

CC-5: HISTORY OF INDIA (CE 750-1206)

V. RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DEVELOPMENTS:

A. BUDDHISM

Sixth century BCE was a period of great religious upheaval. Great teachers Confucius in China, Zoroaster in Iran, and Parmenides in Greece questioned the established socio-religious norms and focused more on ethical and moral values. In India the scenario was no different. India witnessed the growth of two great alternative religions: **Buddhism** and **Jainism**. These religions emphasised that true happiness does not lie in material prosperity or performance of rituals, but in non-violence, charity, frugality, and good social conduct.

Our understanding of Gautama Buddha and the Buddhist religious philosophy is derived mostly from early Buddhist literature. Early Buddhist literature is generally divided into canonical and non-canonical texts. Canonical texts are books which lay down the basic tenets and principles of a religion or sect. The various Buddhist schools classify their canonical literature in different ways, some into 9 or 12 Angas, others in 3 Pitakas. There are Pali, Chinese and Tibetan versions of the Tripitaka (The Three Baskets/Collections). The Tripitakas consists three books- the Sutta-pitaka, the Vinaya-pitaka and the Abhidhamma-pitaka and the three Pitakas are further divided into Nikayas or books. Non-canonical texts are texts that are not the sayings of Buddha, but commentaries and observations on canonical texts, treatise on the Dharma etc. One important non-canonical Buddhist literature is the Milindapanho.

The Buddha was born Siddhartha, son of Suddhodhana, Chief of the Sakya clan, who ruled from Kapilavastu. His mother Maya gave birth to him in a grove at Lumbini in 563 BCE, while travelling towards her parents' house and died within a few days. Soon after Buddha was born some Brahmanas saw the 32 signs of Mahapurusha or great man on his body and predicted that either he

would be a world conqueror or a world renouncer. As his mother died in child birth Siddhartha was brought up by his aunt and step mother Prajapati Gautami. Siddhartha married a young woman named Yashodhara and they had a son named Rahula.

As years passed Gautama was seized by some questions of life and worldly pleasure began to lose their value for him. The Hagiography tells us that when Siddhartha was 29 years old, he saw four things that completely shattered his composure- an old man, a sick man, a corpse and a renunciant. Thus, at the age of 29 he left his home and family and took to the life of wandering hermit and wandered for 6 years, seeking the truth.

In search of permanent remedies to the sorrows of life and spiritual solace Siddhartha became ascetic. But his experiments with the life of asceticism did not bring desired fruits. Therefore, he gave up asceticism for meditation. He meditated with the established teachers of the era-Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, but was not convinced with their instructions that man could obtain liberation from sorrow by mental discipline and knowledge only. After getting no desired result out of penance he gave and one day took bath in the Niranjana river and consumed a bowl of rice-milk offered to him by a young village woman named Sujata. He then sat down under a Pipal tree in modern Bodh Gaya and resolved not to rise again until enlightenment was attained. Thus, at the age of 35, he ultimately attained Nirvana/ Enlightenment at Gaya, under a Pipal tree at Uruvela, on the banks of river Niranjana and came to be known as the Buddha, the Enlightened one.

The Buddha delivered his first Sermon on deliverance from suffering to his five former companions in a deer park at Sarnath. This event is known as 'DharmmaChakka-Pavattana' meaning 'turning the wheel of dharma'. The Buddha wandered about, teaching his doctrines for over four decades, and

established an order of monks and nuns known as the Sangha. He finally attained Parinirvana at the age of 80 at Kushinara.

The core of Buddha's doctrine is expressed in the Ariya-Sachchani (Four Noble Truths), Ashtangika-Marga (Eight-Fold Path), Middle Path, Social Code of Conduct and Attainment of Nirvana.

The Ariya-Sachchani (**Four Noble Truths**) are

- The world is full of sorrow (dukkha)
- The cause of sorrow is desire (trishna)
- If desires are conquered, all sorrows can be removed
- The only way this can be done is following the eight-fold path or Ashtangika-Marga

The Ashtangika-Marga (**Eight-Fold Path**) are-

1. Right Vision
2. Right Aim
3. Right Speech
4. Right Action
5. Right livelihood
6. Right Exercise
7. Right Memory
8. Right Meditation

According to Buddha's teachings anyone who follows this path, considered as the 'middle path' would attain salvation. Another doctrine called Nirvana literally means blowing out or extinction of desires in existence in all its forms and the consequent cessation of suffering.

During the life of Buddha himself, the Sanga or the order of the ascetics came into existence, After the death of Buddha it undertook the responsibility of

maintaining the purity of Buddhism. The First Buddhist Council was held at Rajagriha under the chairmanship of Mahakassapa and during the reign of Ajatasatru in 483 BCE immediately after the death of Buddha. The Second Buddhist Council was held in 383 BCE during the rule of Kalashoka in Vaishali. The Third Buddhist Council was organised in 250 BCE in Pataliputra during the reign of Ashoka. The Fourth Buddhist Council took place in the 1st century CE in Kashmir during the reign of the Kushana king Kanishka.

BUDDHISM DURING THE EARLY MEDIEVAL PERIOD IN INDIA

Xuan Zang noted many large, flourishing monasteries in the Magadha area such as those of Nalanda, Tilodaka and Bodh Gaya, but also mentioned many deserted or ruined monasteries elsewhere. The Chinese pilgrim spend over five years studying the yogachara doctrine at Nalanda. Xuan Zang offers a general description of the monasteries of that time. Textual sources and inscriptions the location of the monasteries of early medieval times, and archaeological remains of these have been identified.

The Buddhist monasteries at Sanchi and Amaravati continued to flourish till the 12th-13th centuries. The Chachnama refers to Buddhism flourishing in Sindh in the north-west. The Palas of Bengal and Bihar were patrons of Buddhism. Various monasteries such as Nalanda, Odantapura, Vikramashila and Somapuri flourished in their kingdom. There was active interaction between the Tibetan monks and these centres. In Orissa remains of early medieval Buddhist stupas, monasteries and sculptures have been found at Lalitagiri and Ratnagiri.

Buddhist images of the early medieval period show great variety of iconographic forms and testify to the popularity of devotional worship. The early medieval period saw the ascendancy of Tantric Buddhism which combined ritual, magic and meditation. The earliest text of this tradition are the Manjushrimulakalpa and the Guhyasamaja (5th-6th century). Tantric Buddhism

was known as Vajrayana (literally, Thunderbolt or Diamond Vehicle). The thunderbolt and diamond both symbolized power and strength, characteristics of a person who had attained Siddhi (enlightenment). Female deities had important place in the Vajrayana pantheon. The most popular of these was Tara. The exponents of Tantric or Esoteric Buddhism were known as Siddhas or Tantra-gurus.

It is rather ironical that from the early 12th century, Buddhism began to disappear from the land of its birth. Buddhism did not completely disappear from the subcontinent, but it did decline and relegated to the geographical, political, and cultural margins. Various factors have been suggested for this- the failure of Buddhism to maintain a distinct identity in relation to the Hindu Cults, the degeneration brought in by increasing Tantric influences, and a strident Hinduism represented by Thinkers such as Shankara. The Turkish invasions led to the destruction of several monastic centres, which formed easily identifiable targets.

REFERENCE

Singh Upinder, A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India. Delhi, 2008

