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Relevance of Buddhism in the New Millennium

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Buddha was born in India 2500 years ago. He is rightly regarded as the greatest rationalist and humanist in the history of mankind. Buddha also established democracy as a way of life for the first time in the world and paved the way for the empowerment of women and weaker sections who were marginalized by Brahmanical forces. Buddha emphasized equality, liberty, fraternity and collective welfare as the real foundations of democracy. In the new millennium, the world is experiencing the worst kind of imperialism and terrorism under the leadership of neo-colonial forces led by capitalist regimes. The marginalized sections have become the worst victims of globalization. The world is also marching towards another war which means total destruction. Under the changed disturbing circumstances, the world has to understand the essence of Buddhism which practically means humanism and collective welfare regardless of gender, religion, region, colour, caste and creed. The world has to choose either war or Buddha. Hence, Buddhism assumes great significance from the point of view of creating a just world free from war and destruction.

Keywords: Buddhism, Brahmanism, Collective Welfare

Buddha can be regarded as an apostle of liberation of mankind from all kinds of diseases, disorders and deprivations. He fought non-violently against all oppressive Brahmanical forces. The indigenous people of India had built a great Indus Valley Civilization and ruled India for about 1000 years by following the law of natural justice. The invasion of Aryans had dealt a death blow to the Indian civilization and heralded a new era of marginalization of indigenous people in the name of Verna system which was based on myths and inhuman practices. The term 'Aryan Invasion Theory' has been widely discussed by the historians in

India before and after independence. The Indo-Aryan migrations had started in approximately 1800 BCE, after the invention of the war chariot and also brought Indo-Aryan languages into the Levant and possibly Inner Asia (Nair, 2009). The indigenous people of India were dominated by the Aryans who enjoyed mind power, money power and muscle power. They were forcibly thrown out of North India and they had to settle down in South India.

Yet, the theory has such a hold on the people that what has been said against it may mean no more than scotching it. Like the snake, it must be killed. In the face of the discovery of new facts set out in the scholarly works, the theory can no longer stand and must be thrown on the scrap heap. The theory is based on nothing but pleasing assumptions and inferences based on such assumptions. The theory is a perversion of scientific investigation. It is not allowed to evolve out of facts. On the contrary, the theory is preconceived and facts are selected to prove it. It falls to the ground at every point' (Ambedkar, 1980). Ambedkar had out rightly rejected the theory of Aryan invasion even though he was highly critical of the caste system created by the dominant Hindu forces. He pointed out that this theory was expounded by western scholars and accepted by Brahmins. Buddha firmly believed in the self rule by the indigenous people of India on the basis of human values and democratic culture.

The four Vedas have primarily dealt with the man-nature relationship rather than the man-god relationship. Buddha discarded the theory of Varna, existence of god and prevalence of inequity in all walks of life. Buddha provided alternatives for the old social, political, economic and cultural orders and established democracy on the basis of rationality and humanity. He called upon his followers to verify his thoughts and deeds and make use of them if they were found realistic and appropriate. He was totally against hero worship and worship of false gods and goddesses manufactured by the Brahmanical order. Buddha, by spreading knowledge and the spirit of truth fought against all kinds of exploitation and made India the land of 'enlightened citizens'.

Today, human values are threatened by the dominant powers all over the world. The market forces are powerful and almost absolute, aided by globalization of the capitalist order. In the new millennium, the world civilization is at the cross roads. The people are fed up with the materialistic culture manufactured by the champions of globalization and promoted by the media owned, managed and controlled by the market forces. There is also guerilla communication which has polluted the minds and lives of people across the globe. The world will simply disappear in the event of any third world war. Buddhism is not confined to any particular religion but it is a universal path to salvation from all kinds of miseries which are

manmade. The mankind should realise that the marrow of civilized society is ethical and not metaphysical. This is indeed the essence of Buddhism which can save the world from destruction in the name of development. This article emphasizes the relevance of Buddhism in the age of globalization on the basis of an extensive review of literature.

Emergence of the Buddha

The Buddha was born on a full moon day of May in 623 B.C. He was the son of Suddhodhana and Mahamaya who ruled over the land of the Sakyas at Kapilavasthu, near Himalayas. He was named as Siddhattha Gautama since he belonged to the Gotama family of the Kshatriya varna. In ancient India, the monarchical states were known as Janapada and the non-monarchical states as Sangh or Gana. The Sakyas had their own historical legacy.

Ambedkar (1957:01) had referred to the meeting between great sage Asita and King Suddhodana in his work. Ambedkar has stated that Asita had told the King that the child was endowed with the 32 marks of a great man and adorned with the eighty minor marks, his body surpassing that of Sakra, Brahma and his aura surpassing them a hundred thousand fold. Asita had predicted that Gautama would become an enlightened Buddha and will turn the supreme wheel of the Doctrine that has not been turned before him by any other being in the world (Ambedkar, 1957:02).

Siddharth Gautama lost his mother Mahamaya after the naming ceremony which was celebrated on the 5th day after the birth of the child according to traditions of Sakyas by Suddhodana and Mahamaya at Kapilavastu, the capital of Sakyas. The child was named as Siddharth Gautama. Siddharth grew in the company of his father and several cousins. He started his education at the age of eight under the guidance of learned teachers including Sabbamitta. He mastered all the philosophic systems and meditation under the guidance of Bharadwaj. He opposed the killing of animals in the name of hunting and concentrated more on learning and meditation. He cultivated supreme sense of compassion in the childhood. Buddha received the best education and comforts of life. He developed a strong inclination for spirituality in the early stage of life since he wanted to liberate the mankind from all kinds of sufferings based on ignorance.

Siddharth Gautama married Yeshodhara when he was 16 years old much against the wishes of Dandapani, his father in law. They had a son who was named Rahula. Resisting persuasion from his father and the prime minister, Gautama continued in the spiritual pursuit of truth, affirming that attachment to materiality would lead to the destruction of human values. Gautama had practically

overcome all misconceptions created by the vested interests. He was initiated into the Sakya Sangh when he was twenty years old. There was a conflict of interest between the Sakyas and Koliyas over the distribution of water resources of river Rohini. He strictly opposed any war on the Koliyas since a war would lead to another war. He opted for a non-violent resolution of the water crisis and voluntarily opted for becoming Parivrajaka which was a kind of an exile voluntarily accepted by Gautama as a true means of liberation from worldly pleasures and compulsions. He left Kapilavatsu when he was 29 years old and became Sakya Muni. He travelled from Kapilavatsu to Rajagraha, capital of the kingdom of Magadha by foot.

King Bimbisara also tried to persuade Gautama to give up his mission but failed to convince Gautama. He visited the rishi Brighu's Ashram and studied Sankhya Philosophy. He was also trained in Samadhi Marga which ensured concentration of the mind. He gained mastery over Dhyana Marga in the country of the Kosalas to achieve concentration by stopping breathing. Gautama continued these exercises for about 6 years and realizing their futility over a period of time ended consciously the trial of asceticism.

Gautama realized that all paths were not good enough for the happiness and progress of the mankind. He sat under the Banyan tree and resolved firmly to accept death in a royal spiritual battle rather than getting defeated in life. He continued his meditation and concentrated on the problem of finding an answer to the question which had troubled him (Ambedkar, 1957:03). Gautama attained Samma Bodhi (Real Enlightenment) after an arduous quest for becoming a Bodhisatta.

Critiquing Brahmanical Theology

Buddha found no merit in the Vedas that he considered as worthless as a desert and discarded the mantras which failed to enlighten people. He firmly rejected the philosophy of the Vedic Rishis as useless (Ambedkar, 1957:04). He attained enlightenment on the basis of firm will and determined efforts. Buddha advocated that there was no logical or factual basis for the presumption that God exists or that he created the universe (Ambedkar, 1957:05).

Buddha vehemently rejected the four theses on which the Brahmanic theology rested in India. He opposed the Chaturvarna philosophy which perpetuated the social inequality among the four castes – Brahmins, Vaishyas, Kshatriyas and Shudras. The Brahmins had gained monopoly over knowledge. The Vaishyas had controlled the national economy. The Kshatriyas had ruled the country on the basis of caste power. The Shudras had become the slaves of the system and were de-

nied the right to education, employment, economic resources and political power. Buddha had also opposed the Doctrine of Karma which was created and endorsed by Brahmanical Philosophy.

The Buddha was strongly opposed to the first tenet of Brahmanism. He repudiated their thesis that the Vedas are infallible and their authority could never be questioned. He argued that everything must be open to re-examination and reconsideration by the people. He condemned the sacrifice of animals in the name of rituals. He observed that the philosophical foundations on which the social order was reared by Brahmanism were wrong if not selfish. The Shudras and women – the two classes whose humanity was most mutilated by Brahmanism had no power to rebel against them. He could find no proof in support of the thesis that Brahmana was a reality and rejected the thesis of the Upanishads (Ambedkar, 1957:06). The people were made to believe that ‘Brahm’ was an ontological entity and Brahmins were created by Brahma to always remain on top of the social order even though they did not deserve such honor by virtue of deeds.

Buddha had come across about 62 different schools of darsana which were opposed to the Brahmanic theology. He identified Akriyavada (Purana Kassappa), Niyativada (Makali Ghosal), Ucchedavada (Ajit Kesakambal), Annyonyavad (Pakudha Kacchyana), Vikshepavada (Sanjaya Belaputta) and Chaturyamsamvarvad (Nigantha Nathaputta) as prominent anti-Brahminical schools of thought. He also rejected the philosophies of his contemporaries on the ground that they did not liberate mankind from exploitation. He also decided to seek an alternative path to salvation. Buddha rejected the belief in Chaturvarna as the ideal for social organisations and accepted the natural law of cause and effect with its corollaries.

Conversion to Buddhism

Buddha had remarked: “The Tathagata has not ceased from effort and reverted to a life of luxury and abundance. The Tathagata is a supremely Enlightened One. Give ear, monks, the Deathless has been attained. I shall instruct you. I shall teach you the Dhamma”. This has been quoted in the writings of Piyadassi which primarily dealt with the spectrum of Buddhism (Piyadassi 15). Buddha chose the middle path in 589 B.C. in order to avoid the extremes based on Eightfold Path such as – right understanding, right thoughts, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. He also emphasized the Four Noble Truths like – the noble truth of suffering, the noble truth of the arising of suffering, the noble truth of cessation of suffering and the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering. Buddha also achieved the unshakable deliverance of mind which led to the ultimate realisation of no rebirth.

Buddha discarded the doctrine of soul and transmigration and emphasized the supreme power of nature.

Buddha undertook the long campaign of conversion after he was persuaded by Brahma Sahampati, a staunch follower of Siddharth Gautama in the kingdom of Magadh. He firmly believed that Buddha would bring comfort to the weary and sorrow-laden mankind (Ambedkar, 1957:07). Buddha came over to Sarnath and delivered the First Sermon on the basis of middle path which is neither the path of pleasure nor the path of self mortification. He taught the right beliefs, behavior and endeavours in order to provide the path of virtue to the people. The Parivrajakas realised that Buddha was born to free the mankind from supernatural and superhuman forces.

Buddha converted the Yashas, Kassypas, Sariputta, Moggallana, Bimbisara, Anathapindika Pasenjiti, Jeevaka, Ratthapala and other kings who accepted Buddha as the real protector and preserver of mankind. He was invited by his father Suddhodana who was deeply moved by the spiritual accomplishments of his son. Buddha also met his wife Yeshodhara and son Rahula and convinced them that his spiritual treasure was the real path of righteousness which liberated mankind from the system failures and human miseries. He was given a rousing reception by the Sakyas who had rejected him few years ago. They were extremely happy to join the Blessed One. Buddha strongly refused to return home as a man of the world and succeeded in winning over the adversaries on the basis of self realization and self actualisation.

Buddha also converted the common people who were victims of manmade disorders. Upali, the barber, Sunita, the sweeper, Sopaka and Suppiya, the untouchables, Sumangala, a backward woman, Suprabuddha, the Leper and other marginalised persons were inducted into the ranks of the New Order, created by Buddha. He was also successful in converting the vagabond, robber, criminals and others who had strayed onto deviant paths. Buddha did not claim any place for himself in the New Order – Dhamma. He claimed himself as the path finder rather than giver of salvation. He discarded divinity for himself. He claimed 'The Dhamma must be its own successor' (Ambedkar, 1957:08).

Buddha was wholeheartedly supported by King Bimbisara who constructed a the Veluvana garden for the Bhikkus and Upasakas. Buddha also received Jetavana from Anathapindika for the rest and relaxation. He accepted the Ambavana and the Vihara built by Jeevaka. Ambrapali, Vishakha and others also donated gifts to Buddha. Many prominent people like Dhananjanani, Visaka, Mallika and Pausandi greatly influenced by the Buddha's ideals and became his ardent followers.

Dhananjanani, a Brahmin lady had become a devotee of Buddha and made

her husband a devotee too. Visakha was another ardent follower of Buddha. Malika also became a Buddhist. Pasendi, the King of Kosala accepted Buddha as his mentor. There were some adversaries who vehemently opposed the humanism of Buddha. He had the courage and conviction to defeat them truthfully and non-violently. He also effectively handled the criticisms of his adversaries. He replied to his critics in unambiguous manner: "What I have consistently preached both in the past and today is the existence of ill and the ending of ill" (Ambedkar, 1957:09).

Buddha visited several places on foot and earned great admirers and followers across the country. He addressed the gatherings regularly and resolved their doubts and pains. He had also met Sariputta who had nursed hidden enmity against him. Sariputta had practically surrendered before Buddha along with his clan and followers. He bid a farewell to Vesali and proceeded to Nalanda along with Ananda and other Bhikkus. He proceeded to Kushinara and relaxed in the river Kakuttha. Thereafter Buddha visited the Sala grove of the Mallas, the Upavana of Kushinara for rest. Buddha had realised the ultimate occurrence of death and assured Ananda that Dhamma would lead them after his demise. Buddha breathed his last in the midnight in 483 B.C on Vaishaka Purnima. The last rites were performed by the Mallas of Kushinara with utmost reverence in the Shrine of the Mallas, called Makuta Bandhana in the presence of several people. The mortal remains of Buddha were equally divided into eight parts and distributed to his followers.

Buddha and His Dhamma

Buddhism is more a system of philosophy and practical ethics than a religion. The most striking feature of Buddhism is that it eschews all hypotheses regarding the unknown, and concerns itself wholly with the facts of life in the present work-a-day world. It does not constrain the rational human mind to dwell upon insoluble problems. Rationality and sanity are in evidence in all points of Buddhism which discarded animism, dogmatism, sensuality, asceticism, self denial and self-consecration. The spirit of Buddhism is essentially socialistic, that is to say, it teaches concerted action for social ends. It alone teaches that there is hope for man only in man (Narasu 14).

Buddha proclaimed that nothing would give real happiness as Nibbana (salvation of the soul). The Buddha's conception of Nibbana is quite different from that of his predecessors. The Middle Way is taught by the Noble Eightfold Path of right outlook, right aims, right speech, right action, right means of livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. He states: "There is no greater benefit than health and there is nothing more valuable than the spirit of

contentment". Buddha taught that the Law of Kamma has to do only with the question of general moral order. It has nothing to do with the fortunes or misfortunes of an individual (Ambedkar, 1957:10).

Buddha's philosophy gave a new dimension to the concept of Dhamma. He did not consider certain things such as – belief in the supernatural, belief in Ishwara (God), union with Brahma, belief in soul, belief in sacrifices, belief in speculation, religious reading of books and belief in the infallibility of religious books as the real Dhamma. Arguing that these practices impeded the salvation and progress of the mankind, he called upon the people to uproot these doctrines which were the most potent sources of superstition. He coined a new term called 'Saddhamma' which cleanses the mind of its impurities, makes learning open to all, encourages people to pull down all social barriers, highlights worth rather than birth, promotes equality and creates a new order (educational, social, political and economic). Buddha pointed out that inequality is the official doctrine of Brahminism which hindered the collective welfare in the country.

The religion of the Buddha is perfect justice springing from a man's own meritorious disposition. Dhamma is righteousness, which means right relations between man and man in all spheres of life. Morality comes in only wherein man comes in relation to man. Morality is the essence of Dhamma. It must be sacred and universal. Ambedkar's political values reflected the essence of Buddhism.

Buddha was an annihilationist since he firmly believed in the non-existence of the soul. Buddha knew well that the body dies but the four elements of existence such as Prithvi, Apa, Tej and Vayu live forever. This aspect of rebirth was believed in by Buddha. The Buddhist Law of Karma rejects the concept of soul and applied only to Karma and its effect on present life. He nullified the perception that Past Karma has an effect on Future Life. Buddhism is built upon certain truths, human values and best practices which benefit the mankind. He rightly considered non-violence as the essence of human life. Buddha created a non-violent army of Bhikkus (monks) who made Buddhism as a universal religion and way of life. Prevention of craving and lust is indeed the Buddhist way of life.

Buddha's sermons practically covered all spheres of human life and provided the wisest solutions to the problems of mankind. He offered practically viable sermons to the householders, husband and wife, man and society, man and nature and man and religion to ensure the state of happiness and purity. He upheld the need for righteousness which enables the people to earn good reputation on the basis of noble thoughts and deeds.

Buddha had realized the importance of democracy and established democracy as a way of life for the first time in the history of mankind. He gave importance

to the people who constitute the ultimate power in the society. He established the Sangh culture and organised people under the banner of humanism regardless of gender, caste, region and other factors. He formulated certain good conduct rules for the creation of healthy and progressive social, economic, political and cultural order. He referred to the Sangh as a spiritual organisation which consists of Bhikku and Upasaka. The Bhikku is bound to celibacy but the Upasaka can marry according to Buddhist tradition. Buddha wanted people to convert on the basis of consciousness rather than compulsion.

There exists a path which is for me the most sacred place in India. This path was one day travelled over by the Prince Siddhartha after he had gotten rid of all his worldly possessions in order to go through the world and proclaim the announcement of love (Venkataraman 17). In the present geopolitical scenario, as the nations of the East have regained their political independence, their citizens led by their intellectual vanguard have searched long and deeply into their own ancient cultural heritage for ideas and values to stabilise their sense of newly discovered national identity and to sustain them in the contemporary world. There they have discovered much that is still valid and that holds relevance not only to themselves, but to all who are seeking clear understanding on the nature and destiny of humanity. For the insights and values proposed by these ancient systems claim to apply to human beings by virtue of their human nature as such independently of any transient and limiting cultural circumstances (Bodhi 12).

Buddhism and Future of the World

The similarity between Buddhism and democracy is perceived in the teachings of the Buddha. He introduced revolutionary concepts and intellectual innovations which were all democratic in content and intent (Bultjens 13). Buddha produced great visionaries, missionaries and rulers like Asoka the Great, Kaniska, Harsha and others. Buddha ensured the supreme freedom and security from the bondage of fundamentalism and taught humanity which can save the world from all disorders and diseases.

In the new millennium, the world has witnessed a mad rush for gaining nuclear supremacy. Nuclear power can be used for peace and progress if it is in the hands of humanists who are wedded to peace, tranquility and welfare. The material values have gained an upper hand over the human and spiritual values taught by Buddha and other champions of world peace and progress. It is obvious that without a certain degree of material and economic progress no moral and spiritual progress can be achieved.

The influence of Buddhism on Chinese life and thought has been manifold and

tremendous. It was the characteristic of Buddhism and receptivity of the Chinese mind that very soon Buddhism got intermingled and integrated with the rich and ancient cultural traditions of China and became a part and parcel of the Chinese modes of thinking and ways of living. Its influence has far exceeded the scope of religion, and it permeates into Chinese philosophy, art, literature, language, dance, music, architecture, medicine and even family and social life. In 21st century, Buddhism has tremendous potential and attracting power to have its sway all over the world with its noble ideas and ideals (Bhat 11). China's material and political progress stands as an example which reveals that Buddhism can usher in a new era of development and benefit the mankind in the age of globalization. India and China with their shared ancestry and culture of Buddhism can work together on spiritual paradigms for a new world order, providing alternative to the hegemonic capitalist and neo imperialist models.

World leaders have also appreciated the ideals of Buddha and emphasized their contemporary relevance in their writings and speeches. Albert Einstein observed that he is not the follower of any religion but he would embrace Buddhism if there was any need for religion. Swamy Vivekananda also stated with pride that Buddha was his role model and India needs to emulate Buddha to achieve the goal of self sufficiency in modern times. Rabindranath Tagore also noted that with the entry of Buddha, the world civilization was enriched in terms of great thoughts and deeds. Mahatma Gandhi pointed out that Hinduism should be grateful to Buddha for identification of certain myths, superstitions and other anti-people practices. Jawaharlal Nehru stressed the importance of Buddhism from the points of view of good governance and corporate social responsibility. Baba Saheb Ambedkar also incorporated the ideals of Buddha under the Preamble and Directive Principles of State Policy in the Constitution of India. It is appropriate to recall what Buddha had said long ago:

“The victor creates enmity
The defeated live in distress,
The peaceful live happily,
Giving up both victory and defeat”.

The preamble to the UNESCO charter states: “It is in the minds of men that the defense of peace must be constructed”. It was Buddha who said that mind matters and people should achieve balance between the material and spiritual values.

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