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The making of a new icon: B.R. Ambedkar's visual hagiography

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Abstract: This essay will explore the significance of a distinct subgroup of South Asian popular prints. Since the late nineteenth century, 'God posters' (colourful, standardized religious prints) have adorned both private and public spaces. They portray Hindu gods and goddesses as icons, often depicting narrative scenes as well as attributes that comprise their iconography. From this type of depiction emerged a new category, one that propelled Indian heroes into the realm of veneration that blurred the lines between adoration and worship. One such figure was Bhim Rao Ambedkar (popularly known as B.R. Ambedkar, and also as Babasaheb, 1891-1956). Ambedkar was a hero amongst the Dalit or 'untouchable' people of India. He fought for their basic civil rights and even challenged the notions of Hinduism. As a result, he sparked the conversion of hundreds of thousands of Dalits to Buddhism. This Buddhist movement helped reignite the practice of the religion on the subcontinent since it was founded approximately 2500 years ago. This essay will examine the process of Ambedkar's iconisation through a selection of these popular prints. It will demonstrate, through an analysis of their iconography, how his actions identified him as not only a significant historical figure during the formation of modern India but also, based on his promotion of Buddhism, as a contemporary bodhisattva. Some images go further to suggest that he was the reincarnation of the Buddha himself. This essay will shed light on the existence of these images, as well as contribute to the study of Indian popular imagery as a whole.

Keywords: Dalits; untouchables; Ambedkar; popular prints; Buddhism; Buddhist iconography

Introduction

For almost twenty years, scholars have investigated the role of popular imagery in order to understand the 'visual language' of modern Hinduism. This examination has primarily focused on so-called 'God posters', colourful, standardized religious prints that decorate private houses as well as public spaces, even to this day.ⁱ Scholars such as Christopher Pinney have explored the iconography of these images in relation to India's struggle for independence and emerging nationalism during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.ⁱⁱ Others, including Gary Michael Tartakov, Owen Lynch, Saurabh Dube, Maren Bellwinkel- Schempp and Nicolas Jaoul, have identified a new category of imagery within these popular prints that relates to the

identities of emerging subaltern groups in India, in particular the so-called 'untouchables' or Dalits.ⁱⁱⁱ Having published on Dalits and the Buddhist conversion movement in Maharashtra, I have been struck by the rich and fascinating imagery relating to this topic.^{iv} The aim of this essay is not only to contribute to the study of popular Indian posters and prints as a whole, but also to introduce new visual source material relating to the Dalit and modern Buddhist movement.

But first, in order to understand the context of this essay, it is important to briefly introduce the notion of caste and, within it, the idea of untouchability. According to general understandings of the term, a caste (jāti) is a social exogamous group that determines a person's societal and professional network and position within Indian society from birth. There are four ranks (varnas); in descending order, they are: the Brahmins, which include priests, preachers, and scholars/teachers; the Kshatriyas, which includes kings, governors, and soldiers; the Vaishyas, which includes businessmen, merchants, artisans, agriculturists, and cattle herders; and the Shudras, which includes laborers and service providers. Those that are excluded from the varnas system altogether are known as Dalits or 'untouchables'. Dalit status is associated with 'ritually impure' occupations, including scavenging, rubbish removal, street cleaning and leatherwork. It has been a matter of dispute whether ritual purity, social stratification, power and economic exploitation were the main motives behind this historical social practice. In fact, the caste system has been controversially discussed over the last hundred years by both Indian and Western historians, anthropologists, sociologists, Indologists and religious leaders.^v Although it continues to be contested, it remains a significant part of Indian society. As a result, certain people are still oppressed and excluded because of their caste identity, especially the Dalits, despite the fact that Indian law prohibits this.^{vi} For example, the Dalits are often denied access to education, temples and civic rights in general.^{vii} The discrimination of this social group developed over centuries and has assumed different forms based on the geographical region and time period. Dalits often revolted against their treatment and the images presented in this essay illustrate this spirit of rebellion and struggle through visual glorifications of their uncontested leader, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (popularly known as B.R. Ambedkar, and also known as Babasaheb, 1891-1956), who not only fought for their social justice, but also challenged the very notion of Hinduism itself. Ambedkar himself came from a Dalit Mahar family in Maharashtra. Although there are numerous stories narrating how he suffered from discrimination, he grew up in a privileged environment since his father was a member of the British Indian Army.^{viii} Additionally, Ambedkar had access to education and graduated from Bombay University in 1912. The

following year, he received a scholarship for postgraduate study in economics at Columbia University in New York. To travel overseas and to receive academic degrees from an internationally well-known institution was unprecedented for Dalits at the time. Through his study of economy, law, and even anthropology, Ambedkar investigated the development of the caste system and its inherent issues.^{ix} He began to consider how the construction and practice of Hinduism actively sanctioned untouchability. Thus, in 1935, he declared that he did not want to die a Hindu, and in 1956, shortly before his death, he converted to Buddhism during an official ceremony in Nagpur.^x Ambedkar chose Buddhism as the answer to Dalit emancipation because he believed it to be the ideal religion for a modern, rational, civil and democratic society. Since the Buddha himself was no god, nor did he believe in a god, he placed humanity at the center of his moral teachings.^{xi} Ambedkar urged Dalits to renounce Hinduism as their faith in order to break away from the bonds of the caste system. Hundreds of thousands of his followers, especially Mahars from Maharashtra, thus converted to Buddhism.

Claiming recognition through printed images

Because of his advocacy of Dalits and their plight, Ambedkar became the subject of quasi-religious adoration amongst them. Aside from commemorative statues, he has appeared in widely-circulated Indian chromolithographs, mostly by unknown artists.^{xii} Like the popular prints of Hindu gods and goddess, these works can be found in many Buddhist homes as well as in public spaces (Fig. 1-2). An analysis of a selection of such prints, which date to the late twentieth century, reveals the development of Ambedkar as an icon. The repetitive depiction of certain postures and gestures across these prints is partly the result of using a limited number of photographs of Ambedkar, resulting in visual consistency.^{xiii}

Figure 3, for example, is a typical portrait of Ambedkar; following the photographic original, he is depicted in a blue suit, red tie and white shirt, wearing his distinctive spectacles, which further indicates his knowledge and wisdom. The fact that he is wearing a modern Western suit visually and symbolically places him in opposition to other Indian leaders and their representations, such as Shivaji (Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, 1627-1680), the Maratha king remembered as a proto-nationalist because of his resistance against the Mughals, who is typically depicted in his historic imperial costume; Subhas Chandra Bose (1897-1945), the founder of the Indian National Army (INA), usually portrayed in his combat uniform; and, of course, Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), leader of the Indian independence movement, who is consistently depicted in his self-woven, traditional cotton dhoti or simply a loin cloth.

Ambedkar is depicted as fair-skinned, a quality that follows the canon of beauty and status of north Indian popular imagery, especially in the realms of cinema and television. In the lower half of the image, we see a bust of the historic Buddha surrounded by a halo. Buddha here serves as a source of inspiration and a symbol of power, especially for a Dalit audience. Significantly, it is Ambedkar, however, who dominates the image. In other examples, Buddha is shown with his right hand lifted, either to sanctify or to bless Ambedkar.^{xiv} Such iconography reflects the fact that many followers regarded Ambedkar as a bodhisattva (an enlightened being wishing to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings), while others believed that he was the reincarnation of the Buddha himself. Indeed, it is widely accepted amongst Dalit Buddhists that he achieved Mahaparinirvana, the same status of enlightenment and freedom as the Buddha. Another print evokes the use of light as a symbol of illumination and wisdom (Fig. 4). An inscription reads: 'Thyself become the light that shows the right path to the downtrodden.' In this context, Ambedkar's struggle brings light to the people, especially to those less fortunate, in his capacity as a 'saviour.' The inclusion of a *dipa*, or devotional oil lamp, conjures both Buddhist and Hindu ritual significance.

Figure 5 depicts a series of significant events recounted in the hagiographies and biographies of Ambedkar, which can be read clockwise.^{xv} This form of sequential narrative harks back to an ancient Indian tradition of representing the lives of holy personages, examples of which can be found on early stone reliefs depicting the life of Buddha.^{xvi} Here, Ambedkar is shown as a child, student, lawyer, young husband, Buddhist authority and devotee, political agitator, and adversary of Gandhi. The latter identity is particularly interesting, and is referred to by featuring Ambedkar and Gandhi in conversation. Tension grew between the two when Ambedkar's demands for separate electorates and mandates for the Dalits at a Round Table Conference in London in 1930 provoked Gandhi's vehement protest. In September 1932, Gandhi, who was imprisoned in Pune at the time, threatened to starve himself to death if Ambedkar did not withdraw his demands. Several days later, there was a compromise — the so-called Poona Pact —, which reserved certain constituencies within the Hindu electorates for Dalit candidates.

Two more popular prints (Fig. 6-7) illustrate Ambedkar in his role as 'Father of the Constitution'. The first Prime Minister of independent India, Jawarharlal Nehru (1889-1964), made Ambedkar Minister of Justice in 1947. During his tenure, he drafted the Indian Constitution, earning him this honorary title.^{xvii} Figure 6 portrays him floating above the parliament building in New Delhi, while Figure 7 depicts him standing in front of it. Both prints clearly stress his authority, reflecting his involvement in, and role as a protector of,

India's democracy. His Western-style dress in Figure 6 can be interpreted as imposing modern, rational, scientific, and 'progressive' values on parliament. Figure 7 illustrates the moment when Ambedkar handed over the Constitution to the first president of India, Rajendra Prasad (1884-1963) (here dressed in red), and Nehru (here dress in yellow), demonstrating Ambedkar's role as its author. Interestingly, Ambedkar is shown in this image wearing typical Indian official dress. The reason for this might be because the colonial associations of a Western-style suit might have been considered inappropriate in an image that celebrates the young, independent nation of India and Indian nationalism as a whole. Figure 8 features a prominent hemispherical structure that was built as a communal hall in Nagpur, which, as previously stated, was the location of Ambedkar's official conversion to Buddhism. In terms of architectural design, it clearly and deliberately resembles a stupa, a Buddhist memorial monument typically containing the relics of Buddhist monks. The ornamental gateway, or torana, of this stupa refers stylistically to that at Sanchi, the renowned ancient stupa of India that dates to the third century BC. The transformation of the function of the stupa from reliquary shrine to communal hall reflected a radical reinterpretation of ancient Buddhism. Figure 9 shows the location where Ambedkar was cremated in Mumbai after his death, which is again modelled after a stupa. Ambedkar is depicted hovering over the building, leaning against a walking stick, evoking the final years of his life. Today, like the stupa-hall at Nagpur, the building serves as a major site of pilgrimage for Buddhist Dalits, held in as high esteem as the major Buddhist sites of north India, such as Bodhgaya, Lumbini and Sarnath. Devotees and followers are allowed access inside the Mumbai building to worship and commemorate Ambedkar. The fact that his cremation site resembles a building meant to house Buddhist relics only strengthens Ambedkar's status as a holy figure.

Visual references to early Buddhist culture were also significant in terms of Ambedkar's glorification of an ancient Buddhist past, which he sought to 'reclaim' for the Dalits. Indeed, he had offered the converted Dalits a new interpretation of their history in order to reformulate the stigma of centuries of exploitation. He believed that the reason for their suppression lay in the fact that they had originally been Buddhists. The practice of untouchability, he posited, had arisen because of an ancient fight for hegemony between Buddhists and Brahmins around 400 AD.^{xviii} With this in mind, the relationship between Ambedkar's new popular imagery and its frequent evocation of classical Buddhist art, with its references to stupas, for example, and images of the historical Buddha, becomes both culturally and politically significant. Gary Tartakov termed this type of imagery 'Navayana' or 'new vehicle', in reference to the Dalit Buddhist movement of the same name.^{xix} Figure 10 is an example of this new Navayana

iconography. It depicts the Bodhi tree (under which the Buddha achieved enlightenment), whose roots form part of Ambedkar's face, and whose leaves and branches make up the face of the Buddha. This depiction of Ambedkar as the 'roots' is surprising; we expect the Buddha to be the roots, since he founded the religious sect. However, the image is not meant to assume a historical perspective, but rather stresses the importance of Ambedkar's contribution in popularising Buddhism in twentieth-century India, setting a new foundation for the religion and reigniting its practice on the Indian subcontinent

Conclusion

Across the images discussed in this essay, Ambedkar is shown as a statesman, a figure of authority and a veritable bodhisattva. Collectively, these works emphasize him as a powerful leader, one that fought for civil rights and had a direct role in shaping the modern-day nation of India.^{xx} Together with Gandhi, Bose, Shivaji, and other heroes, he has become an integral part of India's pantheon of national leaders, so much so that his images receive religious devotion. What many of these depictions demonstrate is that, through Ambedkar, India's new Dalit Buddhists have established themselves as the legitimate successors of the 'old' and 'authentic' Buddhists by appropriating India's Buddhist cultural heritage, which is alluded to through religious iconography. Simultaneously, they have reinvented themselves as a new, autonomous community that demands entitlement to equality, recognition, participation in politics and social emancipation.

Epilogue

More recently, Ambedkar has been appropriated by Hindu right-wing nationalist forces such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in their attempts to present themselves as socially inclusive, fighting against the practice of untouchability and the perversion of the caste system, in order to attract a greater number of Hindu supporters. This has involved a 'rebranding' of Ambedkar as a soldier of the nation: 'Our inability is to see him in [his] totality, [reducing] him [to a] Dalit icon. His canvas was much bigger and the role was epochal. "Nation building" can be considered his core project.'^{xxi} As a result, Ambedkar's criticism of Hinduism has been neutralized: 'There was no place for enmity and hatred in Ambedkar's political thinking. He was fighting against the dichotomies, contradictions and evils of the Hindu society and not the Hindu society and civilisation itself.'^{xxii} Earlier this year, on the 14th of April, Ambedkar's 125th birthday was celebrated. India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, leader of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and advocate of Hindutva ('Hindu-ness'), laid the foundation stone for an Ambedkar Centre in New Delhi. Newspapers and media reports

showed him in front of a large portrait of Ambedkar.^{xxiii} From this right-wing perspective, Ambedkar is further compared to great nationalist Hindu leaders, such as the founder of the RSS, K.B. Hedgewar (1889-1940) – who, incidentally, had very little in common with Ambedkar’s thoughts and ideas. It is clear that Ambedkar is being ‘Hinduized’. This is not new; already in 1954, Dhananjay Keer, author of a celebrated biography on Ambedkar, had described him as ‘a patriotic Hindu reformer’, who opted for an Indian religion instead of converting to Islam or Christianity.^{xxiv} Indeed, Hindu right-wing discourse has incorporated Buddhism as a specific branch of the Hindu school of thought. As a result, Hindu nationalist organizations such as the RSS and the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) have appropriated Buddhism for their concept of a ‘Hindu’ India, a fact that demands critical scrutiny.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

NOTE ON ILLUSTRATIONS

Despite several attempts, I have not been able to contact the copyright holders of the prints which appear in this article. I therefore seek their indulgence and will handle any claims in an appropriate manner. Several years back, I donated my collection to the Religionskundliche Sammlung at Philipps University in Marburg, Germany. All fieldwork photographs are my own and were taken in Pune and Mumbai.

List of illustrations

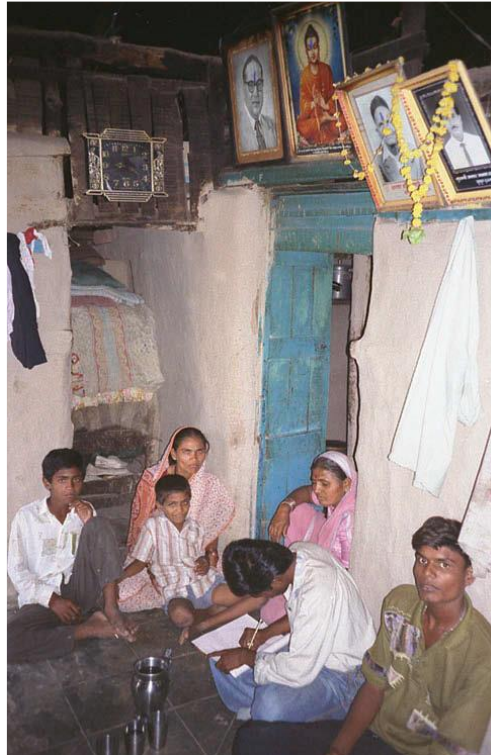


Fig 1 Typical Dalit house in Maharashtra with images of Ambedkar and the Buddha Shakyamuni. Photo credit: Johannes Beltz.



Fig 2 Buddhist gathering in Maharashtra. Photo credit: Johannes Beltz.

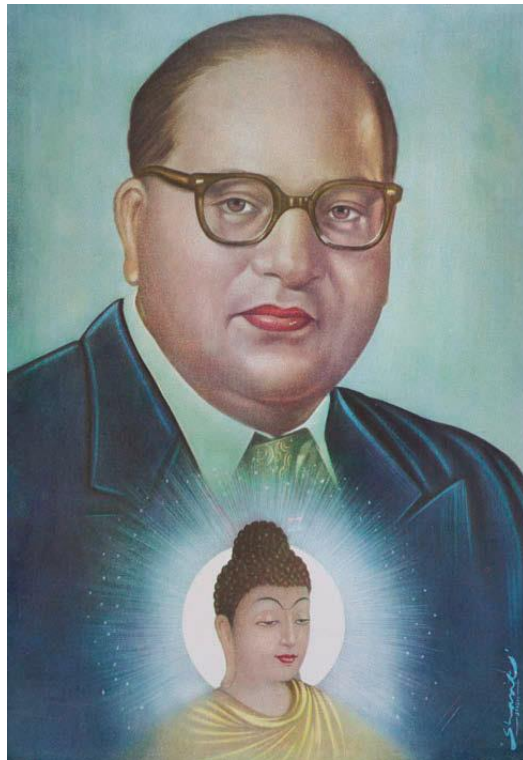


Fig 3 Unknown, Portrait of Ambedkar, chromolithograph on paper, Shant Studio, New Delhi. Acquired in India in 1995.

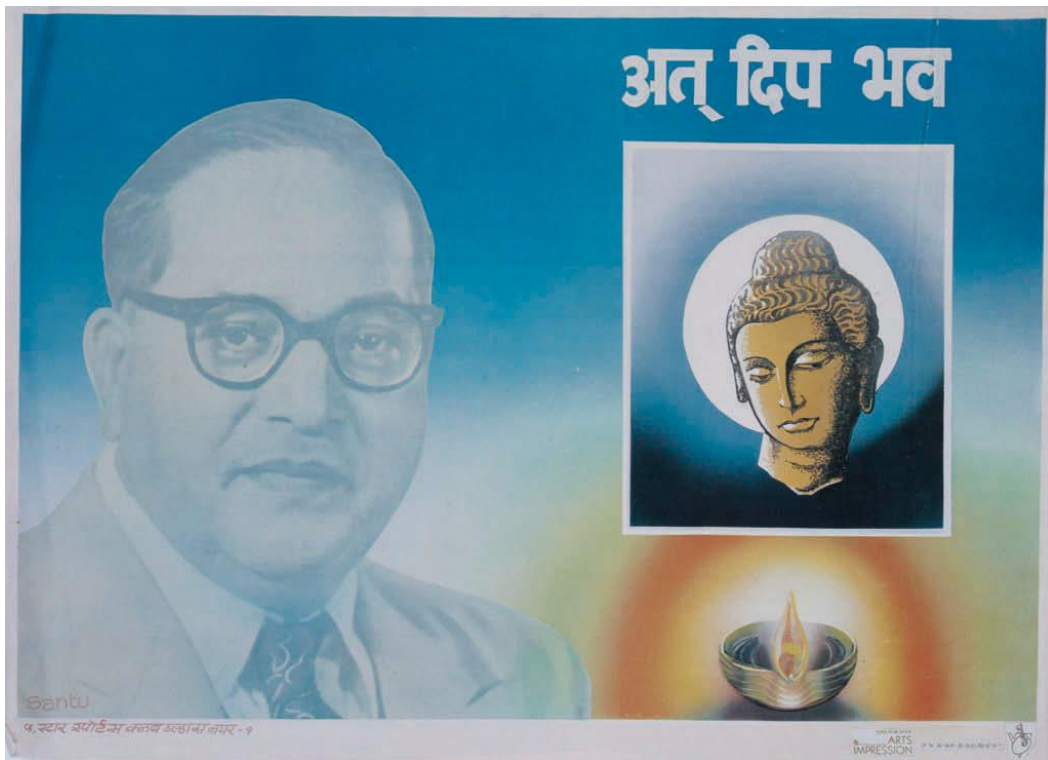


Fig 4 Unknown, Thysself become the light that shows the right path to the downtrodden, chromolithograph on paper, Vailankanni Arts Impression. Acquired in India in 1995.

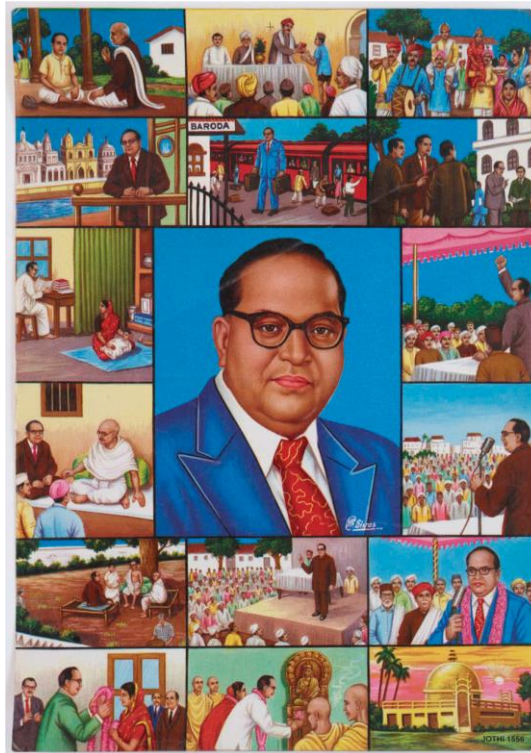


Fig 5 Unknown, Life moments of Ambedkar, chromolithograph on paper. Acquired in India in 1994.



Fig 6 Unknown, Ambedkar floats above the Indian Parliament building in New Delhi, chromolithograph on paper, Shant Studio, New Delhi. Acquired in India in 1994.



Fig 7 Unknown, Ambedkar hands over the Indian Constitution to the President of India, Rajendra Prasad and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in front of the Parliament in New Delhi, chromolithograph on paper, Shant Studio, New Delhi. Acquired in India in 1995.



Fig 8 N.B. Gajbhiye, Diksha Bhumi, chromolithograph on paper. Acquired in India in 1994.

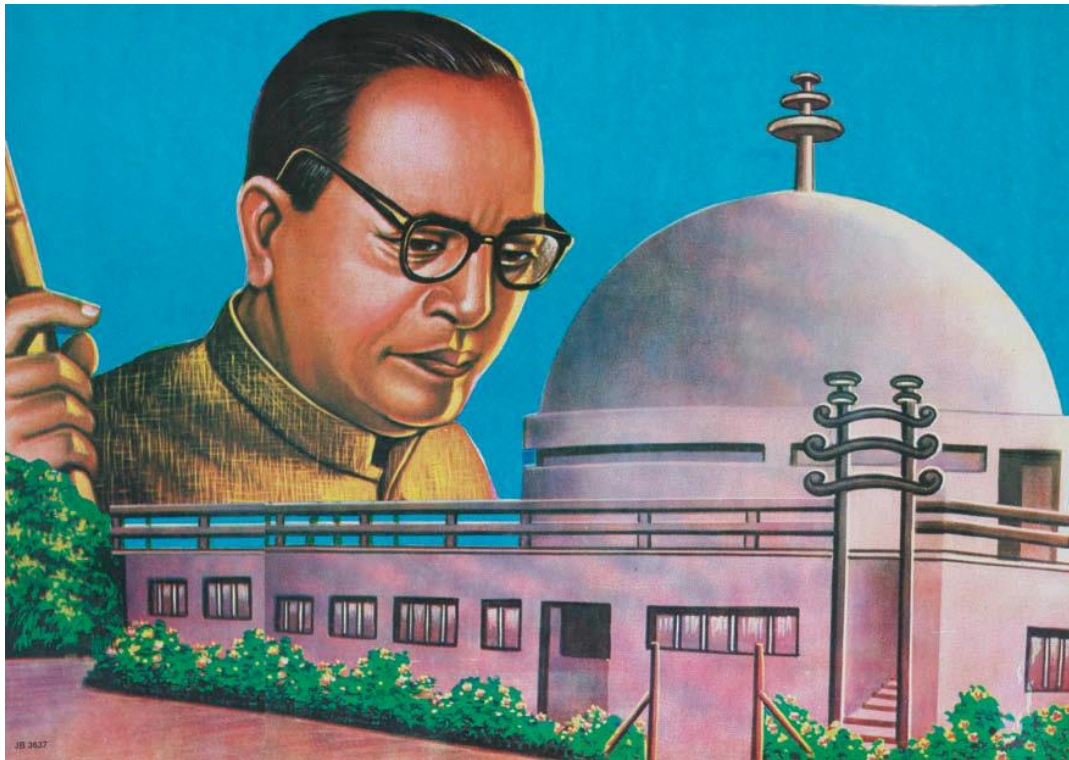


Fig 9 Unknown, Ambedkar with his walking stick hovering over the monument commemorating his cremation in Dadar (Mumbai), chromolithograph on paper. Acquired in India in 1994.

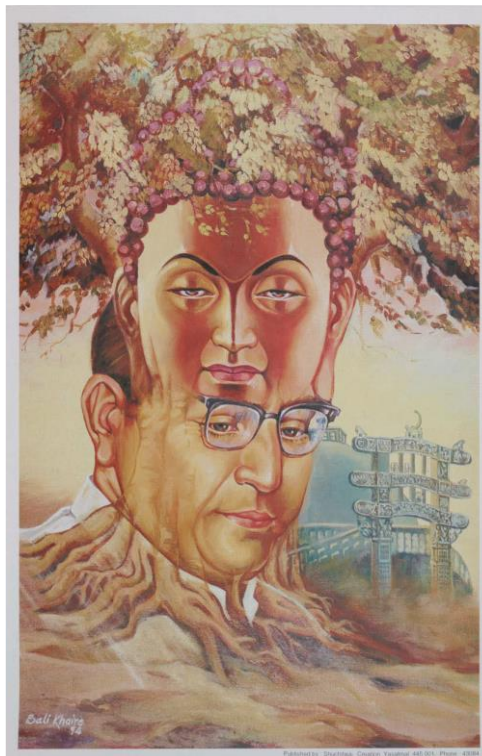


Fig 10 Unknown, Ambedkar and the Buddha Shakyamuni united in the Bodhi tree, chromolithograph on paper. Acquired in India in 1994.

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- ⁱ H. Daniel Smith, 'Impact of God Posters on Hindus and their Devotional Tradition', L. Babb and S. Wadley (eds.), *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997), pp. 24-50; Stephen R. Inglis, 'Suitable for framing. The work of a modern master', L. Babb and S. Wadley (eds.), *Media and the Transformation of Religion in South Asia* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1997), pp. 51-75.
- ⁱⁱ Christopher Pinney demonstrated how India's national heroes, Mahatma Gandhi and Subhaschandra Bose, became part of a new visual repertoire; Christopher Pinney, *Photos of the Gods. The printed image and political struggle in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).
- ⁱⁱⁱ In 2012 Gary Tartakov published a collective volume exclusively dedicated to this theme which I consider a major breakthrough. See Gary Tartakov (ed.), *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994). See also Maren Bellwinkel-Schempp, 'Neuer Buddhismus als gesellschaftlicher Entwurf. Die indischen Dalits und ihre Darstellung im öffentlichen Raum', M. Bellwinkel-Schempp, *Neuer Buddhismus als gesellschaftlicher Entwurf: Zur Identitätskonstruktion der Dalits in Kanpur, Indien* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2011), pp. 1-33.
- ^{iv} Johannes Beltz, *Mahar, Bouddhiste et Dalit, conversion religieuse et émancipation socio-politique dans l'Inde des castes* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2001), and the English translation: Johannes Beltz, *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit, Religious Conversion and Socio-Political Emancipation* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2005).
- ^v Beltz, *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit*, pp. 22-24.
- ^{vi} See for example Gyansham Shah (ed.), *Dalit Identity and Politics* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001).
- ^{vii} Olivier Herrenschmidt and S. Viswanathan examined violence and oppression against Dalits in Tamil Nadu; S. Viswanathan, *Dalits in Dravidian Land. Frontline reports on anti-dalit violence in Tamil Nadu (1995-2004)* (Chennai: Nayayana, 2005); Olivier Herrenschmidt, 'Violences d'un autre âge dans les villages indiens, Actualités d'Ambedkar', *European Journal of Sociology*, 55, 1 (2014), pp. 59-81.
- ^{viii} Beltz, *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit*, p. 48.
- ^{ix} See the excellent anthology edited by Valerian Rodrigues, which gives an excellent introduction to his social, political and religious thoughts; Valerian Rodrigues (ed.), *The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).
- ^x See Beltz, *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit*, pp. 48-58.
- ^{xi} For further details see Beltz, *Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit*, pp. 41-80.
- ^{xii} Indeed, hardly any other medium reaches more people in India than the miniature sized posters or so-called 'calendar images'. They represent a pan-Indian medium of religious expression. See Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*, pp. 187-188.
- ^{xiii} See the collection published by Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar. A Memorial Album* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1982).
- ^{xiv} See for example Pinney, *Photos of the Gods*, p. 153.
- ^{xv} See similar illustrations of a hero's evolution in Pinney's *Photos of the Gods*. Gandhi's and Bose's visual hagiographies (see Fig 108 and 109, pp 142-143) are almost identical in their form.
- ^{xvi} The narrative of the Buddha's life appears in early Gandharan art; cf. Martina Stoye, 'Der Lebenszyklus des Buddha', Christian Luczanits (ed.), *Gandhara. Das buddhistische Erbe Pakistans, Legenden, Klöster und Paradiese* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 2009), 193-196 (p. 196).

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- ^{xvii} Valerian Rodrigues (ed.), *The Essential Writings of B. R. Ambedkar* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp.471-494.
- ^{xviii} Beltz, Mahar, Buddhist and Dalit, pp. 173-174.
- ^{xix} See Gary Tartakov, 'The Navayana Creation of the Buddha Image', J. Beltz and S. Jondhale (eds.), *Reconstructing the World: B.R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 184.
- ^{xx} See Nicolas Jaoul, 'Les statues d'Ambedkar en Inde, répliques artisanales d'un monument et usages subalternes de l'officialité', *Gradhiva*, 11 (2010), pp. 30-55.
- ^{xxi} Rakesh Sinha, 'Dr Ambedkar: A misunderstood national leader', *Organiser*, Sunday 7 June (2015).
- ^{xxii} Op. Cit.
- ^{xxiii} Divya Trivedi, 'Idolatri vs ideology', *Frontline*, 13 May (2015), online edition.
- ^{xxiv} Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar. Life and Mission* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1994 [1954]), pp. 466-7, 503-22.