

# Decline of Buddhism in India and its revival in 20th Century: with special reference to Dr B R Ambedkar

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## ABSTRACT

*The historic significance of the rise of Buddhism must be realised in its proper context before the paradox of the disappearance of Buddhism from its land origin can be resolved, Buddhism was not to call to existence a new and juster social order to redress the balance of the old. Originators as a pre-eminently rational system of philosophy, Buddhism were sanctified by the intense moral earnestness and profound humanism of Buddha. Buddha never thought of himself as a prophet. He did not begin like Moses or Muhammad by repudiating the past and crying down all the gods of old as false gods. It was not for him to hold out any assurance to lead the straying flock back, under his pastorship to the promised land. Indeed, salvation was promised to none by Buddha except by one's individual effort and discipline. It can very well be questioned if a keenly introspective ethical system based on atheism, or at best a guarded form of agnosticism can be called a religion at all Buddha's professed role was that of a pioneer in a grand quest, the quest of a new spiritual goal to be attained from a novel non-personal point of view by uprooting the age old fixations on the continuity of a personal soul nourished in its beginning by the thought and moral discipline of the Upanishad and the early Vedanta. Buddhism never cut itself from the parent stock of Brahmanism, from which it has been enriched and revitalised from time to time in its long career in India. It developed in an almost organic relationship with Brahmanism. Its decay was also as natural and unperceived as the withering away of a branch that leaves its sap and its essence in the giant asvaththa tree out of which it had shot out. In spite of the lofty soarings of his spirit, the great Buddha was held fast to his most ancient moorings.*

## 1. Introduction

Buddhism arose in India, prospered in India, declined in India and disappeared from India. At one time majority of Indian perhaps were Buddhist. This was a pan-Indian religion today, Maharashtra accounts for over 85% of the total Buddhist population of the country.

Prima facie, the virtual disappearance of Buddhism from India is rather puzzling, because Buddhism possessed advantage over Hinduism. Its egalitarianism in the face of the hierarchical Hindu caste system, its use of the popular languages over the literacy exclusivism of Sanskrit, its possession of a central radiant personality in the Buddha in the face of impersonal Hindu Brahman or alternatively its crowded pantheon; its missionary disposition against the ethnic reluctance of Hinduism towards outsiders; its monastic organization against the unorganized character of Hinduism--these and other features appear to give a decisive edge over Hinduism. But finally, while the Buddhist hare romped outside India, the patient Hindu tortoise won out in India.

It has been argued that the relationship between the Buddhist church and the laity was such as accounts for the decline of Buddhism. This relationship has also been cited to explain why Jainism did not "disappear" to the same extent as Buddhism in face of Hinduism. The basic point made is that the laity was not involved by the church to any appreciable degree, so that when the monasteries died down on account of withdrawal of royal or popular patronage or were physically destroyed, as by the Muslims, Buddhism petered out. It should be

noted that as late as 15<sup>th</sup> century Theravada community existed in Kanchipuram, and Buddhist families in Bengal. It is possible that "the end of Buddhism from everyday life or to corruption and decay, as some have suggested". It is also thought that the degeneration of the Sangha was on the account of the rise of Tantrism. But Tantrism was not an exclusively Buddhist development—it also affected Hinduism. The question arises—why did Tantrism prove especially fatal to Buddhism rather than Hinduism? Then it is pointed out that the organisational solidarity of the Sangha decayed as it fragmented into innumerable sects, and that this sectarian proliferation of Buddhism accounts at least in part for decline. But then Hinduism has been even more sectarian than Buddhism.

## 2. Decline of Buddhism

Sometimes the virtual extinction of Buddhism in India is attributed to its tolerant attitude towards Hinduism. This does not seem to be entirely true. Mahayana was quite hostile to theistic Hinduism.

Sometimes the decline of Buddhism is attributed to the attracts made on it both doctrinal and philosophical. On the doctrinal side, Sankara & Kumarila are believed to have carried out a determined campaign against Buddhism. This is, however, far from well-established. Kumarila regards the Buddhist system of thought as authoritative, because it derives its inspiration from Upanishad, and hereafter allows it the merit of having curbed extreme attachment to sensuous objects. He does not seem to be shocked by its opposition to the Veda,

only he put it in the same category with the Samkhya, Yoga, Pancharatra and the Pasupati on these grounds. In the exposition of his own philosophy, Kumarila admits the validity of the Vijanavada doctrine. His respect for Buddha only stops short of the recognition of the Avatahood of Buddha.

A heavy cloud obloquies hovers round the name of Samkara. Let us look by way of antecedents to the philosophy of Gourpada, who was the spiritual grandfather of Sankara, being the guru of Govinda, who was the guru of Sankara. Gourpada's lines of thought often coincides so exactly with some aspects of Buddhist philosophy that he almost betrays himself in his protest that "it was not spoken by the Buddha". Traces of Buddhist thought, particularly of the Mahayana Schools, are so palpable in his works that there are some who believe that he was himself a Buddhist who wrote a commentary on the Madhyamik Karika, because he held Buddhism to be in perfect accord with the Upanisadic system.

Sankara shared in fall with the Buddhists their scepticism about the preconceptions of common sense and the first principles of thought; but as he was not merely negative mind, he displayed rare acuteness in positing the reality of an absolute Brahman. At the same time he fortified Hinduism against the assault of heretical sects by enrolling missionaries in its defence and organising them into corporate monastic schools under the central direction of the grand abbot of Sringeri. But the legend of his having preached and led a bloody crusade against the Buddhists cannot be sustained. In the Dasavatara stotram, he is found describing Buddha with reverence as a Yogin, seated in Padmasana in deep meditation and thereby recognising divine character of Buddha. Suresvara, the disciple of Sankara, quotes the Buddhist logician Dharmakirti, and calls him respectfully as the Sakya pungava or eminent Buddha. In the Sringeri Math, which is supposed to have been once a Buddhist site, there are pillars of distinctly Buddhist design, while in a neighbouring village, under the authority of the above monastic order, stands a Buddhist image which is still worshipped by the devotees of Sringerisvamin. Sankara's fundamental doctrine of Maya or illusion has been reproached in Padma Purana, as Buddhism in disguise because of its proximity to the phenomenalism of Buddhists, and his philosophy cannot be properly comprehended without a clear knowledge of the Madhyamik doctrine of the Buddhists. His view of Moksa closely approaches the Buddhist Nirvana, and his Nirguna Brahman corresponds largely to Nagarguna's Sunya. It is only probable that the name of Sankara, like that of Kumarila, only symbolises the dominant idea of an entire epoch, and it was after them not precisely by them, that the intrinsic value of Buddhism diminished. The fanatical excess freely ascribed to these personalities are after the fanciful absurdities of later zealots who wanted show themselves more royalist than the king himself.

The physical destruction of Buddhism wrought by the Islamic invasions in Bihar and Bengal is well documented but this was more in the nature of a coup de grace rather than a cause. Perhaps the most cited reason given for the virtual disappearance of Buddhist in India is its absorption in Hinduism. There is considerable force in this argument but it

leaves one basic question unanswered: why is it that it was Hinduism which absorbed Hinduism.

The most cogent explanation of the decline and disappearance of Buddhism in India appear to be in terms of the resilience of Hinduism. In view of the affinities between Hinduism & Buddhism, it seems pertinent to ask: what was Hinduism opposed to in Buddhism?

A cue to this may be found in what offended the Hindus most about the Buddha—in his own time. It appears that the tampering by the Buddha with the Varnasrama system was what upset the contemporary Hindus—more specially their religious leaders, the Brahmins. Given the doctrinal flexibility of Hinduism it may be safely assumed that contemporary Hindus would not have been shocked by Buddha's philosophical ideas. The most significant thing which Buddha did in the eyes of many contemporary Hindus must have been that organisational innovation—the institution of the order of monks and nuns. Not that Hindus were not familiar with the monastic institution as it evolved in the Sangha. In the eyes of contemporary Hindus Buddha's concept of the Sangha which left out the other three, at least two asramas—the grihasthas and Vanaprastha was against the law of society. Not only did the Brahmins fear that the Sangha will be socially disorienting; they also feared the economic consequences of young men going into spiritual retirement in their productive years. It appears that it was Buddha's tempering with the asrama system rather than the Varna that might have been more upsetting the contemporary Hindus. The Hindu tradition, in the post-Upanisadic period was surely familiar with ksatriya teachers. Moreover, Buddha only abolished caste among the monks—not in society in general. Besides, early Buddhists criticism of the Brahmins centres on their having fallen from the Brahmanical ideal. Hence there are good reasons for arising that the asrama that must have agitated the Hindus.

These protests however must have remained muted till the time of Asoka. Under Asoke Buddhists underwent a drastic change in status. An 'obscure' sect became a dominant religion. This has the effect of elevating the Sangha into a position of supremacy—atleast so that the Brahmanical leadership under the Varna system was also threatened.

The Hindu reaction to this crisis was a paradoxical win of opposition and assimilation. Active opposition came first; assimilation follows closely behind and after a point the processes seem to have gone on simultaneously.

This active opposition to Buddhism took the form promotion of Hinduism. The last ruler of the Maurya dynasty Brihadrata was killed by the Brahmin-commander in chief while reviewing the troops in 187 BC and this was the Hindu reaction set in motion. There is some evidences to support the view that Pusyamitra persecuted the Buddhists. Brahmanism was definitely revival by him. He celebrated two horse sacrifices. These sacrifices are regarded by some scholars as marking on early stage in the Brahmanical reaction which was fully developed five centuries later in the time of Samudra Gupta and his successors. Kalhana also observed that the successor of Asoka in Kashmir ushered in the Brahmanical

renaissance. He is even said to have inaugurated a policy of militant Saivism and to have persecuted the Buddhists. After Asoka Buddhism found major patrons in Milinda and in Kaniska. Then came Harsha. He was cordial and even partial towards Buddhism so much so that his life was threatened. The assassination attempt on him reveals the tension of the times. The same tensions are rejected in the representation of Buddhist deities trampling Hindu deities which have stylistically been placed in the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century AD. This probably represents an iconographic response on the part of Buddhism to Hindu hostility. Sasanka was very much against Buddhism. He uprooted the Bodhivriksha and burnt it. He persecuted the Buddhist monks and destroyed statues and monasteries.

The active opposition to Buddhism on the part of Hinduism began to tell. The records of the Chinese travellers shed interesting light on the changes fortunes of the religions. In the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century Fa-hsian visited India, probably during the reign of Chandragupta II, though he does not mention the king's name. He found Buddhism in a flourishing condition in Northern India. He visited Ceylon but bypassed South India. By the time Hiuen-Tsang visited India in the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century the signs of the decline of Buddhism had become apparent. The memoirs of I-tsing (634-713 A.D) seem to confirm this.

Moreover, Hinduism tried to combat Buddhism by each of its triple Neopony of Karma, Jnana and Bhakti. Kumarila tried to combat Buddhism through reviving Karma kanda, Sankara on the plane of Jnana and Ramanuja and chaitanya on the plane of Bhakti.

It was ultimately this Bhakti thrust which seems to have been most effective against Buddhism. Kumarila's effort to revive ritual petered out; Sankara's efforts to absorb Buddhist elements in Vedanta may have undercut its intellectual foundations as a separate faith but it was the devotional fervour of the Bhakti movement which seems to have finally overcome Buddhism.

The anti-Buddhist polemical thrust was maintained by Yamuna and Ramanuja and Madhva. According to Chaitanya-Charitamrita even Chaitanya worsted some Buddhists during his tour of the South.

As Buddhism declined Hindus physically took over Buddhist shrines. Such seem to have been the fate of Jagannath, The Sivalinga at Sarnath and Bodhgaya temple.

Hinduism, however, did not merely oppose Buddhism, it also assimilated it. This assimilation of Buddhism, like the opposition to Buddhism, was again carried out at the level of Karma, Jnana, and Bhakti. Its adoption on the level of Karma can be seen from the fact that the pious Brahmin in performing his morning Sandhya refers to the Buddha. On the level of Jnana, Sankara's indebtedness to Buddhism was so apparent as to invite the allegation that he was a crypto Buddhist.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, Buddhism responded to new challenges and opportunities that cut across the

regional religious and cultural patterns that characterized the Buddhist world in the pre modern period.

Buddhism returned to areas where it had previously been an important force (India is the major case in point), and it spread very rapidly into the West, where new developments took place that in turn influenced Buddhism in Asia.

The disappearance of Buddhism from the land of its birth, a gradual process that extended from the latter part of the 1st millennium AD until about 1200-1300 AD, is a phenomenon. The revival of Buddhism, a reawakening with which the name of B. R. Ambedkar is indelibly linked. Indeed, the story of modern-day Indian Buddhism generally commences with Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956. The narrative of Buddhism's revival in India can more accurately be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Buddhism's presence in India is, of course, another matter, with the landscape in many parts of the country still dotted with remains of Buddhist monasteries, Buddhist sculptural art, and other reminders of the supreme presence that Buddhism once occupied in Indian life. The hill regions of north-east India, Uttaraanchal, and Himachal Pradesh, as well as Ladakh in Jammu & Kashmir are other areas where sizable Buddhist communities are found. Japanese tourists arriving in India to take the Buddhist pilgrimage route are writing yet another chapter of the history of Indian Buddhism, as are, in more profound ways, Tibetan Buddhists. There is a sizable population of Tibetan Buddhists, over 150,000 people, in India; and the Dalai Lama heads the Tibetan government in exile at the hill station of Dharmashala. In the 12th and 13th centuries, as Buddhism was pushed further east and north, it eventually made its way to Tibet and found refuge in the mountainous retreats of that country. It is, thus, perfectly apposite that Buddhism should now have come back to India from Tibet to nourish the soil on which it once grew.

The Buddha's advent was a historical necessity for India. He revolted against ignorance, superstition and cruel acts, which were associated with religious beliefs of his time. The Buddha was a vital force to regenerate the true Brahmanic spirit which adopted a newer form to survive long and grow stronger. Thus transformation of Buddhism in India and its merger with Brahmanism was a turning point of Indian history. Transformation of Buddhism in countries outside India was also significant so far as its original character due to local geographical, ethnic and primitive cultural influences. Many non-political International and national organisations are holding conferences for International peace taking the Buddhist ideals of love and mutual service as its base. These organisations take resolutions and chalk out programmes for implementation of permanent peace, prevention of future war, liberation for depressed nations and all round welfare of human beings.

### 3. Buddhism in the twentieth century and Ambedkar

Buddhism in the twentieth century, if seriously thought of, is not only a religion, neither only a philosophy, but it is a practical inspiration for human understanding and foundation of the spirit of love, equality and true happiness. Many Buddhist

organisations of post war twentieth century are optimistic enough to prevent the possibilities of future war and establishment of permanent peace with a concrete programme of human understanding and universal welfare.

My conclusion is that the Buddha and Buddhism are the very spirit of India and cultivation of this spirit only is the solution to modern human problems—individual, national and international. Buddhism has assumed a new attitude towards humanity which is to be accepted by all for a happier and better world irrespective of religious faiths and political ideals to survive against the threats of extinction by hot or cold wars.

B.R Ambedkar was born on the April, 1891 in a poor Mahar community of Maharashtra, which was on untouchable caste. They were treated in the most inhuman manner by the caste Hindus. These unfortunate people were damned as ensemble, unapproachable and above all untouchable whose mere touch and even shadow would pollute the caste Hindus. They were deemed the use of public wells and water resources; they were shut out from the Hindu temples and Hindu festivals. See public service includes police and military forces were barred to them. Born of such parents and brought up in such surrounding that young Bhimrao Ambedkar should have elevated himself is a barrister and a Ph.D, D.Litt, D.Sc and LL.D was in itself in those day an outstanding marvel. What enormous hardship, effort, and zeal must have entailed is easy to imagine. After his education, Ambedkar distinguished himself in many field of public life, until eventually he came to be reckoned amongst the foremost personalities of his time: eminent constitutional lawyer, authority on economic and political issues, statesman, author, agitator and above all the architect of the Indian constitution during his career of 30 years. Always a controversial figure, his speeches as well as books and pamphlets on diverse subjects invariably provoked not only a great deal of thought, but also a lot of heat and controversy.

Ambedkar made one fifth of the whole Indian population conscious of their miserable condition and inspired them to struggle for their own betterment. He deigned into their ears the slogans of self help, self-respect and self-knowledge. Never before such inspiring words, worthy of instilling self confidence in the dejected and distressed minds were heard by the suppressed manners. Thus Ambedkar created a new awakening among them and they on their part responded to his call for action in a magnificent way.

#### 4. Conclusion

Buddha says "hunger is the greatest disease", realizing that the "untouchables" not only suffered from "hunger" but also suffered from numerous social disabilities, Ambedkar

consciously decided to go slow with his plans for conversion to another Religion. Instead, he directed all his energies towards the social, economical political emancipation of his followers. Verily, it was as a result of his exemplary efforts at the round table conference in London 1930-32, as a member of Vileroy's Executive Council 1942-46, and the chief architect of India's constitution that the scheduled castes got the "facilities" which they now enjoy under the constitution. Having achieved that he turned to Religion.

When in 1935 Ambedkar decided and declares his desire to discard Hindu religion, there were tempting offers by the Christians, Muslims and Sikhs to attract him towards their religions. But he scoffed at these offers and rejected the some without any hesitation. Finally he chose Buddhism on his own volition after making on in depth study of the Dhamma. He preferred Buddhism because he found the religion of the Buddha rational, scientific and an epitome of liberty and fraternity. He said: Buddhism is like an ocean. There is no distinction of high and low in it. The Buddha by His compassion and love won the hearts of the downtrodden classes of his days and showed them the right path. Today's Hinduism is rotten to the root. So we must adopt a better religion. In my opinion, Buddhism is the most appropriate religion.

A poet has rightly incorporated the spirit of the life and mission of Babasaheb Ambedkar in the following verse--

"Buddhism is a great religion. Let it shine in Bharat. Let all downtrodden people in the universe attain equality".

The year 1956 marked a milestone in the chequered history of Buddhism. In that year, the Buddhist era, which commenced on the day of the Mahaparinirvana of the Buddha, completed 2500 years. While laying down the foundation stone of the Buddha Jayanti Park on the New-Delhi ridge, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Neheru said "The 2500th Buddha Jayanti celebrations signify the home coming of the Buddha." Not satisfied with mere thanks giving to Lord Buddha, Ambedkar went a step further and sanctified the occasion by embracing Buddhism, along with his half a million of followers on October 14 the Vijaya Dashami day, in that year thus Ambedkar made the home coming of the Buddha. A reality by showing the way to the suffering humanity who were in search of a democrat and just religion. This was an epoch making event: it not only changed his destiny, but changed the course of the history of Buddhism as well. On this day, the movement for the revival of Buddhism in India entered into on era of intense activity which is now known Buddhist Studies "the Ambedkar Era of Indian Buddhism" with this conversion Ambedkar works in this world completed. About two months after his conversion in Kawpti, Nagpur, B.R Ambedkar passed away very silently without any illness whatsoever at his residence in Delhi 26 Alipore Road on the 6th December 1956.

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