VIGNETTES OF DECAYING BUDDHISM

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The Sanyukta-nikaya records Buddha's premonition about
the bhikkhus of the future. He said: 'Monks will no longer wish to
hear and learn the sutanas proclaimed by the Tathagata, deep, deep
in meaning, reaching beyond the world, dealing with the soul, but will
only lend their ear to the profane sutanas proclaimed by poets, poetical,
adorned with beautiful words and syllables.'

The truth of these words are borne out by the literature of
later Buddhism. It is, however, difficult to find out from these texts
the history of decay; non-Buddhist sources too are not very helpful,
still a few incidents recorded in the biographies of saints give a partial
picture of the discomfiture of the Buddhists, and these are given below.

A distant echo of Buddha's warning is probably perceptible
in the Yoga-sastra which states: 'The high state which Buddha had
attained by his patience, and from which the Arhat prince fall to scepticism
by his impatience...'. Possibly this statement contains a veiled reference
of the tantric practices. However, the attitude of the Yoga-sastra
towards Buddhism is somewhat equivocal, but in any case though it is
basically a pre-Sankara advaita text, it is not unduly severe on Buddhism,
though at times critical.

Hostility towards Buddhism is evident in Sankara's writings
(c.a.d. 788-820), which are too well-known to be recalled here, but
some incidents are related in Sankara's biographies which are not so
well-known, though it is difficult to say as to how far they are reliable;
like the biographies of Buddha these are full of marvellous supernatural
stories. However, these anecdotes may have some basis or at least
may be considered to reflect the popular religious attitude from a certain
angle.

According to Sankara's biographies, he converted to his view
people belonging to various sects, such as Bhagavatas, Pancaratras,
Vaihikkas, Vedhakas, Kapalikas, a Kshipraka, a Carvaka, worshippers
of Himayagarbha, Fire, Sun, Kvera, Indra, Yama, Vayu, Earth, Sky,
Varaha, Manu, Candra, Mangala, Pitriloka, Anantadeva, Siddha, and Vetalah, as well as Jainas, Madhyamikas and Vijnanavadin.

The first problem is whether there were so many religious sects by the end of the 8th century? If this situation is accepted as generally valid, it has to be concluded that by this time influence of Buddhism (Jainism probably never had a large following) was distinctly on the wane, and the religious situation was analogous to what Buddha found, namely, people following diverse creeds and divided into a large number of sects.

It is also interesting that the biographies mention only the Madhyamikas and the Vijnanavadin as having had disputes with Sankara. This seems to be partly corroborated by the fact that it is only the views of these two sects among the Buddhists which Sankara has combated in his commentary on the Brahma-sutra (II, ii. 18-31) where he refers to the Madhyamikas as Sanyavadin. It may be, therefore, permissible to conclude that by the end of the 8th century and the beginning of the 9th only the Madhyamika and Vijnanavada schools among the systems of Buddhist philosophy really counted, or had enough adherents to attract Sankara's notice as worthy antagonists of his adequate doctrine. It should be noted that the other sects mentioned above are said to have been converted, but there is no indication that they had developed systematic philosophies of their own, with the possible exception of the Carvakas.

The Jaina too seems to have taken advantage of the decreasing popularity of the Buddhists, and attempted to establish their creed at the latter's expense. According to a tradition current in the Jainas, Hararatara-gaccha, this particular gaccha (order) was established as the result of a debate held in the court of the Cautuka king Durlabhajana of Gujarat (V.S. 1066-1086). This is learnt from Jainaivala who, while giving the spiritual lineage of the Hararatara-gaccha to which he belonged, states that in A.D. 1074 the great Jaina monk Vadhavanana Suri and his disciple Jinesvara defeated the Cātyāyaṇa in a debate held in the court of Durlabhajana. After their defeat, the Cātyāyaṇa, in conformity with the pre-arranged stipulations, left the capital of Gujarat, and Durlabhajana pleased with the acumen of Jinesvara conferred on him the title 'Jharatara' (the very keen), the name which their order adopted later. The Cātyāyaṇa seem to have been identical with the Cātyāyaṇa mentioned in Nigerajmukta and Amaraha inscriptions.

It seems that we have a reference to this incident in the following verse in the Dravya-mahakavya (V.64) which is a chronicle of the
Caudikya kings of Gujarat written by the famous Hemacandra Suri (A.D. 1092-1177) : "Being conversant (with) the categories of (Jain) metaphysics he (Durabha) paid homage to the learned saints; he repulsed the eunuchos (of the Buddhists) and thereby obtained purity himself." Commenting on this verse, Abhayatilaka Gani, who belonged to the Khaṣatara-gaccha, specifically mentions that Durabha learnt the tenets of Jainism from Jinesvara Suri, though he does not mention the celebrated debate mentioned above. Thus it may be said that Buddhism as a spiritual force was extinguished in Gujarat in A.D. 1074. It may be added here that Jainism became very popular in Gujarat and western India due to the patronage of Jain monks by Durabha's successors, some of these monks like Hemacandra, were scholars of outstanding merit. In contrast we do not hear of any great Buddhist scholar during or after this period.

In South India, the ebbing fortunes of Buddhism seem to have sunk further as a result of, what may be called in modern terms, propaganda tour of the Bengal saint Caitanya (A.D. 1486-1533). It is learnt from Caitanya's biographists, that, starting from Rajahmundry he traversed the entire south till he reached Rameswaran; then he proceeded north through Kovalam till he reached Gujarat. In course of this long journey, he halted at many places, and though one may regard the ecstatic description of the biographer, that Caitanya converted entire villages to his faith, with some amount of scepticism, there can be no doubt of the strong impression created by the imposing personality of this young handsome monk.

An interesting account is available in Caitanya's biography about his encounter with the Buddhists. It is said that at a village near Vridha-Kasi (modern Vridhsaalam in South Avir District on the Vellar river, Tamil Nadu) Caitanya held discussions with the followers of the different systems of orthodox philosophy, and convinced them of their mistake, whereupon they turned Vaishnavs. Possibly such debates were held elsewhere also, but here Caitanya met the Buddhists for the first time in his life. Apparently he had met no Buddhist in Bengal, or what is more probably had avoided them. It is also likely that the degraded Buddhists of this period were treated contemptuously and they had kept away from Caitanya, a high caste Brahmana. An idea of the prevailing attitude towards the Buddhists can be gleaned from a remark of Krishnadas Kaviraji, the most celebrated biographer of Caitanya. While describing Caitanya's meeting with the Buddhists, the Kvimtala Ilandly says in an introductory verse that "though the Buddhists should not be
spoken to not looked upon the Master in his mercy tried to crush their pride. The Kaviraja probably completed his work in A.D. 1572, but it would not be unfair to assume that he was recording not only the contemporary attitude towards the Buddhists, but that of several generations which preceded him.

It may be recalled here that Kautliya probably held similar opinion about the Buddhists. In the Arthasastra (III. 10. 16) he states: 'For the receiver of the family treasure denying it, for one forcibly violating a widow living by herself, for a Candalika touching an Aryan lady, for one not rushing to rescue (another) close by in distress, for one rushing without cause (and) for one feeding Sakyas, Ajirikas and other heretical monks at rites in honour of gods and manes, the fine should be one hundred punar'. Scholars are unanimous that the Sakyas in this passage means a Buddhist, and authoritative opinion at present holds that Kautliya was the prime minister of Chandragupta Maurya. Thus it seems that the attitude towards the Buddhists turned a full circle in about one thousand years.

As for the dispute with the Buddhists, Cattana refuted all their arguments and greatly to their chagrin discredited them in public. Indeed it appears from the biography, that Cattana was backed by overwhelming popular support, which is quite likely, for there is no indication that Buddhists at this period enjoyed any greater popularity in the south than what they had in the north.

However, the biography by the Kaviraja then proceeds to relate the final act of injustice by the Buddhists and the swift retribution. After their ignominious defeat, the Buddhists hatched a nefarious plot, and offered Cattana some impure food. But suddenly a large bird intervened, and picking up the plate with its beak dropped it from a height scattering the polluted rice on the Buddhists, and as the plate fell it struck the Buddhist ascaya with such force that he fainted. His disciples then raised loud cries of lamentation, and prayed to Cattana to restore their preceptor. Cattana asked them to chant the name of Krishna, and as all of them performed Krishna-ambirena, the Buddhist teacher came to his senses with the name of Hari on his lips.

This anecdote may be compared with similar anecdotes with which the life of Buddha abounds. After discounting the miraculous part of such stories, possibly a hard core of truth remains, which is vindicated by the ensuing trends. There is no doubt that Buddhism
spread at the expense of orthodox Brahmanical faith, and later it vanished altogether from the land of its birth. These anecdotes possibly contain the kernels of truth, and the miracles associated with such stories have preserved them from oblivion.

It has been asserted that the entire story of Caitanya's encounter with the Buddhists must be apocryphal, since Buddhism had by this time disappeared from South India. This objection, however, is misconceived, for there are evidence of lingering Buddhism. The Kumbhakonam inscription of Svarupa Nayaaka of Tanjore (A.D. 1506), records the gift of some land in the agrahara (Brahmana village) of Tirumalaiya near a temple of Buddha at Tiruvandura.7 But even more surprising, is not somewhat perplexing, is the direction given for the construction of an image of Buddha in Gopala-Bhatta's Hari-bhakti-vilasa, (XVIII 181; 146-47) which is considered by the Gaudiya Vaishnavas (followers of Caitanya) as their standard text work. Gopala-bhatta describes dhyani Buddha as sitting in the lotus posture, dressed in a kanga (red) cloth, with a cintamani on his shoulders; the height of the image should be ten units (talam) with long ears, jeweled like navel, lotus like eyes, raising from deep meditation with raised hands and the gaze of a yogin.

A possible explanation for the inclusion of a Buddha image in a Vaishnava text may have been the acceptance of Buddha as an avatar of Vishnu. The Dasavatara-stava of Jayadeva's Gita-govinda is particularly famous; here Buddha is hailed as the incarnation of Vishnu in which he stopped the cruel practice of slaughtering animals in ritualistic sacrifices. The Gaudiya-Vaishnavas regarded this text as authoritative, and this may have influenced them to include the details of Buddha's image in their text. It may be noted here that late Puranas describe Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu born to delude the bad people to perfection through his false doctrine, that is, Buddhism.

There are indications, that at least in eastern India Vaishnavism, particularly Gaudiya Vaishnavism, accommodated the Buddhists, and possibly the mechanism of conversion included the delusion of Buddha and denunciation of his creed. So far as we know, the interesting history of integration of the later Buddhists with the Vaishnavas has not yet been properly studied. It is known however, that Caitanya himself did some pioneering work in this regard in Oriisa, where the Buddhists had already developed certain peculiar creeds such as worship of formless pinda-Brahman with the help of Tantras, along with Radha and Krishna.
Indeed the worship of Radha and Krishna was much anterior to Caitanya who popularised it.

For example, the following verse ascribed to Damodara in the Suhastiramakosa may be quoted:

The pilgrims in the street have warded off the painful cold with their broad quilts sewn of a hundred rags; they break the morning slumber of the city folk, with songs of the secret love of Madhava and Radha.  

It may be noted that Vidyasara, the author of this anthology was a Buddhist scholar of Bengal who lived in the latter half of the eleventh century, that is, when the Pala emperors were still controlling the destiny of eastern India. It is evident from the verse quoted above that the Radha-Krishna worshippers were poor people who had to sleep in the streets under their patched quilts in winter nights. That they were looked down upon by the intellectual elite as a group of unprincipled people is evident from the writings of Gangesa Upadhyaya of Mithila (c.A.D.1100), the celebrated founder of the Naya-nyaya. Next to nothing is known about the pre-Caitanya Radha Krishna worshippers. The meagre evidence at present available points to the possibility that they were Buddhists.

FOOT NOTES


2. Upasana, 75-76. The verse mentions Naga which is explained in the commentary as ‘Buddha’; but the verse mentions ‘Kotic apa’ which is explained in the commentary as a ‘prince called Arhat’. I have here followed the English translation by Vihari Lal Mitra, Calcutta, 1898.

3 Several Sanskrit biographies of Sankara are available. I am here following the Bengali biography of Sankara by Rajendralal Ghosh (Katyayana Sankara, O Ramakrishna Calcutta, 1889) which is practically based on Anandagiri’s Sankara-Vijaya. But the B.I. edition of the Sankara-vijaya (1868) which I am using does not mention the Madhyamikas and the Vyamanavadas. Possibly Rajendralal Ghosh got these details from some other biography which is not available to me. Unfortunately these pages of the introduction where Ghosh discussed his sources are missing in my copy.

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5. For Caityasaka see R.C. Majumdar, Ed. History and Culture of Indian People, Vol. II, Age of Imperial Unity (1968) p. 385.


7. P.V. Kane: History of Dharmasutra, VI, p. 1014. See also A Corpus of Inscriptions in the Telengana District of H.E.H. the Nizam’s Dominion, p. 176.
