



THE STORY OF BUDDHA AND HIS DHAMMA AN APPRAISAL

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ABSTRACT

The Buddha was one among those numerous heterodox religious preachers that surfaced in the middle Gangetic basin during the second half of the first millennium B.C. to resolve the then existing confusion and chaos in the society. But there is no exclusive Canonical account that discuss the biographical events of the Buddha chronologically from his birth to *nirvana*. However there are a number of interspersed sources in the canonical texts of both Pali and Sanskrit; describing the Buddha's ancestry, birth, infancy, youth, renunciation, austerities, enlightenment and nirvana. The complete biography of the Buddha found in the later Pali commentaries and chronicles as well as in the Sanskrit works, was oven out of those catered evidences. Therefore the current paper explore the historical outline of Buddha, the founder of Buddhism.

Key words: Buddha, Gangetic basin, renunciation, enlightenment, and liberation

Introduction:

The second half of the first millennium B.C. was an epoch in the annals of world heritage for it witnessed the advent of new technologies in the field of production, gradual transformation of petty kingdoms into empires and development of anxiety in the minds of kings, philosophers and common people with regard to the changes taking place in the social and religious urges of the people's lives. Throughout the world people's minds were stirred up with the issues related to religion and salvation. In this context new thinkers like Mahavira and Gautama Buddha in India, Zoroaster in Iran, Heraclitus and Parmenides in Greece and Confucius and Lao Tse in China came out with new religious philosophies to resolve the then existing confusion and chaos in the society. In Indian context, similar changes like gradual replacement of old tribal polities by a large number of regional kingdoms, advent of new agricultural techniques, growth of trade and commerce, urbanisation, proliferation of castes, questioning of orthodox religious practices and rise of new religious philosophies took place¹.

A lot of archaeological and literary sources testify the socio-cultural and politico-economic transformations in the middle Gangetic basin, during the second half of the first millennium B.C. Abundance of information has been excavated by the archaeologists from Ahichchhatra, Hastinapur, Kausambi, Ujjain, Sravasti and many more that find mention in Brahmanical, Jain and Buddhist literary texts². Not only the early Buddhists and Jaina texts but also the Vedic, Shastric and other Sanskrit literature too shed light on different aspects of early Indian history and philosophy. But one cannot deny the fact that the Buddhist Canonical texts such as the *Vinaya Pitaka* dealing with the disciplinary rules of



the Buddhist Sangha, the *Sutta Pitaka* in which the doctrine of the master is eloquently described and the *Abhidhamma Pitaka* discussing the doctrinal aspects and particularly the *Jataka* tales explaining the previous births of the Buddha are an unparalleled source for the study on the changing patterns of life and thought in the middle Gangetic plains during the second half of the first millennium B.C. In the process of corroborating the archaeological evidences with that of the literary texts one can clearly underline a major social and economic transformation in north-east India, including eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar around that period, where the introduction of new agricultural techniques and the use of iron implements took place due to the penetration of the Vedic people into that region³. Apart from that the slaves were employed as labourers in the agrarian operations for the first time.⁴ All these led to the tremendous increase in the produce and that surplus necessitated the exchange system. The dynamics of exchange lead to the organisation of trade and commerce at different levels: local, itinerant and international. The migration of people from rural to urban due to extensive commercial activities brought influential changes in the social life of the people. On the other hand the use of iron weapons and the accumulated wealth collected in the form of taxes enhanced the military might and economic strength of the warrior classes. They made them too powerful, consolidated their authority over large territorial states and to upkeep the royal authority, founded a strong centralised administrative bureaucracy⁵.

Caste infiltration due to territorial expansion and integration of tribals into the state and society and migration of people in the name of trade and commerce to different places created multi-dimensional conflicts within the society like racial, social, economic and cultural or otherwise Aryan verses non-Aryan, Brahmin verses Kshatriya and Brahmana-Kshatriya verses Vaisya-Sudra as well as rural collectivism verses urban individualism. All these factors developed unrest in the psyche of the people as they were incompatible with the then existing Vedic religious norms of purity and pollution, hierarchy of social system, and ritual centrality in religious observances. Hence there was an urge for an alternate religious thought that could appease their souls and guarantee peaceful spiritual life. In such scenario many heterodox religious preachers surfaced on the field, out of whom, Buddha stood foremost in the scene. The doctrine preached by him was more convincing and suitable to the social, political and economic needs of that time.

Ancestry: There is no exclusive Canonical account that discuss the biographical events of the Buddha chronologically from his birth to *nirvana*. However there are a number of interspersed sources in the canonical texts of both Pali and Sanskrit; describing the Buddha's ancestry, birth, infancy, youth, renunciation, austerities, enlightenment and nirvana. The complete biography of the Buddha found in the later Pali commentaries and chronicles as well as in the Sanskrit works, was oven out of those catered evidences.⁶ About his ancestry a folk-lore type story from Ambattasutta of *Diganikaya*, informs that; he belonged



to a Sakyan clan⁷. Likewise the *Mahapadanisutta* of *Diganikaya* enlists the names of Gautama's father and mother along with their royal capital.⁸

Childhood and courtly life: The absence of hard bound facts is the major drawback for the study of early Buddhism. By and large the incidents related with the life of the Buddha are more co-related with the rule of the emperor Asoka (274- 236 B.C.), who was instrumental in transforming Buddhism from a small sect of ascetics into a pan-Indian religion. Even the date of the Buddha's life is conjectured basing on Asoka's date. It is traditionally held that the death of Buddha took place 100 years before Asoka. Modern scholars have on the whole agreed to place His life between 563 and 483 B.C. Buddha belonged to the invincible Shakyan Clan. His father was Suddhodana and mother was Maya.⁹ His original name was Siddhartha. He was married to Yasodhara and had a son named Rahula.¹⁰ He lived a life of luxuries and comforts in royal palace for twenty nine years. He was not exposed to the outer world until all these years. It is said that Buddha led a luxurious life inside the royal household having three lotus pools and three palaces (one for the cold, one for the hot and one for the rainy season) for himself.¹¹

Renunciation and Enlightenment: Regarding his renunciation and enlightenment different texts give different versions. For example Ariya-pariyesana Sutta (discourse of the noble quest) of the *Majjhima Nikaya*, informs that, he himself, at first, pursued what was subject to rebirth, decay and rest and then when reflected on their vanities, he was led to pursue the consummate peace of Nirvana, which is free from birth, death, decay, disease, sorrow and impurity. Contrary to the above, a passage from *Anguttanikaya* narrates a different version that when Siddhartha Gotama attained the age of twenty nine, Devas felt that it was the right time for him to turn to spiritualism and so they created an instinct in him to visit the park. On his way to the park, he coincidentally met with poignant reflections of old age, sickness and death. From then, the elation in his life disappeared. Later on, in the *Nidanakatha* this legend was further developed to give it a concrete shape, where the sight of a contemplating hermit was added to the earlier three poignant reflections.¹²

After encountering all these adversaries of life, Buddha resolved to gain freedom from all such poignant adversaries of life. He was impressed by the sight and the words of a mendicant, whom he came across.

*Nara-pungava janma-mrtyu bhitah sramanah
Pravrajitosmi moksa-hetoh*¹³

I am a sramana, an ascetic, who in fear of birth
and death have left home life to gain liberation

Buddha deemed the highest goal of life to be the stage which is free from old age, fear, decease, birth, death and anxieties as well as absence of continues renewal of activity.



*Pade tu yasminn na jara na bhir na run na janma
Naivoparamo na cadhayah
Tam eva manye purusartham uttamam na vidyate
Yatra punah punah kriya¹⁴*

In quest of the highest goal Buddha renounced the worldly life in the mid-night, on one full moon-night of *Ashada*, when everyone was asleep; he abandoned all his attachments and retired to forest. This incident is known as *Mahabiniskramana* or the great renunciation. In quest of his spiritual knowledge he first met Alara kalama and later Uddaka Ramaputta for spiritual guidance.¹⁵ Dissatisfied with them, he went to Senanigra in Urvula and practised severe penance for six years along with five mendicants. Later on he realised that extreme austerities were not essential for attaining spiritual knowledge, left those mendicants and sat under a Banyan tree, called Ajapala Nigrodha. After forty nine days of meditation he attained the enlightenment and from then on wards he was called as the Buddha.

First sermon: After his enlightenment he wished to deliver his first sermon to his earlier teacher Alara kalama and Uddaka Rama Putta but through his divine eye he found that those two were dead. Then he preferred to deliver his first sermon to his earlier five companions and on his way to the park in Saranath he met two laymen Tappasu and Bhallika, who had an opportunity to listen Buddha. He reached Deer park in Saranath and delivered his first sermon to them.¹⁶ It was popularly known as *Dhamma-chakka-Pavattana* (Sanskrit: Dharma-chakra- Pravarthan), putting the wheel of Dhamma in motion.

The great decease: From then onwards he kept on wandering from place to place to awaken as many people as he can. Only in rainy season he and his followers used to take rest, which is popularly called *Vassa*. On one day in his tireless journey, he was offered a pork meat by a smith as a meal. This made him sick and he slowly proceeded to Kusinagara and there he had his last breath, popularly called as *Mahaparinibbana*.

Central doctrine of Buddhism: The position of man is supreme in Buddhism. Man is his own master and there is nothing like any other supreme being¹⁷. The entire doctrine of Buddhism is carved according to the needs of the individuals. It emphasised more on the ethical aspects and upheld the egalitarian ideology and considered 'Man' as a Supreme Being.¹⁸ The nucleus of *Sakyamuni*'s teachings lay in the "first sermon," especially in the doctrine of 'Four Noble Truths'.¹⁹ The Four Noble Truths; that is to say, the Noble Truth of suffering, Noble Truth of cessation of suffering, the Noble Truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering.²⁰ Apart from that the principle of 'conditioned arising' (*paticca-samutpada*), the 'doctrine of three characteristics' (*Tilakkana*) and the doctrine of 'eight fold path' (Astangika magga) are central to Buddhism.



He was primarily an ethical teacher and reformer, not a metaphysician. He never entertained the metaphysical questions like whether the soul was different from the body, whether it survived death, whether the world is finite or infinite, eternal or non-eternal. He didn't encourage abstruse enquiries about god and soul. There is no room for 'soul' or 'self' as a separate entity²¹. For him discussing a problem for the solution of which there is no proper evidence, will lead to different partial views like the conflicting one-sided accounts of an elephant by different blind persons who touch its different parts²².

Conclusion: The ethical and egalitarian precepts of the Buddha could fascinate different sections of populace in the society and negotiate their religious anxieties of the time. Buddhism is a religion of kindness, humanity and equality. Hence, Buddhism as a humanist force, profoundly affected religious and moral ideas of the time, and acted as a powerful catalytic factor in transforming existing social conditions.

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