
INFLUENCE OF BHAGAVATISM ON MAHAYANA BUDDHISM

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Abstract

Siddhartha of Sakhya Dynasty has performed penance by sitting under pipal tree at Bodhgaya and attained enlightenment in his 42nd year. Later, he turned as a founder of Buddhism by himself calling as Gautama Buddha. Gautami was his step-mother who has brought him up. Hence he has added her mother's name along with his name as Gautama Buddha. After the attainment of Nirvana, serious conflicts arose among the Buddhists which are responsible for a split. On the basis of customary practices, the Buddhism was split into Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhist sects. The Mahayana Buddhism has received its essence from Hinduism which was the ancient religion emerged in India since the emergence of Vedic culture in 2000 B.C. The Mahayana Buddhists changed the status of Buddha as God from Prophet who propagated Buddhist culture. The Hinayanists are the staviravadins who advocated no changes in Buddhism which was proposed by their master Buddha. But the Mahayanists or Mahasangikavadins proposed some reforms, one of which the treatment of Buddha as God on the lines of Sanskrit Hindu scriptures. Thus, the influence of Brahmanical culture on Mahayana Buddhism is the main theme of this paper which is highlighted in the theme.

Keywords:

Sanskrit Hindu scriptures;
Brahmanical culture;
Hinayanists;
Nirvana;
Vedic culture.

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Present research paper is prepared on the basis of different studies which are conducted on Mahayana Buddhism which was influenced by the Vedic religion. The Vedic religion was shaped as Hinduism in the later stages. The religions emerged from 6th century B.C received their essence from Vedic sects.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

1. To focus on the growth of Mahayana Buddhism.
2. To analyze the influence of Hinduism on Mahayana Buddhism.
3. To understand the co-ordination between Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism.
4. Spread of Mahayana Buddhism from Gandhara to other parts of India including Andhra desa.

On the basis of the above mentioned objectives, present research paper has been prepared.

METHODOLOGY:

Doctrinaire method has been adopted to prepare the present paper. Several ancient Buddhist texts have been consulted. A visit has been undertaken to Amaravati museum to understand the Mahayana art and culture. Several Buddhist experts are consulted to have first hand knowledge on Mahayana Buddhism. Sanskrit texts pertaining to Hinduism have been studied to understand the influence of Hinduism on Mahayana Buddhism. This doctrinaire method has been used to prepare the present research paper.

HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY:

On the basis of the following tentative conclusions, present research paper has been presented.

1. Hinduism has its own influence on Mahayana Buddhism.
2. Worshipping of God has been received from Hinduism by the Mahayanists.
3. Mahayanists followed the Hindu teachers to teach religion of their own.
4. The Mahayana Buddhists compiled slokas to worship Buddha on the lines of Rig Vedic riks (Slokas).

On the basis of these tentative conclusions, present research paper has been written.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY:

Present research paper is having its own importance as it has influenced the Mahayana Buddhism, one of the sects of Buddhism propounded by Lord Gautama Buddha. The Mahayana Buddhism wanted to create their master Gautama Buddha as God simply on the lines of Rig Vedic riks. The modern students who wish to conduct a study on Buddhism should know the essence of Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism which influenced each other. The Mahayana Buddhism finally merged into Hinduism and Buddha was considered as one of the avatars of Sri Maha Vishnu, the Hindu God.

THEME OF THE PAPER:

Most of the scholars including the Sanskrit scholar of Germany like Max Muller who propounded the theory of Central Asia as home land of Aryans expressed his view on the origin of Mahayana Buddhism. He is of opinion that Mahayana Buddhism was originated in the North Western region, particularly in Gandhara, present Kandahar of Afghanistan. The main reason for this theory

is the Gandhara art was spread to Mathura from Gandhara. The Gandhara art is consisting of Buddhist statues which are worshipped as symbols of God by the worshippers.

In their opinion, Bhakti in Indian religious systems was the result of the impact of Western, particularly the Magdian religion. As western influence was predominant in the north-west, they held that Mahayana was born in those regions. A. B. Keith says that “*The sudden activity of Mahayana, its conviction of the necessity of the preaching of salvation and the doctrine of the duty of man lay aside the dream of swift release from the transmigration for himself and to choose instead the career of a Buddha to be for the sake of the release of the world from tribulation suggest the introduction of a new spirit which India was eager and able to assimilate, but which would not have arisen in such a form unless there had been external influences at work*”.

Immediately after the nirvana of Gautama Buddha, some changes had occurred in Brahmanical culture. In Hinduism, several sects had originated right from 5th century B.C. Brahmanical culture, Vasudeva Krishna sect (or) Bhagavatism and Shakti cult. From 5th century B.C. to 2nd century B.C., several arguments had been forwarded for worshipping of God. Meanwhile, during Mauryan period, Brahminical cult, Jainism and Buddhism flourished and among all, Buddhism dominated the society.* Hinduism was showing downward trends. By that time, the birth of Vasudeva Krishna and his activities were highlighted in the society. Vasudeva Krishna was born at Vrindavan near Mathura. His activities and birth was brought to the society by Bhagavatam written by Veda Vyas. Of course though the sources for the birth of Vasudeva Krishna were produced, they were not authentic as per the opinions of the historians. This is only a story but in India, Vasudeva Krishna sect was rapidly spread to compete with the Buddhism particularly Mahayana Buddhism which was spread in the same period in North India from Gandhara to Mathura. It is also adduced that the story of Bhagavatham was taken from itihasa i.e, Mahabharata written immediately after Ramayana which was said to be written in 7th century B.C. even much before the birth of Sakyamuni. The stories of Bhagavatam are closely related with Mahabharata. Here the link between the Mahayana Buddhism and Vasudeva Krishna made different sects. Both Buddha and Krishna were born to different kind of sects. Gautama Buddha’s father belonged to the kshatriya clan while Vasudeva Krishna’s father belonged to Yadava community. Yadavas are cattle breeders and Vasudeva was the owner of hundreds of cattle. Gautama Buddha led a simple life and Vasudeva Krishna led a comfortable and pleasurable life by having more than eight wives at a time. His followers were known as Gopikas as he was called as Gopala, the cattle breeder. Gautama Buddha called upon his followers and sympathizers to have equal love and affection between men and women. All are equal to enjoy a peaceful life with one another. But Vasudeva Krishna had shown a path way of life to lead a happy life and by that time, all the men were having more than one wife. The polygyny was widely prevalent among the Hindus. During the time of Vasudeva Krishna,

* N. Dutt, Early Monastic Buddhism, Calcutta, 1980, Pg. 94.

frequent wars had occurred and number of soldiers and people lost their lives. In this warfare, the community of Vasudeva Krishna was also perished as Hindus considered Vasudeva Krishna's birth was eighth incarnation of Mahavishnu. Similarly the Bodhisattvas birth had taken place on the earth to lead the people from miseries and make them to attain peaceful and happy nirvana. It was not known that whether the influence of Vasudeva Krishna's cult was felt on Buddhism.[†] The correct period during which Mahayana Buddhism was originated was also not known. But one can accept that both Mahayana and Vasudeva Krishna were the contemporary religions based upon different ideologies expressed by the followers of these religions.

The followers of the religious sect originated from the Bhagavatam are called as Bhagavatas. The Bhagavatas are the real worshippers of Lord Krishna who was the hero of Bhagavatam. The exponents of this theory think that the concept of Bhakti was borrowed by the Buddhists from Bhagavadgita which is the most important authority of the Bhagavatas. It is held by some scholars that Buddhism sprang up against the uniconic Vedic religion. As the Mahayanists are the worshippers of images of the Lord Buddha, it is said to be that Gandhara is the first place where the Buddhist statue was unearthed i.e., in 1st century A.D. The Statue culture was slowly spread from North to South as Amaravati was considered as a place for Mahayana Buddhism in South. Number of Buddha statues was found in Coastal Andhra which are collected and placed in Amaravati museum. These statues are said to belong to the 2nd or 3rd century A.D.

As it is already discussed, the fourth Buddhist council held at Kunthalavana has intended to spread Mahayana Buddhism across India. Emperor Kanishka had taken a lead to spread Mahayana Buddhism by sending devotees across India to teach and propagate the Mahayana Buddhism. It is not possible to accept the view of the Western scholars like Max Muller and others that devotion in the Indian religious systems was the result of Persian influence. In fact, religion without an element of devotion is inconceivable. The Bhakti cult was propagated by Bhagavatam. Bhagavatas are the followers of Bhakti cult. The Bhakti cult received its source from Vedas and Upanishads. Vedic gods like Indra, Varuna, Surya and Prudhvi are none other than the elements of Panchabhutha. These elements were taken as a source by Mahayana Buddhists and treated Buddha as their own God. Unfortunately for Buddhists in the passage of the time, Lord Buddha was merged with Hindu incarnations. Some of the scholars are of the opinion that the Hindu mythologies dragged Buddhism into its influence by which Buddha became one of the incarnations of Sri Maha Vishnu of Hindu God. Buddhists believed that God is nothing but generation, operation and destruction of the society. These activities would be done by a power in form of Buddha. The Hindus have also believed in the power or shakti which created society and control the people with its activities. Entire universe is created by the power and this universe is being run by the power called operation. Finally on one day, the universe will be destroyed with the power. Thus the power itself is a God in form of Rama,

[†] Sir Charles Eliot, Hinduism and Buddhism, Vol. I, London, 1971, P. 6

Krishna, Shiva, Vishnu or Buddha. Even the Christians and Muslims believed that power is God from whom the Prophets had sprung and wandered on this earth to emancipate the people from miseries. This power of God is responsible for the creation of men and women imbedded with love, affection and sexual pleasures.[‡] Only the relation with man and woman is responsible for the growth of the society from which all the miseries had taken place as per the Christian philosophy i.e., the Old Testament written in Hebrew. The same thing was said by the Buddhists, particularly by the Mahayanists and Prophet Mohammad, the founder of Islam in the early decades of 7th century. For any person who believes in religion, devotion is a psychological necessity. One of the western scholars rightly remarks that “Religious devotion is a psychological phenomenon. It is a natural tendency of the soul to seek an object of religious love and worship, and it appears in any state of society, when a suitable object for its exercise appears or is conceived. Even Buddhists sought the object of worship. They found it in the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, who became little else than the Gods of old polytheism under other names”. A. B. Keith also admits “the seeds of Mahayanism were in the religious tradition, indigenous to India”. Therefore it is not necessary to trace devotion in Indian religions to Western influence.

Both Bhagavatism and Buddhism developed simultaneously. The founder of Bhagavatism generally from Yadava clan but they merged themselves into kshatriya community. Both Buddhism and Bhagavatism have their differences with Brahmanical culture. But Bhagavatism was considered as a sect of Hinduism. They have believed Hindu mythology and philosophy. But the Buddhism has searched separate way and distracted from the Brahmanical culture and taught the same principles more or less near to the principles of Bhagavatism. The principles of Bhagavatism are Satya (truth), dana (money), niyama (rule), sila (virtue) and ahimsa (non-violence) and other such practical ethical values.

There is therefore the possibility of one influencing the other and scholars are divided about the dates of Bhagavadgita and Dhammapada.[§] There is a controversy on the origin of Bhagavadgita which was the real source for Bhagavatism. The Gita was taught by Sri Krishna to Arjuna in the battle of Kurukshetra to provoke Arjuna to fight against his own relatives. Bhagavadgita was said to be the part of Mahabharatam. The exact date of writing Bhagavadgita is not known. Some of the scholars have put the birth of Bhagavadgita between 4th to 2nd centuries B.C. According to Mahatma Gandhi, Bhagavadgita was written in 3rd century A.D. Vincent Smith has expressed his opinion that Bhagavadgita was written during the period of Guptas period. Guptas were responsible for the revival of Bhakti cult and Brahmanical culture. Hence Vincent Smith has linked the birth of Bhagavadgita to Guptas. Bhagavatism was spread by Bhagavadgita. Radhakrishnan assigns the date 500 B.C. to Bhagavadgita probably because the founder of Bhagavatism, Vasudeva lived about that time. But the

[‡] Ibid

[§] Sir Charles Eliot, op. cit, P. 26

renowned scholar himself admits that the Bhagavadgita was subjected to interpolations and alterations at several times. It is not possible therefore to ascertain when it has taken the present form.

Most of the scholars are of the opinion that Bhagavadgita has received its influence from Buddhism. Some of the words which could be found in Bhagavadgita such as advesa (non hatredness), nirvana (death), karma (action), maître (friendship), raga (jealous) and dvesa (hate) are taken from Buddhist Nikayas i.e., the teachings of Buddha during his life time. In their usage, there one can find close resemblance between Dhammapada and Gita. These similarities of expressions and ideas are ample indication to the fact that the Gita assimilated all those Buddhistic elements which it found convenient to fit into its scheme.

Ashoka's Dhammapada are new dharma was said to be influenced by Upanishads. Bhagavadgita cannot be compared with Dhammapada of Ashoka and inscriptions inscribed on rock edits. Ashoka's Dhammapada is suspected that it is older than Bhagavadgita. Bhagavadgita was said to be written in 3rd or 4th century i.e., five centuries after the proposition of Dhammapada made by Ashokan inscriptions and rock edits. Therefore it is not safe to conclude that the concept of Bhakti was borrowed from the Bhagavatas or the Persians by the Buddhists.

According to some western scholars, "There existed in India itself partly even in early Buddhism the germs of the results which are revealed in Mahayana. We cannot deny that these seeds may have been stirred to active life by the intellectual ferment which must have been caused by the introduction of new peoples to India". The Bhagavatas regarded Sri Krishna as their teacher in initial days and God in later times. Similarly, the Mahayana Buddhists regarded Gautama Buddha as Tathagata and later they have seen god in him. Both Bhagavatism and Mahayana Buddhism are similar to each other as they are born in contemporary days.**

In fact in Indian literature, the word Bhakti first appeared in the Terigatha, assigned to the 3rd C.B.C. It speaks of Bhakti as follows – "So bhattima name capote pandito natva ca dhammesu vivesiassa". In ancient Buddhist Nikayas, Bhakti is found. The Nikayas are the great teachings which are compiled by the disciples of Buddha and after his nirvana can be compared with Upanishads. Hence there is close relation between Upanishads and Mahayana Buddhism, particularly the Nikayas which are accepted by both Hinayanists and Mahayanists. On Saddha, Majjimanikaya refer to 'Saddha vimutta'. Cankisutta speaks of 'Saddha bahukara'. It is found in Dhammapada as Sukha Saddha patitthita. Dhammsangani says 'Saddha o Kappana Abhippasado'. Generally the Bhakti is cultivated in Upanishads. The Mahayana Buddhists are having keen interest to worship Buddha with the ideas of Bhakti which are taken from Hindu scripts.

Aryan writings are the source of Hindu religion. During the later vedic period, several foreign sects invaded India and practiced their own religions. Later they intermingled slowly with Hindu culture. Buddhism, Jainism, Bhagavatism, Shaktism have all received essence from Hindu texts.

** Grierson, Bhakti Marga, Vol. II, Pg. 546

Only the Pali scripts of Buddhism provided source to the settled religions in India. That's why a comparison can be made between Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity and Islam. Christianity and Islam originated centuries after the birth of Buddhism and Jainism. Hence the modern historians can call India as a secular state as all the religions taught the same elements which could be found in Upanishads, Pali canons, Bible and Quran.^{††} Magadha, where the new religions sprang up was not yet thoroughly Aryanised by the 6th century B.C. The primitive religions consisted of the worship of Mother Goddess, Trees, Yaksas and Nagas and these systems cannot be said to have been devoid either of devotion or of worship of some object. It is not out of place to mention that the tradition of icon-worship in India was coming down from the Harappan times. Buddhism developed therefore against a complex religious background.

There are in fact literary and inscriptional references which point to the existence of the images long before the image of Buddha were supposed to have been produced in Gandhara about 1st century B.C. According to the Hathigumpha inscription laid down by Kharavela that Mahapadmananda, the ruler of Nanda dynasty, the predecessor of Mauryans invaded Kalinga and took away the images of Thirtankaras of Jains. The Jain Thirtankaras are the source for Buddhists to make images of Buddha in form of 24 Jain Thirtankaras. Ideal culture was an age old tradition which was started by Jains and Buddhists. The ideals of Hindus emerged during the period of Guptas.

CONCLUSION:

It is generally believed that Hinduism can be considered as a source of all religions which emerged from 6th century BC. Buddhism, Jainism, Bhagavatism, Shakti cult and other religions received their essence from the Hinduism which was the first religion or the culture emerged not only in India but also in the world. Hence Hinduism can be considered as no religion but as a civilization as per Professor R. Radha Krishnan, the former President of India. Thus, the Hinduism provided all means for the other religions to develop in their own way. The Mahayana Buddhism taught bhakti cult on the lines of Hindu scriptures. The Mahayana Buddhism treated Lord Buddha as God. This kind of treatment they received from Rig Veda where the five natural elements such as Surya, Marutha, Agni, Prudhvi, and water, the Ganga as Gods. This systematic presentation was received by Mahayana Buddhism that presented their own lord as God. But the presentation of Buddha's image as God provided essence to Hinduism which made images of Lord Vishnu, Shiva, Gayatri, Saraswati and Ganesha which means the image culture of Hinduism was learned from Mahayana Buddhism. The Mahayana Buddhists were the first to worship images of Buddha as God in the 2nd or 1st century B.C. But the Hindus started their image worship in the 3rd or 4th century A.D during the reign of Guptas. Right from the beginning i.e., from Vedic culture, Hindus are not ideal worshippers. They learned the idol worship only from the Mahayana Buddhism. Hence both

^{††} Cullavagga, Pali Text society, Vol. XII, Pg. 11

Mahayana Buddhism and Hinduism have influenced each other for the spread of their own religions. Hence the Hinduism provided source for Mahayana Buddhism to grow and spread all over India including Andhra desa.

References

- [1] N. Dutt, Early Monastic Buddhism, Calcutta, 1980, Pg. 94.
- [2] Sir Charles Eliot, Hinduism and Buddhism, Vol. I, London, 1971, P. 6
- [3] Sir Charles Eliot, op. cit, P. 26
- [4] Grierson, Bhakti Marga, Vol. II, Pg. 546
- [5] Cullavagga, Pali Text society, Vol. XII, Pg. 11