



# Understanding the Philosophy of Buddhism and its challenge to Brahmanism.

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## Abstract

The principles of Buddhism and Jainism started a new era in the history of Indian thought and philosophy. Buddhism became a revolution for the then Indian society and culture. It vehemently opposed the Brahmanical authority and religious orthodoxy. The then political, economic and social circumstances were ripe for the religious and social revolution which emerged as a shape of Buddhism. During 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE the caste distinction became a prime factor in expounding the qualities of an individual. Because once position in a society was determined by his birth not by his deeds. The time gave privileges to enquiry into the problems of life and the way to attain eternal happiness and peace. After a long and uncertain journey Siddhartha (founder of Buddhism) was able to find out the answers of his questions. He attained Buddhata and came to be known as Tathagata. He devoted his life to the cause of the people how one would refrain from sorrow, from old age, from illness and from death. He liberate himself from the recycle of birth. Buddhism is based on rationalism. It teaches man to depend upon his own knowledge. Buddhism is a religion of individual freedom and endeavour. It always respect the quality of individual.

**Keywords:** Caste system, religion, philosophy, buddhism, brahmanism.

## 1. Introduction

The 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE has a great importance in the history of North India due to the political, economic, social changes and the development of philosophical enquiry. Increase of population, craft, specialization, trade and circulation of money economy created social complexity. The expansion of agriculture and urbanization led to the encroachment on forest and interaction between nature and culture (Upinder Singh).

For the majority of Asian people, India is known as a birth place of Buddhism not for any political system or economy. The people of China, Burma, Thailand, Japan, Cambodia regarded Buddhism as their guiding principles for their daily lives. It is the main force of the growth of civilization (D.D. Kosambi, 2001). Buddha age inaugurated the great spiritual and philosophical trend to India. After the emergence of Buddhism the conservative schools of philosophy i.e. Brahmanism and others were compelled to rectify their views and framed rules to

defence their ideology. It is said that Brahmanism killed Buddhism by a fraternal embrace. Because, Brahmanism include many Buddhist practices, condemned animal sacrifices and referred Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu. (S. Radhakrishnan, 1923).

## 2. Objective of the study

The objective of the present paper is-

Firstly, to study how the prevailing rigid caste system in India had helped in the emergence of Buddhism.

Secondly, the philosophy of Buddhism would also be analyzed that would offer a challenge to Brahmanism.

Thirdly a critical analysis is also made on whether Buddhism is a religion or a philosophy.

## 3. Methodology

Methodology of the paper is descriptive. In order to achieve in the objectives both primary and secondary source materials have been consulted.

#### 4. Background

Religion played an important role in uniting the society. It is the collection of belief, cultural systems and relate humanity to an order of existence. Religion helps us the attainment of the supreme God. The two religions Buddhism and Jainism emerged with some new religious doctrine which were different from Hinduism, the dominant religion of India during that period. Buddhism emerged as a revolt against Brahmanical authority. The complexity of rituals and prevalence of sacrifices of animals and the hegemony of Brahmin priest with a false sense of superiority forced the common people to pass a very unhappy life. The weaker and poorer section of the society eagerly awaiting for the emergence of some force to remove their miseries and degradation of society.

During that period Brahmanas attributed a diverse origin to the caste system. Their views was based on 10<sup>th</sup> Mandal of the Rig Veda called Purush Sukta which declare that Brahmana was born out of the mouth of Brahma, the Kashatriyas from his arm the Vaishyas from his stomach and the Sudra from his feet. The Brahmanas occupied the highest position in that society and lived on the charity of the people on the fees obtained by the performance of various rites. The Kashatriyas were primarily concerned with the administration and protection of the country. The Baishyas were connected with the economic life of the country. The Sudras occupied the lowest position in that society. The caste system did not give even the ordinary human rights to a large section of Indian society. (Durges war Roy 1998). Due to the existence of caste system, qualities of a individual is totally ignored.

At that time India was not politically united. The 16 Mahajanapadas were ruled by the kings known as 'Ganas' or 'Sangha' where power was shared by a number of persons collectively called rajas. It was in such a political and social situation, Siddhartha was born. His father Suddhodana belong to the Shakya clan. His wife was Mahamaya. The royal couple was eventually destined to become the parents of the greatest man even born. Being the son of a royal family he was especially trained in the art of warfare and administration. But he was profoundly compassionate. His love for all beings great or small identify his unique personality. Although he was surrounded by all kinds of luxury, the young prince was never happy. His enlightenment after a long journey was the most important and spiritual achievement in the history of

mankind. (Sunthorn Plamintr)

#### 5. Principles of buddhism

After become the Buddha, he questioned the authority of Veda condemned blood sacrifices denied the existence of supreme creative spirit and inculcated reference for saints who from their point of view attained supreme knowledge. He had given importance of individual strength through which one can attain liberation from the trials and tribulations or worldly existence from Brahmanism.

He stressed on following the middle path overruling the virtues of self-indulgence and self mortification. He asked the people to concentrate on right views, right resolve, right speech, right recollection, right livelihood, right effort and right meditation. The middle path shown by him was not a religious revelation but corresponding to a social revelation assuring equality and opportunity to all. (Balangoda Ananda Maitreya Jayasili and D. J. Subasinha, 1993). His attempt to set up a social system for all was only a tool to improve the then existing pattern rather than to replace it. While Brahmanism believed in the involvement of God and deity in the origin of the government and state, Buddhism described it as a social process of gradual changes in the political, social, economic and environment. (Ramila Thapar, 2002). Buddhist concept of *Karma* (deed) was not associated to the regulation of Varna society. The improvement of one's *Karma* to lead a better life was dependent on observing a code of social ethics based on eight fold path. Man is the builder of his own destiny. We make our self pure by our own free good volitions and actions. Whether a man does through his body, speech or thought are to be called as *Karma*.

Buddha teaches rationalism to his disciples and condemn faith in tradition and authority. He advised them to trust in their own reason. He always denied tradition and referred it as a weak argument. He said that "You can take nothing from me. You must be righteous through your own efforts. You must depend on yourselves for the extinctions of all sufferings. (Jadunath Sinha, 1985 p95). The Sunadanda Sutta asserts that Brahmanhood was not a matter of birth, who had true knowledge he is only a Brahmana not those who performed Vedic rites (Upinder Singh, 2008) Buddhist principles created a debate and discussion within the Brahmanas. It is also important that not all Brahmanas were ritual specialists. So, some of them accepted the views of Buddhism.

Buddhist philosophy the truth of sufferings is to be compared with a disease, the truth of the origin of sufferings with the cause of the disease, the truth of extinction of sufferings with the cure of the disease, the truth of the way to cessation of sufferings with the medicine. Such doctrines were totally different from Brahmanism.

## 6. Impact on the contemporary society

Buddhism started in one corner of India and made its way to Ceylon (Srilanka, Burma, Tibet, Central Asia, Java, Sumatra, Japan, Borneo, Champa, China and Siam. The people who were unable to perform complicated rituals of the Brahmin's welcomed Buddhism. The practice of Hinduism had been made very expensive by the Brahmanas. The teaching of Buddha did not involve expenditure. The younger and weaker section of then society was attracted towards Buddhism. Buddha's disciples were from different social background. As a result of training they were equally endowed with spiritual achievements. They were the kings and the princes, peasants and labourers, Brahmins and outcaste, teachers, traders, ascetics, sinners and even notorious bandits all of them having been inspired by the teachings of Buddha. They had consequently abandoned their earlier ways of life and took upon themselves the holy vows, pure and sublime in all respects and attained the ultimate realization of truth (Balangoda Ananda Maitreya Jayasili and D.J. Subasinha, 1993). The philosophy of Buddhism always opposed the theory that considers the states of a person by birth. Such a philosophy must have been welcomed by the Sudras and the Vaishyas who were fed up with the supremacy of and pride of the Brahmanas. Buddha told that there was no necessity of priests and other intermediary in order to attain 'Nirvana'. As Buddhism was economical and practical it was welcomed by the common masses.

Some modern authorities believed that the Buddha had no intention of founding a new religion and never looked on its distinct from the popular sects of the time. He evolved a sort of super doctrine from the popular belief which could help his followers further along the road to salvation. (A.L. Basham, 1997)

Two hundred years after his lifetime Buddhism became a distinct religion. It spread throughout India and other parts of the world under the patronage of great rulers of India such as Bimbisara, Ajatsatru, Kalasok, Ashoka, Kainshka, Harshabardhana and

under the rulers of the pala dynasty. It constitutes the most scientific and practical teachings so more and more knowledgeable people were also attracted towards it. Buddha taught men to be strong to take responsibility of his own action and to be brave to face its consequences. (Sasan Bangsha Mohathera, 2009). Even the Christian faith in its early days was greatly influenced by its teaching. Albert Einstein the greatest scientist in the 20<sup>th</sup> century regarded Buddhist doctrine is based on science. He said, 'religion of the futures will be a cosmic religion. It would transcend a personal God and avoid dogmas and theology covering both the natural and spiritual; it should be based on religious sense arising from the experience of all things natural and spiritual and a meaningful unity. It there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs it would be Buddhism.' (S. Dhammika, 2000, p6)

The establishment of Buddhist monasteries accelerated of education. Education was not restricted to the upper castes only. The directives in the functioning of a monastery was that opinion was to be democratically discussed. The Bhikhu and the Bhikhunies were referred to as Shramanas or Samana. They were mentioned even by Alberuni (Morocon traveller) who observed that they lived as equal members of the order denying caste distinctions. The denouncer discarded the social obligations required through family and caste ties but entered an alternative society that of the Sangha. (Ramila Thapar, 2003)

## 7. Is Buddhism a philosophy or religion

The question has often arose is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy. Buddhism is not strictly a religion in the sense in which that would be commonly understood, for it is not a system of faith and worship, owing any allegiance to a supernatural God. We can rightly be called that Buddha is the first philosopher of the world. A broad study of Buddhism revealed that in their sense it is a set of principles or ethical laws based on realism. Buddha himself is not a imagine character. It does not demand blind faith from its adherents.

On the other hand, it cannot be strictly called a philosophy because philosophy deals mainly with the knowledge and is not concerned with practice whereas Buddhism lays special emphasis on practice and realization. In one sense Buddhism is not a philosophy but philosophy of philosophies (Balangoda Ananda Maitreya Jayarili, 1993)

## 8. Conclusion

From the above discussion it is evident that Buddhism completely broke away from Brahmanism. With a rational mind, Buddha accepted the doctrine of Karma and rebirth as the common goal of liberation from the eternal process of 'Avagaman' coming and going birth and death. He was of course critical of the efficacy of sacrifices and rituals for the firmly opposed the pleasure and prosperity that was sought at the cost of other suffering. It gives more importance to actual practice.

Buddhism had played an important role in shaping or developing the civilization of India in many ways. It helps in uplifting human mind and gave them a separate identity as an independent individual. After the study of Buddhism, some scholars regarded him as a social reformer. He was the pioneer who stood against the caste distinction and favoured equality for all class of people. We can also be regarded him as the first exponent who in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE preached humanism before it

flowered in the 14<sup>th</sup> century CE in Europe. Like Buddhism, the basic concept of humanism is that man as an individual, was capable of making his own discussions and developing his skills. Buddhism gives us mental strength to fight against our sorrows. It teaches us to accept the realism of the Earth. It teaches us what is patient, discipline, and how we can improve our position in a society. By the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE Buddhism started a significant space for women's spiritual aspirations. Numerous Buddhist Bhikkhunis and Upasikas donated in the establishment of stupas and monastery site. Buddhism is a religion without God. It had given importance in the purity of heart. It also teaches that all men are born equally and are free to choose whatever is best for themselves. Liberation does not depend on the grace of God. He does not grant liberation to men, but he teaches them the way to achieve liberation. The basis of Buddhism is non-violence. In true sense Buddhism is a revolution, which has far reaching impact upon human beings.

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