

Article

Navayāna Buddhism and the Conditions of Religious Continuity: Conversion and Anti-Caste Emancipation in Modern India

Jiyeon Choe 

Institute of Indian Studies, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Seoul 02450, Republic of Korea;
2018032@hufs.ac.kr

Abstract

Navayāna Buddhism emerged from B. R. Ambedkar's effort to make Buddhism a path of liberation from caste oppression. Its emphasis on equality, dignity, compassion, and the refusal of humiliation gave it considerable emancipatory power. Yet Buddhism in modern India has remained regionally concentrated rather than broadly expansive. This article argues that this uneven consolidation cannot be explained by external constraints alone, although administrative barriers, anti-conversion laws, reservation policy, and Hindu nationalist pressures have shaped the conditions of *Navayāna* affiliation. It also reflects the religious form produced by Ambedkar's founding reinterpretation of Buddhism. Shaped by the urgency of anti-caste struggle, *Navayāna* developed strong resources for public ritual, collective memory, and moral-political assertion, while devotional, contemplative, and ritually mediated forms of everyday practice were not institutionalized to the same degree. Drawing on Ambedkar's writings, census data, and historical, sociological, and ethnographic scholarship, this article examines the relationship between conversion, anti-caste emancipation, and religious continuity. It suggests that the features that make a religious movement politically potent are not always the same as those that sustain it as a living tradition across generations.

Keywords: *Navayāna* Buddhism; Ambedkar; Dalit; Indian religion; Ambedkarite Buddhism

1. Introduction

Although Buddhism originated in India, it is generally understood to have lost much of its institutional presence on the subcontinent after the early second millennium. To be clear, Buddhist traditions survived in some Himalayan and border regions, but Buddhism no longer functioned as a major religious formation within Indian social life (Fogelin 2015). It was in this context that B. R. Ambedkar led a mass conversion in Nagpur on 14 October 1956, bringing Buddhism back into Indian public life. The Buddhism that returned, however, was not a revival of an older tradition. It was a new formulation shaped by the Dalit emancipatory project, one that diverged considerably from inherited Buddhist traditions. Known as *Navayāna*,¹ it was conceived as a new moral and religious foundation to replace caste-bound Hinduism.

The conversion movement dramatically increased the Buddhist population in India, from 0.05 percent in the 1951 census to 0.74 percent in 1961 (Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India 1963), but this momentum did not develop into sustained long-term growth. According to the 2011 Census, Buddhists still accounted for only about 0.7 percent



Received: 30 March 2026

Revised: 2 July 2026

Accepted: 3 July 2026

Published: 9 July 2026

Copyright: © 2026 by the author.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC BY\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) license.

of the population, or approximately 8.44 million people (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, [India 2011](#)). Despite its powerful significance as a project of caste emancipation, *Navayāna* has not produced a broad national expansion comparable to the scale of its emancipatory ambition. This uneven consolidation provides the point of departure for the present study.

A substantial body of scholarship has examined *Navayāna* in relation to Dalit politics, anti-caste mobilization, Hindu nationalist pressure, state classification, reservation policy, and legal constraints on conversion ([Jaffrelot 2003](#); [Pai 2013](#); [Jenkins 2008](#); [Omvedt 2003](#); [Loftus 2021](#); [Menšíková 2023](#)). The present article builds on this scholarship but directs its attention to a question it has addressed less directly: what kind of religious formation did *Navayāna* become, and how did the conditions of its founding moment shape its capacity to sustain religious continuity²? Other scholarship has emphasized the doctrinal distinctiveness and socially engaged character of Ambedkar's reconstruction of Buddhism ([Queen 1996](#); [Jaoul 2016](#)), and the present article draws on this literature as well.

Scholars following [Asad \(1993\)](#) have rightly emphasized that what counts as religion is never simply given, but is historically shaped by relations of power, authority, and discipline. This point is crucial for understanding *Navayāna*, whose development was conditioned by caste, state classification, and Hindu nationalist pressure. Yet religious continuity also requires attention to the practical and affective dimensions through which religion becomes meaningful in ordinary life. Drawing on Weber's concern with religious authority and McGuire's account of lived religion, this article therefore examines *Navayāna* from the side of religious practice: its rituals, devotional orientations, communal forms, and capacity to address everyday concerns such as suffering, loss, desire, and uncertainty. *Navayāna*'s public ceremonies, collective memory, Ambedkarite authority, and anti-caste assertion generated considerable moral and symbolic force. This article argues, however, that this force was less fully embedded in the everyday religious forms through which individuals and communities sustain commitment across generations.

Ambedkar's reinterpretation, most clearly articulated in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, reformulated Buddhism as an ethical and social project. In Ambedkar's account, the Buddha's teaching is not limited to individual salvation or *nibbāna* but includes a social message concerning justice, love, liberty, equality, and fraternity ([Ambedkar \[1957\] 1980](#), pp. 121–23). This social orientation is developed further in Ambedkar's distinction between "religion" and *dhamma*³, where *dhamma* is defined as fundamentally social and concerned with right relations between human beings ([Ambedkar \[1957\] 1980](#), p. 168). This orientation is also visible in the twenty-two vows⁴ administered at conversion. These vows bind entry into Buddhism to an explicit rejection of Hindu gods, rituals, Brahmanical ritual authority, and caste hierarchy, and to the affirmation of equality and a new ethical community ([Ambedkar \[1957\] 1980](#), pp. 261–62; [Omvedt 2003](#), pp. 261–62). Conversion in the *Navayāna* framework thus operated simultaneously as an embrace of Buddhism and a repudiation of the Hindu social order ([Jaoul 2016](#), pp. 62–65).

Navayāna's emphasis on ethical egalitarianism and social transformation gave it considerable emancipatory power, and its conversion ceremonies functioned as powerful public rituals of collective identity and moral boundary-making. Yet this reorientation also shaped the texture of religious life available to its practitioners. Recent work reflects this complexity: [Menšíková \(2023\)](#) shows that rationalist Ambedkarite self-understandings do not neatly fit the complex lived reality of many practitioners, while [Sonowal and Ashok \(2023\)](#) document the persistence of ritual pluralism among *Navayāna* Buddhist women and suggest that religious revitalization did not occur in the expected sense.

This article draws on a humanities-oriented historical and conceptual approach, engaging with Ambedkar's writings, census data, and existing historical, sociological, and

ethnographic scholarship. It seeks to reconstruct the conditions under which *Navayāna* took the religious form it did, and to assess what those conditions have meant for long-term continuity. Its claims are accordingly framed as conceptual arguments grounded in the available scholarship.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 analyzes the shift from liberation-centered soteriology to social ethics in Ambedkar's reinterpretation. Section 3 examines conversion as collective assertion and moral boundary-making. Section 4 considers the institutional and political contexts—including reservation policy, anti-conversion law, and Hindu nationalist discourse—shaping *Navayāna* affiliation in practice. Section 5 examines the lived religious dimensions of *Navayāna* as represented in existing scholarship, with attention to how its founding priorities and the power relations in which they were embedded together configured the possibilities for long-term religious continuity. The conclusion reflects on what the *Navayāna* case reveals about the relationship between religious transformation and political power.

2. Reconfiguring Buddhism: From Soteriology to Social Ethics

Navayāna opened a new chapter in Indian Buddhist history, but it did so by substantially reconfiguring what many inherited Buddhist traditions had placed at the center of doctrine and practice. In many of these traditions—*Theravāda*, *Mahāyāna*, and *Vajrayāna* alike—the ultimate goal is liberation (*nirvāṇa*) from the cycle of birth and death (*saṃsāra*). Ethical conduct (*śīla*), meditation (*śamādhi*), and wisdom (*prajñā*) form the basic framework of practice through which such liberation is pursued. Within this framework, the Buddha is understood both as the awakened one who attained liberation and as the exemplary teacher who revealed the path leading to it (Gethin 1998).

In Ambedkar's reconstruction, these core doctrines are repositioned. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, the Buddha is reconfigured less as a guide to liberation from *saṃsāra* than as a teacher of social emancipation and ethical practice (Ambedkar [1957] 1980, pp. 121–23; Loftus 2021). The problem of suffering (*dukkha*), central to early Buddhism, is recast in strongly social terms, as inequality, humiliation, and oppression rather than only as suffering rooted in *saṃsāric* existence and in the psychological forces of desire and attachment (Menšíková 2023, pp. 71–72). Liberation is framed less as release from rebirth alone than as emancipation from oppressive social structures and the formation of an ethical community grounded in equality (Ambedkar [1957] 1980, pp. 121–23; Loftus 2021; Witkowski 2025). The shift is fundamental: where many inherited Buddhist traditions ask what binds the individual to suffering, Ambedkar asks what binds the Dalit to caste.⁵

This reorientation constitutes what may be called a soteriological reorientation rather than a simple rejection of Buddhist doctrine. Meditation and contemplative practice are assigned a less central role, while moral conduct and social equality become the primary emphasis (Loftus 2021; Menšíková 2025). Ambedkar reformulates the core of Buddhism in terms of wisdom, morality, and compassion directed toward the reconstruction of the world. *Śamādhi* is not entirely dismissed, but it loses its structural centrality; ethics, not contemplation, occupies the structural center of the path (Ambedkar [1957] 1980, pp. 121–22; Loftus 2021).

The treatment of *nirvāṇa* follows the same logic. Rather than describing it as an ontological or experiential state beyond conditioned existence, Ambedkar interprets it in ethical and psychological terms, associating it with righteous social life and moral harmony. The metaphysical dimension is significantly reframed. In Ambedkar's reinterpretation, the highest religious aim is no longer located primarily beyond the world, but in the ethical transformation of social life within history (Ambedkar [1957] 1980, pp. 234–35).

Ambedkar justifies this reinterpretation through a distinctive understanding of *dhamma* as a socially grounded moral order, which he contrasts with conventional religion and uses as the basis for recovering what he presents as the Buddha's authentic teaching. Historical Buddhist texts, he argues, preserve teachings filtered through monastic interpretation and later doctrinal accretion. Ambedkar reads the Buddha's original intent not only in what the texts explicitly state but also in what they imply. On this basis, he claims the authority to redefine Buddhism for contemporary needs (Ambedkar [1957] 1980, pp. 168, 350–51; Menšíková 2025, p. 284). *Navayāna* thus presents itself not simply as heterodox innovation but as a recovery of the Buddha's social and rational *dhamma*, freed from later accretions, speculative metaphysics, and interpretations that Ambedkar regarded as detached from human welfare (Ambedkar [1957] 1980, pp. 225–26, 350–51).

Taken together, this move detached Buddhism from ritualism and supernaturalism while aligning it with the modern values of liberty, equality, and fraternity that Ambedkar explicitly associated with the Buddha's teaching. It also made Buddhism defensible on rationalist grounds, which mattered in a context where religious authority was increasingly challenged by colonial modernity, anti-caste critique, and scientific skepticism.

The twenty-two vows recited at conversion ceremonies illustrate this reorientation in concrete terms. A substantial portion consists of explicit renunciations: Hindu deities, caste-based ritual authority, and the claim that the Buddha was an avatar of *Viṣṇu*. Other vows affirm equality, moral discipline, and commitment to Buddhist teachings. Only part of the vows directly invoke inherited Buddhist practice, such as the Eightfold Path, the Five Precepts, and the cultivation of virtue. Their structure reveals that *Navayāna* conversion is as much an act of social boundary-making as an entry into a religious path. The repudiation of Hinduism is built into the ceremony itself (Omvedt 2003, pp. 261–62; Menšíková 2025, p. 276).

This reorientation raises questions about intergenerational religious continuity. In many inherited Buddhist traditions, ethical practice gains coherence from its orientation toward liberation. Morality is not an end in itself but a preparatory condition for insight into impermanence (*anicca*), suffering (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*) (Gethin 1998). Within Ambedkar's reconstruction, however, liberation was recast as emancipation within history, and ethics became more closely tied to social transformation.

Many religious traditions sustain intergenerational transmission through historically specific combinations of doctrine, ritual, embodied practice, authority, and collective memory. Ritual repetition and embodied practice can help make religion durable as lived experience, anchoring commitment beyond moments of political mobilization (McGuire 2008, pp. 97–118, 119–58). This general point is also reflected in recent studies of Ambedkarite Buddhism, which note continuing tensions over ritual, authority, and collective identity (Menšíková 2023, pp. 72–79; Jaoul 2016, pp. 46–47). When a religious movement is strongly organized around ethical commitment and protest identity, its modes of transmission may become closely tied to the continuing salience of social grievance and collective memory. If the intensity of collective protest fluctuates, religious commitment may fluctuate with it.

Comparisons with other engaged Buddhist movements are instructive here. Many twentieth-century forms of socially engaged Buddhism reinterpreted Buddhism in activist directions while still retaining stronger institutional, ritual, and meditative frameworks. *Navayāna*, by contrast, was not merely reformist but reconstructive. Emerging from a context in which Buddhist continuity in India had long been disrupted, it had to be rebuilt under conditions of institutional discontinuity, and Ambedkar's ethical emphasis reflected that urgency (Menšíková 2025; Jaoul 2016; Omvedt 2003).

The soteriological reorientation of Buddhism produced moral clarity and broad accessibility. It provided a powerful language for Dalit assertion and collective dignity. The very features that made *Navayāna* effective as a movement of emancipation also shaped the particular conditions under which it developed as a religious formation. When transcendence is reframed as social equality and liberation becomes closely tied to justice within history, the relationship between religious practice and political commitment is configured in ways that both enable and constrain long-term continuity.

3. Conversion as Collective Assertion

If *Navayāna* reconfigures Buddhism doctrinally, it also transforms the meaning of conversion. In many religious traditions, conversion is understood primarily as an inward reorientation: a change in ultimate commitment, often accompanied by ritual incorporation into a new community. In *Navayāna*, however, conversion is also a collective and public act of social assertion. Its significance lies as much in what is renounced as in what is embraced. Ambedkar's own mass conversion in Nagpur in October 1956 was framed not as a private mystical experience but as a public break with caste society and Brahmanical religious authority. Recent scholarship likewise emphasizes that Ambedkarite Buddhism emerged as a socio-political protest against caste oppression and that public conversion introduced a powerful collective dimension into Dalit strategies of resistance and self-assertion (Menšíková 2025, p. 276).

The structure of the ceremony itself makes this clear. After taking the Three Refuges, Ambedkar administered twenty-two additional vows that foregrounded renunciation: Hindu deities, Brahmanical ritual authority, and the identification of the Buddha as an avatar of Viṣṇu were explicitly rejected (Omvedt 2003, pp. 261–62). The ceremony thus functioned as a visible act of boundary-making. Public declaration, collective recitation, and mass participation were not incidental features of the event but integral to its meaning. Conversion did not merely mark entry into a new religion; it enacted a public exit from the symbolic and ritual order of caste Hinduism (Menšíková 2025, p. 276).

Seen in this way, *Navayāna* conversion is best understood not as a choice between religion and politics but as a form of practice in which religious and political dimensions are inseparably intertwined. It may be described as a protest conversion—a form of religious change in which the act of conversion itself becomes a means of refusing humiliation and asserting dignity. As Jaoul argues for the *Navayāna* revival in Uttar Pradesh, Ambedkarite conversion sought to link citizenship, moral community, and emancipation through a religious form that exceeded narrow liberal understandings of individual belief. Conversion offered not only a new label but a new basis for collective self-respect and a critique of the social order that had rendered Dalits “untouchable” (Jaoul 2016, pp. 47–50).

This helps explain why *Navayāna* has often been closely tied to political mobilization. Since Ambedkar, departure from Hinduism has been bound up with the search for distinct political representation and for forms of collectivity not reducible to caste subordination. More recent ethnographic work similarly shows that Ambedkarite Buddhists continue to draw on Ambedkar's legacy as both a religious and a political resource, even as they differ over how strongly Buddhism should be placed on the “religious” or “secular” side of that spectrum (Menšíková 2023, pp. 76–77). In Ambedkarite practice and self-understanding, religion and politics are therefore not easily separable domains (Menšíková 2023, pp. 75–76).

At the same time, this collective model of conversion has imposed certain limits. Because Ambedkar died only weeks after the Nagpur conversion, the movement was left without a singular leader or stable *saṅgha*-like institutional center (Menšíková 2023, p. 65). Later Ambedkarite communities had to negotiate questions of authority, ritual, and identity without a centralized leadership or hierarchical structure, producing a wide spectrum of

practices, ideologies, and interpretations (Menšíková 2025, pp. 279–80). The result has been a tradition that remains symbolically powerful but internally plural, organizationally diffuse, and diverse in practice (Menšíková 2025, p. 294).

The demographic record reflects this ambivalent pattern. On the one hand, conversion to Buddhism led to a dramatic post-1956 expansion of Buddhist communities, and census figures show that the Buddhist population more than tripled between 1951 and 2011 (Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India 1963; Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India 2011). On the other hand, Buddhists have remained below 1 percent of India's total population, and Ambedkarite Buddhism has remained regionally concentrated, especially in Maharashtra (Menšíková 2025, pp. 277–78). Approximately 77 percent of India's Buddhists resided in Maharashtra in 2011, and 95 percent of Scheduled Caste Buddhist communities there were registered under the Mahar caste (Menšíková 2023, p. 65). This suggests not a broad-based national religious transformation but a powerful yet socially concentrated form of anti-caste identification (Menšíková 2025, p. 278).⁶

Administrative and classificatory issues complicate the picture further. Census data may understate the actual reach of *Navayāna*, since some converts remain officially classified as Hindu in civic records, and census personnel may also reproduce assumptions that Buddhism is merely a sect within Hinduism. This does not erase the problem of limited growth, but it does mean that census numbers should be read with caution. The gap between the public visibility of *dikṣā*⁷ ceremonies and the relative weakness of official figures points to a more complex reality in which religious change, social protest, and official enumeration do not necessarily coincide (Jaoul 2016, pp. 62–65).

None of this diminishes the significance of conversion for those who undertake it. For many, the renunciation of caste identity and the adoption of Buddhist symbols generate a genuine reorientation of belonging. At the same time, recent ethnographic studies suggest that the depth and form of this transformation vary. Ambedkarite Buddhism today encompasses a wide spectrum of practices, ranging from politically oriented activism to devotional worship, commemorative observances, hybrid domestic religiosity, and selective borrowings from other Buddhist traditions. Such diversity has increased the tradition's adaptability, but it has also generated ongoing debates over authenticity, leadership, and the boundaries of collective identity (Menšíková 2023, pp. 70–77; Menšíková 2025, pp. 279–80, 294).

This is especially important for understanding conversion across generations. In the Ambedkarite settings examined here, community life often appears less centered on sustained monastic discipline or systematic meditative training than on public gatherings, acts of respect toward Ambedkar and the Buddha, and forms of activism tied to memory, dignity, and anti-caste assertion (Menšíková 2023, pp. 72–74, 77–78). These practices are powerful carriers of solidarity, but they do not necessarily produce a uniform model of Buddhist discipline or authority. *Navayāna*'s practical dilemmas stem in part from the difficulty of combining political urgency with stable religious forms, while the struggle to define collectivity remains ongoing (Jaoul 2016, pp. 46–47; Menšíková 2023, pp. 78–79).

4. Institutional Constraints and Political Context

Doctrinal reconfiguration and protest-oriented conversion did not occur in a vacuum. In India, the relationship between religious identity and administrative classification is particularly dense where caste, affirmative action, and religious belonging intersect. For *Navayāna*, external institutional conditions have mattered almost as much as internal doctrinal priorities. Three factors are especially important: the legal status of Buddhist converts within the Scheduled Caste framework, the bureaucratic management of religious

conversion through anti-conversion laws, and Hindu nationalist attempts to subsume Buddhism within a broader Hindu civilizational order.

The first issue concerns affirmative action and official recognition. Under the Constitutional (Scheduled Castes) Order of 1950, Scheduled Caste status was originally restricted to Hindus, later extended to Sikhs in 1956 and to Buddhists in 1990. The inclusion of Buddhists was significant because it meant that conversion to Buddhism no longer necessarily entailed the loss of reservation benefits, at least in principle. This removed one major disincentive to conversion and helps explain why later Ambedkarite Buddhist mobilization could proceed under more favorable legal conditions than conversion to Christianity or Islam (Menšíková 2023, p. 65).

Yet formal recognition did not eliminate administrative ambiguity. Weak official figures do not necessarily indicate the absence of conversion so much as the instability of its bureaucratic inscription. Some converts fail to change their civic records and therefore officially remain Hindu, while census personnel and wider public discourse may continue to treat Buddhism as little more than a Hindu sect. The result is a mismatch between public *dikṣā* ceremonies, visible anti-caste assertion, and official enumeration. Census data therefore need to be read cautiously, since the state's classificatory practices may undercount the actual reach of *Navayāna* while also obscuring the transitional and politically charged nature of conversion itself (Jaoul 2016, pp. 62–65).

The second issue concerns anti-conversion law. Across several Indian states, conversion has been made subject to bureaucratic management through so-called Freedom of Religion Acts. These laws formally present themselves as protections against conversion by force, fraud, allurement, or inducement, but their practical effect extends beyond the prohibition of coercion. By requiring converts, priests, or organizers to report conversion, provide reasons for it, and disclose personal and social details, such laws recast conversion as an object of administrative judgment and state supervision (Jenkins 2019, pp. 144–50). The breadth of terms such as “inducement” and “allurement” further allows material, social, or institutional benefits to be read as evidence against the convert's agency or sincerity (Jenkins 2019, pp. 144–45).

This logic is especially clear in Gujarat's 2003 law and its implementing rules. In Gujarat, anyone performing, organizing, or even indirectly participating in a conversion ceremony must obtain prior permission from the District Magistrate, while the convert must subsequently submit an intimation of conversion. The required forms ask for details such as reasons for conversion, prior religious affiliation, address, age, occupation, income, and the time and place of the ceremony; the District Magistrate must also maintain a register of conversions and submit periodic reports to the government (Jenkins 2019, pp. 147–49). In practice, such procedures place converts under suspicion and turn conversion into an object of state management rather than simply a protected expression of conscience.

For *Navayāna*, whose conversions are often collective and public by design, this legal structure is particularly consequential. A form of conversion intended as an act of communal assertion is thereby made legible to the state as a regulated and potentially suspect event. The issue is not only repression in a narrow sense, but delay, scrutiny, and procedural burden. Anti-conversion law therefore matters even when it is not directed specifically at Buddhist converts: it alters the political meaning and practical costs of public conversion itself. In this sense, the state does not ban *Navayāna*, but it participates in shaping the terms under which conversion becomes thinkable and actionable.

The third issue concerns Hindu nationalist discourse. A recurring feature of contemporary Ambedkarite experience is the attempt to collapse Buddhism back into a Hindu civilizational whole. One of the most visible forms of this pressure is the continued public representation of the Buddha as the ninth avatar of *Viṣṇu*, a discourse that many younger

Ambedkarites interpret as an attempt to reinsert Buddhists into the same social and symbolic order from which Ambedkar sought to extract them (Menšíková 2023, pp. 75–76). This is precisely why Ambedkar placed the rejection of Buddha-as-*Viṣṇu* in the conversion vows: if Buddhism is reabsorbed into Hinduism, conversion no longer functions as a meaningful exit from caste Hinduism (Omvedt 2003, pp. 261–62).

This strategy of symbolic incorporation extends beyond theology. Rashtriya Swayam-sevak Sangh (RSS) discourse has also targeted Dalit communities by reinterpreting their histories and traditions, including through attempts to appropriate Ambedkar for nationalist purposes (Menšíková 2023, pp. 75–76). Ambedkarite Buddhists also encounter the broader Hindutva language of “homecoming” or *ghar wapsi*⁸ which frames non-Hindu communities as populations to be returned to the Hindu fold; Loftus notes, by contrast, that Ambedkar’s own vision of the *saṅgha* can be read as a pre-Sangh Parivar, bottom-up version of *ghar wapsi* (Loftus 2021, pp. 274–75). Whether through the language of “homecoming,” the portrayal of Buddha as *Viṣṇu*, or the broader claim that Buddhism belongs within a Hindu civilizational continuum, the effect is similar: the oppositional logic of *Navayāna* conversion is weakened by denying that conversion constitutes a genuine break at all.

Taken together, these factors create an environment that constrains *Navayāna* without necessarily prohibiting it. The state may formally recognize Buddhists as eligible for Scheduled Caste protections, yet bureaucratic classification still obscures conversion in practice. Anti-conversion laws may not target *Navayāna* directly, yet they subject collective conversion to the logic of suspicion and oversight. Hindu nationalist discourse may not deny Buddhism outright, yet it neutralizes its protest function by reinscribing it within a Hindu framework. The cumulative effect is neither simple repression nor free expansion, but a structurally constrained space in which the symbolic force of conversion is persistently complicated.

5. Everyday Practice and Religious Continuity

Religions may support social organization, ethical reform, and collective identity. At the same time, they address forms of human vulnerability that cannot be fully accounted for by social critique alone. Death, loss, suffering, desire, and uncertainty are existential and affective experiences as much as social problems; through them individuals seek meaning, consolation, and orientation. From a Weberian perspective, religion becomes durable when it offers a meaningful order within which suffering can be interpreted and life conduct can be organized. McGuire’s account of lived religion develops this point at the level of everyday practice, showing how religious worlds become real through ritual acts, embodied habits, devotional relations, and affective attachments that help people sustain such meanings in ordinary life (Weber [1922] 1978; McGuire 2008).

From this perspective, *Navayāna*’s religious continuity must be considered together with its moral and political force. As Section 2 argued, Ambedkar’s reconstruction of Buddhism reoriented suffering, liberation, and dhamma toward the social conditions of caste oppression. This reorientation gave *Navayāna* considerable moral clarity, making Buddhism a language of dignity, equality, and collective emancipation. Ambedkarite Buddhism was therefore presented as a rational, ethical, and socially oriented dhamma. At the same time, devotional, ritual, and otherworldly dimensions were given a less central place (Loftus 2021). Yet a religious formation organized so strongly around social ethics does not automatically generate the everyday practices through which individuals confront grief, illness, and uncertainty. For such concerns to be addressed in religiously sustaining ways, they usually require routinized forms of devotion, meditation, ritual care, and communal support.

This shift had important consequences for *Navayāna*'s capacity to function as a lived religion. In many religious traditions, everyday practices such as ritual observance, prayer, devotion, and petition play a crucial role in making religious worlds experientially real, sustaining affective attachment, and helping practitioners cope with suffering and uncertainty (McGuire 2008, pp. 12–13). These practices help religious life become embedded in the rhythms, emotions, and practical routines of everyday existence. Where such embedding remains limited, religious commitment may depend more heavily on public and collective conditions, such as the salience of social grievance or the visibility of collective mobilization.

The relevance of these dimensions appears indirectly in empirical studies of Ambedkarite Buddhism itself. Sonowal and Ashok (2023, pp. S53–S54) argue that conversion among the *Navayāna* Buddhist women they studied was driven primarily by social and political reasons, and that this orientation meant that full religious revitalization did not occur in the sense of producing new devotional or ritual forms. Menšíková (2023, pp. 72–74) similarly observes that the rationalist self-understanding of many Ambedkarite Buddhists sits uneasily alongside the complex lived reality of practitioners, among whom tensions persist over prayer, *pūjā*, devotional acts, and the boundary between respect and worship.

6. Conclusions: Emancipation and Religious Continuity

Navayāna Buddhism carries immense symbolic and historical weight. It emerged through one of the most significant mass conversions of the twentieth century and articulated one of the clearest religious critiques of caste in modern South Asia. Yet its long-term development remained demographically concentrated and regionally uneven. *Navayāna* remained visible and influential but did not become a numerically transformative national religion. It endured as a powerful religious formation shaped by a specific social and regional history.

This pattern cannot be explained by external constraints alone. Reservation policy, administrative classification, anti-conversion laws, and Hindu nationalist attempts to reinscribe Buddhism within a broader Hindu civilizational framework have all shaped the practical conditions of *Navayāna* affiliation and raised the costs of formal conversion. These are real constraints, and they remain consequential. Yet even where political conditions have seemed comparatively favorable, *Navayāna*'s growth has tended to be episodic rather than cumulative. A further issue concerns the religious form made possible by Ambedkar's founding reinterpretation: the kinds of everyday practice, affective attachment, and intergenerational continuity that it enabled, and the kinds that remained only partially institutionalized or less consistently stabilized.

This founding reconstruction gave *Navayāna* its distinctive strengths and shaped the conditions of its long-term development. By centering morality, rationality, and social justice, Ambedkar transformed Buddhism into a language of collective dignity, social equality, and anti-caste emancipation. He also reoriented the place of classical soteriology, metaphysical cosmology, and many ritual and devotional forms. The result was a form of Buddhism uniquely suited to the urgency of its historical moment. The materials considered here suggest that *Navayāna*'s religious force was especially strong in public, commemorative, and moral–political registers. Everyday devotional, contemplative, and ritual practices remained more locally varied and only partially stabilized. The structure of reinterpretation shaped the horizon of continuity. That horizon, in turn, shaped what *Navayāna* could become.

The broader significance of this case lies in what it shows about the relationship between religious transformation and political power. When religion is joined to a struggle for emancipation, it can acquire ethical clarity and historical urgency. Yet the power relations that make such a movement necessary—caste hierarchy, structural inequality,

and symbolic domination—also shape the religious forms it develops. They influence which practices receive institutional support, which forms of authority become central, and which modes of everyday religious life are only partially stabilized. This is not a universal condition of religiously grounded emancipation movements, but a historical outcome produced by a particular configuration of power, urgency, and institutional possibility. *Navayāna*'s history suggests that the features that make a modern religious movement politically powerful may differ from those that enable it to deepen, routinize, and sustain itself as a religious tradition across generations. Understanding this tension requires attention both to the power relations that shape religious form and to the practices through which religious commitment is sustained.

Later developments within Ambedkarite Buddhism suggest that these conditions are not fixed. Some organizations and communities have sought to combine social commitment with more sustained doctrinal formation, meditation training, education, and communal practice. More broadly, *Navayāna*'s emphasis on dignity, equality, rational inquiry, and the refusal of humiliation provides a moral language that is not confined to its initial anti-caste context. Whether this language can become part of a wider Buddhist conversation beyond its founding social location remains an open question.

Funding: This research was funded by National Research Foundation of Korea grant number NRF-2017S1A6A3A02079749.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created for this study. All materials analyzed are drawn from published literature and publicly available sources cited in the article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ In this article, “*Navayāna* Buddhism” refers primarily to the Buddhist reinterpretation articulated by B. R. Ambedkar and institutionalized through the 1956 conversion movement, while “Ambedkarite Buddhism” is used more broadly to refer to the communities, practices, and later developments inspired by Ambedkar’s Buddhist vision. The two terms overlap substantially and are sometimes used interchangeably in the scholarship, but the distinction is retained here where analytically useful: “*Navayāna*” emphasizes Ambedkar’s doctrinal and normative reconstruction of Buddhism, whereas “Ambedkarite Buddhism” emphasizes the historical movement and lived formations that developed around that reconstruction.
- ² By “religious continuity,” this article does not refer to a Buddhist doctrinal aim, but to the historical and social processes through which religious identity, practice, authority, memory, and forms of commitment are transmitted, stabilized, or reconfigured across generations.
- ³ Here *dhamma* refers, in Ambedkar’s reconstruction, to a moral and social order rather than to religion in the ordinary theistic or ritual sense. While Ambedkar also appeals to *saddhamma* as the “true” teaching of the Buddha, his more fundamental contrast is between religion and *dhamma*: the former is associated with God, ritual, and private belief, whereas the latter is centered on morality, reason, and right relations among human beings.
- ⁴ The twenty-two vows may be grouped schematically into four overlapping clusters: vows 1–6 and 8 explicitly reject Hindu gods, avatars, ritual obligations, and Brahmanical ritual authority; vows 9–10 affirm equality; vows 11–18 concern Buddhist ethical discipline and moral practice; and vows 19–22 declare conversion to Buddhism, with the nineteenth vow combining the renunciation of Hinduism with the adoption of Buddhism. Particularly revealing is the nineteenth vow, which rejects Hinduism as a religion based on inequality and adopts Buddhism in its place. This structure helps explain why *Navayāna* conversion functioned not only as religious affiliation but also as a public break with caste Hinduism (Omvedt 2003, pp. 261–62).
- ⁵ Early Buddhist critiques of Brahmanical claims to birth-based superiority should not be equated with modern anti-caste politics. Ambedkar’s *Navayāna* is treated here as a modern reinterpretation of Buddhist resources under the historical conditions of caste oppression and colonial/postcolonial modernity. For discussions of the relationship between classical Buddhism, Ambedkarite/Neo-Buddhism, and caste, see Gokhale (2020), Deokar (2020).

- ⁶ The marked concentration of Ambedkarite Buddhism in Maharashtra also suggests that its uneven spread among Dalits across India reflects regional variation in Dalit political and social histories. Uttar Pradesh, for example, represents a different trajectory, in which *Navayāna* developed more as a revival linked to specific phases of Dalit political mobilization than as a mass social formation rooted in a single caste community (Jaoul 2016; Menšíková 2025).
- ⁷ *Dikṣā* here refers to the public act of Buddhist initiation or conversion, especially in the Ambedkarite context, where it commonly denotes the collective ceremony in which participants formally renounce Hinduism and accept Buddhism through the recitation of vows, most notably the twenty-two vows associated with Ambedkar's 1956 conversion at Nagpur.
- ⁸ *Ghar wapsi* ("homecoming") refers to reconversion campaigns that frame return to Hinduism not as conversion proper, but as restoration to an original religious identity or civilizational belonging.

References

- Ambedkar, Bhimrao Ramji. 1980. *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. In *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches*. Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, vol. 11. First published 1957.
- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Deokar, Mahesh A. 2020. Buddha and Ambedkar on Caste: A Comparative Overview. In *Classical Buddhism, Neo-Buddhism and the Question of Caste*. Edited by Pradeep P. Gokhale. London: Routledge India, pp. 87–110.
- Fogelin, Lars. 2015. *An Archaeological History of Indian Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gethin, Rupert. 1998. *The Foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gokhale, Pradeep P., ed. 2020. *Classical Buddhism, Neo-Buddhism and the Question of Caste*. London: Routledge India.
- Jaffrelot, Christophe. 2003. *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Jaoul, Nicolas. 2016. Citizenship in Religious Clothing? Navayana Buddhism and Dalit Emancipation in Late 1990s Uttar Pradesh. *Focaal—Journal of Global and Historical Anthropology* 76: 46–68. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Jenkins, Laura Dudley. 2008. Legal Limits on Religious Conversion in India. *Law and Contemporary Problems* 71: 109–27.
- Jenkins, Laura Dudley. 2019. *Religious Freedom and Mass Conversion in India*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Loftus, Timothy J. 2021. Ambedkar and the Buddha's Sangha: A Ground for Buddhist Ethics. *CASTE: A Global Journal on Social Exclusion* 2: 265–80. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- McGuire, Meredith B. 2008. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Menšíková, Tereza. 2023. Negotiating Boundaries Between 'Religious' and 'Secular': A Struggle for the Sense of Collectivity Among Ambedkarite Buddhists in Maharashtra. *Journal of Global Buddhism* 24: 64–82. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Menšíková, Tereza. 2025. Reviving Buddhism in Western India: Pluralism and Cultural Hybridization in the Ambedkarite Buddhist Movement(s). *Religio* 33: 275–94. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. 2011. *Census of India 2011*; New Delhi: Government of India. Available online: <https://censusindia.gov.in/census.website/en> (accessed on 24 March 2026).
- Omvedt, Gail. 2003. *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Pai, Sudha. 2013. *Dalit Assertion and the Unfinished Democratic Revolution: The BSP in Uttar Pradesh*. New Delhi: Sage.
- Queen, Christopher S. 1996. Ambedkar and the Hermeneutics of Buddhist Liberation. In *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. Edited by Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King. Albany: SUNY Press.
- Registrar General and Census Commissioner, India. 1963. *Census of India, 1961: Paper No. 1 of 1963, 1961 Census—Religion*; Delhi: Manager of Publications. Available online: <https://censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/31326> (accessed on 24 March 2026).
- Sonowal, Chandra Jyoti, and Mayuri Ashok. 2023. Religious Pluralism Among the Navayana Buddhist Women: A Study in Mumbai Metropolitan Region, India. *Contemporary Voice of Dalit* 15: S45–S55. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Weber, Max. 1978. *Economy and Society*. First published 1922. Berkeley: University of California Press. First published 1922.
- Witkowski, Nicholas. 2025. Review of Classical Buddhism, Neo-Buddhism and the Question of Caste, edited by Pradeep P. Gokhale. *Journal of Buddhist Philosophy* 7: 134–36.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.