

Essay on the Discovery of the Buddhist Heritage in India

In a short essay in the opening chapter of *Aspects Of Buddhism In Indian History*, published by the Buddhist Publication Society, The Wheel Publication Nos. 195/196, Kandy 1973 Sri Lanka, L. M. Joshi, M.A., Ph.D., Reader in Buddhist Studies, in Punjabi University, Patlala, convincingly uses accumulation of facts and details, along with classification and ordered chronological sequence to explain the thesis stated in the paragraph below:

“Today India is again appearing on the Buddhist map of the world. Indians are awakening to their Buddhist past. In the second half of the nineteenth century—thanks to western and Indian archaeologists and orientalists—Indians began to be surprised at the discovery of the Buddhist legacy.

To talk of a “revival of Buddhism” in modern India is right in this sense of the discovery of the Buddhist heritage by Indians. Even today, 199 years after the foundation of the Asiatic Society, 81 years after the foundation of the Mahá Bodhi Society of India, 71 years after the foundation of the Archaeological Survey of India, the process of the discovery of Buddhism in India is still going on.

There is no doubt about it that much good work has been done in recent decades to disseminate some knowledge about Buddhism among those who care to know or those who can read and write. But the number of those who care to know is small and of those who cannot read or write is very large, and much literary and educational work remains to be done in order to give a glimpse of the wonder that was Buddhism in the Indian sub-continent before the Muslim invasions.

The year 2500 of the Buddhist Era (1956 A.D.) was of far-reaching importance and historic consequences for Buddhism in India. On the one hand, the celebration of Buddhajayanti on an international scale, organized by the central government and by state governments may be considered as symbolic of modern Indians’ express acknowledgement of their profound debt to the Buddhist tradition.

On the other hand, the government’s enthusiasm and involvement in the year-long celebrations were perhaps indicative of her respect for the universal ideas and principles taught by the Buddha. The government also took upon itself the task of renovating sacred Buddhist monuments and making the Buddhist centres of religion and culture accessible to pilgrims and tourists.

An important portion of Buddhist literature in Pali and Sanskrit has been published under the patronage of the government since 1956. A few learned institutions have been financed to promote Buddhist Studies and this branch of study is now recognized in its own right. A number of universities in the country provide facilities for study and research in Pali, Tibetan, Buddhist Sanskrit, art and archaeology of Buddhism.

The Mahá Bodhi Society, in spite of its meagre resources, has been trying to keep up the tradition of bahujana hitáya bahujana-sukháya. The Indo-Japanese Friendship Society has been displaying rare interest in the task of promoting good-will and peace through the construction of Buddhist shrines. Much good work has been done by the neo-Buddhists in Maháráshtra and other parts of India.

Most important of all, there is now a sizable number of professed Buddhists in the mixed population of India. The number has been increasing since 1956. The Buddhists in modern India are a mixed group and in some sense truly representative of the wide variety of practices and beliefs characteristic of Buddhism that is universal.

First of all should be mentioned the Buddhists by tradition, those who have inherited the Buddhist religion from their ancestors. They are generally found in Orissa, Bengal, on the Indo-Nepal border in northern districts of Himachal Pradesh and in Ladakh.

Next come the neo-Buddhists, the followers of B. R. Ambedkar and others, who, have embraced Buddhism from time to time after renouncing their status as harijans. They form the largest section of the Buddhist population and are generally wedded to the Theravada tradition.

The third group of Buddhists consists of those who have grown into Buddhist religiousness through education, conviction and consideration: Buddhists in this group have come from different strata of society, ex-bráhmaṇas, ksatriyas,—vaisvas, káyasthas, and so on. Men like the late Dharmánanda Kosambi, the late Ráhula Samkṛityayana and Bhiksu Jagadish Kashyap belong to this group.

The fourth group of Buddhists consists of non-Indian Buddhists resident in India. These include over fifty thousand Tibetans headed by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. There are some Buddhist families and monks from almost all Asian lands and also a few from Europe.

India continues to be respected as the holy land of the Dharma by all devout Buddhists the world over. Educated Indians too are now aware of India's Buddhist Past and her cultural contacts with other Asian peoples.

There is, however, no organization on an all-India level nor any other kind of liaison among the different sections of, the Buddhist population. There seems to be, e.g., no contact between professional Buddhist scholars and the Buddhist masses of modern India. The organization of monastic life is practically non-existent; the bhiksu-samgha, it seems, is nobody's concern.

Of all the sections of the Indian people, Buddhists are the poorest. There is a clear dearth of Buddhist monks in the country. Educated and trained bhiksus, versed in Dharma lore, are greatly needed. But there are no material resources, no Buddhist schools, no good monasteries or temples or funds or rich donors to maintain and take care of Buddhist monks. In most parts of the country it is difficult to come across a bhikkhu. The lonely families of lay Buddhists have to carry on their religious activities often without the presence of monks.

The individual families of lay Buddhists as well as individual Buddhist monks, living in different parts of the country, are in fact facing a cultural and religious crisis due: to the absence of an organized community of workers and an established samgha. So long as the absence of able leadership, proper education, necessary funds; and organizational liaison among all scattered sections of the Buddhist population on a countrywide scale, continues to exist, I have grave doubts about the prospects for the progress of Buddhist thought, culture—and literature in India.

There is also the other side of the situation in which Buddhism finds itself in contemporary India. This is its relationship with the tradition of the majority of Indians who are called “Hindus.” The Buddhists, especially the neo-Buddhists, will continually have to seek the goodwill and sympathy of the followers of Vaisnavism, Saivism, Saktism and of Vedantic “Hinduism.” Due respect for the faith of others has been a cardinal feature of the Buddhist tradition. No true Buddhist can afford to disparage the religious beliefs and practices of others.

Emperor Asoka commanded, some three and twenty centuries ago, that “There should not be honour to one’s own religion or condemnation of another’s without any occasion, or it may be a little on this and that occasion. By so doing one promotes one’s own Dhamma, and benefits another’s too. By doing otherwise one harms both his own and also another’s religion. One who honours his own and condemns another’s Dhamma, all that through attachment to his own religion—why?—in order to illuminate it. But in reality, by so doing, he only harms it, to be sure. Concourse (samavaya) therefore, is commendable (sadhu) - why? - in order that people may hear and desire to hear one another’s Dhamma.” (Rock Edict XIV).

In these days of the encounter of the religions of the world this teaching of Asoka has a special relevance. India has always been a multi-religious nation. Brahmanism, Jainism, and Buddhism existed and flourished side by side for many centuries. The tradition of religious tolerance was violated, especially by Brahmanical followers, only occasionally till Islam appeared on the scene. Sectarian fanaticism and religious intolerance unfortunately characterized the medieval history of India and incalculable harm was done to the true ideals of religiousness.

Today the government of the country is wedded to a secular policy so that the votaries of different faiths are free to pursue and promote all that is best in their respective faiths. But even under a secular government the position of Buddhism remains the weakest, for its followers are among the poorest and most disorganized. The vast majority of neo-Buddhists are, by and large, illiterate and ignorant about the real nature and significance of Buddhism. Only by sustained and stupendous efforts can we overcome these weaknesses.

As a matter of fact, revival or promotion of Buddhism in modern India is possible only through education and creative literary publications of a high standard. Ignorance or avijjā in any form is incompatible with the Buddhist message. The Buddha is the embodiment of knowledge and wisdom.

The path of Buddhahood is a path of wisdom (nana-magga). Propagation and progress of Buddhism in ancient Asia was due, to a large extent, to its missionaries who were not only pious men but often vastly learned. The amount of sacred books and the great number of languages in which they were written by ancient and medieval Buddhists testify to the Buddhist emphasis on education and learning.”

In his conclusion, the author pulls his facts together, into a coherent unity, emphasizing how through India’s discovery of its Buddhist heritage, and the way the Buddhist legacy has been recognized and lauded in India, it is important to encourage further support for education in this area.