

Buddhism and Its Impact on Indian Society

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Introduction

Religion is a matter of faith. It is a faith in supernatural or superhuman forces. It considers some acts as righteous and sacred and endorses such acts. It deems other acts as impious and profane and condemns such acts. Behaving in accordance with the religious laws is virtuous; going against them is sacrilegious. The virtuous acts are believed to bring man good results, on the other hand the profane acts result in calamity. The concept of heaven and hell are intertwined around the sacred and profane acts. Man, the social animal, is also a religious or spiritual being. Religion is a major concern of man. It is one of the earliest and the profoundest interests of the human beings. It is universal, permanent, pervasive and perpetual interests of man. We as human beings not have only biological, economic and social needs, but also, what is termed as a religious need. Therefore, the Biblical saying—“Man cannot live by bread alone.” Religion is not a phenomenon of recent origin. Its beginning is mysterious. It is timeless. But, it is found in all the societies, primitive and modern. Religion is not only the most persuasive force of social control, but also the most productive guide of human behavior. It has influenced and conditioned economic endeavors, political movements, property dealings, educational tasks, ideological fervors, scientific inventions and artistic developments. It is closely affiliated with morality and has detailed rules of conduct. Furthermore, the world religions—Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism and Islam—are truly centers of elaborate cultural systems that have influenced all societies/nations for centuries.

India occupies a distinctive place in the world community. It is the country of the followers of all the major religious ideologies of the world viz; Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Zoroastrianism. All of these influence India society in varying degrees. This paper shall, however, be confined to the impact of Buddhism in various spheres of life of Indian society. It is commonly acknowledged that Buddhism is essentially an offshoot

from ancient Hinduism. In terms of historical antiquity Buddhism is a little later development than Jainism for Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, was an older contemporary of Buddha. Mahavira's period is generally accepted to be between 599-527 BC and Buddha's is 560-480. Buddhism is one of the most important religions in the world. It originated in India during 6th century BC. Buddhism emerged as a challenge to the Brahmanical supremacy and the caste inequality. It declared that caste or Varna should not come into the way of person's seeking to obtain 'Nirvana'. In Buddhism all the monks are equal and they have simple philosophy. As a result many Hindus accepted Buddhism. It has spread its influence both inside and outside the borders of India. Buddhism introduced organization by accepting one order or one leader. This influenced the Hindu thinkers and they started establishing organizations. In contemporary India we can see a large number of organizations. Buddhism has invariably been a very simple and basic religion. There were no complicated rituals like Hinduism. Therefore, the Indian society embraced this type of simple religion and transmitted it to their liking.

Gautama Buddha—Founder of Buddhism

Buddhism was founded by Gautama Buddha (563-483 B.C.). He was born in Lumbini, now in modern day Nepal. His original name was Siddhartha. His father was Suddhodana, the ruler of Kapilavastu. His mother was Mahamaya of the Kosalan dynasty. Mahamaya died at child birth and Siddhartha was brought up by his step-mother PrajapatiGautami. He married his cousin Yashodhara and had a son Rahul. Siddhartha was provided with a comfortable and happy life. Yet the royal splendors did not make him content; he was moved by human miseries in the form of old age, sickness, death and disillusionment. The misery of the human life cast a deep spell on Gautama. After seeing an old man, a sick man, a corpse and an ascetic, he decided to become a wanderer. In order to find a solution to the miseries of mankind he left his wife Yashodhara and son Rahul at the age of twenty-nine and wandered from to place in ascetic garb. This event is known as the 'Great Renunciation.' Gautama spent six years as a wandering ascetic and had discussions with sages and Brahmins. Their teachings did not help him to find a solution. In order to find the truth, he resorted to rigid austerities of various kinds of self-torture. Eventually, he abandoned everything and went to Uruvela on the banks of Niranjana River and sat under a pipal tree (Bodhi Tree) and mediated. He attained the 'supreme knowledge' (Enlightenment) on the forty-ninth day of his continuous meditation. The place where he got

enlightenment is known as Bodh Gaya. From there on he came to be known as the Buddha (the enlightened one). He gave his first sermon at Sarnath (deer park) where his five former disciples had settled. To these five ascetics he preached his first sermon and called it 'Dharma Chakra Pravartana' (setting in motion the wheel of Dharma). He died at the age of eighty (483 B.C.). His last words were "all composite things decay, strive diligently."

Teachings of Buddha

Buddha did not accept the God as creator or destiny maker. He preached Anatmavada (No Athma) and AnityaVadha (nothing is eternal and everything undergoes transformation. He did not acknowledge the sanctity and supremacy of Vedas and Yagnas and repudiated the caste system. He emphasized that 'man is the maker of his own destiny.' The first sermon preached by Buddha at Sarnath contains his philosophy. His teachings were simple and conveyed to the masses in their languages i.e. Prakrit (Pali) and not in Sanskrit. The essence of his teachings are contained in the 'Four Noble Truths' and the 'Eightfold Path.

Four Noble Truths

- i. Dukkha—world is full of sorrow/sufferings.
- ii. DukkhaSanudaya—the cause of sorrow is craving/desire.
- iii. DukkhaNirodha—the suffering can be removed by destroying its cause i.e. by curbing the desire.
- iv. In order to remove suffering, one must peruse the right path. This path is the eightfold path (AshtangikaMarga) which leads to salvation (since this path avoided ritualism and self-mortification, it is also known as golden path or middle path). In order to end our sufferings Gautama Buddha advocated the Eightfold Path (Eight codes of conduct).

The Noble Eightfold Path

- i. Right Understanding (Sammaditthi)
- ii. Right Thought (Sammāsankappa)
- iii. Right Speech (Sammavaca)
- iv. Right Action (Sammakammanta)
- v. Right Livelihood (Sammaajiva)

- vi. Right Effort (Sammavayama)
- vii. Right Mindfulness (Samma sati)
- viii. Right Concentration (Sammasamadhi)

This eightfold path is considered as the middle path between extreme asceticism and self-indulgence. Buddha preached 'Nirvana,' the ultimate goal in the life of a man. By a process of elimination of desire, one can attain 'Nirvana.' He laid stress on the moral life of an individual. According to his Karma theory, the present is determined by the actions of past. The condition of man in this life depends upon his own actions. As his actions or karma are responsible for his sufferings, he can secure salvation by perfecting his own deeds. No eternal force, either God or rituals can give him salvation. Thus man becomes the maker of his own destiny.

Buddha neither accepted nor rejected the existence of God (agnosticism). He was more concerned about the individual and his action. Buddhism also did not believe in the existence of spirit. Buddha stressed the spirit of love. Love could be expressed on all living beings by following 'Ahimsa' (non-violence). Buddha preached the basic equality of all men. He had no faith in caste system. His egalitarian principles attracted deprived masses towards Buddhism. He also disapproved the supremacy of Brahmans and he laid down the concept of universal brotherhood. He condemned the practice of rituals and sacrifices, especially animal sacrifice. He rejected the authority of the Vedas and insisted that everything must be subjected to scrutiny or reason. He laid emphasis on morality. He preached his followers to lead an upright and disciplined life. He also advised them to practice Ahimsa—non-violence and not indulge in vice practices. During his life time Buddhism made rapid progress. In the fourth council conveyed during Kanishka's reign, the Sangha (established by Buddha to propagate his principles and to render services to people), separated into two; Mahayana and Hinayana sects.

Growth of Buddhism

Buddhism made phenomenal progress as a popular religion not only in India but outside India as well. There are number of factors which helped in this progress and growth. Appeal to all sections of people was one of the most important factors. Kshatriyas admired it for it challenged the Brahmanical supremacy. Traders welcomed it for non-violence and coming out in support of money lending. Shudras were attracted by its propagation of racial equality and

justice. A life of moderation based on moral values and no ritualism, attracted the common people who were fed up with complex rituals of Brahmanism. Personality and character of Buddha was a key factor in making Buddhism popular. His rational attitude towards objects appealed the mind of intellectuals. His morals and simple living touched the heart and imagination of common folk. The commitment and devotion of Buddhist missionaries was a key factor in rapid rise of Buddhism. They took the message of Buddhism to other parts of the world. It was their devotion, sacrifice and labor which made Buddhism a dominating religion in South, East and Central Asia. Buddha gave his preaching/sermons in “Pali”, the language of the common people. This came as a great relief to common man who could not follow Sanskrit. The literature was written and sermons were delivered in people’s language. Buddhist Councils were held from time to time which attempted to settle down the discords among the scholars and this helped to strengthen the unity. Patronage of rulers was yet another factor in the rise of Buddhism. A galaxy of kings like Kanishka, Harsha, Ashoka etc. adapted and supported the religion. They provided material resources, protection and help to monks, built Stupas and encouraged missionary works.

Decline of Buddhism

There are several factors which led to the decline of Buddhism. Some of them are as follows:

1. With the passage of time, the Buddhist ‘Sangha’ became corrupt. The monks/nuns and followers came to be drawn towards luxury and amusement. Receiving and saving valuable gifts like ornaments like gold and silver made them avaricious and acquisitive. They came to lead a life of indiscipline. Their example and perverted life-style could not but bring disharmony. No more the people were inclined towards Buddhism.
2. The revival of Hinduism was yet another factor which paved the way for the decline of Buddhism. Hinduism Attempted to give up the complex system of rites and rituals and make Hinduism simple and attractive. The Hindus even came to acknowledge the Buddha as a Hindu incarnation and accepted the principle of non-violence. This helped revive Hinduism and made it popular again. This took away the charm out of the flower of Buddhism. The decline of Buddhism became unavoidable.

3. Buddhism faced divisions from time to time. Division into various sects like 'Hinayana', 'Mahayana', 'Vajrayana', 'Tantrayana' and 'Sahajayana' led Buddhism to lose its originality.
4. Pali and Prakrit, the spoken language of most people of India, was the medium for the spread of the message of Buddhism. But Sanskrit replaced these at the Fourth Buddhist Council during the reign of Kaniska. When Buddhism adopted that language, few people were able to comprehend it. People refused what they could not grasp.
5. Image worship was started in Buddhism by the Mahayana followers. They started worshipping the image of the Buddha. This type of worship was a transgression of the Buddhist credo of opposing complex rites and rituals of Brahminical worship.
6. With the passage of time Buddhism came to lose royal patronage. No king, worthy of note, came forward to sponsor Buddhism after Asoka, Kaniska and Harsavardhan.
7. Emergence of the Rajputs became an important reason for the decline of Buddhism. Kings of such dynasties as Bundela, Chahamana, Chauhan, Rathore etc. were militant rulers and loved warfare. They could not tolerate the Buddhists for their message of non-violence. The Buddhists feared persecution from these Rajput rulers and fled from India. Buddhism became weaker and faced decline.

Contribution and Impact of Buddhism to Indian Culture

Buddhism has made a remarkable contribution to the political, social, religious and a cultural life of India. In social life Buddhism contributed egalitarianism. It raised voice against caste discrimination and social oppression. It helped in upliftment of women by making religion and education accessible to them. The doctrine of 'Ahimsa' (non-violence) encouraged virtues like kindness and considerations among the people. In the sphere of religion, it was against ritualism, superstitions and sacrifices. Further, it popularized idol worship. It was Mahayana followers who worshipped images of Buddha. The Hindus took over from them the idol worship. In cultural field, Buddhism enriched the architectural heritage of India through Stupas of Sanchi, Gaya, Amravati etc. Buddhist scholars made a significant contribution to the promotion of new literature in the language of the common people. Several genres like drama and poetry were enriched. Tripitakas occupy the same position as the Vedas for Hindus. The Buddhist

contribution in the field of education is immense. They universalized it and opened schools for even Shudras as well as women. In addition to this, the Buddhist missionaries who went outside India carried with them Indian language, literature and culture.

Buddhism exercised great influence in shaping the various aspects of Indian society. Its impact in socio-cultural, religious and political spheres cannot be overlooked. Buddhism developed a popular religion, without any complicated, elaborate and unintelligible rituals requiring necessarily a priestly class. This was one of the reasons for its mass appeal. The ethical code of Buddhism is also relatively simple based on charity, purity, self-sacrifice, truthfulness and control over passions. It laid great stress on love, equality and non-violence. It is an acknowledged fact that the Upanishads, too, had illustrated these virtues before the advent of Buddhism but credit goes to Buddhism for raising public morality to those heights never witnessed before. It became an article of faith for the followers of Buddhism. But more importantly Buddhism laid stress on the value that man is the architect of his own destiny, not any God or gods. There is a great element of individuality in Buddhism and it sans any elaborate idea of God.

Notwithstanding Buddhism could never dislodge Brahmanism from its high pedestal it unquestionably jolted it exhilarated institutional changes in Indian society. Rejecting the caste system and its concomitant evils, violent rituals based on animal sacrifices, pilgrimage, fasting and conservation, it propagated total equality. In the Buddhist system gods and goddesses, fatalism, previous birth and movements of planets are not believed to be accountable for man's present plight. It exhorts people to seek answers from this world. Therefore 'this worldliness' rather 'that worldliness' should be the basis of man's quest for seeking answers of the unknown. Compassion, equality between all human beings including gender equality, protection of all life forms and welfare of all tried to bind the entire society into one. Promotion of social equality and social justice helped Buddhism cross the frontiers of Indian sub-continent and become a world religion. The impact of Buddhist thought may be seen in our foreign policy, national integration, mutual cooperation, peace efforts, Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence, upliftment of weaker sections and welfare of SCs, STs and depressed classers. Since Buddhism identified ignorance as the root cause of sufferings, it laid great stress on acquisition of knowledge. Promotion of democracy and democratic values is yet another contribution of Buddhism to

Indian society. Buddhist 'sanghs' and 'maths' promoted democratic conduct and in the course of time its impact was felt in many Hindu 'maths' and religious institutions.

In the field of education Buddhism tried to make education practical, action oriented and geared towards social welfare. Most of the ancient India's varsities for instance, Taxila, Vikrampur, Nalanda, Vikramshila and others are product of Buddhism. A free search for the acquisition of knowledge in Buddhism produced such eminent scholars as Dignang, Charak, Nagarjun, Vasumitra and similar ones of highest order. The flag of independent India carries the picture of Ashoka's wheel and the national emblem has been adopted from Buddhism. Buddhism also familiarized the Indian vernaculars and thus promoted respect for different languages and dialects. Indisputably, Buddhism has exercised a profound humanizing and philanthropic influence on Indian society. Buddhism preached universal brotherhood. Asoka took deep interest to promote universal brotherhood through the propagation of Buddhism. Even he sent his own son Mahendra and daughter Sanghamitra to distant Ceylon for the spread of Buddhism. In due course of time Buddhism spread to Burma, Japan, China, Tibet, Java, Sumatra, Bali, Borneo, Champa and so on. Thus, Buddhism spread a unique feature of Indian culture abroad that is universal brotherhood. Buddhism spread in the nook and corner of India It encouraged the concept of national unity and integrity. Asoka, Kanishka and Harshavardhan became the ardent champion of nationalism and they tried to unite India under one umbrella. This was followed by the Mughals, the British and later on freedom struggle nationalists. Thus, Buddhism undoubtedly brought national unity. Last but not the least, Mahatma Gandhi also learnt the lesson of Ahimsa from Buddhism and started the struggle for freedom against the British rule by following the path of non-violence.

Conclusion

Buddhism originated in Ancient India sometime between the 6th and 4th centuries BC from where it spread into foreign countries like China, Japan, Mongolia, Burma, Tibet, Sri Lanka, and Nepal and exercised substantial impact on the culture and civilization of those countries. It made valuable and lasting contributions in the field of religion, philosophy, literature and art. Its contribution was not confined to architecture and sculpture alone. It also made valuable contribution to the art of painting. It gave us a simple, intelligible and popular religion. It immensely appealed to the people on account of its simplicity; emotional element,

easy ethical code, the use of vernacular language and the methods of teaching. One of the greatest contributions of Buddhism to India was that it promoted a sense of national feeling amongst the Indians. It laid great stress on the principle of Ahimsa which immensely affected the character of the people. It insisted on virtues like charity, purity, compassion, self-sacrifice, truthfulness, control over passions, non-injury to living creatures in thought and action etc.

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