

## **BODHI, the Bahujan Hitay Pune Project, and the ongoing work of Dr Ambedkar**

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This paper starts by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land this conference is held on, the Gundungurra, the Indigenous people who have thrived on this continent for 65,000 years. The authors of this paper are all apprentices of dharma. We do not pretend to understand the intricacies of the law of karma; or the caste system in India; let alone the best way to apply the teachings with wisdom and compassion. Really, what we are trying to do with BODHI (Benevolent Organisation for Development, Health and Insight) is create the karmic conditions to start to alleviate the immediate suffering of a small number of people in this world. Through our path of engaged Buddhism we reject the principle that hereditarily transmitted inequality is legitimate. We reject any notion that women are inferior to men. We act (in the words of Shantideva) with the knowledge that "All beings have similar suffering." We are all the same. We are connected by our suffering. And we are one."

The main purpose of this presentation is to provide information about the work of the Bahujan Hitay Pune Project, run by a group of women in Pune, India. This work has been directly inspired by Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, who lived in India from 1891 until 1956. Dr Ambedkar, born Hindu, converted to Buddhism in October 1956 (1), in Nagpur, Maharashtra, in central India. This was in a mass gathering attended by over 300,000 people, one of whom was the grandfather of the second author of this paper, Karunadeepa, the only one of us born Buddhist.

This rise to prominence of Dr Ambedkar had several causal factors. As well as a vigorous and courageous intellect, he had opportunities as a child that were highly unusual for an "untouchable" in India. These opportunities arose from his descent from several generations of soldiers, including his father who rose to be an officer, in an army whose British leaders were far less caste-conscious than most Indians. The historical context of Ambedkar's life was also remarkable. He gained an international education, in both America and Britain, completely unique for an untouchable at that time, and possibly unique for any Indian. His adult life coincided with the final struggle for Indian independence from Britain, in which he was a major participant. He consequently became a leading public figure, serving as Law Minister in the first Indian government in 1947. Ambedkar chaired the committee that drafted the Indian constitution. Ambedkar is credited with placing the ancient Buddhist image of roaring lions, symbolizing the conquest of Law, on the Indian currency and adding the traditional Buddhist dharma wheel, representing interdependence and liberation, to the Indian national flag. Dr Ambedkar's death coincided with the celebration, held in India and elsewhere of Buddhism's 2500<sup>th</sup> year.

As a member of the Mahar caste, Dr Ambedkar was born untouchable, meaning that close contact with him (even if indirect) was considered, by orthodox Hindus, to pollute or contaminate those who were conditioned, usually since birth, to consider themselves “higher born”, such as Brahmins.

Dr Ambedkar, in his autobiographical sketches “Waiting for a Visa” describes some firsthand experience of this discrimination. At school Ambedkar not only had to sit in a separate section of the classroom (sometimes outside) but could not touch the tap if he was thirsty. In order to drink, a peon considered “touchable” had to be found to turn on the tap (2).

One experience was especially formative. While travelling to visit his father, Ambedkar, aged 9, along with an older brother and two young nephews, all children, were stranded for over an hour at the station (following their first ever train ride), waiting for a servant who never arrived. The stationmaster was at first sympathetic to the four well-dressed children, until he discovered their lowly caste. Eventually, however, he helped them to find, with difficulty, a bullock cart driver, who agreed to take them to their destination, for twice the normal fee. But this was on condition that the children acted as drivers while the driver walked, for fear of caste “pollution”. En route (on an overnight journey), as part of a harrowing ordeal, they were refused water.

Reflecting on this, Ambedkar wrote: “it left an indelible impression .. before this incident occurred, I knew that I was an untouchable, and that untouchables were subjected to certain indignities and discriminations. All this I knew. But this incident gave me a shock such as I had never received before, and it made me think about untouchability--which, before this incident happened, was with me a matter of course, as it is with many touchables as well as the untouchables.”

Today, in India, the injustice of caste is milder, especially in urban areas, than in Dr Ambedkar’s time. This is partly due to Dr Ambedkar, partly to increased Westernisation of affluent Indians, and partly the work of liberal Hindus, such as the Ramakrishna mission. But chiefly, it is as a result of the struggle and inspiration of tens of millions of people (sometimes called Dalits, meaning “broken” or “crushed”) who have rejected the legitimacy of caste as a concept. We believe injustice based on interpretations of karma is still common. In India, karma can no longer be unquestioningly interpreted as meaning that parental status and income completely determines people’s life course. Naturally, though, the culture that children are reared in has a powerful effect.

Many injustices still exist, in India and elsewhere, including for millions of “tribal” people. One group, seeking to reduce this injustice, and inspired by the teaching and legacy of Dr Ambedkar, is led by Karunadeepa, who, in 2017, with colleagues, almost all of whom are women, started to develop a new non-government organization (NGO), called the Bahujan Hitay Pune Project (<http://bhpuneproject.org.in/>). Since 1982, this work has been undertaken under the umbrella of a larger NGO, the Trailokya Baudha Maha Sangh Gana, but the time has come for a new, legally distinct group.

Bahujan refers to the people in the majority, meaning in India, “Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Castes”. Bahujan Hitay roughly translates as “for the welfare of many”. The work of the Bahujan Hitay Pune Project is principally with disadvantaged slum dwellers (scheduled castes and scheduled tribes) in this city of about six million, in the sprawling state of Maharashtra, parts of which are afflicted by drought and accompanying desperation, including farmer suicide. Consequently, many people migrate to Pune, seeking better conditions.

A major aim of the BHPP is the empowerment of women. Indian women can successfully better their own lives and those of their families given the opportunity. Yet today nearly half the women in India not have bank or savings accounts; mobile phones or internet access - let alone property, a statistic that cuts across caste and class (4). BHPP does this through vocational training (eg teaching sewing, fashion designing, beauty parlour, bag making, henna and jewelry making) and holding workshops on the rights of women. They also provide leadership training and counselling.

BODHI Australia supports two projects overseen by the BHPP. One project is a creche in the Hadaspar slum, Pune, currently benefiting 28 children. A teacher (Mrs Chaya Kate) and her assistant (Mrs Rubina Khan) take care of the children, each day from Monday to Saturday from 9.30 am to 1 pm. This gives the children’s very poor, hard-working parents a chance to earn money. In the morning the teacher leads prayer, then teaches songs, as well as basic literacy and numeracy. Mrs Khan prepares nutritious food for the children. Sometimes the children receive fruit; every week they are given eggs. Every month there is an evening meeting, involving staff and the parents, to discuss the progress of students and to invite suggestions and any queries about the crèche. The teacher also discusses hygiene and health with the students.

Topics discussed with the mothers at these and other meetings include parental awareness of health, nutritious foods available at home, and meal preparation. Although there is insufficient space in the slum to grow vegetables, people do plant trees, such as mango, guava, chickoo, tamarind, lime, custard apple, papaya and curry leaves. The risk of early childhood marriage is also discussed, as are the benefits of family planning. Women are also taught about relevant government schemes, including the availability of free contraceptives from the nurse at the primary health centre.

The children also receive a monthly medical check, recording their height and weight, with additional advice and medicine to children, especially for those who are underweight. Every year the children and staff go on an outing together, to a garden.

All the activities of Hadapsar crèche, including the awareness program, are running successfully. BODHI also supports the costs of a clinic (elsewhere in Pune) which provides a doctor, nurse and means subsidized health care is available for many people.

This work in Pune has, since 1982, been supported by the Karuna Trust (<https://www.karuna.org/>) a British charity founded by the late Ven Sangharakshita, who, as

young man seeking to work for the good of Buddhism, based mainly in Kalimpong, in the Himalayan foothills, met Dr Ambedkar three times, including shortly before his conversion (4). Since 2005, this work led by Karunadeepa has also been supported by two NGOs with an Australian connection. These NGOs (BODHI and BODHI Australia) were co-founded by Colin Butler and his late wife Susan (see <https://www.bodhi-australia.com/>). BODHI's founding patron, since 1989, is His Holiness the XIVth Dalai Lama. Since 1989, these groups have raised and distributed about A\$0.5M to partners in six countries in Asia, mostly in India. BODHI Australia also helps to support the Aryaloka Education Society, a Dalit-led NGO, based in Nagpur, which teaches basic computing skills, mostly to young women from poor villages (<https://www.bodhi-australia.com/aryaloka-education-society-nagpur.html>). This work is also inspired by Buddhist values.

In the three decades of BODHI's work the barriers facing partner organizations, in order to receive foreign funds have worsened. This steepens the challenge to reach the poorest people and to promote genuinely long-lasting development. But there is still a great need. We ask for your support, either directly, or in many other ways.

## References

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