

Elements Of Secularism In Buddhist Education

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Seeking God has always been the final frontier of all human activities in Indian civilization. All religions have a complex web of their own concepts of Gods, Goddesses, Karma and destiny. The most remarkable feature of all Indian religions, particularly of Buddhism is its steadfast refusal to accept any blind adherence to its dogmatic beliefs and practices. Fundamentalism or discrimination between men on the basis of religion has never held any significance for Buddhist followers. This was the reason why, when Buddhism grew its fully developed educational system, it was largely secular in nature. World famous Buddhist universities like Nalanda, Vikramshila and others earned their popularity not only because of their high standards of teaching learning process but also due to the wide range of subjects offered to the students. All this and more made Buddhist education in ancient India a system which was secular in spirit, resting in the ideas of equality, fraternity and peace.

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*So many gods, so many creeds
So many paths that wind and wind,
While just the art of being kind
is all the sad world needs.*

- Ella Wheeler Wilcox : The World's Need¹

Man is a creature of multi-faceted dimensions. He carries within him a plethora of attitudes, emotions, thoughts and ideas. This diversity is reflected into his decisions and actions which are often the cause of several divergences and discords. These discords have sometimes grown into heinous bloodsheds and this bloodshed in turn has led man to secure himself within the womb of self-created religions and varied concepts of God and God-hood. Men clustered themselves under the heads of one or the other such religions and tried to derive harmony and oneness in the society. But alas! Even these religions failed to deliver the much sought after peace and happiness which the men were seeking so desperately. It ruled over the heads of the people, made him rigid and uncompromising and set a history of unimaginable bloodbath spanning the whole wide breadth of the world. It led Karl Marx to comment in the critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right that 'Religion..... is the opium of the people'. And this opium has divided man more than any other concept or idea. So much so, that new religions were formed, new wars were waged and new blood was shed. And the story continues till today. Several words of wisdom, harmony and caution have come up from time to time. Bible, for instance says, "Render therefore unto Ceasar the things which are Ceasar's; and unto God the things that are God's"- a clear indication to separate worldly matters from religious and spiritual ones and thus cement the bonds of peace, accord and harmony. But such appeals fell on deaf ears and continued to be neglected the world over.

In India also, such strains of disharmony and discord could not be avoided. Since ancient

times till the modern ones religion has been the singular feature which has moulded and shaped the course of India's history and has dominated its political, social and economic order. The fundamental principles of the daily life of the Indians were welded deeply into a comprehensive theory which is called Religion in Hindu thought. Practical attitudes thus followed theoretical orientations. The total configuration of ideals, practices and conduct is called Dharma or Religion or Virtue or duty in this ancient tradition. It's influence was profound and all-pervasive and explained much of the socio-economic and political history of ancient Hindus. Somewhere along the journey, the need of social order and better management of the society led to the rise of "Varna" or caste system which, with time, became so rigid that its assumed monstrous proportions. Common man could not save himself from its grinding and blood-sucking teeth. It culminated into the new heights and thus gave rise to Buddha who attacked the very roots of caste system and tried to put a soothing balm on the otherwise seething spirits of ordinary man. His teachings were canonized into a new monastic order called Buddhism which reached the world in the form of Buddhist education.

Buddhism rose as a revolt against the extreme rigidities of the caste system. As a heterodox sect it therefore opened itself to the people of all castes and creeds and welcomed them to its folds with open arms . So it was secular from its very inception. But if the modern definition of secularism puts forth the view that religious considerations should be excluded from civil affairs and public education, then the moment the teachings of Buddha were canonized into a separate religion, it stopped being secular. But again, if it happened so, then it was perhaps due to the influence of the contemporary times when nothing independent of religion could survive for too long. To propagate the basic teachings

of Gautam and to give them a sound and strong foundation which could survive in the annals of history for centuries to come, it was perhaps mandatory to give it the shape of a separate religion. At the same time it is equally true that Buddhism soon became a force for Brahmanism to reckon with and it strongly stood on its grounds which negated the deeply rooted caste system of Hindu society. To that extent, Buddhism can be called secular by nature.

Following the traditions of its contemporary times, Buddhist education was also by and large religious. As A.S. Altekar (1965) puts in, "As far as the curriculum (of Buddhist education) is concerned, it was predominantly religious and philosophical, as it was primarily intended for monks and nuns and not for laity."² But the caste system which was rampant at that time could never influence Buddhist education. It "did not at all influence the education imparted in Buddhist centres of learning. This was but natural, for the Buddha was against the system and argued that the worth of a man should be determined by his actual merit, and not by his descent or family status"³. Buddhism thus shunned all the distinctions of the castes system and worked on the principle which was deliberately and diametrically its very opposite, the principle of equality and fraternity. In the words of Buddha himself: "As the great streams, O disciples, however many they may be, the Ganga, Yamuna, Achiravati, Sarabhu, Mahi, when they reach the great ocean, lose their old name and old descent, and bear only one name, 'The great ocean'. So also, my disciples, these four castes, Nobles, Brahmans, Vaishya and Sudra, when they in accordance with the law and doctrine which the Perfect One has preached, forsake their home and go into homelessness, lose their old name and old paternity, and bear only the one designation, 'Ascetics, who follow the son of the Sakya house'. Thus, the persons of low caste like Upali, the barber, were admitted into the Buddhist order as monks. Buddha himself never hesitated in accepting the hospitality of the people

of different castes. The circle of Buddha's hosts included not merely his own lay devotees but also the devotees of other faiths. This was perhaps a great compliment to his spiritual pre-eminence, which thus won a universal recognition. There is thus the reference of a Brahmin named Keniya the Jatila who, along with all his friends and servants, relatives and kinsmen, hosted a huge dinner for Gautam and his two hundred and fifty disciples. Another example of a dinner given by a non-Buddhist to the Order is that of a certain high official at the court of a Magadhan King who was the follower of Ajivikas⁴. The impact of such liberal example by Buddha himself was bound to influence the Buddhist education which rose above the current clamour of castes and sub-castes and opened its doors to the adherents of all religions, sects and sections of the society.

Buddhist education received greatest impetus through some of its renowned seats of learning and India thus, earned its first Universities in the name of Nalanda, Vikramshila, Taxila and other such popular institutions⁵. They earned their popularity not only due to the high standards of teaching but also because of the wide range of courses offered to the students coming from varied backgrounds. These courses covered the entire circle of knowledge then available and were thus drawn from the different fields of learning: Brahminical and Buddhist, sacred and secular, philosophical and practical, sciences and arts, crafts and commerce. The students in Nalanda, for instance, not only studied the Great Vehicle of Buddhism but also the works belonging to the eighteen sects or 'Shilpas' which were totally secular in nature. They also studied the three Vedas and other such Brahminical texts, Hituvidya, Shabdavadya, Chikitsavidya, works on magic or Atharvaveda, Samkhya and other miscellaneous courses. The famous Chinese traveller Hiuen-Tsang became a student of Nalanda for the study of Yoga-Shastra, in which the Nalanda Chancellor Shilbhadra was the highest living authority, followed by other subjects,

books on Brahmins covering a wide area of knowledge including philological, philosophical, astronomical subjects and Sanskrit Grammar of Panini. So while Nalanda attracted Hiuen-Tsang, a student of Mahayana branch of Buddhism, it did not lack students like I-Tsing, another Chinese traveller and a keen student of Hinayana branch of Buddhism.

Like Nalanda, Taxila also imparted both religious and secular education. It, according to Dr. A.L. Basham (1992) "in the far North-West, laid more emphasis on secular studies."⁶ Basham quotes Buddhist Jataka tales which show that young men from all over civilized part of India sought education in this city, through which a trickle of Iranian and Mesopotamian influence found its way to India.⁷ The reason behind Taxila's growth as a centre of secular learning was more because it was the central point of trade between India on one side and countries like Iran, Afghanistan, Rome, Greece and China on the other. The result was that the impact of Romano-Greek ideas was more evident here. Taxila had a long history of association with the Hellenistic culture. Exchange of merchandise led inevitably to an exchange of ideas. The borrowing of words, largely of a technical kind, on both the sides was an obvious result of this exchange. This could also be seen on the evolution of Buddhism. This religion must have been popular with Greeks because it provided easier access to the Indian society than did the caste-determined attitude of Brahminism.⁸ The result was that Taxila soon became a cosmopolitan city of varied cultures and the impact of these cultures could be felt on all its aspects -- art, education, trade, day-to-day life, even its thoughts and ideas. As a centre of secular learning, it claimed to specialize in eighteen 'Shilpas' which were vocal music, Instrumental music, Dancing, Painting, Mathematics, Accountancy, Engineering, Sculpture, Agriculture, Cattle-breeding, Commerce, Medicine, Conveyancing and Law, Administrative-training, Archery and Military art, Magic, Snake-charming

and Poison antidotes and the Art of finding hidden treasures.⁹ These subjects were totally secular in nature. Some passages in the Jatakas make individual mention of some subjects under scientific and technical education, but it is not certain whether they came under eighteen 'Shilpas' or not. Other, totally secular subjects were also taught in some of the colleges of Taxila. They were, Elephant lore, Magic Charms, Spell for bringing back the dead to life, Hunting, Spell for understanding all animals' cries, Archery, Art of Prognostication, Charm for commanding all things of sense, Divining from signs of the body and Medicine. ¹⁰

Thus, these centres of Buddhist learning were serving two purposes simultaneously - one, by including in their curriculum all Buddhist and non-Buddhist areas of knowledge prevalent in the contemporary India, they were disproving the divisions between Brahmanism and Buddhism and were thus indirectly fostering the spirit of secularism and two, by teaching the secular subjects like eighteen 'Shilpas', they were directly becoming the torch-bearers of secularism in ancient India.

But to create harmony of life in the midst of utmost diversity of studies and beliefs, must be one big challenge for the Buddhist educationists. The monks in Nalanda for instance, were not a homogenous community. It had flung its gates wide open to all systems and schools of thoughts and belief in the country and the students coming here to study were drawn not only from the different denominations of Buddhist order but belonged to even non-Buddhistic systems of learning and courses of study. With them they carried into the University all the strife and discord of different sects and schisms. Nalanda thus, became the common meeting ground of the warring sects and creeds in the India of the contemporary times, with their possible and impossible doctrines. But despite its wide variety of intellectual life, animated controversies and acrimonious debates, the academic repose and

peace of Nalanda as a seat of culture was never disturbed or broken. Nalanda was known both in India and abroad for its schools of discussions and debates in which foreign students were so anxious to enter. Through these discussions and debates Nalanda boldly faced the intellectual differences of the times, the profound and earnest disagreements in opinions and cherished beliefs and presented a larger ideal which would evolve into a common life and concord out of the divisions. That ideal was freedom and tolerance of thoughts, opinions and beliefs which would never constrain the conscience within. This, according to R.K. Mookerji (1969) is the first principle of a sound and scientific education. "What else the definition of modern secularism advocates if not these principles? In my opinion, Buddhist education gave to the world some hundreds and thousands of years ago what the world is today yearning for — a larger synthesis of theoretical and conventional differences in and through life, thereby reconciling and calmly accepting warring opinions and arriving at a common life and a common moral ideal. Buddhism, despite the presence of different schools or rival establishments of Brahmins and Jains, or the philosophical sects of Agnostics and Materialists, never raised the cry that the faith was in danger or kindled the fires of persecution. R.K. Mookerji (1969) quotes a well-known contemporary record, Bana's "Harsha-Charita", which speaks of the hermitage of a Buddhist recluse in the forest of the Vindhya named Diwakarmitra. The reputation of his learning was such that the people forgot their individual and class-differences and crowded around him to hear his precious sermons. Thus "there were Buddhists of different varieties, there were Jains in white robes and worshippers of Krishna, there were ascetics of various orders, Samkhists, Lokayatikas, Vedantins, followers of Nyaya and Vaisesika, of the institutes of Law and of the Puranas, adept in sacrifices and even Grammarians and others beside, "all diligently following their own tenets,

pondering, urging objections, raising doubts and resolving them, discussing and explaining moot points of doctrines, in perfect harmony".¹² What further evidence is required to prove the existence of secularism in Buddhist education !!! It was perhaps due to such catholic and secular spirit that Buddhism has survived the onslaught of times and thrives today both within India and outside it. If such perfect harmony could be achieved in the India of 6th-7th centuries A.D. then why not today? Lessons need to be derived from history and not erased from it.

References:

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3. ibid , pp.47-48
4. Mookerji R.K. (1969), Ancient Indian Education, New Delhi Motilal Banarsidas ,pp. 423-425.
5. Although the Western world had already witnessed its first University in the 4th century B.C. in Athens, Greece where the cadet training was united with the intellectual education. Soon the Hellenic world boasted of other Universities like those at Rhodes, Pergamon, Alexandria and Rome. Graves. Franke Pierrepont. (1958), A students' History of Education, New York, Macmillan Publications s. p.45
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9. Altekar. A.S., op. cit , p.111
10. Mookerji R.K, op. cit , p.487
11. ibid . p.572
12. ibid . p.573



प्रकाशन शोध प्रक्रिया का अंतिम और अत्यंत महत्वपूर्ण चरण होता है। शोध समाज की मूल्यवान उपलब्धि है। इसे समाज के बीच आना ही चाहिए जिससे समस्त मानवता लाभ उठा सके। प्रकाशन के सीमित अवसर शोध को संकुचित करते हैं।