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## **BUDDHISM : ITS RISE AND FALL IN INDIA IN CONFRONTATION WITH HINDUISM**

### **Introduction**

Generally speaking Buddhism has a fascinating history of give-and-take with the other religions and cultures. Christianity and Buddhism after a small beginning spread rapidly, one to the West and the other to the East. Christianity spread to the West rather imposing itself on others, by trying either to destroy or replace other religions and cultures, while Buddhism spread to the East by enriching other religions and cultures, and by being enriched by them. Wherever it went, nobly assimilating the religions and cultural insights of that place, Buddhism took a new form, and gently inspired the local religions and cultures to imbibe the Buddhist spirit. The result is that just as by the influence of Christianity the Western culture has become a basically Christian one, so by the influence of Buddhism the Eastern culture has become a basically Buddhist one. All the same there is one important difference indeed: while the previously existing cultures and religions in the West simply gave way to Christianity, and the latter took their place, in the East the encounter of Buddhism with the other religions and cultures resulted in a creative transformation of Buddhism itself as well as of those others. Buddhism, not insisting on uniformity, easily took on different forms in accordance with the religious and cultural ethos of the different regions, while the original religions and cultures of those places allowed themselves to be influenced by the Buddhist ethos. This is the story of the different forms of Buddhism in Tibet, China, Japan, Burma, Sri Lanka, India and so on. While all of them retain the basically Buddhist perception of life, they also differ considerably from one another, having transformed in accordance with the particular ethos of each of those countries.

In more recent times Buddhism has started smoothly provoking the Western conscience too. On the one hand there are many Westerners coming to the East in search of the Buddhist spirituality, or rather the Buddhist perception. On the other hand, however,

Buddhism has long started making its presence felt in the West especially through its centres of meditation. It seems, that a dialogue between the contemplative spirit of Buddhism and the consumeristic spirit of the West, between the persuasive approach of Buddhism and the aggressive approach of the West, is under way. If this dialogue is allowed to gain momentum and to go on, there is the hope that eventually both the partners will benefit, as a result of which there may arise a new form of Buddhism in the context of the Western ethos, and a new Western culture inspired by the Buddhist perception.

The story of Buddhism in India, however, is slightly different. Originally it appeared as a creative criticism of Hinduism, and as such it was well accepted. Very soon it became a separate 'religion'. But in the course of time it virtually disappeared from the Indian scene, although in the mean time it did succeed in leaving its impressions deep on the Indian mind. All these happened mostly in its confrontation with Hinduism, which is specifically the theme of this article. Here I would like to suggest possible answers to certain questions. First of all, what was it that made the appearance of Buddhism so forceful and relevant? Secondly, how can we account for the rapid spreading of Buddhism even during the life time of its founder? Thirdly, what caused the virtual disappearance of Buddhism from India, its birth place? Fourthly, what is it that appeals to the contemporary man in Buddhism? Fifthly, and finally, what is the universally acclaimed contribution of Buddhism to the world culture and civilization?

### **A Creative Criticism**

It is generally agreed that Buddhism arose as a popular reaction to Brahmanism which had become an oppressive institution rather than a saving religion. It was a time when the Brahmin priests dictated every detail of one's every day life. They presented religion as a system of complicated rituals and sacrifices. These rituals and sacrifices were so elaborate and expensive that the ordinary people could hardly afford them. For them such rituals and sacrifices meant financial liabilities rather than sources of spiritual consolation. Nor did the intellectuals find any satisfaction in the Brahmanic rituals and sacrifices. For, those rituals and sacrifices were presented with

so little logical explanations, and with so much of dogmatic assertions. Thus the Brahmanic religion, that is, the Hinduism of that time, with its over-emphasis on ritualism and the exaggerated claim for priestly superiority, was so inadequate to meet the needs and religious sentiments of the people that a different sort of religion was urgently called for. Therefore, there is no wonder that Buddhism was readily welcomed by the people. It was rather natural that Gautama who came forward challenging the value of external rites and ceremonies, and the superiority of the Brahmanic caste, was accorded a prompt welcome by the people. However, that a religion gets degenerated from time to time is not unusual in the history of religions. Take for example, the state of Jewish religion at the time of Christ. It had long lost its pristine simplicity and religiosity, to say the least. Instead, it was reduced to a system of meaningless customs and ceremonies, rituals and sacrifices. The message of Christ for the most part was to reform the Jewish religion and thus to restore it to its original purity and sublimity. It may be then said that Gautama had a similar role with reference to the Hinduism of his time.

Now to return once again to the origin of Buddhism, it was a time when the society was already classified into different castes. Moreover, the Brahmins were very much in favour of caste distinctions and caste discriminations. The Brahmins claimed superiority over all others for the simple reason that they were born Brahmins. Consequently, they looked down upon the other sections in the society. For them the merits or demerits of an individual were to be decided mostly on the basis of his birth in this or that caste. Such a social system offered little consolation to the vast majority of the people belonging to the lower castes. Therefore, it was again natural for them to welcome Gautama who preached a religion which envisaged a society without caste distinctions and discriminations. For him one's merits and demerits rested not on the caste into which one is born, but on one's own actions. Referring to the Brahmin claim for superiority over others by reason of the nobility of caste, he said: "No Brahmin is such by birth; no outcaste is such by birth; an outcaste is such by deeds, and a Brahmin is such by deeds." Gautama admitted to his *samgha* people from all castes and walks of life, and treated them all on an equal footing. Similarly he

severely criticised the Brahmanic sacrifices on economic, social and moral grounds. He would not subscribe to the traditional faith in the efficacy of sacrifice. In the place of the expensive Brahmanic sacrifices he suggested other simpler and more meaningful forms of sacrifices such as acts of charity, mercy and self-control. This new way of looking at class distinctions and religious acts must have impressed the people at large, and that accounts greatly for the wide acceptance of Buddhism in a short time from its beginning. To the ordinary people it appeared as a liberating movement to which they have been looking forward to.

Even later on, we find this particular feature of Buddhism attracting so many to Buddhism. A classical example is the mass conversion to Buddhism under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar beginning in 1935. This was the year when, at the Yeola Conference, the 'untouchables' under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar, resolved to leave Hinduism and to join some other religion which would give them social and religious equality. In accordance with that resolution, in 1956 Ambedkar publicly accepted Buddhism at a ceremony held at Nagpur, and since then at least three and a half million 'untouchables' have followed him. What did make Ambedkar and his followers choose Buddhism rather than any other religion? The Yeola conference which decided that the 'untouchables' should quit Hinduism, did not specify which particular religion they should eventually accept in its place. It was clear that, what Ambedkar and his followers were searching for, for more than twenty years, was freedom from the oppressive structures of Hinduism. It was the liberating character of Gautama's teaching that appealed to them. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru once remarked: "Buddhism was a revolt against caste, priestcraft and ritualism."

### **A Prophetic Urge**

Once set in motion Buddhism started spreading at an amazingly rapid pace. Within less than half a century it was well established in central India, with thousands of members coming from all walks of life, and different social strata. One may ask what were the factors responsible for the growth of Buddhism so fast. I may point out two of them.

First of all, it was the Buddha's own impressive personality and charismatic leadership that won so many people over to the new religion. He was a convinced missionary and an efficient leader, to say the least. Yes, above all he was a man of conviction and determination. He acted on his own, and communicated a message of his own, and that too with a sense of urgency. He had an experience, an inner vision, of *dharma*, which urged him to launch a missionary movement on its behalf. He had the confidence, too, like any other missionary, that the message he carried, was really a serious one, and that its acceptance alone would liberate the mankind. It is said that he was first uncertain about whether the *dharma* he had discovered could ever be communicated to others. He found mankind so intent on its attachments and so engrossed in sensual pleasures that he thought his message would be too deep for it to perceive, too difficult to see, and too hard to understand. Hence, as the tradition has it, he had nearly decided against attempting to convey his experience to the world. Brahma is then said to have appeared to him, pleading with him to teach the new doctrine to mankind. Brahma is said to have urged that if Gautama refrained from teaching his doctrine, the whole world would be lost. This legend may be considered an invention of the Buddha's disciples who thereby tried to claim superiority for the new wisdom over the Brahmanic teaching. But it certainly indicates the Buddha's conviction that he possessed an insight which alone could save the world, and the sense of urgency with which he preached his doctrine.

### First Encounter

What is more, Gautama spoke with the authority and force of a truth-bearer. It was said about Christ that he taught not like the scribes, but as one having authority. A similar claim for authority was evident in the way Gautama approached his first audience at Sarnath. He almost demanded to be heard, and forced his message on his hearers. The audience consisted of the five monks who had long left Gautama accusing him of going lax in his ascetical practices. Now seeing the same Gautama coming back to them, they naturally did not feel like taking notice of him, still less like listening to him. Instead, they were resolved to treat him with scorn and contempt. But as he came closer they could not resist the force of his "awakened" personality, so that as if prompted by an inner voice they greeted him

and showed signs of respect due to a fellow monk. They addressed him by name and by the title friend. But to their surprise, Gautama protested at this point. He refused to be called a friend and treated as a fellowmonk. He said: "Monks, you should not any longer call me by name, nor treat me like a friend, for now I am an *arhat*, a *ta-thāgata*, a fully enlightened one. I shall teach you the *dharma*. If you accept it, you too will attain enlightenment". The monks found it difficult to believe that Gautama, whom they knew to have been leading a very relaxed sort of ascetical life, had attained enlightenment. Nevertheless, they could not fail to note the confidence with which he preached, and they accepted his teachings and leadership.

### The Elite, Political and Economic Factors

From then onwards Buddha showed himself as a charismatic teacher and an efficient organizer. His message was addressed first to the most influential elements in the society. After the five Brahmin monks, his first convert was Yasa, son of a the richest man in Banaras, next Yasa's parents and rich friends, and then fifty influential citizens of Banaras. Once Buddha was able to establish his disciples as a significant group in the city of Banaras, the most prestigious centre of learning and worship of that time, he sent missionaries to various parts of the country to preach the *dharma*. He instructed them to travel from place to place to spread the new doctrine both by word and example "for the sake of the peace and happiness of the world." They were asked to go not in groups but individually so as to reach as many people as possible.

Buddha himself turned to the elite of the society and went to Rajagriha, the capital city of Magadha, on the way converting thirty young couples. In Rajagriha he converted the king Bimbisara and three influential Hindu teachers Mahakasyapa, Sūta and Sariputra along with their students numbering about two hundred and fifty. In a short time, Buddhism became so strong in the capital city that during Buddha's life-time there arose eighteen large Buddhist monasteries in Rajagriha.

Another important factor that helped the fast growth of Buddhism was the patronage of royal families and of the rich merchants, as has been already hinted. That is, Gautama's intimate connection with royal families and rich merchants of that time definitely played a

crucial role in the spread of his teaching in so short a period of time. Coming from noble or probably a royal family he had easy access to the higher social circles. It should be noted that his public life as a missionary was confined to some of the big cities of those times: Banaras, Rajagriha, Sravasti, and Kapilavastu. The first Buddhist community was established in Banaras, the intellectual and religious metropolis of northern India. In Rajagriha Gautama received the patronage of king Bimbisara, who ever since remained his firm supporter and friend. Many of Gautama's discourses are connected with that capital city. It was at Sravasti, the capital of Kosala, that he spent most of his missionary life, and he made it the headquarters of his Order. He is said to have delivered about 1300 of his discourses there. Various sources indicate that Buddhism was established also in Saketa, Vaisali, Kosambi and Ujjain, all of them situated along the middle reach of the river Ganges.

In the meantime Gautama kept visiting his home city, Kapilavastu, where he converted many from the Sakyas clan including his father Suddhodana, his wife Yasodhara, his cousins Ananda, Anurudha and Devadatta, his son Rahula and the latter's half-brother Nanda.

That Gautama found many supporters from the merchant community of his time was still another factor that made for the rapid spread of his teaching. For example, it was in large part due to the efforts of the rich merchant Sudatta that Buddhism got a start in Sravasti. A native of Sravasti he met Gautama at Rajagriha, and while returning home helped him construct Jatavana monastery, the first of the Buddhist *vihāras*. Purua was another wealthy merchant who embraced Buddhism. He was from Western India and came to know Buddhism through some of his fellow merchants who had already accepted the new religion. Once a Buddhist he dedicated himself to the spreading of the new wisdom. As a business man he knew how to read the minds of the people and how to make the sermons suit to his audience. On account of the great impression he made on the hearers he was acclaimed "the foremost in oratory and preaching." What attracted the merchants most to Buddhism was perhaps the greater freedom of movement it permitted among people of different classes and religions.

Even in the later history of Buddhism royal patronage has played a crucial role. A classical illustration of it is the history of Buddhism

under the reign of the emperor Ashoka, which began in 270 B.C. The biggest missionary expansion after the time of Gautama took place under the emperor Ashoka. Particularly bent on promoting peace and moral discipline among his subjects, Ashoka found the Buddhist principles of non-violence and compassion most appealing. He seems to have been more interested in Buddhist principles than in Buddhism itself. He favoured Buddhism because he knew that it would make him a better king, and his subjects happy and peace-loving. He wanted to be first of all an ideal king, not a Buddhist monk. He turned out to be a staunch supporter of Buddhist missionaries. He convened the third Buddhist council at Pataliputra, which determined the Pali canon of the scripture. The same council also decided to send missionaries to other countries. From then on Ashoka started on his *dharma-vijaya*, 'conquest through morality,' by sending Buddhist missionaries to various countries. The most important of such missions was the one to Sri Lanka, led by Mahindra, Ashoka's son. The king of Sri Lanka, Devanampiya Tissa, welcomed the missionaries, and himself adopted Buddhism. Ever since Buddhism has remained the strongest religion of that island, and there too it was the royal patronage that facilitated the development of Buddhism. Ashoka is said to have sent missionaries to the West as far as Macedonia, Syria and Cyrene, and to the East as far as Malaya and Sumatra.

### **The Decline of Buddhism in India**

However, paradoxically enough, in India Buddhism has been on the decline from as early as the first centuries of the Christian era. The Buddhists who carried their faith from the Indian subcontinent beyond the mountains and seas profoundly effected the destiny of all East Asian cultures. But in India itself Buddhism slowly diminished, save in some areas along the foothills of the Himalayan ranges in the areas abutting on Tibet. In India Buddhism in all its forms in the course of the first millenium of this era, was pressed back step by step and finally was almost exterminated. Today the Buddhists in India form only a small minority of the population of the country. It may be interesting, therefore, to look into the reasons for the decline of Buddhism in India, its birth place. Such reasons are rather complex. I shall single out a few of them.



### 1. *Lack of a Lay Community*

The basic reason why Buddhism did not take deep root in the Indian soil seems to be the fact that it did not cater to the religious sentiments of ordinary man. Buddhism from the very beginning seemed to have been a community of monks. To be a Buddhist meant basically to be a monk. Similarly, the moral code of Buddhism too is meant for the monks. Therefore, only the elite and recluses could normally afford to be a Buddhist. The other sections of the population were virtually outside the provisions of Buddhism. The householders and the lay people found it beyond their reach. They were permitted to affiliate themselves to the Buddhist community only by supporting the monks economically, and by offering alms to the monks. Even so they would be considered only as third rate members of the Buddhist fold. The acts of charity towards the monks, such as alms-giving, would not be considered as sufficient by themselves for one to attain to the Buddhist perfection called *nirvāṇa*. For attaining *nirvāṇa* they had eventually to embrace the monastic life. Thus, in short, Buddhism did not at all provide for a lay spirituality. Along with that, Buddhism seriously failed to develop the popular forms of worship and rituals, which alone would satisfy the religious needs of an ordinary devotee. In short, the emotional aspect of religion, namely the need to worship a deity in love and trust, and to have the surety of being protected and cared for by a personal God, was not recognised by Buddhism. For these reasons, Buddhism appealed very little to the ordinary men and women of India, or it disappointed those who entered it from the lay section of the population.

### 2. *The Blurred Identity*

Along with that, Buddhism in its later form, called Mahayana, became increasingly like the Hinduism surrounding it, and the revival of the latter in the early medieval period meant that Buddhism so lost its distinctiveness that it failed to maintain a separate identity in India. For example, Buddhism in its original form had dismissed the idea of a permanent soul and thus distinguished itself from Hinduism for which such a soul called *ātman* was a central teaching. But the Mahayana Buddhism introduced the concept of an *ālayavijñāna*, which for all practical purposes meant a recognition of the Hindu

concept of a permanent soul. Even otherwise from the very beginning the two religions, Hinduism and Buddhism, had so many concepts and terms in common that a casual reader was likely to miss the identity of each of them separately. For example the doctrines of *karma* and *punar-Janma*, which were basic to Hinduism, were accepted also by the Buddhists as the central explanations of man's life on earth. Hinduism and Buddhism differed with reference to these two doctrines only in the interpretations of them. Therefore, a casual observer would easily miss the respective distinctiveness of Buddhism and Hinduism. Now in the Mahayana form of Buddhism even the theoretical distinctions between Hinduism and Buddhism were blurred so that the Buddhist claim for being a separate religion was hardly justifiable. Moreover the Buddhist techniques of meditation did not differ very much from those of the Yoga system of Hinduism. These and similar points made Buddhism sound very much like Hinduism, and for that matter many perhaps did not find much point in becoming a Buddhist rather than remain a Hindu.

Yet another decisive factor that arrested the growth of Buddhism in the subcontinent of India was the Muslim invasion of the country that began in the 11th century A. D. It resulted in the destruction of the Buddhist monasteries and the dispersal of the monks: since demise was the deathblow of the faith.

### **The Universal Appeal of Buddhism**

Although Buddhism found little favour with the people of India, it has had always an universal appeal, and especially nowadays it is becoming increasingly popular in the West. Satiated with the material affluence of the Western countries, the people there are, as it were, looking towards Buddhism both as a liberating ideology and a special way of life for gaining spiritual liberation from the rat race for material gains. The Buddhist method of meditation, especially the Zen, is becoming more and more popular among the youth. Recently Buddhism has also caught the attention of great many scholars engaged in research into the religious experience of mankind. In short, Buddhism seems to be playing an important and decisive role in shaping the world culture of today. What is it that makes Buddhism so universally appealing? To my mind it is its humanism and the consequent universality.

Buddhism in its original inspiration is fully a humanistic ideology rather than a religious one. If religion essentially includes explicit reference to a personal God, Buddhism is none, nor did Gautama claim to suggest an alternative to the Brahmanic religion. We have already seen how he carefully dismissed the exaggerations and abuses of Brahmanism, namely its over-emphasis on ritualism and the exaggerated claim for priestly superiority. But a closer look at his teaching will reveal that it has hardly any place for a personal God whom the devotee can worship in love and trust. All that he did was to analyse the human situation, to diagnose the illness of man, to investigate into its cause, and finally to prescribe a remedy for it. His teaching is summarily known as the four noble truths: first, all that man experience in this life is basically suffering; secondly, this suffering has a cause—namely desire; thirdly, the eradication of desire will result in the final liberation from *saṃsāra*, namely *nirvāṇa*; and fourthly, the way of eradication of desire. Then the Buddha elaborates the way. It consists of eight steps or elements: right view, right resolution, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Following the path of these eight disciplines will definitely lead one to the enlightenment called *nirvāṇa*. So much is the essential teaching of the Buddha. It may be noted that it does not make a reference to God, nor to worship, nor to priesthood. That means, the teaching of the Buddha has nothing specifically religious about it. He is rather making an analysis of the human psyche, and suggesting a remedy for the illness of man. The remedy he suggests is basically a psychotherapy rather than a religious commitment. Even the Zen, to which I referred a while ago, is not particularly a religious practice. It at best involves certain techniques of gaining mental concentration, mental power and mental peace. To use such mental concentration, mental power and mental peace for religious purposes or otherwise is upto the individual. Thus Buddhism is humanistic in its approach to the problems of life, and for that matter is also universal in the sense that everybody irrespective of his religious convictions can be a Buddhist, and can benefit from the treatment it offers for the human suffering. It is this secularity, universality and the consequent novelty of approach that attracts so many to Buddhism.

I am inclined to imagine that the specific contribution of Buddhism to the world culture and civilisation is its detailed and expert analysis of the human psyche. Psychology and psychoanalysis of today owe a

great deal to Buddhism. The psychoanalysts like C. G. Jung have acknowledged their indebtedness to Buddhism. Their analysis of the human psyche into different strata such as the unconscious and the conscious, for example, has been inspired by the Buddhist analysis of the same.

As a final remark I must make one more point. I have said that Buddhism in its original form is not a religion. However, one should not overlook the possibilities Buddhism has left open for one's religious experience. For example, by distinguishing *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* as the temporal and transcendental realms of existence, Buddhism has kept its teaching open to religious interpretations and metaphysical speculations. And in fact, as I have mentioned above, a later form of Buddhism, namely the Mahayana, has built up an elaborate system of religion and philosophy as if it were an explicitation of the original teaching of the Buddha. For them Buddhism is essentially a religion which accepts the Buddha as the Supreme Being. Some may consider it a degenerated form of Buddhism, and a distorted version of the Buddha's teaching, while others consider it an explicitation of the original Buddhism.