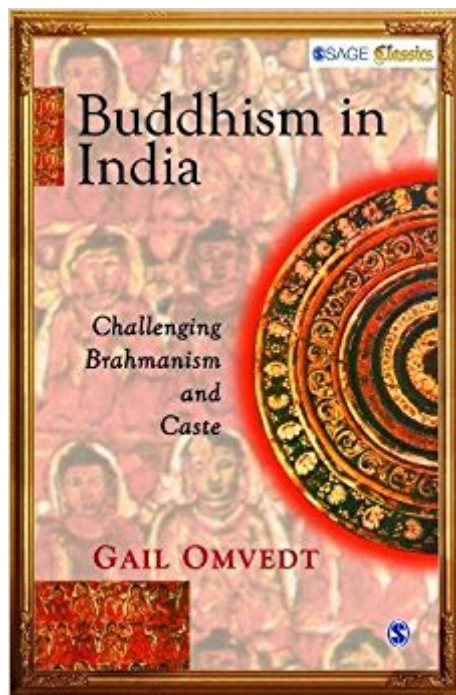




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# Buddhism In India: Challenging Brahmanism And Caste (SAGE Classics)



## Synopsis

SAGE Classics is a carefully selected list that every discerning reader will want to possess, re-read and enjoy for a long time. These are now priced lower than the original, but is the same version published earlier. SAGE's commitment to quality remains unchanged. This fascinating book constitutes a unique exploration of 2,500 years of the development of Buddhism, Brahmanism and caste in India. Taking Dr Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism as its starting point, Dr Gail Omvedt has researched both the original source of the Buddhist cannon and recent literature to provide an absorbing account of the historical, social, political and philosophical aspects of Buddhism. In the process, she discusses a wide range of important issues of current concern. Dr Omvedt maintains that the revolutionary audacity of Dalit leaders such as Dr B.R. Ambedkar, despite their often subversive reinterpretation of the Buddhist tradition, is in tune with the basic ethos of original Buddhism. Ambedkar found his own middle way by avoiding both the straitjacket of the Marxist ideological response to suppression and the tame reformist within the fold of Hinduism. Since there has always been a struggle of hegemony between competing religious systems, the author argues that given the ascendant position of Buddhism from the 4th century BC to the 6th century AD, ancient India should actually be described as 'Buddhist India' and not 'Hindu India'. Providing an entirely new interpretation of the origins and development of the caste system, which boldly challenges the 'Hindutva' version of history, this book will attract a wide readership among all those who are concerned with the state of contemporary India's policy and social fabric.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Dr. Gail Omvedt has been living in India since 1978, became an Indian citizen in 1983, and works as a freelance writer and development consultant. She has also worked actively with various social movements including the Dalit and anti-caste movements, farmers' movements, environmental movement and especially with rural women. Besides having undertaken many research projects, Dr Omvedt has been a consultant for FAO, UNDP and NOVIB and has served as a Dr Ambedkar Chair Professor at NISWASS in Orissa, a Professor of Sociology at the University of Pune and an Asian Guest Professor at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Copenhagen. She is currently a Senior Fellow at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library and Research Director of the Krantivir Trust. A prolific writer, Gail Omvedt has published a large number of books including *Dalit Visions* (1975), *Violence against Women: New Theories and New Movements in India* (1991) and *Dalits and Democratic Revolution* (1994) besides having translated *Growing up Untouchable in India: A Dalit Autobiography*. She is currently engaged in translating Tukaram, considered to be the greatest Marathi writer of all time.

"Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste" is an exploration of the historical roots of Navayana, or New Buddhism, an Eastern Liberation Theology launched seemingly single-handedly by the father of modern India's constitution, Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar. The first of India's untouchables to rise to not only national but international prominence, Ambedkar was a double PhD from Columbia and the London School of Economics. A tireless champion of civil liberties who began his political career as a labor activist, Ambedkar later came to stress the primacy of social, rather than economic, revolution. He believed untouchables would never claim their full rights until Hinduism, a system built on caste and the moral justification of oppression, was repudiated and replaced. It was precisely for this reason that Ambedkar tussled with Ghandi, who dismissed casteism as an unpleasant accretion that could be cut away while maintaining the romantic (and, according to Omvedt, historically suspect) idea of India as a Hindu nation. In Buddhism Ambedkar discovered the perfect vehicle for reformation, a home-grown religion in which individuals practice rather than believe, in which individual inquiry is held in higher regard than devotion to gurus or sacred texts, a religion based on ethics rather than metaphysics. After several years of careful study, he came to the conclusion that contemporary Buddhism had become cut off, distant, and

unresponsive to the common man and was unsuited for the purpose of liberating the underclass. What was most needed was a new school of Buddhism, a Buddhism for the modern world, a socially engaged Buddhism that worked for enlightenment and nirvana for all people in this lifetime on this world. And so he composed a Buddhist catechism that rewrote some of the fundamental ideas of the religion as it has been passed down over 25 centuries. Scholars and clergy have questioned whether this is a real form of Buddhism, or something entirely different posing as Buddhism. It is just this question that frames Gail Omvedt's study, a survey of the history of Indian Buddhism in search of antecedents of Ambedkar's most controversial reinterpretations. These include shifting karma from the individual to society, setting nirvana as the earthly goal of stilling the passions, and reimagining the purpose of the monastic as a social worker rather than a self-absorbed recluse. A naturalized Indian scholar in Dalit studies, Omvedt's sympathies clearly lay with the oppressed, - with untouchables, laborers, the peasantry, women - as well as with those forces associated with their empowerment - with Buddhism over Brahmanism, with Ambedkar over Gandhi, rationalism over romanticism, modernization over traditionalization. She presents her case concisely in clear prose, demonstrating through her survey that Ambedkar's ideas are nothing new in the history of Indian Buddhism. Observing that millions of Indians today practice Navayana, Omvedt concludes there is "no way that any true Buddhist of any school can deny that this is a form of Buddhism."#

The worst book I have ever purchased. It has nothing to do with Buddhism. It is a case of academic dishonesty, because parts of the suttas are taken out of context to defend a biased viewpoint.

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