

The Neo-Buddhist Architecture: A Site of Identity Formation

Dr. Naresh Suna

Assistant Professor, Department of Painting, Allahabad Degree College, Prayagraj-211003 (UP)

Abstract

The Neo-Buddhist architectural movement in contemporary India is deeply intertwined with the socio-political awakening of Dalits following Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's historic conversion to Navayana Buddhism in 1956. This paper examines how Ambedkar's adoption of Buddhism led to the emergence of a new visual and spatial identity for Dalits, serving as both a form of cultural emancipation and a political assertion. The transformation is evident in the emergence of architectural landmarks that incorporate Buddhist imagery, symbols, and design principles, reclaiming dignity and rewriting Dalit identity through a neo-Buddhist lens. Central to this exploration is the architecture of Gautam Buddha University, Mayabati's Rashtriya Dalit Prerna Sthal, and Deeksha Bhoomi in Nagpur—sites emblematic of this cultural and spiritual resurgence. The university and memorials embody Ambedkar's reinterpretation of Buddhist values, blending ancient Buddhist architectural motifs such as stupas, Ashokan Chakras, and symbolic fauna (elephants) with modern monumental forms. Deeksha Bhoomi, designed by Sheo Dan Mal, reflects a conscious invocation of the famous Sanchi stupa's form, while innovatively using modern construction techniques to foster an inclusive, hollow space symbolizing openness and transformation. Similarly, Mayabati's Dalit Prerna Sthal spatializes Dalit resistance and empowerment through monumental stone elephants and concrete landscaped zones, creating a narrative of social transformation and pride. This paper argues that these architectural sites not only represent collective aspiration and identity but operate as powerful counter-narratives against caste marginalization, using Buddhist symbolism to articulate Dalit liberation and socio-political agency. Through multidisciplinary analysis drawing on architectural studies, Dalit visual culture, and neo-Buddhist philosophy, this paper contributes to understanding how architecture becomes a site of identity formation, memory, and resistance within Dalit communities inspired by Ambedkar's neo-Buddhist vision.

Keywords: Navayana Buddhism, Neo-Buddhist Architecture, Social Emancipation, Buddhist Symbolism, Resistance.

Introduction: Reclaiming Visibility through Space

Starting from Babasaheb Ambedkar's mass mobilization for voluntary conversion to Buddhism by the Dalit community to claim or own the past, Buddhist monuments, their histories, and architectural structures have played a very important role in this claim for visibility. Gary Michel Tartakove's writings (Tartakove, 2012) are a very important contribution to this analysis. Y. S. Alone has also highlighted this aspect of alternative architectural form in the Neo-Buddhist movement, which helps to form Dalit Identity, for instance, how the caves of Ajanta and Ellora and other Western Deccan cave architecture of the early Buddhist period are the visual sources for architectural motifs like *chaitya* arches that are used as an

alternative form of modern monuments and public buildings (Alone, 2012, p.133). Tapti Guha Thakurta has also extensively traced the architectural motifs of Buddhist historical monuments that became aspirations during post-independence and the recent language of Dalit heritage sites.

The theoretical understanding of the concept of “Public art” and “public space” by Rosalyn Deutsche is very significant for this paper. Rosalyn observes that neither public places are a pre-existing entity designed for users, but rather emerges only from the practice (or counter-practice) of usage by marginalized groups who are prohibited from restricted spaces (Deutsche, 1996, p.xvi).

On the other hand, Mayawati’s projects were made after she achieved political power, even though it was for a short duration. Mayawati’s government (BSP) initiated the building of public parks and monuments of anti-caste icons, a process of Dalit visual representation that challenged Brahmanical dominant, hegemonic discourse.

In the post-Ambedkar period, the initiatives of Manyavar Kanshiram and Behen Kumari Mayawati led to the consolidation of strong Dalit movements. There was a concerted attempt to make visible the Dalit’s ignored history through the making of statues and parks of Babasaheb Ambedkar, Mahatma Phule, Birsa Munda, and other such revolutionaries. Despite other “*Manustream*” agenda of the destruction of oppressed history and struggle, the anti-caste movements always preserved their history. The site, even after Mayawati’s loss of political power, continues to be significant for the people. In spite of the fact that she is no longer the chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, there is a continuity of resistance through gatherings at these sites which play an important part in the political life of people. Another interesting architectural edifice is The Gautama Buddha University in Greater Noida, an industrial township in the National Capital Region. This new University has incorporated Buddhist references and architectural symbolism that embodies an aesthetics of ‘permanence.’ Making use of monumental form is a way of establishing a long-term presence directed towards a political movement.

As has been the focus of the majority of recent research on the historical and contemporary politics of statue construction and destruction in India Tapti Guha Thakurta studies demonstrate, statues and busts have been at the centre of the volatile identity politics of caste, language, and ethnicity in post-Independence India. In the current representational politics of Dalits across Indian cities, they are believed to play a crucial, enduring role in the claims over public spaces and assertion of rights of diverse marginalised or contesting populations (Tapti Guha Thakurta).

To discuss the symbolism in the Public Space which particularly focuses on Dalit cultural and Neo Buddhist symbols, one can look at the work of Harish Wankhede for significant insights.

Social symbolism focused on public events, memorials, conferences, and rallies, etc., is a prominent aspect of the Dalit movement in India and Maharashtra in particular. Due to the active participation of Dalits, the public spaces here are becoming increasingly democratic and open. Periodically, public rituals, memorials, and monuments in major cities like Mumbai, Pune, Nagpur, and Aurangabad have experienced the increasing prominence of neo Buddhist and Dalit cultural icons. These social symbols and public installations elicit an emotional response from Dalits, who view them with ambition and as a symbol of social empowerment and dignity (Wankhede, 2019, p.13).

The erection of a statue of Babasaheb Ambedkar and the subsequent mobilisation of the public around it appears to be the catalyst for revived democratic and egalitarian hopes among Dalits. The dominance of abstract elite ideals of public and national places might be challenged by Dalit public symbols. It gives fresh meaning to secular areas and democratises them in a substantial way (Wankhede, 2010).

Deeksha Bhoomi: Monumentality as Community Practice

The Stupa-like Deekshabhoomi¹ in Nagpur, Maharashtra, India is a Buddhist monument. It is one of the world's largest hollow Buddhist Stupas and is used for religious and social purposes including meditation, chanting, and giving lectures. The historic significance of the stupa is that it is usually built as a site of relic worship an important aspect of Buddhism. Deekshabhoomi is a popular place for tourists to visit in central India. It is well-known for its beautiful architecture and historical significance. Babasaheb Ambedkar, converted to Buddhism on October 14, 1956, at Nagpur, along with his supporters. The President of India, Shri K. R. Narayanan, inaugurated the stupa in December 2001. In July 1978, work on the stupa began in the same place to remember the important event. This stupa took 20 years to build. "Figure 1"

The formal analysis of the stupa is that the external design was influenced by the stupa in Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, which is a major tourist attraction. It's important to note that the Deekshabhoomi monument is hollow on the inside, unlike the Sanchi Stupa. "Figure 2" Among Buddhist stupas, it is one of the biggest. The landmark consists of two tiers. The Buddha statue and prayer area, as well as the exhibition galleries, are all placed on the ground level in a 64.30 x 64.30 m square hall. A meditative area with a hemispherical dome of 22.16m radius rests above a drum of 26.03 m radius and 9.6 m height, with a combined volume of 43,229.96 m³. This area has been set aside by the authorities and resident monks for group activities like meditation, Buddhist chanting, and prayers. The area behind the stupa is encircled by a veranda that is 4.80 m in width. Four fountains, one in each cardinal direction, decorate the verandah. (Manohare, 2017) There is an umbrella for decoration above the dome (Hermika). Intricately patterned Dholpur marble from Rajasthan, India, covers the hall's floor. In the hall with the hemispherical ceiling, two major axes run perpendicular to one another and have enormous arched openings that serve as doorways. The structure is decorated with a variety of Buddhist architectural motifs. "Figure 3".

Behenji Mayawati's architectural memorials: Materiality and Political Assertion

In parallel, Mayawati's monumental interventions further radicalize the visual and material assertion of Dalit identity.

Hardtman (2009) says that the BSP has changed the "Indian culture of politics" by questioning the norms that have made Dalits invisible in the country's political system.

Sabana Ali states that even though the visual culture and aesthetics are consistent, the sculptures made by the community and the official monuments made during BSP's rule show different kinds of visibility. It's a sign of anti-caste ideas and the marginalised community's desire to reclaim public space and prove that they have the right to take part in democratic processes (Sabana Ali, 2018).

The proliferation of monuments honouring Babasaheb Ambedkar around India serves merely to reinforce this notion. The fact that these sculptures are often attacked and torn down shows that they are more than just pieces of cement and concrete (Jain, 2014). They are a political statement by the community, an attempt to establish a concept or an ideology. And that claim is significant because it lends a voice and a

¹ Ambedkar wanted to find a religion that would help the untouchables the most. He was strongly opposed to Hinduism because it denied the lower castes the right to life. He spent a lot of time learning about the good and bad parts of Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, and other religions and philosophies. In the end, he chose Buddhism, which is a religion that came from South Asia and rejects both the idea and reality of social inequality. On October 14, 1956, Ambedkar and 500,000 of the people who followed him became Buddhists. The diksha, or initiation, ceremony took place in Nagpur, in the state of Maharashtra. Since then, the site has been called Dikshabhoomi.

platform to a marginalised group; it is an effort to demand equality in an unequal society (Sabana Ali, 2018).

Memorials serve an important social function by inspiring and uniting the local community. No one can alter the fact that the monuments have given Dalits a place in the history of this country. Commemorative architecture is very exclusive and sends a strong message of community or isolation through its design. In India, Dalits have not been given a place in space or time, both literally and symbolically, for hundreds of years. Because of this spatial and historical exclusion, Dalit people are still left out of society, both inside and outside of their community. So, it's not surprising that a big part of Mayawati's radical way of asserting Dalit rights is claiming physical space and marking it with DBA historical figures, which is a visual way of demanding that they be recognised (Melia Belli, 2014, p.86).

The Prerna Kendra is an exception because it is a memorial to Kanshi Ram's funeral and holds his ashes. This makes the Prerna Kendra unique (Melia Belli, 2014, p.87).

People across the country have both praised and criticized Mayawati for making the memorial building. However despite the fact that all political parties have projected their identity and politics through statues, no one has received as much criticism as Behenji Mayawati. This is the act of reducing her and very few historians have recognized her contribution to this architectural project.²

Behenji Mayawati said, "We are here. We have not been recognized for thousands of years. We've been made invisible. We've been excluded from public space. We're here now and we're here to stay."

Mayawati's use of permanent materials to build monumental structures shows that anti- caste history and memory are here to stay and are not easy to remove. She is also worried about people vandalizing Babasaheb Ambedkar statues and other Dalit icons, so she makes sure to use materials that are extra thick and strong. Light pink and red sandstone from Karuli, Rajasthan, and buff coloured sandstone from Chuar, Uttar Pradesh, were used as construction materials. All the icons are made of bronze.

She uses marble, stone, and bronze in her construction rather than concrete, which is a material that is actually not very long-lasting. Also, she does not work in the landscaping. Because the landscaping will deteriorate into a jungle as soon as she is no longer in control of it.

The Chunar sandstone is linked to the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka, who in the third century BCE supported Buddhism and its arts. Ashoka inscribed edicts on sandstone columns throughout his vast empire. Mayawati has put up a lot of Chunar sandstone columns on her monuments so that people would associate themselves with a Buddhist or neo-Buddhist. Her columns aren't Ashokan. The former are built of sandstone and have animals, inverted lotuses, and wheels on their capitals. Four elephants carry bronze wheels on their capitals. Elephants signify Indian strength, Ashoka's capitals, and the BSP party. Dozens of life-size carved stone elephants decorate Mayawati's gardens. Ashokan pillars are individual, whereas Mayawati pillars are clustered. As per Mayawati's instructions, the building columns are taller than Ashoka's. "Figure 4, 5 & 6"

Gautam Buddha University: an architecture of constitutional values

The visual appeal of this university is unique due to its Buddhist architectural motifs on 511 acres of land. The whole university is an entirely made up in its visual appearance of anti-caste symbols and motifs. Such a university, through its architectural assertion, is political in nature, and Ambedkarite ideology is

² See Manuela Ciotti, "Futurity in Words: Low-Caste Women Politicians Self-representation and Post-Dalit Scenarios in North India," *Contemporary South Asia* 18, no. 1 (2010), 44–45.

attached to it. Though it's not a memorial space like *Dalit Prerana Sthal*, the design, motifs, and medium of this architecture are similar to that. This is an educational space; therefore, the space is significant for this architecture. Students are directly and indirectly involved with this structure. Each building of this university is named after anti-caste icons. There is also a "Bodhi-Mindfulness Meditation course," the architecture of this structure is inspired by stupa architecture and is named Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Dhyana Kendra. It is claimed that this hall is one of the largest column-free domes in India. The architect of this university is C P Kukreja. "Figure 7"

What is interesting about the site is the incorporation of waterbodies which amplify and double the images of Buddha sculptures that are positioned across the campus. This is akin to multiple stenciled identical images of Buddha figures that we see in rock-cut ancient Buddhist architecture.

The photograph reveals a radial plan like an Ashoka Chakra, with broad tree line avenues interspersed with the educational infrastructure. "Figure 8." Placed on an elevated platform at the edge of the central waterbody is a sculpture of Buddha on a high pedestal. ³ Flanking the sculpture are images of Behenji Mayawati and Manyawar Kanshi Ram. This space differs from the memorial parks as the educational infrastructure views education as an emancipatory project while the memorial parks may be viewed as spaces of political mobilization. This university was built by Bhenji Mawabati during her governance.

The architecture design comprises of eight academic blocks symbolizing the Buddha's "Eightfold Path." Constructed from sandstone, the university buildings showcase *Jaalis* crafted by skilled local artisans, drawing inspiration from Buddhist texts. Additionally, local craftspeople were involved in producing murals and sculptures for the campus installation.

Another intriguing site at the university is the '*Samajik Parivartan Prateek Sthal*' "Figure 9" dedicated to the nation. It was inaugurated on January 15, 2011, by Behenji Mayawati. This Prateek Sthal features statues of various anti-caste icons, including Gautam Buddha, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Birsa Munda, Sant Guru Ghasidas, Chhatrapati Sahuji

Maharaj, Mahan Sant Kabir, Sant Ravi Das, Narayan Guru, Manyawar Kanshiram, and a statue of Behenji Mayawati. These statues, crafted from marble, symbolize specific sites that were important in their history. The choice of permanent and robust materials, as discussed earlier, challenges the politics of invisibility. "Figure 10"

Free-standing marble statues, each approximately 5 feet in size, are positioned on elevated pedestals crafted from red sandstone. These pedestals serve a dual purpose: promoting the statues and providing biographical introductions to each figure through inscriptions. This design ensures that the anti-caste icons are easily recognized by both Indian and international visitors. Notably, the Prateek Sthal (symbolic place) incorporates a distinctive feature – each figure is sheltered by a roof supported by four pillars in the form of a dome. Both the pedestals and roofs are red, enhancing the prominence of the white marble statues. "Figure 11"

This location remains open to the sky, with only the figures in a shelter. The shelter serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it acts as protection against direct exposure to natural elements like rain and sunlight, thereby enhancing the durability of the material. Secondly, the design is not only aesthetic but also symbolically represents the equal and individual importance given to each figure. These symbolic spaces, characterized by circular shapes where the icons are positioned, maintain a consistent design and uniform spacing. At

³ <https://www.lifestyleasia.com/ind/living/architecture/gautam-buddha-university-designed-as-an-interpretation-of-buddhist-architecture/>.

the centre of this circular space, a substantial stone pillar stands, decorated with inscriptions detailing information about Gautam Buddha University, presented in both English and Hindi languages.

The detailed detailing of the statues, skillfully carved, presents a vibrant and lifelike appearance. The design of the circular space holds a political intention to involve visitors in a circular path aligned with Buddhist philosophical practices. This architectural arrangement transforms the space into an interactive community engagement platform.

All statues are depicted in a standing posture, symbolizing collective guardianship or guidance toward the central stone pillar from all directions. The stone pillar, serving as a metaphor for the university, signifies that the anti-caste icons guide the institution philosophically and politically. This guidance is instrumental in shaping the university's role in knowledge production, contributing to the construction of an egalitarian society.

Interestingly, in front of this space, an area is dedicated to depicting the pivotal episode of Babasaheb Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism. This visual narrative captures the moment when Babasaheb Ambedkar embraced the Buddhist religion, portraying him in the act of acceptance in the presence of four Buddhist monks. It is important to understand these projects within the infrastructure of education and social emancipation that are in fact at the core of these building activities. They provide symbolic meaning to the infrastructure and cannot be relegated to being images of Dalit emancipation alone. In fact the core argument that these structures make is about universal access and collective progress rather than being particular to Dalit imagination. They embody constitutional values of inclusion and participatory democracy.

Conclusion

This examination of Neo-Buddhist architecture demonstrates how cultural, political, and architectural interventions since Ambedkar's conversion have worked to forge a new Dalit identity. Sites such as Deeksha Bhoomi, Mayawati's Dalit Prerna Sthal, and Gautam Buddha University function as living spaces for memory, community engagement, and ongoing resistance. These spaces, infused with both ancient Buddhist motifs and contemporary aspirations, articulate a vision of equality and dignity, serving not only as commemorative markers but also as dynamic sites of social transformation and upholding constitutional values.

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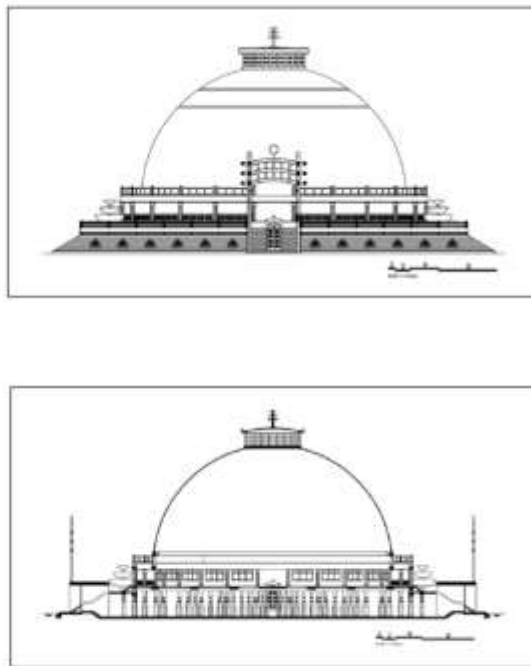


Fig 1. Deekshabhumi

(Fig.2.).



Deekshabhoomi(1978/2001, Mumbai, Maharashtra),



Deekshabhoomi(1978/2001, Mumbai, Maharashtra),

(Fig.3).

(Fig.4), (Fig.5), and (Fig.6). Dalit Prerana Sthal, Noida, Uttar Pradesh.

Dalit Prerana Sthal (Noida)



.(Fig.7). Gautam Buddha University



Architecture of
Gautama Buddha
University, Uttar
Pradesh.



Fig.8. Gautam Buddha University



Fig.9. Samajik Parivartan Prateek Sthal, Birsa Munda, Marble Statue, Gautam Buddha University, Noida, UP.



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