

VIGNETTES OF DECAYING BUDDHISM

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The *Samyukta-nikaya* records Buddha's premonition about the *bhikkhus* of the future. He said: 'Monks will no longer wish to hear and learn the *suttantas* proclaimed by the Tathagata, deep, deep in meaning, reaching beyond the world, dealing with the void, but will only lend their ear to the profane *suttantas* proclaimed by poets, poetical, adorned with beautiful words and syllables.'

The truth of these words are borne out by the literature of later Buddhism. It is, however, difficult to find out from those texts the history of decay; non-Buddhist sources too are not very helpful, still a few incidents recorded in the biographies of saints give a partial picture of the discomfiture of the Buddhists, and these are given below.

A distant echo of Buddha's warning is probably perceptible in the *Yoga-vasistha*² which states: 'The high state which Buddha had attained by his patience, and from which the Arhat prince fall to scepticism by his impatience...' Possibly this statement contains a veiled reference to the *tantric* practices. However, the attitude of the *Yoga-vasistha* towards Buddhism is somewhat equivocal, but in any case though it is basically a pre-Sankara *advaita* text, it is not unduly severe on Buddhism, though at times critical.

Hostility towards Buddhism is evident in Sankara's writings (c.A.D. 788-820), which are too well-known to be recalled here, but some incidents are related in Sankara's biographies which are not so well-known, though it is difficult to say as to how far they are reliable; like the biographies of Buddha these are full of marvellous supernatural stories. However, these anecdotes may have some basis or at least may be considered to reflect the popular religious attitude from a certain angle.

According to Sankara's biographies³ he converted to his view people belonging to various sects, such as Bhagavatas, Pancaratras, Vaikhanasa, Vaishnavas, Kapalikas, a Kshapanaka, a Carvaka, worshippers of Hiranayagarbha, Fire, Sun, Kuvera, Indra, Yama, Vayu, Earth, Sky,

Varaha, Manu, Candra, Mangala, Pitriloka, Anantadeva, Siddha, and Vetala, as well as Jainas, Madhyamikas and Vijnanavadins.

The first problem is whether there were so many religious sects by the end of the 8th century? If this situation is accepted as generally valid, it has to be concluded that by this time influence of Buddhism (Jainism probably never had a large following) was distinctly on the wane, and the religious situation was analogous to what Buddha found, namely, people following diverse creeds and divided into a large number of sects.

It is also interesting that the biographies mention only the Madhyamikas and the Vijnanavadins as having had disputes with Sankara. This seems to be partly corroborated by the fact that it is only the views of these two sects among the Buddhists which Sankara has combated in his commentary on the *Brahma-sutra* (II. ii. 28-32) where he refers to the Madhyamikas as Sunyavadins. It may be, therefore, permissible to conclude that by the end of the 8th century and the beginning of the 9th only the Madhyamika and Vijnanavada schools among the systems of Buddhist philosophy really counted, or had enough adherents to attract Sankara's notice as worthy antagonists of his *advaita* doctrine. It should be noted that the other sects mentioned above are said to have been converted, but there is no indication that they had developed systematic philosophies of their own, with the possible exception of the Carvakas.

The Jainas too seems to have taken advantage of the decreasing popularity of the Buddhists, and attempted to establish their creed at the latter's expense. According to a tradition current in the Jaina Kharatara-gaccha, this particular gaccha (order) was established as the result of a debate held in the court of the Caulukya king Durlabharaja of Gujarat (V.S. 1066-1080). This is learnt from Jnanavimala who, while giving the spiritual lineage of the Kharatara-gaccha to which he belonged, states that in A.D. 1024 the great Jaina monk Vardhamana Suri and his disciple Jinesvara defeated the Caityavasins in a debate held in the court of Durlabha. After their defeat, the Caityavasins, in conformity with the pre-arranged stipulations, left the capital of Gujarat, and Durlabha pleased with the acumen of Jinesvara conferred on him the title 'Kharatara' (the very keen), the name which their order adopted later.⁴ The Caityavasins seem to have been identical with the Caityakas mentioned in Nagarjunikonda and Amaravati inscriptions.⁵

It seems that we have a reference to this incident in the following verse in the *Dvyasraya-mahakavya* (VII.64) which is a chronicle of the

Caulukya kings of Gujarat written by the famous Hemacandra Suri (A.D. 1092-1172): 'Being conversant (with) the categories of (Jaina metaphysics) he (Durlabha) paid homage to the learned saints; he repudiated the *ekantavada* (of the Buddhists) and thereby obtained purity himself.' Commenting on this verse, Abhayatilaka Gani, who belonged to the Kharatara-*gaccha*, specifically mentions that Durlabha learnt the tenets of Jainism from Jinesvara Suri, though he does not mention the celebrated debate mentioned above. Thus it may be said that Buddhism as a spiritual force was extinguished in Gujarat in A.D. 1024. It may be added here that Jainism became very popular in Gujarat and western India due to the patronage of Jaina monks by Durlabha's successors; some of these monks like Hemacandra, were scholars of outstanding merit. In contrast we do not hear of any great Buddhist scholar during or after this period.

In South India, the ebbing fortunes of Buddhism seems to have sunk further as a result of, what may be called in modern terms, propaganda tour of the Bengali saint Caitanya (A.D. 1486-1533). It is learnt from Caitanya's biographies, that, starting from Rajahmundry he traversed the entire south till he reached Ramesvaram; then he proceeded north through Kerala till he reached Gujarat. In course of this long journey, he halted at many places, and though one may regard the ecstatic description of the biographer, that Caitanya converted entire villages to his faith, with some amount of scepticism, there can be no doubt of the strong impression created by the imposing personality of this young handsome monk.

An interesting account is available in Caitanya's biography about his encounter with the Buddhists. It is said that at a village near Vriddha-Kasi (modern Vriddhacalam in South Arcot District on the Vellur river, Tamil Nadu) Caitanya held discussions with the followers of the different systems of orthodox philosophy, and convinced them of their mistake, whereupon they turned Vaiṣṇava. Possibly such debates were held elsewhere also, but here Caitanya met the Buddhists for the first time in his life. Apparently he had met no Buddhist in Bengal, or what is more probably had avoided them. It is also likely that the degraded Buddhists of this period were treated contemptuously and they had kept away from Caitanya, a high caste Brahmana. An idea of the prevailing attitude towards the Buddhist can be gleaned from a remark of Krishnadasa Kaviraja, the most celebrated biographer of Caitanya. While describing Caitanya's meeting with the Buddhists, the Kaviraja blandly says in an introductory verse that 'though the Buddhists should not be

spoken to nor looked upon' the Master in his mercy tried to crush their pride. The Kaviraja probably completed his work in A.D. 1512, but it would not be unfair to assume that he was recording not only the contemporary attitude towards the Buddhists, but that of several generations which preceded him.

It may be recalled here that Kautilya probably held similar opinion about the Buddhists. In the *Arthashastra* (III. 20.16) he states: 'For the receiver of the family treasure denying it, for one forcibly violating a widow living by herself, for a Candala touching an Arya lady, for one not rushing to rescue (another) close by in distress, for one rushing without cause (and) for one feeding Sakyas, Ajivikas and other heretical monks at rites in honour of gods and manes, the fine should be one hundred panas'⁶. Scholars are unanimous that the Sakya in this passage means a Buddhist, and authoritative opinion at present holds that Kautilya was the prime minister of Chandragupta Maurya. Thus it seems that the attitude towards the Buddhists turned a full circle in about one thousand years.

As for the disputation with the Buddhists, Caitanya refuted all their arguments and greatly to their chagrin discomfited them in public. Indeed it appears from the biography, that Caitanya was backed by overwhelming popular support, which is quite likely, for there is no indication that Buddhists at this period enjoyed any greater popularity in the south than what they had in the north.

However, the biography by the Kaviraja then proceeds to relate the final act of iniquity by the Buddhists and the swift retribution. After their ignominious defeat, the Buddhists hatched a nefarious plot, and offered Caitanya some impure food. But suddenly a large bird intervened, and picking up the plate with its beak dropped it from a height scattering the polluted rice on the Buddhists, and as the plate fell it struck the Buddhist *acarya* with such force that he fainted. His disciples then raised loud cries of lamentation, and prayed to Caitanya to restore their preceptor. Caitanya asked them to chant the name of Krishna, and as all of them performed *Krishna-samkirtana*, the Buddhist teacher came to his senses with the name of Hari on his lips.

This anecdote may be compared with similar anecdotes with which the life of Buddha abounds. After discounting the miraculous part of such stories, possibly a hard core of truth remains, which is vindicated by the ensuing trends. There is no doubt that Buddhism

spread at the expense of orthodox Brahmanical faith, and later it vanished altogether from the land of its birth. These anecdotes possibly contain the kernels of truth, and the miracles associated with such stories have preserved them from oblivion.

It has been asserted that the entire story of Caitanya's encounter with the Buddhists must be apocryphal, since Buddhism had by this time disappeared from South India. This objection, however, is misconceived, for there is evidence of lingering Buddhism. The Kumbhakonam inscription of Sevappa Nayaka of Tanjore (A.D. 1580), records the gift of some land in the *agrahara* (Brahmana village) of Tirumaliarajapuram to an individual attached to a temple of Buddha at Tiruvilandura.⁷ But even more surprising, if not somewhat perplexing, is the direction given for the construction of an image of Buddha in Gopala-Bhatta's *Hari-bhakti-vilasa*, (XVIII 182; 246-47) which is considered by the Gaudiya Vaishnavas (followers of Caitanya) as their standard *smṛti* work. Gopala-bhatta describes *dhyāni* Buddha as sitting in the lotus posture, dressed in a *kasaya* (dull red) cloth, with a *civara* on his shoulders; the height of the image should be ten units (*talam*) with long ears, jewel like navel, lotus like eyes, rising from deep meditation with raised hands and the gaze of a *yogin*.

A possible explanation for the inclusion of a Buddha image in a Vaishnava text may have been the acceptance of Buddha as an *avatara* of Vishnu. The *Dasavatara-stotra* of Jayadeva's *Gita-govindam* is particularly famous; here Buddha is hailed as the incarnation of Vishnu in which he stopped the cruel practice of slaughtering animals in ritualistic sacrifices. The Gaudiya-Vaishnavas regarded this text as authoritative, and this may have inclined them to include the details of Buddha's image in their text. It may be noted here that late Puranas describe Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu born to delude the bad people to perdition through his false doctrine, that is, Buddhism.

There are indications, that at least in eastern India Vaishnavism, particularly Gaudiya Vaishnavism, accommodated the Buddhists, and possibly the mechanism of conversion included the deification of Buddha and denunciation of his creed. So far as we know, the interesting history of integration of the later Buddhists with the Vaishnavas has not yet been properly studied. It is known however, that Caitanya himself did some pioneering work in this regard in Orissa, where the Buddhists had already developed certain peculiar creeds such as worship of formless *pinda-Brahman* with the help of *Yantra*, along with Radha and Krishna.

Indeed the worship of Radha and Krishna was much anterior to Caitanya who popularised it.

For example, the following verse ascribed to Dimboka in the *Subhasitaratnakosa* may be quoted

The pilgrims in the street have warded off the painful cold
with their broad quilts sewn of a hundred rags;
they break the morning slumber of the city folk
with songs of the secret love of Madhava and Radha.⁸

It may be noted that Vidyakara, the author of this anthology was a Buddhist scholar of Bengal who lived in the latter half of the eleventh century, that is, when the Pala emperors were still controlling the destiny of eastern India. It is evident from the verse quoted above that the Radha-Krishna worshippers were poor people who had to sleep in the streets under their patched quilts in winter nights. That they were looked down upon by the intellectual elite as a group of unprincipled people is evident from the writings of Gangesa Upadhyaya of Mithila (c.A.D. 1200), the celebrated founder of the Navya-nyaya. Next to nothing is known about the pre-Caitanya Radha-Krishna worshippers. The meagre evidence at present available point to the possibility that they were Buddhists.⁹

FOOT NOTES

1. *Samyukta-nikaya*, II, p. 267; quoted by T.R.V. Murti: *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (1955). p. 51.
2. *Upasama*, 75.76. The verse mentions Sugata which is explained in the commentary as 'Buddha'; but the verse mentions 'Kascit nrpa' which is explained in the commentary as a 'prince called Arhat'. I have here followed the English translation by Vihari Lal Mitra, Calcutta, 1898.
3. Several Sanskrit biographies of Sankara are available. I am here following the Bengali biography of Sankara by Rajendralal Ghosh (*Acarya Sankara, O Ramanuja* Calcutta, 1889) which is practically based on Anandagiri's *Sankara-Vijaya*. But the B.I. edition of the *Sankara-vijaya* (1868) which I am using does not mention the Madhyamikas and the Vijnanavadins. Possibly Rajendralal Gohsh got these details from some other biography which is not available to me. Unfortunately those pages of the introduction where Ghosh discussed his sources are missing in my copy.

4. D. Sarma: *The Kharataragaccha Pattavali* compiled by Jinapala, *Indian Historical Quarterly* XI, p. 779.
5. For Caityakas see R.C. Majumdar, Ed. *History and Culture of Indian People*, Vol. II, *Age of Imperial Unity* (1968) p. 381.
6. *The Kautiliya Arthasastra*, II, Tr. by R.P. Kangle.
7. P.V. Kane: *History of Dharmasastra*, VI. p. 1014. See also *A Corpus of Inscriptions in the Telengana District of H.E.H. the Nizam's Dominion*, p. 176.
8. *An Anthology of Sanskrit Court poetry* tr. by. D.H.H. Ingalls, p. 287.
9. For details see A.K. Majumdar. *Caitanya, His Life and Doctrine, A Study in Vaisnavism*, Preface pp. vii-ix and *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute* [vol. xxxvi (1955), p. 257]