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Dr. Arun Kumar
Associate Professor,
Department of History,
Mahila College Khagaul, Patna
(PPU), Bihar, India

Dr. Alok Kumar
Department of History,
A.K. Gopalan Degre College,
Sultanganj, Bhagalpur, Bihar,
India

Indian historiography on Buddhism: A re-appraisal

Dr. Arun Kumar and Dr. Alok Kumar

Abstract

Buddhism has been one of the hotly debated topics in the study of early history. The reason for its presence and visibility in Indian history owes to its existence to a wide time scale traversed during the 6th century BC to 11 century AD. There is no doubt that many special and unique features of Buddhism not only reshaped Indian culture and society, but it also played an eminent role in spreading its teachings across the world, where it is still shining as one of the prominent religions. However, in its own birth land, Buddhism was not able to sustain its existence.

Keywords: Buddhism, history, Indian

Introduction

Indian historians of early India held diversified views on Buddhism. But the strange and the weird commonality in their writings is that they all seem to be biased against Buddhism and often they have committed factual errors in dealing with this important subject. There have also been many instances when the same allegation or beliefs were repeated by a number of prominent Indian historians without referring to each other. Thus, there was repetition of same allegations again and again in the manner of putting old wine in new bottles.

This paper is an attempt to critically evaluate the writings of some prominent Indian historians on Buddhism and to present a more factual picture of Buddhism.

Ramvilas Sharma one of the Marxist historian, in his writings on, for instance, Gandhi, Ambedkar, Lohia, Itihas Darshan and in 'Some Aspects of the Teaching of Buddha levelled various serious charges against the Buddha. He alleged that there is hardly any original teaching in Buddhism, whatever the Buddha said had either already been discussed in Upanishads or by the Charvakas. He argues that Buddha did not believe in god or soul and he did not accept the authority of any sacred book. The Charvakas also said the same thing and he is indebted to them for this much of rationalism in his teaching.

He further goes on suggesting that the Sariputta's explanation of consciousness had already been discussed by Dirghatamas (a Vedic Sage) prior to the Buddha.

While framing these charges, Sharma knowingly or unknowingly committed factual mistakes. He failed to understand that the Buddha's denial of god and soul was no doubt similar to that of other Indian materialists and rationalists such as Charvakas but deep down, the Buddha's teachings were not restricted to these denials alone. In fact the Buddha dealt with almost all the issues of human concerns, which in modern terminology are known as psychology, sociology, history and polity. Secondly, Sharma's point of copying teachings from the Upanishad was even more ridiculous on the simple ground of chronology. As it is already known in the study of Indian history that there is no unanimity on the dates available regarding the creation of these scriptures. Further, the Upanishads if not all, yet a large number of them were composed after Buddha. As Kosambi points out that it mentions Ajatshatru, a king who was a younger contemporary of the Buddha. Thereby Kosambi observes that the reference of king Ajatshatru of Kasi in the Upanishad shows that the nascent doctrines were in the air during the sixth century B.C. Moreover, the composition of Upanishads continued up till medieval centuries where one more Upanishad, i.e. Allopanishad was being composed in the praise of Mughal emperor Akbar. But it is strange that even before Sharma, Jawahar Lal Nehru in his famous 'Discovery of India' also aired the same view. He maintains that the philosophy of Buddhism was not the original one as much of it was borrowed from Vedanta and Upanishads. The argument of another well-known historian Romila Thapar who is recognized as a prominent authority on Ancient Indian history is also of the same opinion. In one of her writings while beginning with the roots of the Buddha's lineage, she claimed Sakyans to be a vedic tribe. This statement like the above allegations had no ground or any evidence. There is hardly any other historical fact that the Sakyans were linked with the vedics.

Rather it is generally known and accepted in history that the Sakyans were a non-vedic tribe. Thapar's belief could also easily be refuted through one of the studies of Kosambi where he categorically denied any vedic lineage to Buddha's tribe. He says: There were no Brahmins

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Arun Kumar
Associate Professor,
Department of History,
Mahila College Khagaul,
Patna, (PPU), Bihar, India

or caste-class divisions within the tribe, nor there have high vedic observances ever been reported among the Sakyas. Further it is to be noted that in spite of being referred as Kshatriyas, the Sakyas also worked as agriculturists.

Kosambi reference to word *ikshu* = sugarcane, viewed that Ikshvaku which is said to be the lineage clan of the Buddha, was a pre-Aryan tribe. Thapar's allegations is therefore an attempt to assimilate the Buddha into the vedic fold. In one of her famous books, 'Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas', She elaborates her agenda further and imposed her idea that the Dhamma – frequently mentioned by Asoka in his inscriptions – was no way Buddhism (in her words narrow sectarianism) but it was a personal belief of Asoka based on an age old culture and ideology prevailing in the Indian soil. Thereby she concluded that Asoka was not a Buddhist, as frequently claimed by the Buddhists and a wide range of historians. However, this belief is again an individual idea of Thapar's without any evidence or logic. Dhamma was no way a sectarian approach but a teaching of universal love with no boundaries of caste, creed, gender, nation or anything else and the Dhamma mentioned by Asoka, was also the same as propagated by the Buddha. But it is strange that the learned authority of ancient India fails to understand this. However, her argument was well refuted by one historian Harishankar Kautiyal:

The Asoka's explanation of Dhamma, were derived from Buddhist texts such as Dighanikaya's Lakkhan Sutta, Chhakavatti Seehnad Sutta, Rahulovaad Sutta and Dhammapada. In these scripture there was mention of Chakravarti Samrat (Universal Emperor) who wins the heart of people by love not by sword. Asoka's definition of non-violence is derived from Rahulovaad Sutta.

Romila Thapar's prejudice against Buddhism is also reflected in her other writings, where she says, Ashoka became obsessed with Dhamma. Interestingly, Thapar's wrong understanding of Dhamma, was of course not the unique way of thinking, but the same views have already been aired by other historians for instance, R.C Majumdar, who while describing Asoka's polity said 'Asoka never sought to impose his sectarian belief on others.' Elsewhere he echoed the same view by saying that the Dhamma was not the policy of heretic but a system of beliefs created out of different religious faiths. Majumdar further carried on imposing his belief by saying that Asoka was more influenced towards Brahmanism rather than Buddhism. He says:

The prospect that he held before the people at large is not that of sambodhi or nirvana but of svarga (heaven) and of mingling with the devas. Svarga could be attained by all people high or low, if only they showed zeal, not in adherence to a sectarian dogma or the performance of popular ritual (mangala) but in following the ancient rule (Porana pakiti).

However, R.C. Majumdar forgets that the words like *Deva* and *Svarga*, no doubt having deep attachment with Brahmanism, are also words that had frequently been used in the Buddhist scriptures. Further the ancient rule (*Porana Pakiti*) mentioned by Asoka was not in any way brahmanic ideas comprising of graded inequality but it was the democratic values of the tribal culture that was in existence from primitive tribal communities onwards. Further, how could one forget that despite using some of the brahmanic terminology, Asoka ridiculed the religious practices carried out by womenfolk. In one of his inscriptions Asoka says:

In times of sickness, for the marriage of sons and daughters, at the birth of children, before embarking on a journey, on these and other occasions, people perform various ceremonies. Women in particular perform many vulgar and worthless ceremonies. These types of ceremonies can be performed by all means, but they bear little fruit. What does bear great fruit

however, is the ceremony of the Dhamma. This involves proper behavior towards servant and employees, respect towards ascetics...

However, historians continued to ignore these facts and without any hesitation continued their agenda of undermining Buddhism. Radhakumud Mookerji had produced a strange reason for Asoka's respect and reverence towards Buddhism in general and towards Monks in particular. He Says:

Prince Mahendra and Princess Sanghamitra both renounced the world and entered the Sangh as its members. That is why Asoka shows a distinct predilection for ascetics in his edicts.

But while passing this statement, Mookerji forgets that Asoka embraced Buddhism much before than the royal siblings Mahendra and Sanghamitra joined the Sangha. In fact, the brother-sister duo was influenced towards the Sangha by looking at the dedication and commitment of their parents towards Buddhism.

Indian historians targeted, Buddha as anti-poor and Pro-status-quo. For example, D.N. Jha believes Buddhism was reluctant for any social change and has followed caste and untouchability in same manner as in Hinduism. He writes:

In spite of the protestant character of Buddhism and Jainism neither of them waged any powerful struggle against caste system and untouchability. On the contrary, Buddhism like brahmanic religion seems to have recognized the phenomenon of untouchability, which originated in the post vedic period and remains to this day an appalling feature of Indian social life. The Chandalas and Nishadas originally aboriginals, were recognized as untouchables by Buddhism. At one place the Buddha himself equates the food earned by unlawful means with the leavings of the Chandala. This is in tune with attitude of the early brahmanic law givers, who prescribed bathing as essential for such members of higher castes as a touch of Chandala. The Jataka stories describe Chandala as amongst the meanest being on caste and regard even contact with air that touches their body as pollution. We are told in one story that the daughter of a sethi of Banaras washed her eyes that were contaminated by the mere sight of a Chandal. The new religions therefore did not try to abolish the existing social differentiation they strongly 'refuted, lower the importance of caste for attaining nirvana.

However, in this opinion Jha also committed a fundamental mistake. First, while talking of untouchability he forgets that, all the mainstream Indian historians have dated the origin of untouchability in Indian society much later than the Buddha period. It is true that society was already stratified into four fold social grading from the Rig vedic period onwards which continued till the post vedic period, where many tribes such as Chandala, Nishada, Pukkasa and others were being looked down by the caste elites. Yet to charge the Buddha for inculcating social distance and untouchability is in no way factual. The reference of Sethi's daughters washing of her eyes on mere sight of a Chandal has nothing to do with Buddhism as Jataka are not the tales of Buddhist lifestyle alone but it is the description of the events that happened at that time. Therefore, the characters in Jatakas were both Buddhists as well as non-Buddhist. Thus, in Jatakas there were many Buddhist as well as non-Buddhist practices included. Further, Jha's belief could also be refuted in Matanga Jataka, who was a Buddhist character and according to Gail Omvedt, seems to have been a famous hero-leader of the Chandals, was in direct conflict with Brahmins. Besides this another Matang, called Kashyapa Matang was a Buddhist missionary in the first century. Taranath also records a Matangi-pa who was said to have been a disciple of Nagarjuna. Not only this, even one of the former Buddha was born into a Matanga family. Further, with regards to the historical Buddha, it is clear that he inducted a number of

despised castes into his Sangha, such as Upali- a barber, Sunita- a Pukkusa, Sati- a fisherfolk and many others. The Buddha in his sermons categorically denied supremacy of caste and he also questioned the graded inequality on logical grounds such as recorded in Amabattha Sutta, Prabhavasutta and in various other places. He used to say:

Just as, O monks, the great rivers Ganga, Yamuna, Aciravati, Sarabhu and Mahi, on reaching the ocean, lose their earlier name and identity and come to be reckoned as the great ocean, similarly, O monks, people of the four castes (Vannas)... who leave the household and become homeless recluses under the Doctrine and Discipline declared by the Tathagata, lose their previous names and identities and are reckoned as recluses who are sons of Sakya.

But these facts and views of Buddhism have often been ignored by Irfan Habib, a prominent authority of medieval Indian historians, professes even further than his predecessors by viewing that Buddhism also contributed to the ultimate denigration of the peasantry in the varna structure. He put this argument by quoting Hiuen Tsang, who was found saying that the Buddha forbade the ploughing by monks as it involves killing. But Habib made a blunder while coming to this conclusion. As in actual fact, the Buddha nowhere restricted lay Buddhists to involve in agricultural activities; instead he himself came from a community where his own father used to plough the fields. Students of Buddhism know well that extremity of non-violence is not Buddhist teachings but it was a Jaina teaching. This teachings, as Rahul Sankrityayan says resulted in occupational mobility of lay Jain followers to adopt commercial activities by leaving agricultural activities but no where is found any such case in the case of lay Buddhist. But Habib did not only stop here, he further charged the Buddha for establishing caste system in India by saying:

Almost everyone seems agreed that in the universalizing the caste system within India, brahmanas have played a key role, and that by integrating the caste doctrine into the dharma, brahmanas made the caste system and Brahmanism inseparable. One result of these assumptions has been that the role of Buddhism in the process of caste formation has often escaped notice and yet may be asked whether Buddhism did not have its own contribution to make to the development of the caste system. The Karma doctrine or the belief in the transmigration of soul which formed the bedrock of the Buddhist philosophy was an ideal rationalization of the caste system, creating a belief in its equity even among those who were its greater victims. The Karma and Transmigration doctrine referred above by Habib was however never been a part of Buddhism but had been the Brahmanic ideas. Moreover, Habib fails to notice that the Buddhism denies the existence of soul or transmigration in any form. Similar is the case of Karma, which though has frequently been used in Buddhism but is diametrically opposite to that of Brahmanism. As mentioned by Ven. Buddhadasa.

Nowadays, wrong teachings concerning Karma are publicized in books and articles by various Indian and Western writers with titles such as "Karma and Rebirth." Although they are presented in the name of Buddhism, they are actually about karma and rebirth as understood in Hinduism. So, the right teaching of Buddhism is misrepresented.

However, with a little reading of Buddhism, Ramvilas Sharma again charged the Buddha by mentioning that there was no progressive agenda in Buddha's mission as there was in the Marxian approach. He writes,

It is true that among Buddhists there were priests, there were kings but there was also a large group of people without any rights.

But Sharma here ignores the fact that the Buddha's teaching

helped a lot of despised communities to raise their level, It resulted in class revolution. It is interesting that after the Buddha's Dhamma revolution, there was a sudden revolutionary change in social and political sphere, it is interesting to note that all the major ruling dynasties of India after the Buddha were of Shudra class, a varna which was till that time considered and treated as beast of burden. The Nagas, the Nandas and the Mauryans who reigned in Magadha from 363 BC till 185 BC i.e., a long period of 178 years were all Shudra dynasties. It is strange that such a revolutionary socio-political impact remained unacknowledged by these historians. Moreover, they ignore the Buddha's admission of Shudras into his Sangha as mere formality and they fail to understand that still in India, as in other religious minded countries, the priest carries the highest position no matter what his achieved status, whether he is rich or poor, intelligent or stupid, attractive or not. Therefore, in such a case when a person from an extreme humble social background would become a monk in the Buddhist Sangha, it would naturally not only raise his individual position in the society but also upgrade the position of his family (where he was born and brought up) to a great extent. In such a case naturally the position of his family and relatives would have been upgraded in the eyes of society. It is on record that the Great Buddhist emperor Asoka used to worship monks by putting his forehead on the ground before the feet of monks. One of his commanders even asked him why he is bowing down before monks of despised communities. To which Asoka responded, caste doesn't matter in the case of Dhamma. There is no doubt that such attempts by the leading Buddhist ruler was successful in breaking the mental barriers of the casteist people. The breaking of caste rules and stratification no doubt played an important role in leading the Shudras to the level of rulers.

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