



- *If change could be brought by a king,* Review: A Spoke in the Wheel

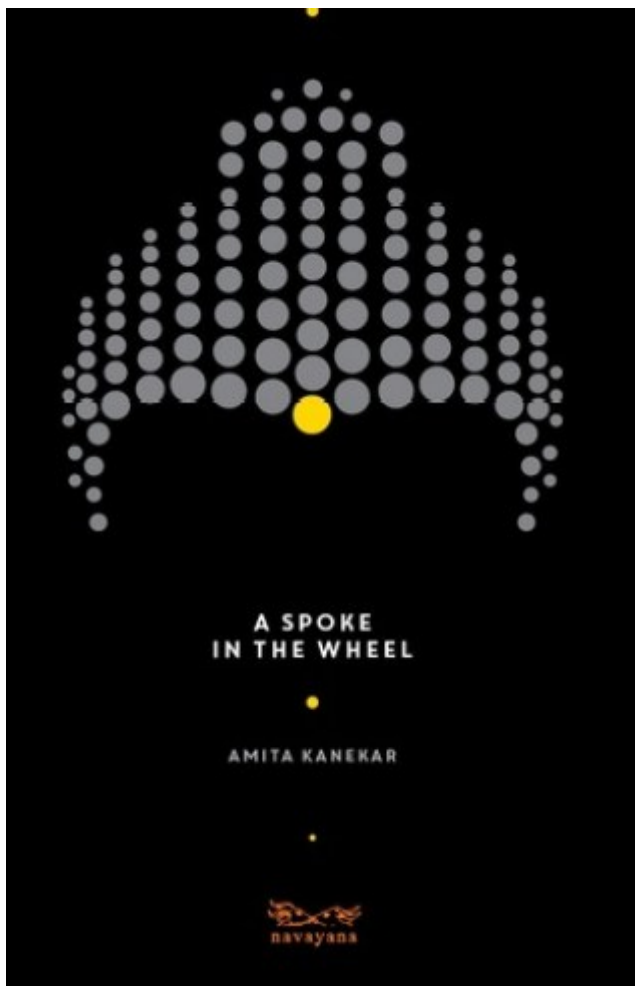
*why did the Buddha become a beggar? (p. 382)*

- *The Buddha preached his Way, they went theirs (p. 334)*

Before Hinduism, in Ancient South Asia, Buddhism was a major religion. What the common man as well as the student of history knows about Buddhism has come, generally, from the old Jataka story of how the Buddha who was a prince was isolated from all the ills of the world and a chance encounter with old-age, sickness and death transforms his whole life, eventually leading to his enlightenment. Sadly for all of us this legend has been – verbatim – passed off as history. The Buddha is viewed as godhead, when charting the history of Buddhism with the actual historical processes that the Buddha as a person had experienced, given scant attention.

How we understand and construct the history of Buddhism (or for that matter the history of any other religion of Ancient India) is on many occasions found to be lacking in a rigorous imagination coupled with erudition. While studying Buddhism, I have always felt that the thrust is on the philosophy (and sometimes only philosophy!) rather than the historical conditions that required such ideologies and philosophies – such as Buddhism – to be produced. Hence, when I read the debut novel of the Goan writer and academic Amita Kanekar, now based in Miramar, I felt that my knowledge and imagination about the Buddha in particular and the historical setting of Ancient India in general was enriched.

*A Spoke in the Wheel* (2005) by Amita Kanekar, to be simply put, is a novel about the Buddha and Buddhism along with other historical personages. In attempting the portraits of such historical personages like the Buddha and the Emperor Asoka, Amita Kanekar also interrogates the history of that time as well as critically examines the conventional wisdom that has been handed down to us. (In particular, the thrust is towards rethinking the whole nationalist historiography and construction of Ancient Indian history).



The protagonist of the novel is a monk named Upali, who has been commissioned by the great Emperor Asoka himself to produce a biography of the Buddha in prose. The novel opens in 256 BC, four years after the bloodshed in Kalinga and three centuries after the death of the Buddha. Upali, a native from Kalinga, had witnessed first-hand the destruction of Asoka's military campaign there. He is now based in a small monastery, in the middle of a thick and treacherous jungle. Upali is portrayed as a scholastic who has to work with legends or *suttas* which contain several discrepancies in their content as a primary source. He is caught between providing a faithful account of the life of the Buddha as well as staying loyal to the spirit that Gautam, the Enlightened One, had embodied. He is an upstart, getting into frequent arguments with the elders on the finer theoretical points of the Buddha's life.

Upali, through his keen, interrogative mind and fearless questioning of the handed-down-wisdom manages to produce an account that shocks and revolts a lot of elder monks. But the Emperor Asoka likes it. *A Spoke in the Wheel* gives a picture of the time when the first largest empire in history was consolidated in South Asia; the author describes the cities, the people and the social atmosphere in which the daily business was carried out with much élan. The Mauryan Empire under Asoka was vast containing equally varied identities: tribal, caste and class. Amita Kanekar is not just writing a novel, but is also arguing, informing and providing an alternate view of the history of Buddhism and Ancient India. For instance, consider the very popular myth about the 84,000 stupas that were constructed by Asoka. She says,

“...since he ruled some thirty-seven years, averages 2,270 each year, or more than six a day, a feat clearly impossible for anyone not Beloved of the Gods.”

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Did the Buddha really lead a sheltered life totally buffered from the harsh realities of the world? Amita Kanekar argues otherwise, “He probably led the most luxurious life possible, but it was not that of a lotus-eater. Otherwise Shudodhan [Buddha’s father] could never have hoped to make his son Chief after him. It was a time of confusion, even chaos, and a Chief had to at least understand both the old and the new divides, to defend his own interests and also swing popular feeling behind him. It was a tall order, as Shudodhan knew only too well.”

It is also interesting to note how perfectly Amita Kanekar weaves the importance of iron in the whole narrative. Yes, although this ubiquitous dark metal transformed our society and history, sadly this is not taken into much consideration by most established scholarship when discussing the history of Buddhism. Amita Kanekar’s concern and commitment to the cause of the subaltern is seen through the protagonist Upali (who is revealed to be a Chandala, a low born) as well as how she tries to represent the Nagas who were perceived to be racially inferior by the Arya society. Describing the first long-distance trek that the Buddha undertook, Amita Kanekar says, “It was a difficult trip, the first of many cross-country treks, and unforgettable. It was really the beginning of a new education, not in any lofty or esoteric philosophy, but in ordinary, even familiar things. Like the heat of the sun. He had never noticed how it built up from a mild lighter of the path at dawn to a ferocious torch by midday, pulling out all the water from his body, burning his uncovered head, burning the top and the bottom of his feet, drying the skin of his eyes, tearing the skin of his nose and throat. The Shakyas worshipped the sun in every form, from Ushas, gentle goddess of dawn, to burning Aditya of the noon sky, and not surprisingly, for they too were rulers – arrogant, uncaring, robbing the earth and all who walked on it for their juices. Nobody dared to look the sun in the eye. How sharply different was the moon. Yes, now he could understand why so many of the low-caste worshipped that gentle lantern of cool white light. Anybody who had to expend sweat and energy through the day unprotected by the flimsiest of shades would. The moon was a reinvigorating friend, so that even the tireddest could think of poetry and love in the night, or sleep well and find the strength to rise and face the sun again.”

The Enlightenment of the Buddha is spoken in a much nuanced way, situating it in the social and historical setting. The portrayal of the Buddha’s Enlightenment is minus the mystical glamour. It is more prosaic, “He thought and thought, till he was satisfied that he had some answers. Such was his enlightenment.”

Amita Kanekar dwells on how the Emperor Asoka had appropriated the ideology of the Buddha and the Buddha himself and she also tries to show how such an ideology like

Buddhism could be, thereby, helpful to the State. The religious ideas may have (unwittingly) helped the State to control its subjects. “Look at the issues of tolerance, peace and renunciation. They [rulers] liked them, they said. Enough to encourage them among their subjects. Tolerance in the poor and dispossessed made for a more peaceful kingdom. And renunciation was a brilliant idea – if people scorned wealth, they would not notice the inequities in its availability. The matter was different for themselves. Their own tolerance, of their neighbours for example, remained low. Their avarice for greater land and revenues remained largely unabated. Nor did they forswear violence towards anybody – their neighbours, their subjects, even their own kinsmen who chanced to cast a covetous eye on their throne,” Amita writes.

History and polemics aside, there is murder and intrigue woven in the novel. Amita Kanekar also discusses how using subtle suppressive measures, the Asokan empire was kept intact, particularly when the established historiography can rarely see anything beyond the greatness of the tyrant and mass-murderer that Emperor Asoka was.

The novel provides fresh insights into the life of the Buddha as well as the history of Ancient India. For a person interested in history and Buddhism, this book will be a smart and discerning read.



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