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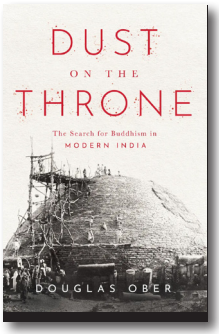
BOOK REVIEW

Dust on the Throne: The Search for Buddhism in Modern India. By Douglas Ober. Stanford University Press, 2023. 394 pp. ISBN 9781503635036 (hardcover); 9781503635036 (paperback); 9781503635777 (e-book). $95.00 (hardcover); $32.00 (paperback and e-book).



In a historical context marked by social tensions and the increasing political instrumentalization of religion, *Dust on the Throne* offers a timely and illuminating perspective on the place of Buddhism in India's modern history. The book's significance becomes especially clear when read against the backdrop of violence directed at minorities and the deliberate reshaping of national narratives. Rather than offering a neutral chronicle of events, Douglas Ober engages directly with the dynamics through which religious traditions are erased, remembered, and strategically mobilized under shifting regimes of power. A professor at the University of British Columbia, Ober brings together rigorous archival work and a critical historiographical lens to reassess the revitalization of Buddhism in India, challenging widely accepted simplifications in the field.

The metaphor embedded in the book's title encapsulates, in my view, both the symbolic erasure and the layered processes of retrieval that characterize Buddhism's trajectory in South Asia. "Dust," here, evokes not only historical neglect but the ideological sediment that veils alternative narratives—narratives Ober brings into focus through a rich array of multilingual sources and an interdisciplinary methodology. What I find particularly compelling is Ober's insistence that the Buddhist revival in India cannot be reduced to a colonial artifact. Instead, he situates it within longer continuities and tensions, showing how it emerges as a response to both colonial oppression and deeply entrenched social hierarchies. His reading emphasizes that Buddhist revitalization drew as much from local aspirations and contested moral debates as from external stimuli such as European Orientalism.

This book engages meaningfully with debates in religious history, postcolonial theory, and subaltern studies, yet it does so without relying on a rigid theoretical agenda. What stands out to me is its ability to unsettle the assumption that Buddhism vanished entirely from India after the medieval period. Ober offers a more layered account, where absence and continuity are not mutually exclusive but closely entangled. While scholars such as Arthur McKeown, Anne M. Blackburn, and Giovanni Verardi have already challenged the extinction narrative, Ober's contribution is distinctive for the breadth of material he mobilizes and the coherence with which he interrelates archival, textual, and social dimensions. His work draws attention to sources and actors often excluded from canonical historiography.

Buddhism, in this account, does not remain confined to archaeology or Ambedkarite movements. One of the most compelling aspects, in my view, is how Ober reconstructs vernacular memory and traces intellectual lineages that have received little scholarly attention. These efforts allow him to show that Buddhism has continued to shape conversations about caste, secularism, and national belonging well into the modern era. His intervention is not simply additive; it also reframes the interpretive lens through which Buddhist history in India has been viewed. The Buddha becomes a contested figure, invoked in competing ideological projects and reimagined within evolving visions of social order. In this sense, the book does more than recover a neglected tradition; it reflects critically on the very conditions that have made such neglect possible.

The structure of the book encourages the reader to attend to the diversity of actors and intentions that shaped the reconfiguration of Buddhism in modern India, while also exposing the fragility of the categories—religion, caste, nation, modernity—through which that process has often been described. What I found particularly effective is how each chapter adds depth through thematic echoes and contradictions, rather than through a linear or accumulative logic. These overlaps challenge many of the assumptions still embedded in mainstream narratives about Buddhism and Indian modernity. What Ober offers, in my view, is not a recovery of a lost tradition, but a critical inquiry into the ways in which that tradition has been claimed, authorized, and contested. The book pushes us to rethink what we consider as evidence of historical continuity and to ask who has the power to define it.

Dust on the Throne examines the ways in which Buddhism has been reinterpreted and adapted to modern contexts, often negotiating tensions between inherited traditions and contemporary social realities. These include meditation practices, collective rituals, and commemorative events that link

the past to the demands of the present. The book avoids generalizations and instead focuses on specific turning points and figures. Among them, B. R. Ambedkar receives close and sustained attention. His 1956 mass conversion ceremony, in which hundreds of thousands of Dalits embraced Buddhism as a form of resistance against caste oppression, is treated as a pivotal moment. Ober writes with force: "Ambedkar's conversion cut to the very foundations of this oppression" (282). As I read it, this moment redefined Buddhism not only as a spiritual alternative but as a political project grounded in dignity and dissent.

Ober is careful, however, not to idealize the movement. He notes that "modern Indian Buddhism is often disparaged as having little relevance outside Ambedkar's followers, or among Himalayan Buddhists and exiled Tibetans" (20). This observation struck me as particularly important. It points not just to social marginalization, but to a persistent unwillingness—within both public discourse and academic writing—to acknowledge these communities as full participants in the making of religious modernity. That a movement of such magnitude continues to be framed as peripheral says much about the hierarchies of recognition in postcolonial India. Ober's intervention exposes those hierarchies and calls them into question.

One of the most significant arguments in the book, in my view, is its critique of the narrative that presents Buddhism as a derivative or marginal offshoot of Hinduism. This interpretation, still common in both academic and political discourse, tends to obscure the persecution experienced by Dalit communities and to diminish the social dimensions of Buddhist revivalism. Ober addresses this directly by showing how Buddhism has served as a framework for imagining egalitarian alternatives—visions that stand apart from both caste hierarchies and colonial models of governance. As he writes, movements "from Lucknow and Kanpur to Calicut and Madras promulgated new meanings of human dignity and launched a social project that was as much political and ethical as it was historiographical" (192). This line captures well the book's emphasis on Buddhism as a living language of dissent, grounded in specific struggles and aspirations.

The same sensibility shapes Ober's discussion of ideological intersections, particularly in the chapter "When the Buddha Met Marx." Here, he examines attempts to bring Buddhist ethics into dialogue with Marxist critiques of class and property. The figures of Kosambi and Sankrityayan, among others, are not simply treated as intermediaries but as thinkers who reframed Buddhism as a resource for social transformation. I found this section especially illuminating. It shows how Buddhism, often cast as contemplative or ahistorical, was reimagined in active engagement with

economic injustice and state power. Ober is careful to note that "modern Buddhism was shaped as much by Marxist ideas about property, economic organization" (250) as by any return to ancient teachings—an assertion that reinforces the tradition's adaptability to shifting political horizons.

While the book investigates areas often overlooked in academic discourse, such as the vernacular transmission of Buddhist memory, the interplay between Buddhism, Marxism, and anti-caste thought, and the symbolic appropriation of Buddhist imagery by the postcolonial state, it leaves certain questions open. Some of these may well fall outside the scope Ober set for this study; even so, future work could profit from a closer look at the roles women have played in shaping modern Indian Buddhism and at the experiences of communities situated at the intersections of multiple exclusions (for example, lower-caste Catholic Christians or LGBTQ+ Buddhists and sympathizers). Attending to these dimensions would extend the book's insight into how Buddhist ethics and imaginaries adapt within India's intensely plural social and religious landscape.

Ober's conclusion brings together many of the book's insights with a clear and memorable line: "As Indians relived the past to find a better present and future, a classless, casteless, egalitarian society, free as much from the influences of colonial oppression and Western materialism as Brahmanical discrimination and intolerable poverty, they found the Buddha" (292). The sentence distills one of the book's most persistent arguments, viz., that the past is not merely recovered, but actively reimagined in response to the pressures of the present. *Dust on the Throne* is ultimately a study of how religious traditions become tools for critique and reinvention. Even as it acknowledges the limits of India's political landscape, the book ends with a sense of possibility that is grounded not in idealism, but in historical struggle. That, I think, is one of its lasting strengths.

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