

A Study of Expansion and Popularity of Religious of Mahayana Buddhism

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Abstract

The earliest religion in India was the Vedic religion that took shape and crystallized over an extremely long period of time and particular stages of that process are reflected in various Vedic writings. Vedic religion can be regarded as well-defined system, a whole complex of religious beliefs together with corresponding rites and ceremonies. It also reflected the development of Vedic society itself in the period when the first Indian states were taking shape. Buddhism emerged in the most developmental stage of the Vedic religion and both were developing abreast without exclusion.

Keywords: Popularity, Religious, Buddhism, Vedic religion, India.

1. INTRODUCTION

All scholars agree that firstly Vedic Aryan conquered the aborigines of Punjab and settled on the banks of the Indus and its tributaries. In recent years the interesting archeological findings have brought to light the concrete evidence on the Indo Aryan of the Vedic age. K. Antonova affirms that Vedic Aryan extended throughout Punjab, in the upper reaches of the Yamuna and Ganges and the valleys of these rivers. R.C. Dutt also holds that before the rise of Magadha, Brahmin was only a number of colonist tribes on the Ganges but after the rise of Magadha that brought all Northern India to the rule of a nation and Brahmanism was spread the whole north India. D.N. Jha³ gives a more detail report that after the spread of Brahmanism to Magadha, its surrounding areas such as Anga, Vanga, Berares, Kosala accepted this religion. And in subsequent centuries, Brahmanism spread to Bengal, Orissa, Assam and other provinces of western India. These places received the first rays of Vedic civilization. According to R.C. Dutt, by the end of the fourth century B.C., Bengal, Orissa and the whole western India belonged to Vaisnavism and Shaivism (two branches of Brahmanism). Gujarat was early colonized by Vaisnavism and it would appear from the legends of Krishna in the Mahabharata that the country was colonized from the banks of the Jumna by some the races, who had fought in the Great War and by the fourth century B.C., the Surashtra of Gujarat had been powerful nation of Brahmanism. Malwa too was early assimilated by Brahmanism and the kings of Ujjain were reckoned among the civilized Brahmin powers of the six century B.C.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF BRAHMANISM IN INDIAN COUNTRIES

The waves of Brahmanism continued to roll further and the Vindhya mountain was crossed. In Andhra, a great and powerful kingdom of Brahmin was founded in the country between the Nerbada and the Krishna rivers and capital of this southern empire was near modern Amaravati. And the country beyond the Krishna river received the Aryan civilization and religion. Three kingdoms (the Chalas, the Cheras and the Pandyas) had arisen in the extreme southern part of India also followed Brahmanism. R.C. Dutt holds that wherever Aryan came, they introduced cultivation, manufactures and arts. They spread the Sanskrit language, Vedic religion and rites. And they founded the school of law, religion and learning. Upto the third century B.C., the Vaisnavism and Shaivism developed in the whole country. Though R.C. Dutt holds that these new religions aimed at the image worship, rites and ceremonies but the image worship, in fact, started from the first century B.C. and it was certainly influenced by Buddhism.

Vedic Brahmanism

An important element of the Vedic religion is polytheism. According to K. Antonova, Vedic Brahmanism had no image worship and its gods and goddess are related to the phenomena of nature. In Rig Veda, the classification of

gods was made according to heaven, earth, and space. The heaven gods include Surya (the sun god), Usha (the goddess of dawn) and Varuna (the upholder of moral order). The earth gods were Agni (the god of fire) and Soma (the god of the holy intoxicating drink). The gods of space were Rudra (the god of storm), Vayu (the god of wind) and the mighty Indra (the god of thunderbolt). Brahman, Visnu, and Siva (Rudra) were the most important gods, who became trinity of Hinduism later. And many hymns and the sacrifices were offered to these gods. The Vedic people believed that by performing sacrifices, gods would send them more cattle, victory in battle, good harvest or to free them from disaster and ruin. Apart from benevolent gods, Vedic people believed in existence of evil spirits and demons such as Rakshases and Asuras. In the later Vedic age, there emerged a group of abstract divinities whose functions were vague and they were not connected with the tripartite model of the world like the previous Vedic faith. K. Antonova maintains that a characteristic feature of the Vedic beliefs was the absence of any clear individualization of gods or clear distribution of their functions.

3. IMAGE WORSHIP IN HINDUISM

The gods worshipped by Hindus are Brahman, Visnu, Siva and other gods. The god Prajapati (god of prayer) in Vedic Brahmanism is replaced by Brahman, who is considered as the creator of the world. R.C. Dutt maintains that Brahman and goddess Sarasvati, the consort of Brahman, were worshipped by Hindus. Really, the concept of Brahman's wife is not found in the Upanisads and Brahman is not the object of worship; he is only considered as the base of all existences and he had no wife. Visnu, the sun-god in the Rigveda, was appropriately chosen to designate the preserver of the world. Krishna is considered as the incarnation of Visnu and his wife Laxmi, the goddess of harvests and wealth, to be worshipped. Rudra, the thunder-storm god in Rigveda, was appropriately chosen for the destroyer of the world, who is called Siva or Mahesvara in the Upanisads. Uma, the daughter of the Himalayas, was his amiable consort and she was also called Durga, Kali or Sakti is to be worshipped. In the time of Guptas, many temples erected for Visnu and Siva, there was no temple for Brahman. Siva, the god of animal or human sacrifices in the Shaivism, was considered as a benevolent god in the Puranas-, he loves living beings as his sons and he is also the protector of man in his ordinary life. The blood sacrifices offered to Siva by the followers of the Shaivism were replaced by vegetation. This reason it seems might be disappearance of the Theravadin Buddhism, a religion of non-veg eating, from India during the Sixth century A.D. It became the main religion in Srilanka later.

4. HARMONIZATION OF BUDDHISM AND BRAHMANISM

One of the characteristics of Buddhism is harmonization with other religions. Mahayanists advocate that there should be no praising of one's own religion and decrying of other ones but on the contrary a rendering of honour to other religions for whatever reasons honour may be due to them. Mahayanists look upon all religions as the revelation from the dharmakdy and each of them tries to bring out some aspect of truth that is the all-pervading spiritual force and the supreme principle of life. So wherever Mahayanism prevailed (India, China, Korea, Japan, Mongolia, Tibet, Vietnam, etc.) the respective indigenous religions were tolerated. Especially Mahayanism never seriously opposed the Brahmanical doctrines and practices. The Brahmanism also looks upon the Buddha as an incarnation of Visnu. Mahayanists have still deified all gods and goddess of Brahmanism as Bodhisattvas who are the protectors of Dharma. The Mahayanists returned the compliment by identifying Visnu with Bodhisattva Padmapani called Avalokitesvara. The Brahmin ascetics were looked upon as the brethren of the Buddhist Sramanas. On the other hand, Brahmanism and Mahayanism have close correlation of thought and the religious practice. Specially Mahayanists not only respected the local religions and beliefs but it also took care to teach them a new aspect of life, kindness to animals and patient but they did not teach of a grim, austere, self-repressive doctrines and to open the immortal gate for all without discrimination between members of different religions.

This condemnation is completely correct because Mahayana always looks upon all living beings as the future Buddhas, the Brahmanical gods and goddess are, therefore, merely living beings and they will become Buddhas in the future lives. By this reason, Nagarjuna, a master of Indian Madhyamika school in the second century A.D., taught that the Brahmanical gods, i.e. Brahman, Visnu, Siva, Kali, Laxmi, etc had the attributes assigned to them in the Brahmanical scriptures and were proper objects of propitiation.

5. PATRONAGE OF RULERS TOWARDS BOTH BUDDHISM AND BRAHMANISM

Several rulers of India, who flourished from the first century B.C. to the sixth century A.D., took pride in following Buddhism and at the same time they patronized either Vaisnavism or Shaivism. These kings are known as the Sakas,

the Kusanas, the Satavahanas, the Salankyanas, the Ikshvakus and the Guptas. They imitated king Asoka, who had already introduced and zealously practised the policy of religious tolerance and inter religious understanding, patronized both Buddhism and Brahmanism. In the Guptas period, the rulers patronized Buddhism and Brahmanism zealously as a result both these religions had close relationship during the sixth century A.D.

King Kaniska (A.D. 78-102), one of the Kusana emperors, became a Buddhist. He particularly patronized both Mahayana and Sarvastivada in his kingdom. According to A.K. Warder, Kaniska's empire was centered on Gandhara and Kashmir with two capitals, the former was at Purusapura in the Kubha valley and the latter at Mathura in Siirasena. Kaniska supported Buddhism and tolerated other religions, these evidences were displayed on his coins in which beside the image of Buddha, the gods of Brahmanism and the gods of Greek religion are also found. D.D. Kosambi also informs that the images of Buddha and Siva appeared on the Kusanas' coins. According to him, in the Kusana empire, there was no religious discrimination, the historical interaction between Buddhism and Brahmanism could be recognized. S. Radhakrishnan affirms that Kaniska moved his centre of power from the east to the west. He is said to have built a tallest temple (more than 600 feet in height) at Purusapura. Under Kaniska's patronage, the fourth Buddhist council was held in Kashmir where the great split of Buddhism was acknowledged. Taranatha places the rise of Mahayanism during the time of Kaniska and his son Vasiska. Kaniska used Sanskrit as the state language. So Pali gave place to Sanskrit from the first century A.D.

A.K. Warder affirms that during the period of Kaniska, many missions of Mahayana and Sarvastivada were sent abroad and Buddhism came in contact with the foreigners. In the process of contact, Buddhism received new data from the native people and studied their customs and habits to adjust themselves to new life. A special feature is acknowledged here that Mahayanists did not destroy all indigenous religions but they still assimilated the gods of native religions into Bodhisattvas who protected the Buddha's Dharma. According to Warder, the indigenous support to Buddhism came mainly from the mercantile communities that were by all accounts prosperous. As a result, many stupas, monasteries, caves of Buddhism were built in native countries during the period from the first century B.C. to the sixth century A.D.

It is said that Brahmanism and Buddhism developed side by side in the time of Guptas. Among all Brahmanical sects, Vaisnavism became most popular during the period of Guptas; it spread in different parts of the country and even traveled across the sea to South east Asia. Puranic Brahmanism or Hinduism was established in the time of Guptas, it is considered as a new religious form. Buddhism had its special feature in image worship and elaborates ceremonial ritualism. The cult of the Amitabha Buddha and his world of Sikkhavati had attracted the masses. Even eminent philosopher like Vasubandhu II, the master of Dlnnaya, was attracted by the doctrine of pure-land. Beside the image worship and ceremonial forms, the practice of reciting Amitabha Buddha's name and that of Dhdranis for sacred and secular purpose were the most notable features of Mahdyanism during the period of Guptas.

Under the patronage of the Gupta rulers, Buddhism in both Sarvastivada and Mahayana continued to flourish. And North Western India and Kashmir gradually became the centres of Buddhism. Many stupas, viharas, caityas continued to be built and maintained except at old sites like Kapilavastu, Sravasti, and Gaya, which are, according to Fa Hien, appeared in desolate and ruinous states. The monasteries at Mathura and Pataliputra were active centres of Sarvastivada and Mahayana, the great university of Nalanda, founded by king Kumaragupta Mahendraditya (A.D. 415-455), became the great centre of art, literature, philosophy and Buddhist learning in Asia. The highest achievements of the Gupta sculpture are the Buddha image from Sarnath, the best contemporary paintings at Ajanta have Buddhist theme. Eighteen Puranas of Hinduism are said to be composed during the time of Guptas.

6. CONCLUSION

The present study would not be going into the details of the factors responsible for the decline of Buddhism in India, as the problem situation under investigation, as its title suggest, remains focused on emergence and growth of Buddhism (1st century B.C. to 6th century A.D.). However, a serious attempt to investigate the factors responsible for decline of Buddhism in India could be an interesting independent area of research. It would be pertinent to point out here that though Buddhism has no longer remained an active religion in practice in India, yet these is no denial the fact that one could still sense the presence of its soul in Hinduism and other related practices. Its strength as an active religious practice could be seen in the countries outside India.

7. REFERENCES

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