

## **Ambedkar Information Pack**

Karuna have produced this information sheet to raise awareness of the significance of Dr Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism and the Ambedkarite approach to Buddhism that has grown in the last 50 years. It is an approach that has much to teach us in the West.

Karuna hope this information pack will be of interest to the movement and inspire centres to organise and celebrate Ambedkar Day.

If you would like further information or have any questions please contact Andrea on 0207 697 3001 or [andrea@karuna.org](mailto:andrea@karuna.org)



**The greatest thing that the Buddha has done is to tell the world that it can not be reformed except by the reformation of the mind of man, and the mind of the world** – Dr B.R. Ambedkar, Dalit Leader & First Indian Law Minister.



### **About Dr Ambedkar**

Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (14 April 1891 – 6 December 1956) was born into an "untouchable" family. Using his skills as an academic and advocate, Dr Ambedkar spent his life fighting social discrimination in the Indian caste system.

Dr Ambedkar is widely acknowledged as having started the Dalit Buddhist movement with his public conversion to Buddhism in Nagpur on 14 October 1956 alongside 400,000 of his followers. He had personally suffered from beatings as result of being considered 'untouchable'. One such incident occurred when he drank water from a public well which outraged caste Hindus.

Despite numerous difficulties, Ambedkar was a diligent and determined pupil and became one of the first "untouchables" to obtain an education in India. Ambedkar's family was one of the Mahars to obtain employment as soldiers firstly under the East India Company and, when that employment was transferred, to the British Army. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century education was made compulsory for the children of all those in the service of the British Army.

Ambedkar was granted a scholarship and had travelled abroad to continue his education. He was awarded numerous degrees and doctorates from universities such as Columbia University and the London School of Economics. Despite his impressive education, when he returned to India he was unable to secure accommodation because of his 'untouchable' status and had to temporarily adopt another name to be accepted.

When Dr Ambedkar returned to India he practiced law before publishing journals supporting political and social rights for India's "untouchables". Dr Ambedkar is also widely credited as the chief architect of the Indian constitution (hence why his picture often appears alongside that of Gandhi in Constitutional buildings in India).

### **About Ambedkarite Buddhism**

Many Dalits employ the term "Ambedkar (ite) Buddhism" to designate the Buddhist movement, which started with Ambedkar's conversion. Many converted Buddhists call themselves "Nava-Bauddha" i.e. New Buddhists.

The Buddhist movement was hindered by Dr. Ambedkar's death so soon after his conversion. It did not receive the immediate mass support from the "untouchable" population that Ambedkar had hoped for (Ambedkar



had hoped tens of millions would convert), nor from the rest of the Buddhist world. The newly converted Buddhists were left without the guidance and support of a leader.

It is estimated there are approximately 8 million Buddhists in India, of whom at least 6 million are based in the state of Maharashtra. This makes Buddhism the fifth-largest religion in India but less than 1% of the overall population of India are Buddhists. The Buddhist revival remains concentrated in two states: Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh.

According to Subhuti, "Dr Ambedkar saw conversion to Buddhism as having three dimensions:

- 1) Basis of social change through change of identity: He realised that caste is not an objective phenomenon. It is a mental construction that even the oppressed themselves hold. There has to be a change in the minds of all Indians, beginning with Dalits themselves. If Dalits become Buddhists, they leave behind an identity under which they are not full, equal human beings and take on one in which they see themselves as such.
- 2) Basis for a free and just society: Dr Ambedkar's ideal society is based on the principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity, which he equated with Democracy and which he understood as having their roots in Dhamma – he said he learnt them 'not from the French Revolution, but from my Master the Buddha'. Morality must be based in deep human spiritual values, which he believed could ultimately only be found in the Dhamma.
- 3) Basis for the self-cultivation of the individual and realisation of the supreme spiritual goal: He understood this deepest aspect of the Dhamma, saying that it was for this reason that he had converted, as well as his desire to lead his followers to benefit from the first two above.

In particular, Dr Ambedkar encouraged his followers to practice Shila (Precepts) and Samadhi (Meditation) to transform society to make a world of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.

Mass conversion, even following leaders whose interests are narrowly political, does lead many people to change their way of seeing themselves and to begin to lead a better and more valuable life. It can help to bring a free and just society. A significant proportion will also want to understand and practice the deeper and more individual aspects of the Dhamma."



## **Sangharakshita's role in the conversions and the Ambedkarite movement**

Before Dr Ambedkar's historic decision to convert to Buddhism he had consulted Sangharakshita and even asked him to conduct the ceremony. When Ambedkar died just six weeks after converting, Sangharakshita stepped into the breach and consoled the bereft followers of Ambedkar by spending the Winter months in India over 7 years giving talks and raising the confidence of the newly converted Buddhists.

## The Twenty-two Vows of Dr Ambedkar<sup>1</sup>

- I shall have no faith in Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, nor shall I worship them.
- I shall have no faith in Rama and Krishna nor shall I worship them.
- I shall have no faith in Gauri, Ganapati and other gods and goddesses of the Hindus nor shall I worship them.
- I have no faith in the belief that god has taken an incarnation.
- I do not believe that the Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this to be irrational and grossly false propaganda.
- I shall not perform *shraddha* (the Hindu rites for the dead) nor shall I give *pinda-dan* (offering oblations to the dead).
- I shall not act in a manner violating the principles and teachings of Buddhism.
- I shall not invite a Brahmin to perform any rituals.
- I shall believe that all human beings are equal.
- I shall endeavor to establish equality.
- I shall follow the Noble Eightfold Path of the Buddha.
- I shall follow the ten paramitas prescribed by the Buddha.
- I shall extend kindness and compassion to all living beings.
- I shall not steal.
- I shall not practise sexual misconduct.
- I shall not tell lies.
- I shall abstain from intoxicants.
- I shall live my life according to the three Buddhist principles of wisdom, morality and compassion conjoined together
- I renounce my old religion, Hinduism, which is harmful for the advancement and development of the individual and which regards some people as unequal and inferior and I hereby embrace Buddhism.
- I firmly believe the *Dhamma* of the Buddha is the *Sadhamma* (true religion).
- I am taking a new life, so I declare.
- I solemnly affirm that I shall hereafter lead my life according to the principles and teachings of the Buddha.

---

<sup>1</sup> From Garland of Terms by Asvajit and Cittapala, Padmaloka Books



## What does it mean to be an 'ex-untouchable'?

"Dalits have faced a unique discrimination in our society that is fundamentally different from the problems of minority groups in general. The only parallel to the practice of 'untouchability' was Apartheid. **Untouchability** is not just social discrimination. It is a blot on humanity."

India's Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, December 27, 2006

Dalits ('the oppressed') come from the communities which, under the Indian caste system, used to be known as 'untouchables'. They are also known as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST). Traditionally they were considered so inherently inferior that the merest contact with them would pollute those of higher caste.

Forced to live apart from other communities, Dalits were allowed to do only the filthiest and most menial jobs and for thousands of years were denied access to culture and education. For example, many Dalits become manual scavengers. This is the removal of human excrement from toilets and sewers. The Dalit Solidarity Network estimates that 95% of manual scavengers are women who earn around 7p per day for this degrading work.

Although 'untouchability' was declared illegal in 1950 it continues to haunt millions of men, women and children who are trapped in a cycle of poverty and social stigmatisation. The vast majority of India's 150 million Dalits still lack proper housing, medical care, education and employment prospects.

"If you think and believe that you are an 'Untouchable' then you are.... it is all in your mind, what you think you become."

This is a quote attributable to Dhammachari Aniruddha, who does on to say, "The society in which I was born had given me a label called 'Untouchable'. For 35 years or so I lived a life of humiliation and disgrace for a simple reason that I thought and believed, what the society was saying is the truth. This thought was so overpowering that many a times I thought that this 'untouchability' is in my DNA. I was mental slave of my own thoughts."

A major breakthrough came in my life when I was ordained in the WBO/TBMSG in 1985. My need for *acceptance, understanding, self-respect* was met. It was a new life for me. It gave a new meaning to my life.

## **Dalit Facts**

- As many as 36 per cent of Dalits in rural areas and 38 per cent in urban areas are below the poverty line (Times of India, 8 Dec, 2006)
- 48% of villages deny Dalits access to water (Hindustan Times, August 15, 2006)
- 73% of villages don't permit Dalits to enter non-Dalit homes (IBID)
- 33% public health workers refuse to visit Dalit homes (IBID)
- 28% police stations ban entry to Dalits (IBID)
- "...the overwhelming majority of bonded labor victims in agriculture, brick making, mining and other sectors are from the Scheduled Castes..." (UN International Labour Office, Report of the Director-General, 2005, p. 31)
- Over 45% of Dalits are landless agricultural workers (Times of India, 8 Dec, 2006)
- 38% of government schools make Dalit children sit separately while eating ("Hidden Apartheid", Human Rights Watch report, February 2007)
- About 10.2% of Maharashtra's approximately 100m-strong population belong to the Dalit community (BBC news online, 5 Dec 2006)
- In Nagpur more than 70% of the rickshaw pullers are Dalits (BBC news online, 5 Dec 2006)



## **About Karuna**

Karuna have been supporting the Indian movement for nearly 30-years. We have a distinctly Buddhist emphasis, supporting individual transformation to energise effective social change to achieve the peaceful revolution that Dr Ambedkar cherished.

Maharashtra is the home of one of India most successful Dalit communities, the Mahars, of which their great leader Dr B R Ambedkar was a member. Karuna has been working in the state of Maharashtra for nearly 30-years.

Karuna's vision is a world without prejudice, in which every human being has the opportunity to fulfil their potential, regardless of their background or beliefs. To do this we aim to support and empower the most disadvantaged children, women and men in South Asia to meet their needs, access their legal rights and participate fully in society.

In 2008 Karuna helped around 375,000 women, men and children to transform their lives. However, such is the scale and severity of exclusion and poverty in South Asia that over 250 million people are labelled Dalit or Tribal.

Karuna raises and sends well over £1 million each year to India for a wide range of social and dhamma projects. The majority of funds come from individual supporters who are signed up on the doorstep by volunteer fundraisers who undertake 6-week Karuna Appeals.

To find out more about Karuna visit [www.karuna.org](http://www.karuna.org) or for more information on Karuna Appeals visit [www.appeals.karuna.org](http://www.appeals.karuna.org)





## **Celebrating Ambedkar and his achievements**

Ambedkar Day is celebrated on 14 October, the date of Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism and the subsequent mass conversion of 400,000 of his followers which took place in Nagpur in 1956.

## **Planning an event**

Some notes by Saul Deason (who has co-organised North London Buddhist Centre Ambedkar events)

"In North London we always looked to the broader Buddhist movement as well as to the FWBO. Contacts outside the movement were obtained through the Buddhist Directory issued by the Buddhist Society. We were fortunate to get the active support of the Ambedkarite Federation of UK Organisations as well as the support of Amida and the Network of Engaged Buddhists. Amida carried articles in their journal Running Tide as did the Network of Engaged Buddhists in their journal Indra's Net. On line articles were carried by FWBO News.

We tried to encourage the interest of the local press was inviting local MP Jeremy Corbyn and a local councillor from the Green Party. Letters to the local press about the Indian caste system can publicise the event in advance. We also ran items on local on-line listings and prepared flyers.

In 2007 we invited Sangharakshita to be the principal speaker as a result we faced the prospect of very large numbers of visitors from the FWBO. We organised extensive teams of volunteer supporters to welcome arrivals, to issue tickets (actually, churis/cotton bracelets), programmes and usher them to the hall and the overflow basement sala with video links. We gave volunteers light responsibilities and urged them to participate in the events when they weren't working. (In fact we modelled this on Buddhafield Festival).

We started the day with a plenum session where speakers were invited to give short – 7 minute - introductions to their workshops. This was done to tempt the audience to stay and participate in the day's events rather just in Sangharakshita's speech. In fact on the day he was sick so we then started with our contingency plan and had briefed another speaker. Always have a plan B for when things go wrong! Fortunately there are many good speakers in the FWBO. Karuna really do expert workshops on their projects. By the time the evening came we had yet another audience who came to hear our classical sitar player Baluji. The following year we ran a cabaret with local poets, musicians and performers.



In North London we started by giving very short four minute speeches during the break at meditation evenings in order to drum up interest. At the same time we put a display up in the foyer of the centre that made a series of short statements, carried a portrait of Ambedkar, copies of the programme, copies of Sangharakshita's 'Ambedkar and Buddhism' etc. Then we put the Buddhist flag up behind the shrine."

## **Information sources**

### Books

Jai Bhim by Nagabodhi  
Broken Voices by Vimalasara  
But Little Dust by Padmasuri  
Ambedkar and Buddhism by Sangharakshita

### Films

In the Footsteps of Ambedkar with Sangharakshita  
Recurring Dream by Suryaprabha

<http://www.zinemaya.com/zinemaya/movie?movieCode=ambedkar> – it costs \$6 to download and it works. It's 1.7gb though!

### You Tube

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVixgMEs2iI>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yEC1cs85yC0>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aAki71LuxKs>  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RSA8-kjTkl8>

## **Some of the organisations that work with Dalits**

Karuna

[www.karuna.org](http://www.karuna.org)

Jai Bhim

<http://www.jaibhiminternational.org/> (in the USA)

Dalit Solidarity Network

<http://www.dsnu.org/>

Jambudvipa Trust

<http://www.jambudvipa.org/>

Karuna Deutschland

<http://www.karunadeutschland.org/>

## **Images**

Karuna have an extensive archive of images of India, TBMSG and the Ambedkarite Buddhist movement as well as Karuna projects and beneficiaries please contact Andrea at [andrea@karuna.org](mailto:andrea@karuna.org) or 0207 697 3001 for further information.