

Challenges and Prospects of Buddhist Studies in India

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The advent of Śākyamuni, the Buddha, initially the light of Asia and now of the entire world, has been a significant event in the history of world culture and civilization. Born in a royal family with all material prosperity and physical comforts, he was awakened by the pain and suffering, finitude and evanescence of the mundane life. After intensive study, deep reflections and profound meditation he gained insight into the nature of reality and the phenomenal world. Having attained enlightenment he did not remain self-centered. He was not contented with his own emancipation but longed for the liberation of all suffering beings. He showed to the humanity the sure path of *Nirvāṇa*, a way to eradicate suffering and to escape from the labyrinth of the cycle of birth and death which consisted of a symbiosis of wisdom and conduct, ethics and meditative practice. He realized the "Four Eternal Truths" and practiced them in the form of "Eternal Eight-fold Path" in his own life and subsequently enlightened people about it. That is why he was regarded as a 'Great Healer', a Liberator. In the words of Rhys Davids, "He was the greatest, and wisest, and best of that long line of reformers who have tried to infuse new strength into the religious life of India." (*Buddhism*, p.83)

The Buddha was the finest product of Indian culture. He was not born in an intellectual void and his ideas did not spring in a cultural vacuum or in isolation. He was an inheritor of an ancient, rich and varied cultural tradition of a very high order and he formulated and established a new culture out of it which was theoretically enlightening and practically redeeming. He reconstructed the old path, a middle path, which avoided all extremes. In his own words, "... Even so have I, O monk, seen an ancient way, ancient road, traversed by the supremely enlightened ones of the olden times." (*Samyutta Nikāya*, Pt II, p. 106-7). He was well-steeped in the Vedic lore. In his ideas, doctrines and practices the proto-Vedic view of Reality and way of life blossomed forth in a fresh, purified and invigorating form which attracted the elite and the masses alike.

The origin and spread of Buddhism has been a landmark in the history of Greater India. It acquired popular recognition during the life time of the Buddha but soon after his *Mahāparinirvāṇa* it grew by leaps and bounds and continued to hold its sweep in India till 13th century A.D. when it ceased to be a distinct living

tradition mainly because of foreign invasions. During this period Buddhist Councils were held to draw up canonical and other expository literature. A vast literature of varied nature was produced in India all of which is not fully available in modern times as it got extinct due to accidents of history. M. Winternitz in his "*History of Indian Literature*", Vol. II, and Taranatha in his "*History of Buddhism in India*" have made an appreciable attempt to provide a brief thematic description of the extant part of it. An equally immeasurably vast literature came up in Buddhist countries outside India in the past and now almost all over the world. It is the need of the times to attempt another compilation or documentation on a grand scale in a systematic, chronological, geographical and thematic order in a classified way. It is also necessary to write a comprehensive history of Buddhism covering the entire globe. It is a huge task to be taken up by a large team and sponsored by an International Organization as it requires global networking. It is hoped that South Korea may take a lead in this.

From the point of view of cultural history of humankind it is indeed significant that originated in India, Buddhism soon penetrated almost the whole of Asia, enamored the hearts of the masses, influenced the intellect of the elite and won over the spirits of the powerful rulers. Its intermingling with the local cultures and morass, its deep and pervasive impact on the minds of the native people have been so intense and immense that it not only moulded and reformulated the original thoughts, ideas and ideals, beliefs and practices of the countries of its *locale* but also brought about profound changes in their social, cultural, religious and political life. The people of these countries felt that Buddhism has something ennobling, enlightening and emancipating to offer.

It is a wide spread misunderstanding that Buddhism had got extinct in or was banished from India, the land of its origin and development. It is not a correct way of looking at the situation. Buddhism was an offshoot of Indian culture and not an upstart movement originating *de novo*. So the Indian psyche accepted and imbibed the ideas propagated by the Buddha as something valuable and worthwhile. It was quite natural therefore that Buddha's teachings got assimilated in the mainstream Indian culture. The interfusion was so deep and pervasive that there was no need for its separate existence. All aspects of Hindu culture became Buddhistic by the acceptance of the main doctrinal and practical tenets of Buddhism. Dr. S. Mukherjee in his paper on Buddhism in "*The Cultural Heritage of India*" states, "It will not be incorrect to say that every Hindu is a Buddhist.

Buddhism has permeated the entire religious and philosophical thought of India and percolated into the deepest recesses of the religious mentality of the present-day Hindus." (Ed. Haridas Bhattacharya, Vol. I, P. 575, Calcutta, 1958). The So-called decline of Buddhism is also not a very correct view. It is assimilation and absorption of something which is our own and not something alien. As Dr. Radhakrishnan has opined about the Buddha in his Foreword to "*2500 Years of Buddhism*, (Government of India publication), "He was born, grew up and died a Hindu" "The Buddha left his footprint on the soil of India and his mark on the soul of the country." Professor Upendra Thakur also writes, "It is now admitted on all hands that Buddhism, in the course of its march for conquest through *Dhamma*, has greatly widened the sphere of Hindu life, broadened its outlook and awakened its consciousness of true greatness that really lies in the fulfillment of all values-higher and lower which have been beautifully elaborated in the *Manu Samhitā*" (*Bodhi-Rasmi*, P.17, Ed. Mahesh Tiwari, New Delhi, 1984.) Professor P.V.Bapat in this book in the paper entitled "Vedic Sources of Some Buddhist Beliefs" (P.3) writes, "Buddhism cannot be considered as an adventitious phenomenon or an upstart movement, but it had its roots firmly planted in the earlier religious movements of the people of Vedic, or occasionally even non-Vedic tradition". India is Buddhistic through and through, whether we believe it or not. It is not a matter of argumentation but of feeling. Buddhism is alive in the deepest recesses of the Hindu mind and it can not be extinct so long as Hinduism is extant or so long as the Advaita Vedānta holds its sway. One has not to see the legacy of Buddhism only in the national emblems of in the sectarian followers, but one has to look for it in the very cultural ethos of the country, in our modes of thinking and ways of living.

However, it must be clarified that Buddhism continued to survive as a distinct living faith also in the Himalayan regions and in the North-Eastern parts of India. Now it has separate followers in many parts of the country. But this separatist tendency has not helped much to the cause of Buddhism. In spite of sectarian in-fights, the Hindus have by and large cherished Buddhistic ideas and ideals. Most of the Buddhist Pundits were Hindus, particularly from the *Brāhmaṇa* class. Even in modern times this trend is witnessed. The Buddha himself revered this class and longed to be born in this in the next birth.

Here a reference to persistence of Buddhist thought in the political life of modern India may be in order. Just as Buddhism contributed to be national unification in Korea in the past, in India too it did so in the past during the time of

King Aśoka, and in modern times it helped in generating patriotic feelings and stimulated the freedom fighters. Many prominent political leaders of India like Gandhi, Nehru, Ambedkar and others were inspired by Buddhism. All of them were greatly fascinated by Buddhism. Some eminent intellectuals and social reformers like Vivekananda, Tagore, Radhakrishnan etc. were under the influence of Buddhism. They paid glowing tributes to the Buddha and highlighted Buddhism. After India became independent the "Wheel of Righteousness" (*Dharmacakra*) found a place in the National flag. The use of *Dharmacakra* reminds the nation about the sublime teachings of the Buddha. The Lion Capitol of King Ashoka representing fearless proclamation of Dharma has been adopted as official Seal of the Republic of India. The acceptance of "*Pañca Śīla*" as a state policy again is inspired by Buddhism. The ideals of Buddhism have been rejuvenating India for the last 50 years or so with full support from the Government of India. The celebration of 2500th birthday of the Buddha by the Government of India in 1956 gave further impetus of Buddhism. Buddhist art, visual, performing and decorative, are becoming more popular. Patriotic Indians are happy to note that Buddhism which originated in India spread over in many Asian countries and now is gaining ground all over the world.

Since the arrival of His Holiness the Dalai Lama in India, the Buddhist Studies, particularly the Tibetan Buddhist Studies, have become very popular. He has a large following from different parts of the world and many people embraced Buddhism under his influence. He has been able to provide fresh impetus to Buddhist studies.

In modern times a large number of Indian scholars have taken interest in Buddhist studies and the number is increasing. In fact the old affinity between Buddhism and Vedic culture has been brought about by some scholars. These scholars who studied Buddhism and popularized Buddhist studies are not Buddhist by sectarian faith but they are enamored by Buddhist ideas and ideals as a part of India cultural heritage. They adore the Buddha as a Deity. There is a need to harmonize Vedic and Buddhist studies for mutual enrichment.

Buddhism can well be compared to a big banyan tree with numerous trunks and branches, varied flowers and fruits, spread all over the world but the roots lie in the Pali literature. It is therefore imperative that we pay due attention to this pristine source. The importance and value of Pali language lie in the fact that it is the source, sustenance and fountain springs of all Buddhist thought, practices and

culture from ancient to modern times. It is the foundation and gateway to know about Buddhism. The roots of Buddhism lie in Pali literature. It can be said without exaggeration that all subsequent development of Buddhism and all its doctrines, tenets and practices which evolved later on in India and out side have their rudiments and are available in the Pali literature in germinal form and therefore in the present world situation when Buddhism is gaining ground Pali studies will provide a base for augmenting Buddhist studies through original sources. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has very rightly and perceptively denounced the separation between Pali Buddhism and Sanskrit Buddhism and thereby Theravāda and Mahāyāna. His arguments are both rational and textual and need to be paid serious attention by Buddhists all over the world. Just as in the past Chih-I, the founder of T'ien-t'ai school in China tried to harmonize the profound meaning of all the *Vaipulya sūtras* and *Pāramitā* literature (and also Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism) and likewise in Korea Won-hyo did the similar exercise and tried to reconcile Theravāda and Mahāyāna, a similar attempt needs to be made in modern times under the leadership of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Buddhist literature is vast, rich and multidimensional. Its canonical and commentarial material is available in many ancient languages, viz., Pali, Sanskrit, Sinhalese, Tibetan, Chinese, Mongolian, Manchurian, Korean and Japanese. In modern times it has come to be translated and expounded in many other languages. But this does not minimize the importance and utility of Pali and Sanskrit literature. Apart from serving as roots, the ideas contained here are of seminal nature and intrinsic worth. Any one who takes Buddhism seriously will find them interesting, absorbing and useful.

In modern times there is a need for a comprehensive understanding of Pali and Sanskrit literature from an interdisciplinary and holistic perspective. There can be three approaches to Buddhist studies, or for that matter for any classical study. One is philological and linguistic, the second is exegetical and textual, and the third is philosophical and interpretative. All the three are complementary and must be in symbiotic union as a whole. The significance of none is to be minimized or belittled. However, it must be stated that the philosophical constitutes the core and the essence and its pivotal character should not be lost sight of. Buddhist philosophy and philosophical thinking about Buddhism have always remained dominant and paramount and without this niceties of philology or textual mastery will become myopic. If the world cares for Buddhism today it is because of its

philosophical ideas and practices. It is therefore imperative that philosophical content and philosophical interpretation of meaning are at the centre stage in order to see their possible applications for contemporary life in modern society. Buddhist philosophy embodies experiential data and critical enquiry, phenomenological reflections and psychological analysis. They provide the kernel and essence to Buddhist thought and culture. The world of scholarship today is replete with new understandings and reappraisals of old scholarship and therefore theoretical, philosophical and practical methodological issues should always remain in the fore front. However this is not to deny the religious and meditative aspects of Buddhism which emanate from its philosophy.

Buddhism is diverse and the whole panorama of Buddhism can be seen in India. There are two groups of students and scholars who study Buddhism in India. Some are Indians and some are from outside India. Those who come from outside India belong to Sri Lanka, Thailand, South Korea, Japan, China, Vietnam, Cambodia and other Asian countries. They study Pali, Tibetan and Sanskrit languages along with Buddhist history, Buddhist philosophy and Buddhist art and architecture. Though the number is increasing the quality of scholarship is not increasing. This is a cause of worry. There are various forms of Buddhism. The Korean, the Japanese, the Vietnamese and other Asian forms are not being given sufficient attention because of lack of facilities and expertise. I have tried in my humble way to meet with this requirement but it is meager and insufficient.

In the universities Theravāda and Mahāyāna studies are going on but there are very few who take interest in Vajrayāna. It is not easy to understand Tantric Buddhism and it requires practice as well. There are various facets of Buddhist thought and culture and all of them demand serious attention. Buddhism is at once ancient and modern and there is diversity in both the aspects.

The Buddhist Studies are taking place in India in five ways. They are teaching, research, seminars, conferences and publications. It may also be mentioned that apart from studies the Buddhist mediation centers, particularly the Vipassana Meditation Center at Igatpuri in Maharashtra is doing good work to popularize Buddhist techniques. With the popularity and spread of other systems of Yoga the Buddhist system is also becoming popular. The prospects of Buddhist studies are not bleak but concerted efforts are required. In this respect His Holiness the Dalai Lama may take the lead and be the spiritual leader just as India did in the hoary past. An establishment of International Institute of Buddhist Studies is

the need of the times and this host institute can be the best nucleus for that. Just as in the past the University of Nalanda in India attracted high quality of scholars from different parts of the world, let there be another Nalanda in Sarnath in the modern times.

I would like to conclude by saying that the Buddha was one of the most revolutionary thinkers and the holiest persons ever lived on the earth. He has been a beacon light not only for India or Asia but for the entire world. His message of truth, peace, harmony, compassion, altruistic service, selflessness, etc. is as relevant today as it was in the past. His advocacy of pursuit of *prajñā* and practice of *karuṇā*, his vision of selfsameness with everyone and zealous longing for eradication of suffering of others as one's own cross all barriers of race, creed, country and even humanity. His benevolent teachings of universal compassion and cosmic goodwill, his emphasis on noble virtues of *maitrī*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* and *upekṣā* know as *Brahmavihāras* (i.e., living and working for totality) all these have a significant message for the present-day distracted humankind suffering from exhaustion of spirit and languishing in the narrow and rigid confinements of ego-centricism, parochialism and disastrous materialistic consumerism. In the present times our traditional cultures are facing terrible danger of extinction under the perverting impact of the so-called modernization which is divisive, depriving and destructive. For the first time since their inception such a large scale threatening situation has arisen. We have not so far cared to share a common platform at the global scale to meet the challenge in a decisive and global way may be due to ignorance, negligence, self-centeredness or bewitchment with perverted modernism, etc. A time has come for the beginning of a cultural renaissance for which the teachings of the Buddha can play a vital and pivotal role. In fact the humanity standing at crossroads looks at Buddhism for the needed light and guidance which once Lord Buddha provided to the world. A renewal of cross-cultural interactions under their banner will not only help and contribute mutual understanding, mutual empathy and mutual enrichment; it will also consolidate our common spiritual roots and resources. It will enable us to appreciate the spiritual, holistic and integral perspective as against the divisive and dichotomous world-view. If the humanity looks back to its hoary past to discern whatever is true, good and beautiful, whatever is living and beneficial in it, the wisdom of those times will help us more intimately and more truly to our mutual well-being.