



## “I Am in Search of a Womb for My New Creativity”: Navayana Buddhist Ethics, Impermanence, and the Quest for Dhammic Rebirth in Late Poet Ketan Pimpalpure’s Ambedkarite Poetry

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.14.1.332](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.14.1.332)



### Article info

Article Received: 19/02/2026  
Article Accepted: 15/03/2026  
Published online: 20/03/2026

### Abstract

Late Ketan Pimpalpure’s poem “I Am in Search of a Womb for My New Creativity” translated by me from ‘Majhya Navya Srujanasathi Mi Navi Kush Shodhto Aahe’ included in his Marathi anthology *Demofun* (Samta Sangar Prakashan, Nagpur, 2006) and translated into English by Sunil Ramteke, presents the Buddha (Siddhartha) as an imminent, diffused energy of consciousness rather than as a figure awaiting literal rebirth. The speaker rebukes Mother Earth’s “excessive motherly craving” for rebirth, thereby foregrounding the impermanence of beings in the world (“I am impermanent – Death eternal”) and their dissolution into the five elements, while simultaneously seeking a fertile ethical “womb” for renewed Dhammic creativity. Through elemental metaphors – fragrance, honey, flowing water, *Panchshila* (Five Precepts), and the *Arya Ashtangik Marg* (The Noble Eightfold Path) – the poem diagnoses modern spiritual decay: the suffocation of compassion (*karuṇā*) by craving (*tanhā, tṛṣṇā*), hatred, deceit, hypocrisy, and neoliberal individualism. The recurring refrain, “I am carrying on my shoulder a gigantic crucifix of your pain / I am in search of a womb...” fuses Bodhisattva compassion with Christ-like suffering, calling for character (*śīla*), awakening, and collective rebirth.

The research paper offers an exhaustive close textual analysis, symbolic deconstruction, and socio-philosophical contextualization of the poem within Navayana Buddhism, Ambedkarite literature, and the Dalit-Marathi poetic tradition. Drawing on B. R. Ambedkar’s rational reinterpretation of the *Dhamma*, Sharan Kumar Limbale’s Dalit aesthetic theory, and Ramteke’s critical analysis of Pimpalpure’s work, it argues that the poem articulates a prophetic Navayana manifesto: the Buddha’s energy persists as an “alchemy of consciousness” diffused throughout nature and humanity, demanding ethical renewal amid a moral winter. The paper situates Pimpalpure as a key Ambedkarite voice in Maharashtra, contributing to a radical and progressive

literary tradition whose poetry bridges impermanence (*anicca*) with urgent social praxis.

Keywords: Navayana Buddhism, Ambedkarite literature, Dalit-Marathi poetic tradition, Ketan Pimpalpure, Dhammic creativity/alchemy of consciousness, impermanence (*anicca*) and rebirth, compassion (*karuṇā*) vs craving (*taṇhā*, *trṣṇā*), ethical renewal and social praxis

## Introduction

With the opening lines of the poem—"O Mother Earth! / This excessive motherly craving on your part for my rebirth/ is against the cycle of nature" (Pimpalpure, lines 1-3; my trans.)—the late Ketan Pimpalpure launches a profound philosophical rebuke of ideologies that posit the permanence of life and the rebirth of the soul or human beings, while ignoring death as the ultimate reality of existence. From the outset, the poem establishes dual registers: the Buddhist doctrine of impermanence and a radical call for ethical rebirth within the collective consciousness. The speaker identifies explicitly as "I, Siddhartha! The biological son of Shuddhodhana" (lines 6-7), thereby invoking the historical Buddha while simultaneously rejecting any assurance of personal rebirth: "I have already told the truth to Kisa Gotami—I am impermanent—Death eternal/ I have never given a promise to anybody of my rebirth" (lines 4-5; my trans.).

This direct allusion to the Kisa Gotami parable—where the Buddha teaches the universality of death by sending her to collect mustard seeds from a house untouched by bereavement (Ambedkar)—anchors the poem in core Buddhist teaching while reworking it through a Navayana rationalist lens.

Ketan Pimpalpure was one of the leading Ambedkarite poets and thinkers, as well as a sculptor, painter, lyricist, journalist, orator, and staunch activist of the Samata Sainik Dal. He passed away on 31 July 2015 at the age of forty-nine, leaving a significant vacuum within Ambedkarite socio-literary and cultural circles. He authored six poetry anthologies: *Suryakankan* (1995), *Marshal Race* (1999), *Demofun* (2006),

*Makabi* (2012), *Hemlock* (2013), and *Noble Truth* (2015). His sensibility and devotion to the Dhamma constitute the core of this body of work (Ramteke).

The title of the anthology *Demofun* is derived from the Homeric Hymn to Demeter. In this hymn, Demophon, the son of King Celeus and Queen Metaneira, occupies a central position. The goddess Demeter resolves to confer immortality upon Demophon by burning away his mortal nature in the family hearth at night. She places the child in the fire like a brand or ember, without the knowledge of his parents. Her attempt to deify Demophon ultimately fails when Metaneira unexpectedly enters, sees her child in the flames, and cries out in terror. This interruption breaks the ritual and ensures that Demophon remains mortal. Nevertheless, Demophon is portrayed as a heroic figure, willing to endure any ordeal.

Pimpalpure extends this figure symbolically to the innumerable activists in the Ambedkarite movement, conceptualizing them as contemporary "Demophons" who, undeterred by storm, rain, calamity, sorrow, pain, insult, or humiliation, continue to struggle relentlessly for the realization of Babasaheb Ambedkar's vision (Pimpalpure). The translator—an Ambedkarite scholar from Nagpur—renders the incantatory rhythm of the original Marathi into English while preserving its symbolic density and alliterative force. The poem's structure is simultaneously cyclical and incantatory. It comprises five major movements punctuated by a recurrent refrain that mirrors both the wheel of Dhamma (*Dhammacakka*) and the repetitive nature of suffering (*dukkha*).

Within this framework, Pimpalasure transforms the Buddha from a purely historical figure into an eternal, pervasive energy. This energy is described as an “alchemy of consciousness, energy and intelligence/ percipience” (line 9; my trans.). It is diffused throughout the world like fragrance or flowing water. Yet this diffusion does not entail a loss of agency. The speaker actively seeks “a womb, which yearns for giving birth to my creativity” (refrain, lines 29, 49, 76, 93; my trans.). This “womb” is not biological. It is ethical and collective. It signifies a receptive humanity grounded in *sīla* (character), the Five Precepts (*Pañcasīla*), the Noble Eightfold Path (*Arya Ashtangik Marga*), and the *Pāramitās*. The poem therefore operates both as a lament for moral decay under neoliberalism and as a Navayana call to ethical and social action.

This paper is organized into five sections. First, it examines the figure of the Buddha as immanent, diffused energy and rejects the notion of literal rebirth. Second, it diagnoses contemporary moral and spiritual suffocation. Third, it offers a symbolic analysis of the womb, crucifixion, and selected natural metaphors. Fourth, it explores Navayana ethics, with particular attention to character, precepts, path, and the metaphor of battlefield struggle. Fifth, it evaluates the poem’s literary significance, contemporary relevance, and location within the Ambedkarite-Buddhist tradition. Through extensive line-by-line critical interpretation, cross-references to Ambedkar’s *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, and engagement with Dalit aesthetic theory (Limbale) and Ramteke’s analysis of Pimpalasure’s Dhamma philosophy, the paper demonstrates the poem’s complexity as both a literary artefact and a political-spiritual manifesto.

### 1. The Buddha as Immanent Energy: Dissolution, Diffusion and Eternal Presence

The poem’s first movement (lines 1–28) establishes the speaker’s ontology through a poetics of radical impermanence and alchemical

transformation. After addressing Mother Earth with a critique, the Buddha declares: “I have mingled with every particle of nature by becoming/ Alchemy of consciousness, energy and intelligence/ percipience” (lines 8–9; my trans.). This act is not a dissolution into nothingness, but a transmutation into a “concrete philosophy!” (line 10; my trans.) and into “a new path of energy to all the animate and inanimate beings for the liberation!” (lines 11–12; my trans.).

Pimpalasure here reinterprets *anicca* (impermanence) and *anattā* (no-self) in explicitly Navayana terms. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar rejects metaphysical reincarnation and emphasizes the Buddha as a rational teacher who claimed no divinity either for himself or for his Dhamma. The Dhamma, Ambedkar insists, was discovered by a human being for human beings; it was not a revelation (221). Ramteke observes that Pimpalasure’s poetry consistently reflects this orientation: “Dhamma philosophy has become the core of his creative expression,” portraying the Buddha not as a deity but as a living energy permeating existence (Ramteke). The poem’s image of eternal energy reinforces this view: “I live here only in the circle of earth (soil, water, fire and air)” (line 13; my trans.), an image that echoes the five *skandhas* and the four great elements (*mahābhūta*) in Buddhist cosmology.

The metaphors of this movement are sensual, pervasive, and immanent. The Buddha proclaims: “I am like the unexpressed sweet fragrance of a flower—scattered here and there—in every particle” (lines 14–15; my trans.). He continues: “I expressed myself like the drops of honey—in the heart—full of compassion” (line 16; my trans.); “I am in the conduct of a person of character—in the life—in the minds” (line 17; my trans.); and “I am there in the consciousness like eternal truth” (line 18; my trans.). These lines approach a near-mystical immanence while retaining a rational, this-worldly emphasis. The Buddha further states: “I have sown my moral goodness, energy and

intense stolidity in every animate and inanimate thing of nature and begun my long journey of consciousness; I am not finished – I will never [be]" (lines 19–21; my trans.).

In this way, the poet affirms that Buddhahood is not a remote concept of antiquity but a present and attainable state. Anyone who undertakes conscious effort, cultivates good conduct, and exercises discerning intelligence while following the path of the supreme Buddha can attain Buddhahood. There is no need to await the arrival of a future Buddha who will incarnate solely for the salvation of humankind. Rather, it is one's own conscious ethical practice that enables liberation.

The speaker therefore affirms endless renewal: "I will bloom again and again on the pedicle/ ground/ strength of Humanity" (line 22; my trans.). He declares, "I have no end – no beginning – I am incessant, uninterrupted – I am pure flowing water" (line 23; my trans.). Here, Pimpalpure fuses *anicca* with *nibbāna* as a dynamic process rather than a static state of extinction. The Buddha describes himself as "gratified fragrance which smells in the heart of limitless/ Those who drink the drops of sweat with lips of the forehead of sorrows/ I am that stainless, like sweet taste of the fruits of good deeds" (lines 24–26; my trans.). This karmic imagery – good deeds as sweet fruit – aligns closely with Ambedkar's emphasis on *sīla* as foundational to social justice. Ambedkar further asserts that *paññā* (Pradnya) is *Vichar Dhamma*, thinking aright, while *sīla* is *Achar Dhamma*, acting aright (295). Highlighting the primacy of *sīla*, he remarks: "Sila is the beginning and the refuge, Sila is the mother of all good. It is the foremost of all good conditions" (295).

Within this framework, "Nobody can stop the footsteps of time crying for me" (line 27; my trans.) underscores the inevitability of time and change, while "I am in the existence of Sangha, nobody can go further without following it" (line 28; my trans.) positions the

*saṅgha* as the indispensable vehicle of continuity and collective progress. This opening movement therefore rejects the Hindu doctrine of cyclical rebirth while affirming a specifically Buddhist continuity through ethical action, thus preparing the ground for the poem's subsequent critique.

## 2. Diagnosis of Modern Moral Decay: Suffocation, Craving and the Extinction of Compassion

The second movement of the poem (lines 30–43) marks a shift from affirmation to lament, offering a stark depiction of contemporary existence. The lines "Lives have scattered here and there like rags/ The vital breath/spirit has been suffocated in the crowd of eternal life beliefs" (lines 30–31; my trans.) evoke an image of radical fragmentation and spiritual asphyxiation. The phrase "crowd of eternal life beliefs" functions as a critique of both traditional religious dogma and the modern consumerist illusion of permanence. The assertion that "No route leads straight like a main road to the life truth" (line 32; my trans.) signals the absence of a clear ethical or existential orientation. Instead, the speaker confronts "These complications of questions – This vehement setting upon and worrying about/ the problems day and night" (lines 33–35; my trans.), suggesting a condition of unrelieved anxiety and confusion.

The poem also laments the erosion of human solidarity. The lines "Nobody shares or lends his/her breath of competitive life for the sake of spreading smiles on the faces of others/ Nobody tries to support the fallen humanity by their unselfish greetings" (lines 36–38; my trans.) portray a social world governed by competition rather than care. This movement culminates in a deeply pessimistic vision: "I could see the gradual extinction of compassion in the hearts of human beings/ Alas! What happened to our hearts?" (lines 39–40; my trans.). The speaker then explicitly identifies the Buddhist coordinates of this moral decline: "Did

Trishna (craving) handicap the leg of compassion?/ Hatred wore the dark black shade of sickness over nobility/ And the marsh of deceit has increased at each step" (lines 41-43; my trans.).

The poem thus diagnoses *trishna* (craving)—the cause of *dukkha* (suffering) in the Second Noble Truth—as the force that paralyzes *karuna* (compassion). *Trishna* (craving), hatred (*dvesha*), and deceit (*moha*)—the three poisons—are translated into the terms of neoliberal competition, in which "competitive life" supplants any notion of a shared, collective breath. This critique resonates with the socio-economic dynamics of post-liberalization India, marked by rising inequality, intensifying communal hatred, and the commodification of spirituality. Within this context, Sharankumar Limbale underscores the necessity of formulating a distinct aesthetics for Dalit literature. He argues that "Dalit literature cannot be fully appraised without knowledge of the Dalit writers' experience, their anger, rejection and rebellion vis-à-vis traditional values, as well as the social context" (Limbale). Pimpalpure's poem extends this critical project to what might be termed neoliberal spiritual untouchability, in which compassion becomes "extinct" in hearts that were once capable of genuine, unselfish support.

### 3. Symbolic Anatomy: The Womb, Crucifix and Dialectic of Decay and Renewal

The refrain—"I am carrying on my shoulder this gigantic crucifix of your pain! I am in search of a womb, which yearns for the birth of my new creativity" (lines 29, 49, 76, 93; my trans.)—functions as the poem's structural heartbeat. The "crucifix" conjoins Christian soteriology (Christ bearing the Cross) with the Bodhisattva's vow to shoulder *dukkha* until all beings are liberated. This syncretic image, characteristic of Ambedkarite poetry, universalises suffering while simultaneously grounding it in a specifically Buddhist ethic of compassion.

The "womb" develops symbolically over the course of the poem: it is initially personal (aligned with the Earth's craving) and subsequently becomes collective (signifying humanity's ethical receptivity). This generative symbol is opposed by a series of negative images. "An owl has confined himself in a space (hollowness) of darkness" (line 50; my trans.) signifies stagnation and ignorance, while "A group of selfish vultures belching after having eaten the embryo of creativity" (line 73; my trans.) allegorises predatory capitalism that devours creative potential. Nonetheless, the text insists on the persistence of renewal: "The cold season has accepted the loss of leaves of dreams / Now nobody can say that spring should never bloom / flourish" (lines 53-54; my trans.). Even "the life of subjection" retains the "right to germinate" (line 56; my trans.). Nature's cyclical processes thereby affirm ongoing possibility: "Life and death are alike; the rise and end of pain on the board of nature [are] continuous" (line 61; my trans.).

Within this framework, life is figured as a battlefield: "Life has to pierce the craving-circle, a whirlwind of happiness and misery" (line 64; my trans.); "The murderous animals have encircled the lifeless lives / The conspiracies are woven in the heart like the movement of [a] poisonous snake" (lines 68-69; my trans.). The assertion that "Nobody can avoid the storm, even though an ostrich thrusts its neck in the sand" (line 75; my trans.) explicitly rejects denial and escapism. Collectively, these images construct a dialectic between forces of domination—craving, vultures, hypocrisy—and forces of potential—spring, germination, light. Ultimately, the womb figures the awakened Sangha, or an ethically transformed society, prepared for "new creativity": Dhammic, liberatory art and action.

#### 4. Navayana Ethics: Character, Precepts, Eightfold Path and the Call to Awaken

Navayana, literally meaning “new vehicle,” denotes B. R. Ambedkar’s reinterpretation of Buddhism. Navayana rejects a range of practices and doctrines traditionally regarded as foundational to Buddhist traditions, including monastic renunciation, karma, rebirth in the afterlife, samsara, meditation, enlightenment, and even the Four Noble Truths. It offers a radical redefinition of Buddhism, revising the Buddha’s teaching as a discourse on class struggle and social equality (navayan.org).

The poem’s ethical core invokes central Navayana tenets. The line “I am green life-fluid of principles which can be found leaves after leaves of Panchshila (Path of Purity)” (line 44; my trans.) figures the five precepts as a living sap. The assertion “I am life-centred speed, which could be understood even by ignorant base man” (line 45; my trans.) works to democratize access to wisdom. The imperative “Awake and arise!—wipe out your eyes with your own lap!” (line 47; my trans.) echoes the Buddha’s final exhortation, *appamadena sampadetha* (“strive with diligence”). According to Rahula, in his last message to the bhikkhus the Buddha declares: “Transient are conditioned things. Try to accomplish your aim with diligence.”

The poem also foregrounds character (*śīla*). Character is exalted in the lines: “The character has to be observed rigidly and heedfully like carrying burning light in the storm./ The flowers have no meaning without sweet fragrance!/ Likewise without character life is meaningless” (lines 85–87; my trans.). The subsequent lines sustain this emphasis: “The tenderness of character should not shake/ like the slipping off of dewdrops.../ like the tight grip of amputated hand on weapon in the battle of truth” (lines 88–89; my trans.). The claim that “The layman upasaka with sterling character can be respected and worshipped like an arhat/ ascetic” (line 90; my trans.) exemplifies a

characteristically Navayana levelling of religious hierarchy.

Core doctrinal elements are explicitly named. The Noble Eightfold Path appears in the line: “I have hung on the walls of every direction, the long clothes of Samma (right) life’s Arya Ashtangik Marga (Path of righteousness)” (line 77; my trans.). The *pāramitās* (Perfections) are imagined as “street lamps... on the life street” (line 91; my trans.), illuminating everyday existence. In the perceived absence of genuine devotion, “self-lit lamps in the Vihara of life have quenched” (line 81; my trans.), and “birthday celebration of hypocrites sacrificed also weighed with money” (line 82; my trans.), thereby critiquing ritualistic and commodified forms of religion.

The poem articulates an ethic of struggle against craving. It insists that “Life is not an easy agreement.../ Life is not a complicated inner struggle.../ Life has to pierce the craving-circle” (lines 62–64; my trans.). This battlefield ethos culminates in a call for militant compassion: “Arise! Don’t burn yourself with sigh in the everlasting heat” (line 78; my trans.). The speaker assumes the burden of suffering so that humanity may assume the generative role of the womb of transformation.

#### Conclusion

“I am in Search of a Womb for My New Creativity” may be read as a significant contribution to Navayana Buddhist poetics, articulating a complex reconfiguration of Buddhist symbols and ethical imperatives. The poem presents the Buddha as simultaneously diffused and demanding, impermanent yet enduring, a bearer of suffering who also functions as an awakener of critical consciousness. Pimpalpure’s poetics rejects notions of passive rebirth in favour of what may be termed active ethical germination, foregrounding agency, responsibility, and social transformation. The “gigantic crucifix of pain” is placed not on an isolated individual but upon collective shoulders, thereby underscoring the

shared nature of oppression as well as the communal potential for liberation. The metaphorical womb is figured as a moral and spiritual site, awaiting subjects prepared to embody sila, Panchshila, Arya Ashtangik Marga, and the Paramitas. Situated in an era marked by constrained life-breath, predatory greed, and the eclipse of emancipatory hope, the poem's imperative—"Awake and arise!"—assumes the force of an ethical summons. Only under such awakened conditions can "new creativity," understood here as Dhammic, compassionate, and liberatory praxis, genuinely emerge and flourish. The reference to Ambedkar's choice of Nagpur for the historic mass conversion further situates the poem within an Ambedkarite Navayana lineage. Pimpalpure, whose life and work are firmly rooted in this geographical and ideological terrain, thus reminds readers that the Dhamma's journey is not a completed historical episode but an ongoing, dynamic process of socio-moral transformation.

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