

Buddhism— Its Contribution to Indian Culture

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The word culture has an extensive application in its sense. Culture, so far as India is concerned, is composite. Buddhism which moulded the Indian thoughts for several centuries contributed largely to Indian culture in its various aspects. The contribution which Buddhism made to the cultural advancement of India is indeed notable. The part played by the viharas (monasteries) and sangha (order) was unique in this regard. In this paper an attempt has been made to describe some of its important aspects, such as, political and social ideals, educational system and artistic development based on the aesthetic ideals acquired by the people of ancient India. We now proceed to discuss them :—

POLITICAL IDEAL

Buddha lived in the 6th century B.C. It was an age of great upsurge, intellectual and social, in many parts of the world. In India too we also notice the upheaval in the domain of political and social ideals, educational system and the like. Gautama Buddha was born in a famous Sakya clan. His father Suddhodana with his capital at Kapilavatthu was the chieftain of the clan which had the oligarchical system of government. There were other neighbouring clans, viz. the Vajjis, Licchavis, Koliyas, Videhas and the like. They had also republican organisations. Buddha was thus born and grew up among republican people.

Being disgusted with the earthly pleasures Gautama in his youth left home and adopted the life of a recluse to rescue mortal beings from the miseries of the world. After his enlightenment he started his missionary career at the age of thirty-five and continued it for forty-five years, i. e. till his Mahaparinibbana. With his sixty disciples Buddha started his religious order, known as the sangha, which contributed much to the propagation and popularity of Buddhism and

exists even today. From the Mahavagga we learn that he sent them out to different directions with the words, "Go ye, now, oh Bhikkhus, and wonder, for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, out of compassion for the world. Let not two of you go the same way. Preach the doctrine which is glorious in the beginning, middle, and end, in the spirit and in the letter, proclaim a consummate, perfect and pure life of holiness"¹ Ere long the number of his disciples had grown fairly large and he had to work out rules and regulations for the guidance of the members of the sangha (order) which are contained in the Vinayapitaka.

The sangha (order) which Buddha founded was not, of course, a new one. At and before the rise of Buddhism there were forms of communal life, but they lacked any organisation and code of rules regulating the life of the members. Buddha's credit lay in his thorough and systematic character which he gave to the sangha (order). As already observed, Buddha was born in a republican state. He was imbued with democratic ideas from his boyhood. The political constitution of the clans from which many men joined the sangha as Bhikkhus (monks) in early times was further of a republican type. One can, therefore, naturally expect Buddha's democratic ideals in the constitution of the sangha.

Here is given an outline of the noteworthy features of the constitution of the sangha to have an idea how principles of democracy worked in the sangha

PABBJA AND UPASAMPADA

There are two ceremonies prescribed for admission into the sangha. The first called Pabbajja which admits one as a novice into the sangha while the other known as the Upasampada makes one a regular member of the sangha, a bhikku. In the beginning these were done by Buddha himself with the words 'ehi bhikkhu, come

1. Caratha bikkhave carikam bahujanahitaya bahujdsukhaya lokanukampaya aithaya hitaya sukhaya devamanussanam. Ma ekana dve agamittha. Desetna bhikkhave dhammam adikalyanam majjhekalyanam pariyoosanakalyanam sattham savanjanam kevalaparipunnam parisuddham brahmacariyam pakasetha.

bhikkhu' or 'etha bhikkhave, come bhikkhus', according as the member was one or more. This completed the ordination which conferred monkhood. No other formality was necessary. He did not delegate the power of ordination to any of his monks in the beginning. Their duty was to place before Buddha the seekers after ordination. The candidates for the ordination were thus brought before his presence from different parts of the country to the place where he was staying at the time. This caused great hardship to the desiring entrants and was sometimes also found impracticable. The Sanskrit Vinaya records that one of such men, when being brought before Buddha for ordination, died on the way, and was deprived of the benefits of entering the sangha. This necessitated a modification of the original procedure "which eventually changed the whole outlook of the community of monks making its system of government democratic in every spheres". Buddha permitted his senior disciples henceforth to confer the Pabbajja and Upassampada on the candidates in the name of Trinity i. e. Buddha, Dharmma and Sangha. He thus delegated the power to his monks to admit people to his sangha. But this power of delegation to the individual monks who were Upajjhayas did not work well. Shortly after, a brahmin was denied the ordination. Buddha came to know of it and made it a rule that the entire assembly would confer the ordination at a formal meeting instead of the monks individually as hitherto before. The minimum member of monks required to constitute such an assembly was also laid down. This new procedure effected a radical change in the outlook of the sangha and did away with the privileges granted to the individual monks. It left everything to the judgement of the assembly of monks. This indeed made the opening of a new chapter as to the introduction of democratic principles in the history of Indian religious orders.

UPOSATHA

Next in importance to the ordination is the Uposatha ceremony which was introduced into the sangha at the instance of King Bimbisara. It is a ceremony in which religious discourses were held on certain days of a month for the well-being of the members of the sangha. Such practice was in vogue among other sects of ascetics

even before Buddha. It was held twice every month on the new moon and full moon days. On those days monks were to assemble at a select place and recite the Patimokkhasutta which contains 227 rules of conduct. This code of rules which takes up eight chapters enumerates different types of offences committed by the monks. All the monks living within the fixed jurisdiction of the avasa (monastery) should hold the Uposatha together. None of them could be absent. If any one failed, to join in the service due to illness or unforeseen events, he should send his consent by proxy, and in which case the consent of the absentee was as valid as that of one present personally in the service. In case of a dispute as to the date of the calculation of Uposatha ceremony—the incoming monks counting the day as the fifteenth, while the resident monks reckoning it as the fourteenth—then if the number of the incoming monks was greater, the resident monks should yield to them and vice-versa. It may be recalled that the working of the sangha was on democratic lines. Every transaction of the sangha was done on the basis of the rule by majority and that was why consent of all the monks of an avasa (monastery) was so much insisted on.

All property was communal. Every member of the sangha had an equal voice. All Sanghakammas were transacted according to the principles of democracy. Like modern public meetings at the assembly of monks a chairman was elected by the unanimous consent of those present, but the consent was made by silence. There was no recognition of rank in the sangha. Simple seniority on the relation of teacher to pupil was only recognised. No monk could give orders to another. Buddha considered himself as an elder brother who was concerned with happiness of the masses. From the Mahaparinibbanasutta we learn that he repudiated the idea of a successor to him. As already observed, all decisions were taken by majority of votes and when differences of opinions arose, the decision was postponed. It was then referred to a select committee to deal with the dispute. Sometimes votes were taken, marked sticks (salakas) were used for the purpose. Thus the system of government obtaining in the sangha was entirely democratic in nature, and the principles of democracy working first in the domain of religious institutions. It made the san-

gha invincible and, as such, it was destined to work wonders in the history of the Indian people not very long after its inception.

Lastly, this democratic ideal was further developed and materialised in the field of state administration by the Maurya emperor Asoka who was indebted for this grand and noble deal to Buddhism. His idea of Dharmavijaya was not only a missionary movement, but a 'definite imperial policy'. It indeed achieved ideal of unity and fraternity for the people of India.

SOCIAL IDEAL

Let us now discuss what effects Buddhism produced on the society :—

Buddhism brought a new outlook in the social life of ancient India. Before the rise of Buddhism there was the Varna (grade) which mainly determined the various grades in the society. According to Rhys Davids the rigid caste system that we know of today was not in vogue at the time of Buddha but was in the making then. The Pali texts speak of the division of the society into four castes, viz. Khattiya, Brahmana, Vessa and Sudda. An adequate idea about the lofty claims of the brahmins can also be gathered from them. They maintain that the brahmins 'alone form the superior class, all other classes being black, that purity resides in the Brahmanas alone and not in non-brahmanas, and that Brahmanas are Brahma's only legitimate sons, born from the mouth, offspring of his, and his heirs.' But Buddha's attitude towards the division of the society on the basis of the caste was all along antagonistic. He denounced the superiority of the brahmins on the ground of birth. The Vasala and Vasettha Suttas of the Suttanipata, the Madhura, Assalayana and Canki Suttas of the Majjhimanikaya prove the worthlessness of the castes. Buddha did away with all social distinctions between man and man and achieved social justice thereby. From the Cullavagga we find that 'just as the great rivers, such as, the Ganga, the Yammuna, the Aciravati, the Sarabhu and the Mahi, when they pour their waters into the great ocean, lose their names and origins and become the great ocean, precisely so, you monks, do these four castes the Khattiya, the Brah-

man the Vessa and Sudda when they pass, according to the ' doctrine and discipline of the Tathagata, from home to homelessness, lose their names and origins'.¹ Buddha thus stood for the equality of castes. He maintained that it was kamma (action) that determined the low and high state of a being. By birth one does not become an outcaste, by birth one does not become a brahmin.² Every living being has Kamma (action) as its master, its kinsman, its refuge.³

We also find that the equality of social position based on actions (Kamma) and not on birth so much insisted on by Buddha was also in later times emphasised upon by the saints, such as, Ramananda Caitanya, Kabira and others. There was no distinction of caste in the sangha. Buddha's disciples belonged to all strata of society. For instance, we know that Upali who was a barbar by caste occupied an important position in the sangha.

Admission to the sangha was open to men and women alike. We are told that Buddha was at first unwilling to admit women into his sangha. But at the insistence of his foster mother Mahapajapati Gotami agreed to admit women into his sangha. He did away with the religious disabilities of women. Womenhood was no bar to the attainment of Arhathood, the goal of life. A new and respectable career was open before women. This attracted a number of women who attained positions of eminence in the various spheres. The Therigatha gives us names of eminent nuns. Buddha thus raised the status and position of women in the society.

Truth (sacca) righteousness (dhamma), charity (dana), non-violence (asahasa) and the like were further the important norms which Buddha had postulated for the society.

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1. Seyyathapi, bhikkhave, ya kaci mahadnadiyo seyyathapi, Ganga, Yamuna, Aciravati Sarbhu, Mahi, ta mahasamuddam patta jahanti purimani namagottani, mahasamuddo tv va sankham gacchanti, evameva kho, bhikkave, cattarome vanna—khattiya, brahmana Vessa, sudda, te tathagatapavecite dhamavinaye agarasam anagarim pabbajjitva jahanti, purimani.
 2. Na jacca vasalo hoti, na jacca hoti brahmano, Kammana vaslo hoti, Kammana hoti bramano.
 3. Kammassakomhi kammadayado, kammayoni, kammabandhu, kammapatisarano.

EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

We have noticed before how Buddhism influenced the political and social life of India. Let us now see how it acted in the domain of education :—

The introduction, expansion and proper management of the educational system are one of the main functions of a modern state. In ancient times the Christian missionaries in Europe and the various religious orders in India planned out their own educational methods. They also received the active support and patronage of the ruling powers and the nobility in this regard. Among them the Brahminical system of education is the most ancient. It has been in vogue even today since the Vedic age. The tradition of the system of education with which we are concerned here relates to the Buddhist system of education only. It differs from the Brahmanical system in some aspects.

There is no denying the fact that in ancient India all education that was imparted could broadly be divided into religious and secular, religious education, of course, out-numbering the secular one. With the origin and development of the Buddhist sangha, came into existence the system of education which was monastic in conception. The Buddhist viharas (monasteries) were the centres of education and the monks imparted instructions on both the religious and secular matters. The history of Buddhist system of education is really the history of the Buddhist Sangha.

The viharas (monasteries) took up the teaching work not only for the monks but also for other seekers after knowledge from outside. It was, therefore, 'organised on the ideals of a residential university for the monastic members only and appeared as a day school for the laity, and its teachers were selected from those monks who were highly cultured, experienced and educated' ?

In the viharas (monasteries) various branches of knowledge were taught. But emphasis was generally on matters of religion (Dhamma) and rules of discipline (Vinaya). From the Cullavagga we

learn that those who wanted to specialise in some subjects were taught by experts of those subjects. The teachers of allied subjects were given seats close to one another. It further gives the names of subjects that were taught in the viharas (monasteries). A Jataka tells us that king Pasenadi being defeated by Ajatasattu approached the monks and learnt the method of forming battle array from them and ultimately defeated Ajatasattu. From the Milindapanha we learn that constructing and repairing of buildings and the like were also taught in the avasas (monasteries).

The viharas (monasteries), as already observed, were residential centres of learning. They came into existence first for spiritual training for the monks. But they gradually changed into great centres of learning. Later on, they turned into big universities to which flocked students far and near to gather knowledge on different subjects. Admission to them was thrown open not only to monks but also to others who had a desire to receive education therefrom. Kings, nobles and the like used to meet the cost of running these universities. Students in no way felt any inconvenience to prosecute their studies there. Teaching of various subjects was carried on uninterruptedly from morning to evening. Of them, the university of Nalanda to which flocked students from far-off countries attracts our attention most. It accommodated ten thousand pupils and one hundred teachers were there to teach them. During this period there were other universities like Vallabhi, Vikramasila, Jagaddal and Odantapuri which deserve mention here. This shows the vastness of cultural activities carried on in the domain of education by the monks of the viharas (monasteries).

Lastly, it will not be out of place to mention here that Kaviguru Rabindranath Tagore who was noted for his great love for Buddhism built up his Visvabharati on the model of the Buddhist viharas (monasteries) which were great centres of learning in those days.

BUDDHIST ART :

Buddhist art owes its origin due to the religious devotion and fervour of Buddha's followers. But it received the greatest incentive from the great Maurya emperor Asoka through whose efforts Buddhism became a popular religion in India. He did all that was possible for the propagation of Buddhism and art which reflects 'the ideas and ideals, ambitions, joys and fears of Buddhist laity'. There were other lay devotees who generously contributed to the erection of caityas, stupas and the like to express their deep veneration to Buddha. Thus the inspiration of the Buddhist art came from religion. Indeed, it also served as a valuable means for the propagation of Buddhism.

Starting from the time of emperor Asoka upto the middle of the 1st century B. C. Buddha was represented by a few symbols. We do not come across any image of Buddha. The followers of Buddha did not believe in the worship of the image then. They paid their veneration to the symbols. We thus see that a garden with trees in the midst and his mother represents his birth, a house his renunciation, the Bodhi tree his enlightenment, his first discourse to his Pancavaggiya bhikkhus by a wheel flanked by a deer and the like. These kinds of symbols are found at Sarnatha, Nalanda and Amaravati. Stupas were also erected over the relics of Buddha, specimens of which are to be found at Sarnatha and Amaravati. Next comes pictorial representation of the Jataka episodes depicting the previous lives of Buddha. In the bas-reliefs of Bharhut and Sanchi we find this kind of representation. During this period Asoka built large pillars at important places throughout India. His famous Lion Capital Pillar is indeed one of the noblest products of Buddhist art. It has been accepted as the national emblem of free India. This period also witnessed the appearance of rock-cut temples at Bhaja, Karle and Ajanta.

The first representation of Buddha in anthropomorphic form in sculptures dates from the 1st century A. D. Buddhist art received a great impetus during the reign of the Indo-Greek and Indo Scythian rulers. King Kaniska who played the part of second Asoka was a great lover of art. He patronised the artists to carve statues of Bodhisat-

tvas and Buddhas to popularise Buddhism. As a consequence, statues of Bodhisattvas and Buddhas in various postures (mudras) were produced and they were in great demand. Mathura became shortly a great centre of Buddhist art. Many Buddhist stupas, caityas, viharas were constructed during the reign of Kaniska. Here is a pertinent question about the origin of the Buddha image. Opinions differ as to its origin. Some scholars hold that the image of Buddha was first made in the Gandhara school of art while some others hold that it was the Mathura school which was responsible for the first image of Buddha. We do not like to enter into a polemic here - we keep the question open.

The Mathura art reached its apex in the Gupta period. The Gupta age was an era of art. It brought the Buddhist art of India to its highest perfection as an expression of the inner feelings of devotion and zeal of the artists.

Lastly, Buddhist art like Buddha's religion was not confined to its land of origin. Along with Buddhism it spread to the north, south and south-east of India and made its influence felt in those regions. The full flowering of Buddhist art can be noticed in the temple of Borobodhur in Java, which can be regarded as 'the architectural wonders of the world,' and 'no where in the world has the Buddha Pratima or the hand of the stone sculptor revealed the quality of spiritual beauty so characteristic of the Dharma'. The same may be said of the Buddhist monuments of Chandi Kalasan and Chandi Mendut in Java as also of the temple of Bayan in Ankor Thom (Cambodia). Thus the achievement of Buddhism in the realm of art is most significant and also unique in all respects.