Japan and Taiwan have also played a role here, but their contribution is much smaller than that of FWBO and TBMSG. See Eleanor Zelliot's 'A New Phase in the Ambedkar Movement' for details of Japanese and Taiwanese contributions. Paper given under the panel 'Low Caste, Untouchable and Anti-Caste Movement' at the Sixteenth European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies held in Edinburgh from 6-9 September 2000. See website <http://www.ed.ac.uk/sociol/sas/conf16/panel2.html>, downloaded on 23/01/2003
- <sup>iv</sup> The details of his relationship with Ambedkar can be found in Sangharakshita's book, *Ambedkar and Buddhism*, Suffolk: Windhorse Publications, 1986. See especially chapters 2, 6 and 7
- <sup>v</sup> From Sangharakshita's personal collection of letters, copies of which have been obtained by the author with Sangharakshita's permission on her visit to Birmingham in January 2004. Source: Madhyamaloka Library, Birmingham, UK.
- <sup>vi</sup> Dharmachari Subhuti's biography of Sangharakshita.....contains details of the English monk's activities as a Buddhist in India.
- <sup>vii</sup> 'Babasaheb' is an affectionate honorific that the dalits use to refer to Ambedkar.
- <sup>viii</sup> Dharmarakshita cited in Terry Pilchik's *Jai Bhim! Dispatches from a Peaceful Revolution*, Glasgow: Windhorse Publications, 1988, p. 122.
- <sup>ix</sup> The second chapter of Sangharakshita's book *Ambedkar and Buddhism*, gives an account of his 1956 visit to Nagpur immediately after Ambedkar's death, especially pp 25-27
- <sup>x</sup> Terry Pilchik, *Jai Bhim! Dispatches From a Peaceful Revolution*, op cit p 151.
- <sup>xi</sup> Hence his adoption of the terms *Dharmachari* (male dharma-farer) and *Dharmacharini* (female dharma-farer) to designate members of his Order rather than the traditional *upasaka* (lay Buddhist) and *bhikshu* (monk).
- <sup>xii</sup> Alan Sponberg, 'TBMSG: A Dhamma Revolution in Contemporary India', in *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*, eds, Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B.King, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996, pp 86-87.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Sangharakshita, 'Religio-Nationalism in Sri Lanka' in *Alternative Traditions*, Glasgow: Windhorse Publications, 1986, p 70.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Alan Sponberg, op cit , p.75
- <sup>xv</sup> See his *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge University Press), 1989.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Narrative Time", *Critical Inquiry*, 7(3), Fall issue, 1980, p. 188.
- <sup>xvii</sup> See Donald Lopez's "Introduction" to his *Modern Buddhism: Readings for the Unenlightened*, Harmondsworth; Penguin, 2002, pp. xxii-xxv
- <sup>xviii</sup> Cited in *But Little Dust*, Cambridge; Allborough Press, 1990, p169.
- <sup>xix</sup> *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, op cit, p 34-36.