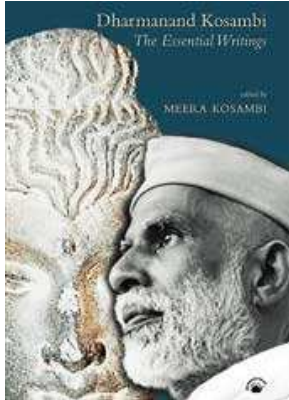


MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 2010

Scholar Rebel- Dharmanand Kosambi –by Dileep Padgaonkar

From [The Telegraph](#)



SCHOLAR REBEL

- A window into a remarkable mind

Dharmanand Kosambi: The essential writings Edited by Meera Kosambi,
Permanent Black, Rs 695

The Kosambi whom historians know well is D.D., the brilliant iconoclastic scholar who brought about a fundamental change in the writing of ancient Indian history and who, ironically, himself acquired an iconic status in Marxist historiography. But this book is about another, less-known Kosambi, D.D.'s father, Dharmanand (1876-1947). And the editor-translator is yet another Kosambi — Meera, eminent sociologist, daughter of D.D. and granddaughter of Dharmanand. Given the fact that Dharmanand was a grandfather whom she did not know, the book no doubt represents an important personal journey for her. For the reader, what lends it importance and interest is the remarkable life of its protagonist, and his amazing life-journey, which took him from a small Goan village to Sri Lanka, Nepal, Burma, Russia, the United States of America and back. Not a bad record for a man who was afraid to travel!

Dharmanand is known as a Buddhist scholar in Maharashtra but is scarcely known elsewhere. This is because, although fluent in English, he chose to write in Marathi. This book introduces the man and his ideas to a wider audience and offers the first English translation of some of his writings. These include his autobiography, Nivedan, and his essays on Ashoka, Buddhism, non-violence, socialism, and the Indian working class. There is also a play (was it ever performed?) titled Bodhisattva, where Dharmanand wove satyagraha, women's emancipation and his own vision of an ideal conjugal relationship into the story of the life of the Buddha-to-be.

Dharmanand was a school drop-out, his early education interrupted by frequent bouts of ill health. Married at the age of 14, shouldering the responsibility of the family business

at 16, he had a strong contemplative and melancholy streak right from his childhood. Being a voracious reader only increased his dissatisfaction with life. The turning point came when he chanced upon a biographical sketch of the Buddha in a Marathi magazine, and later read a Marathi translation of Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*. He resolved to renounce his family and worldly life and to embark on a quest in search of knowledge of Buddhism. The problem was that he didn't know quite where to look, because in the late 19th century, Buddhism had practically disappeared from India. After a seven-year-long journey, during which he became a monk, Dharmanand returned to the worldly life, determined to spread the Buddha's message among his fellow Maharashtrians.

It is a gripping story. Dharmanand's was not the usual search for an academic understanding of Buddhism. He was inspired by an intense, desperate yearning to comprehend the Buddha's teaching from within the tradition, from practitioners of the faith. And his extraordinary spiritual quest was combined with a grim struggle for survival. He had no money and no wealthy patrons. He lived on the edge of starvation, begging for food and shelter, his body frequently racked with sickness. Concealing his interest in Buddhism, he set out to learn Sanskrit in Kashi, submitting to the Brahmin hierarchy which often left a Saraswat Brahmin like him hungry because he could only eat in the second shift. His pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy places speaks volumes about their sorry state in the early 20th century. His account of his sojourn in Burma is frank about the practical difficulties faced by a vegetarian monk in that country. After his return to the worldly life, Dharmanand travelled to the US, where the Harvard Indologist, Charles Rockwell Lanman, tried to deprive him of credit for translating the *Visuddhi Magga* — a story recounted with an admirable lack of rancour.

In the Harvard libraries, Dharmanand discovered Marx. His thoughts moved from religion to social and political issues, but he viewed these through a somewhat innocent Buddhist lens. He saw Buddhism as an ancient form of socialism. He talked about the incompatibility of fear and national freedom. National craving was the cause of war and world suffering. He urged capitalists to love their workers. He wrote against child marriage, caste discrimination and untouchability. Dharmanand was also inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. He became the leader of the Maharashtra Satyagraha Mandal and led the salt satyagraha in Shirode village near Goa. But he was not an unquestioning camp follower and criticized both Gandhian ideas and Marxism. He was drawn towardssatyagraha, but thought it dangerous to base a philosophy of non- violence on the *Bhagavad Gita*. Moved though he was by Marx's egalitarian message, he was repelled by the conflict and violence that was inherent in that message and in the Bolshevik revolution.

The autobiography is fascinating not only for what it says but also for what it does not talk about. There is remarkably little about his family, even in his account of his life after he gave up monkhood. There is no description of what must have been a very poignant family reunion. Was this reticence due to indifference, or was it too personal or painful a subject? Other relationships that remain hazy include Dharmanand's relationship with Anagarika Dharmapala, and with Ambedkar and his movement. A very significant point

mentioned by Meera Kosambi is that although Ambedkar does not mention any sources in his *The Buddha and his Dhamma*, he was probably indebted to Dharmanand for his understanding of the life and ideas of Gautama Buddha.

Historians are bound to be very curious about the relationship between Dharmanand and his historian son, Dharmanand Damodar. Did D.D. inherit some of his talents, ideas and methods from his father? Or did he react against his father's engagement with religion and spirituality that had torn his family apart? In spite of being a great scholar, Dharmanand did not make a major scholarly impact. This was because he was essentially a loner who chose to operate within a Maharashtrian world. Even after renouncing monkhood and engaging directly with the world as a teacher of Pali and Buddhism in various universities, he remained unmoved by the lure of money and ambition. His death was as unusual as his life. Wearied by persistent illness, he decided to end his life through *sallekhana*, fasting unto death in Gandhi's ashram near Gorakhpur. Dharmanand died just a few months before India became independent. Do not be misled by the gentle unpretentiousness of his writings. This book is a window into the remarkable life and mind of a rebel who lived by his convictions, who combined scholarly erudition with spirituality, simplicity and social commitment, with no interest in mundane personal gain.