

Development And Decline Of Buddhism In South India

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Abstract

In this paper an attempt has been made to describe the entry, growth and disappearance of the globally reputed Buddhist faith and practice in the Southern part of India especially in the Tamil land. Grandeur of Buddhism lies not only in the scriptural texts, teachings and practices, etc. but in the organisational techniques like the Sangam paved the way for the spread of Buddhism in all parts of the world through royal patronage, scholarly interpretations, and collective modes of propagation and institutionalized methods of worship in the monasteries. The methodology resorted to here are both historical and descriptive, but highly informative and explanatory.

The entry of Buddhism was traced from the historical records especially of the travellers, and the notes of eminent emissaries, literary sources, excavations, inscriptions, art and architecture, viharas etc. The development of this faith has been studied from the grand epics like Manimekalai, Virasoliam, Kundalakesi etc. The Tamil emperors, even though followed different native religions, they did not hate the promotion of Buddhist practices both individually and collectively. They constructed monasteries and donated lands and revenues to sustain them. The Bodhisattvas too contributed their might in maintaining the prestige of Buddhism through their commitment and praxis.

Besides the historical back ground, this study accounts for the existence of Buddhist centres in different parts of Tamil country as well as the origin of new cult known as the avalokitesvara. Also more information are obtained from the inscriptions, sculptures, art and architecture regarding the prevalence of Buddhism in the Southernmost part of India. It is to be proudly noted that this faith did not flourish without philosophical themes and doctrinal expositions.

The final section deals with the reasons for the decline and disappearance of Buddhism from this land and concludes with a few suggestions to revive this holy faith in this soil.

Keywords: Dhamma, Sangha, Bodhisattva, Brahmi scripts, viharas, arahats, akaram, paramitas, mantras, inscriptions and rock-cut carvings.

Introduction

Buddhism, a living faith of the world, founded by a prince turned enlightened sage of the aristocratic Saka clan, has made significant contribution to the realm of religious pursuits as well as intellectual interrogations, cultural heritage, social stability, moral enhancement, artistic development and literary zeal. Though it declares life being filled with sorrows, it is not subscribing to pessimism; it apparently inculcates the profoundest egoism, yet it is extolled for its loftiest moral denominations; it denies the metaphysical self, but it insists total responsibility for our actions through rebirth; it denies the existence of a supreme God, still it guarantees perfect liberation from the turmoil of worldly existence.

Buddhism received royal patronage for its exalted and sublime ideals along with scholarly support for its continued existence so that millions of followers embraced this simple religion with high thinking. Above all, this religion advocates deeply humanism in all spheres and promoted equality at all levels of human existence. As a well organised religion, Buddhism promulgates universal truths in a four-fold manner, the theory of dependent origination as an offshoot of the second noble truth, the famous eight practical pathways to perfection as well as the tri-ratna (three jewels viz. the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha). These unique and meritorious doctrines having universal appeal and the magnificent personality of its founder made this religion more popular since they amalgamated both theory and practice.

Entry of Buddhism to South India:

Emperor Asoka stimulated strenuous efforts to make Buddhism flourish through missionary zeal and socio-political service. According to the Ceylon chronicle Mahavamsa, after the successful completion of the third Buddhist council held at Pataliputra under the patronage of Asoka and under the presence of Tissa Moggaliputta of Ceylon during the 3rd century B.C., the emperor sent many monks along with his son Mahendra to Ceylon to preach the gospel of Buddhism there. It is highly probable that they must have visited Tamil country on their route to Ceylon. Again, the origin of Buddhism can be traced to Asoka's Dharma Vijaya and the rock edicts II and XIII give a fairly good account of his territory in the 3rd century B.C. along with the sending of his missionaries to Tamil Nadu and Ceylon. Rock edict II mentions the names of the dynasties that were prevalent then in the Tamil country and Ceylon viz. Chola, Pandiya, Satyaputra, Keralaputra and Tamraparni. The last name in this list is identified as Ceylon while the name Satyapura refers to Athiyaman and Keralaputra refers to Cheraman.

Even though Buddhism has been out of focus in the Tamil land, it is an undeniable fact that in the antique past it was one of the centrifugal life forces of Tamil culture. This faith gave an impetus and invigoratively nurtured the Tamil language, literature and grammar which can be evidenced from the

availability of several art works and sculptural artefacts that bear the testimony of indelible Buddhist imprint. In his travel report the Chinese monk Yuan Chwang, who visited the Dravida (Tamil) country in 637 A.D., mentions about the existence of a large monastery (samgharama) near Kanchipuram which served as the rendezvous for the most eminent scholars and Acarya Dharmapala stayed there and wrote several commentaries on Pali texts. He also states about the stupa about 100 feet high, built by emperor Asoka to commemorate the victory of the Buddha over Tirthikas in religious debate and admitted several people in to his fold. Kanchipuram was a well-known centre of Buddhism during the regime of the Pallava dynasty in teaching and cultural activities associated with Buddhism. In the Talaing chronicles, the source book of Burmese Buddhism the names of ancient Pali rulers like Asokavarman and Buddhavarman finds a place who visited this centre. Buddhist scholars like Dignaga and Dharmapala went to North India from Kanchipuram and Bodhidharma went to China and founded the Zen school of Buddhism (ch'an) based on Mahayana Buddhism. According to Yuan Chwang, there existed more than 100 monasteries with about 10,000 monks all belonging to the Sthavira school.

The Chinese visitor refers to the prevalence of a few monasteries in Malakuta in the Pandiya country accommodating very few monks. He also mentions about the Avalokitesvara cult in the potaloka mountains. Akitta Jataka refers to Kavarippumpattinam, a capital and port city of the imperial Chola dynasty, in the kingdom of Tamila. It also refers to the visit of great monks of Theravada, such as Buddhadatta, Buddhaghosa and Dharmapala who engaged in religious activities in Ceylon and the Tamil land. Abhidhammapatara depicts this city as a wealthy and luxurious one. Both Silappathikaram and Manimekalai, the two grand epics of Tamil language, refer to Indira vihara, built by Mahendra, son of Asoka, who visited this town when he proceeded to Ceylon as a Buddhist missionary.“ The spread of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu is known from the epi-graphical evidences found in its ancient caves and stone beds. Brahmi scripts in a number of caves have been found in Tamil Nadu mainly in the Madurai, Tirunelveli and Chengalpattu districts. It is clear from history that Brahmi script was popularised by Emperor Asoka through his Dharma vijaya; such scripts are found in almost all places in India. The name Dravida or Damidi (Tamili) is given to the South Indian Brahmi scripts.”1. (Murthy, R.S., p.XIII). The above name is noticed in a few Jaina works and Lalitavistara, an early Mahayana Buddhist work.

Development of Buddhism in Tamil country:

We come across a happy blending of all the healthy and wealthy elements of various sects of Buddhism in the cultural heritage of the Tamils which is vouchsafe for religious tolerance and harmony in Tamil Buddhism.

The evolution of Tamil Buddhism can be gleaned from the Tamil epic *Manimekalai* which incorporates the gamut of the philosophical truths of all the schools of Buddhism including the mantrayana and tantric trends. We can also notice the indigenization of alien concepts of Buddhism which promulgates universalism and humanism as the chief characteristics. As has been advocated by the Buddha, the followers taught his teachings in the native language so that the laity can easily comprehend all the complicated doctrines and such a phenomenon took place in the Tamil epic from the linguistic, literary and cultural perspectives. A large number of philosophical terms of Sanskrit has been converted to Tamil in the Buddhist literatures. Though *Manimekalai* is a complete Buddhist epic depicting the doctrinal expositions as well as religious pursuits of this faith, this universal religion has influenced to a great extent the *Thirukkural*, *Silappathikaram*, *Veerasoliyam*, *Kundalakesi*, etc. the famous Tamil literary works. Sathanar, the author of *Manimekalai*, portrays the Jaina monks as merciless ones who seldom work for human welfare. On the contrary, he praises a Buddhist monk, Cankataruman (Sanghadharma) as a benevolent one, committed to selfless service to humanity.² (V,II.45-70) He also insists that people must acquire adequate knowledge of other religions in order to understand Buddhism in a better manner. "When we read *Manimekalai*, we come across the following features which are largely characteristic of Buddhist literature. The first feature is the frequent occurrence of events pertaining to the previous births of the main characters. The second one is the abundant use of supernatural events. We come across these two aspects in *Cilappatikaram* too. But Cattanar uses these techniques more profusely and in a more complex way than Ilanko. These aspects can be seen embodied in a large measure in other Buddhist works written in other languages. This leads us to assume that Cattanar might have had some Buddhist works as his model."² (Hikosaka Shu, p.55)

The *Manimekalai* uses the expression, *Taanam taankic cheelam thalaininru* which means 'upholding charity and prominence in keeping the precepts' which are similar to the paramitas of Bodhisattva of Mahayana tradition. Though the author portrays the heroine, *Manimekalai* as a Bodhisattva, he composes this text for the common man to comprehend the basic doctrines of Buddhism from Tamil perspective and cultural heritage i.e. his audience are not the bhikku and bikkuni, but mainly the upasaka and upasika. Saathanar translates the ratna-traya viz. the Buddha, the dharma and the sangha as *mummani*—the three gems—which are common to both the monks and nuns of Buddhism and the lay people as well. "Aravana Atikal (a Bodhisattva par excellence) tells *Manimekalai* that good men would eschew the ten kinds of evil deeds and follow the silas and take upon themselves the doing of dana. Consequently, they will be born in one among the three classes of beings – the devas, human beings and Brahmans. They will live a life of bliss and ecstasy as a result of their good deeds (*nalvinai*). This clearly shows that

the instruction given here is for the Buddhist lay people. When preaching the bhikkus and bhikkunis, there will be normally no mention about taking birth in Heaven. As such, it is clear that the order dana, sila and taking birth in Heaven. But sila and dana can be included into Rokusuinen, i.e. the Buddha, dharma, samgha, sila, dana and its result viz. taking birth in heaven. Therefore, with regard to Buddhist doctrines expounded in Manimekalai, it is necessary to know that these doctrines are meant for the Buddhist lay people and not for bhikkus or bhikkunis,” 3 (Hikosaka Shu, p.98)

In the thirtieth canto of Manimekalai, Dvadasanga-pratitya sautpata or the twelve linked chain of the theory of dependent origination is expounded which are explained through Aravana Adikal one after another in excellent classical Tamil terms with simple and easy illustrations. Virasoliyam, a Tamil grammatical work by Puttamittirar, is a contrastive-transfer grammar for Tamil with Sanskrit, to teach Tamil to Buddhists who came from Sanskrit background. The polemics of Nilakesi, a Jaina work and the Sivagnana Siddhiyar, a Saiva philosophical treatise develop arguments against the Buddhist concept of ‘no soul’ (anatma) theory in a manifold dimension. While criticising Buddhism from the Saiva religious point of view, St. Thirugnana Sambandhar, an infant saint, points out the salient points of Buddhism. Scholars have found out there are several similarities between Thirukkural, a moral compendium in Tamil and the Dhammapada, a Buddhist work, not only in conceptual framework but in the illustrations too.

The Cult of Bodhsattvas as Envisaged in Tamil Literature:

There are three modes of moral and spiritual life in Buddhism:

1. Sravakayana or Arhatyana and
2. Pratyeka-Buddha-yana (these two are collectively called Dvi-yana and belong to Hinayana)
3. Bodhisattvayana or Eka-yana belonging to Mahayana

In the Manimekalai, the ideal of arhat has been noticed. The father of Kovalan who is the father of Manimekalai resolved to become an arhat to observe the dhamma possessed by kindness (anbukol arathirkku arukanen). They preferred secluded life to attain salvation rather than showing altruistic concern. Those who resort to the pratyeka (private or solitary) Buddha develop supreme knowledge and self- enlightenment without the guidance of a master nor do they intend to become a guide to others. The merit of a Bodhisattva is greater than that of an arhat or a pratyeka. Universal salvation is the prerogative principle of Bodhisattvayana. In the Nilakesi, a Jaina polemic Tamil epic, for the first time the word Bodhisattva explicitly finds a place.

(Pothicattuvar puttar enappatu neethiyar periyaar—the Bodhisattvas and the Buddhas are great for their ethical excellence).

“In Kundalakesi ‘Vada Carukkam’ of the same text, the ideal of Bodhisattva has been picturesquely portrayed. Herein, it is stated that until he reached Nirvana, he envisaged what was pleasant to others and preached the dharma to all beings. He never aspired any benefit for himself. He suffered for the welfare of others. He protected those who took refuge unto him. He was the Lord known as Potiyan, (i.e.Bodhisattva). In this context it is to be remembered that the hymnologists of the Saiva devotional literature (Tirumurai) have also used the word Potiyar to mean the Bodhisattvas and the followers of Buddhism.”⁴ (Kandhsamy, S.N. pp. 268-269) Viasoliyam, the Tamil grammatical work, Avalokitesvara has been glorified as a Bodhisattva. He is regarded to be the preceptor of Saint Agathiyar who learnt Tamil from him and disseminated the language in the world. The concept of Bodhisattva is in total agreement with the major details furnished in the Pali and Sanskrit texts especially in the cultivation of paramitas and constant practice of dhutangas. (Nilakesi)

Buddhist Centres in Tamil land:

The contact of Buddhist monks in Tamil land was due to the commercial interaction of traders with Tamil merchants from the Mauryan country, besides the deputation of missionaries by Emperor Asoka to spread Buddhism. From the excavations carried out in different parts of this land so many material evidences are found like polished ware shreds, punch-marked coins, panel of the Buddha, viharas, copper image of the Buddha, Buddha Pada made of Palnad stone. There were four important Buddhist centres prominently bear the testimony of the prevalence of Buddhist worship and cultural activities.

1. Kanchipuram: Before 7th century A.D. nearly 10000 monks inhabited and practised Buddhism in more than 100 monasteries, as envisaged by Yuan Chwang. According to Manimekalai, a Caitya was located here. In Tharumadhavanam a Chola king by name, Ilankilli built a Buddha Pidakai. At Kanchi, Aravana Adikal, Manimekalai, Dharmapala, Anurudhar (the author of Abhidhammathasangaha) and other prominent monks lived and practised Buddhism. Mahendravarman, a Pallava king wrote Mattavilasa Prahasanam, a farce literature, mentions a vihara known as Raja Vihara. A grey ware fragment bearing Brahmi letters “Putalatisa” a name of a Buddhist monk and a

small circular structure connected with the votive stupa and a few remnants of Buddhist stupas have been unearthed in the archaeological excavations.

2. Kaverippumpattinam: Buddhadata and Buddhaghosa lived here in a famous monastery and the latter wrote Abhidhammathabaram. From Melaiyur a bronze image of Maitreya was discovered. Both Silappathikaram and Manimekalai, two Tamil grand epic literatures glorify Indhira vihar supposed to be built by Indhira, a celestial deity of Hinduism and some scholars are of the opinion that this vihar was built by Mahendhira, the son of King Asoka. The monastery where Bhuddhabatta lived in kaverippumpattinam was built by Kanakadasa, a donor of a slab of the Amaravathi stupa. Manimekalai speaks about Cakkaravalam, Kuccarakkutikai, marble mandapas and Uvavanam.

3. Nagappattinam: It was a port city and a prominent centre of Buddhism during the Chola dynasty. History reveals that Narasimhavarman, a pallava king built a Buddhist temple here known as China Pagoda, at the behest of a China king to enable the Chinese merchants to worship Lord Buddha. Vajrabodhi, the eminent Buddhist Acharya (661-730 A.D.) went to China and preached Vajrayana there and presented the famous work Maha Prajna Paramita to the Chinese king. The Chola kings Rajaraja and Rajendhira patronised Buddhism by all means. From a concealed chamber five images of Buddha were discovered here.

4. Madurai: Maduraikkanchi describes that womenfolk accompanied by their husbands and children visiting a Buddhist vihara with flowers and incense to adore the Buddha. According to the Pulankurichchi inscription, a palli (settlement) existed for the dwelling of the followers of Buddhism. At Putamankalam a Buddhist centre also existed as envisaged in the Vinayavinichchaya of Buddhadata.

Besides these four major centres, there were other centres prevailed to promote Buddhism in Tamil land. A number of artefacts were found at Karur with Buddhist origin. A golden ring bearing the figure of Mithuna couple may have been influenced by Amaravati art. At Vanchi, the erstwhile capital of Karur, there was a beautiful caitya worshipped by the devotees of Buddha. The recent discoveries of Buddhist remains in places like Madras, Kadahathur, Polumampatti, Rameswaram etc, show that the Kings and chieftains welcomed the worship of the Buddha cult.

The Avalokitesvara Cult: Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva occurs in the Mahayana texts and it has been viewed and explained from Tamil perspective.

“ The main tenet of this cult is to generate in one’s own self the thought of enlightenment and to fulfil the vow of becoming the Buddha, forgoing entrance into Nirvana in order to remain in this world as long as there are creatures to be saved from suffering” 5(Hikosaka,Shu, p.177). A mountain in the Southern part of Tamilnadu known as Potiyil is said to be a sacred place for the Hindus and equally for the Buddhists. Yuan Chwang holds that the Buddhist devotees worshipped Avalokitesvara at the foot of this mountain and this Lord yields to their request and appears in the form of a Pasupata Tirthika or mahesvara, a manifestation of Lord Siva, the supreme God of Saivism.

“Manimekalai informs that near the water-fall in the Potiyil mountain a Vedic ascetic Virucchikan was doing penance. It also informs us that Buddhists from Vitiyatara loka like Kancanan also visited the peak of the potiyil mountain (Manimekalai XX.II.22) According to Taranata at the time of Dignaga,Santivarman visited this mountain and in the period of king Siladitya, Candragomin climbed it and made a puja for Dhanyakataka tower. He constructed one hundred small temples of Avalokitesvara and died there. He also states that in the region of Dharmapala, there were two monks, Suddhaguhya and Buddhasanti, who climbed the Potalaka mountain. They prayed to the stone statue of Avalokitesvara there, and both of them obtained mystic power.”6 (Hhikosaka,Shu, p.131) The ascetics of the Vedic era as well as the Hindu devotees in general engaged in the performance of religious rites at the foothill of this mountain. The Buddhist monks and the lay devotees adored Avalokitesvara at a higher place of this mountain as evidenced from the above citation.

The latter part of the name Isvara in Avalokitesvara refers to Siva-Mahesvara, which clearly indicates some relationship between the Buddhist cult of Avalokitesvara and the Hindu cult of Isvara. “Moreover, Yuan Chwang associates Avalokitesvara of Potaloka with Pasupata Tirthika or Mahesvara. Avalokitesvara is also portrayed as sitting with his consort Tara, which reminds on of Siva and Uma. The Buddhist text called Taracukkam refers to Avalokitar as Potalagiri Nivasini. According to this work, Avalokitesvara bodhisattva is seated in this mountain with his consort Tara. (Pl. Nos.2,3) The worship of Tara was popular in Tamil Nadu which is obvious from the prefix Tara in many place names in Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari districts such as Taraputur and Taravilai. It may be argued that the present temple at Taracuram in Tanjore was originally a temple dedicated to Tara. A rock near Potiyil hill is named Taravattam parai after the deity. Thus Tara is referred to

as Cintadevi in Manimekalai. Avalokita is portrayed in some instances as androgynous like Siva in the form of Arthanarisvara. This type of association seems to be very popular in South India. A bronze statue of Avalokitesvara found at Nagappattinam of Tamil Nadu bears ample testimony to this.⁷ (Ibid. pp.132-133). Hence we can safely maintain that there existed a synthesis of Avalokitesvara and Mahesvara in the Potiyil Mountain which was in sacred esteem both by the Hindus and the Buddhists.

The Decline of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu:

In the long run Buddhism lost admiration among the people in the Indian sub-continent in general and the Southern peninsula in particular since it could not gain the royal patronage continuously. The rulers retrieved the past glory of Hinduism and the common man embraced that faith vigorously. The kings and chieftains not only promoted Hindu faith in letter and spirit but also did severe damages to the existing monumental devices of Buddhism so that the once famous religion had become a glory of the past.

Since Buddhism did not advocate a Supreme, Powerful, Benevolent and Merciful God, people who could not satisfy their devotional instinct developed contemptuous and disdainful outlook. Again the anatmavada or the no-soul theory also played a havoc in the withering away of Buddhism, since men of little intelligence could not understand the significance of re-birth and karma theory in the absence of an abiding spiritual substance. Since Hinduism promulgated these verities and substantiated appropriately the notions of bondage and liberation, people were attracted towards that religious philosophy.

Several scholars made logical refutations to all the philosophical doctrines of Buddhist schools of thought and had shown that the arguments of Buddhism are unviable to have a strong foothold in India, and hence the edifice of that faith with ideologies was dwindled.

“The decline of Buddhism seems to have begun from the period of Cattanar, the author of the great epic Manimekalai. Manimekalai gives a glowing account of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu. The epic provided the public with a new awareness of the Buddhist religion. The internal causes for the decline of Buddhism may be mentioned as follows:

“The development of the devotional movement of the Saiva and Vaishnava saints and mystics was a fain force in destroying the foundation of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu. The emotional Bhakti movement became dominant and it was a blow to the rational and philosophically inclined religion of

Buddhism. From the 6th century A.D. up to the 12th century, Buddhism had to struggle for its existence. The activities of Manikkavacakar and Nana Campantar (Thirugnana Sambandhar) were responsible for the suppression of Buddhism and Jainism. Thirumankai Alvar looted Buddhist viharas and carried away things. The Advaita philosophy of Sankara which attracted vast populations and the establishment of the Hindu monasteries contributed much to the quick decline of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu.

“The political and cultural factors also contributed to the decline of Buddhism. The emergence of the imperial Colas with their allegiance to Caivism was one of the main factors for the decline of Buddhism in Tamil land. Besides, the emergence of the agrarian class, supporting the Saiva faith, was against Buddhism which was previously maintained by the merchants and traders. As the conditions were unfavourable, Buddhist monks left Tamil Nadu and took shelter in the neighbouring countries. They were given a cordial reception in Ceylon and East Asian countries, where the genius of the Tamil Buddhists developed to the highest level enriching the art, culture and architecture of the Asian countries.....”⁸ (Murthy, R.S. pp. XIV-XV)

Thus we can notice Buddhism being remained orphaned in all the realms without sufficient patronage and efficient encouragement. The monks who repatriated to the neighbouring countries found them as the most propitious soil and started a new epoch forgetting their homeland.

Conclusion:

“A comparative study of the development of Buddhism in Tamil Natu and the neighbouring countries clearly shows the fact that when Buddhism was in decline in Tamil Natu, it witnessed tremendous growth in the neighbouring countries. The monks of Tamil natu, who had left from their native land, have contributed a great deal for the growth of Buddhism abroad. In this sense we may say that the Tamil Buddhist genius was not destroyed but sublimated in another direction where it has grown with fresh vigour and vivacity. We may cite a host of Buddhist monks such as Bodhidharma and others who moved from South India and developed Buddhism in other countries.

“Nevertheless, the impact of Buddhism can be seen in all aspects of Tamil Culture. It has expressed itself in exquisite forms and given an enduring colour and richness to Tamil culture as a whole. It has exerted a profound influence on the existing religious and social institutions, language and literature as well as on art and architecture. One can recall the attempts made

by the Tamil and Malayalam poets of the twentieth century to revive Buddhist tales and message in their themes of humanitarianist orientations. It should indeed be a purposive and fruitful study to examine the impact of Buddhism after its decline, on different facets of Tamil artistic expression and experience during the various phases of the development of Tamil culture.”⁹ (Hikosaka Shu, p.202)

The genuine and right thinking and ambitious aspirations of a Buddhist Scholar from abroad is getting fulfilled in a slow and steady phase. The disgruntled scholars on Hindu faith especially in the promotion of social inequality and caste menace not only embraced Buddhism but also giving new orientation to invite followers to this very ancient faith. Contemporary scholars with historical knowledge and literary genius also do their might in providing a new impetus for the revival of Buddhism and restoring the abandoned and dilapidated monuments and relics with pristine purity and magnificent glory. Let us hope for the day when a large number of followers of Buddhism dominate in the historically, culturally and socially well repudiated and recognised Tamil Country.

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