

Fake theory of persecution of Buddhists in India

(This is a Research article to explode the myth of Fake theory of persecution of Buddhists in India)

Recently a new trend is being noticed in the literary circles particularly amongst the camp followers of Dr.Ambedkar that the Buddhism disappeared in ancient India due to persecution by the Hindus. This camp especially holds Brahmins as responsible for almost extinction of Buddhist tradition from this country. In this regard, Pushyamitra Shung, the Brahmin chieftain of Buddhist King Brihadratha who was also the founder of Shung dynasty is commonly targeted as the destroyer of several Buddhist stupas and killer of thousands of head shaven Buddhist monks.

The myth of religious persecution of Buddhism in India has been is rejected by Rhys Davids^[i] who is considered as the grand authority on Buddhism. Renowned Historian Vincent Smith also rejects this assumption that Buddhism had been extinguished by the storm of Brahman Persecution. He considers this as false explanation^[ii]. Most important Hiuen Tsang, during his visit to India does not mention any persecution against Jains and Buddhists^[iii] but according to Sir Alexander Cunningham both Fa Hian and Hian Tsang noticed decline of Buddhism during their visits in India.

The fact of the matter is that Buddhism disappeared from the land of its origin due to various other important reasons:

1. Decline of moral values and ignoring the teachings of Lord Buddha by the followers especially of the Vajrayana sect of Buddhism.
2. Loss of patronage from the ruling class.
3. External attacks of Islamic invaders.
4. Consolidation of Brahmanical Hindus.

The basic teachings of Buddhism are based on Truth, Non violence, abstinence and devotion. With the passage of time we see that different sects and schools of thoughts emerged within Buddhism and they deviated from the core tenets of Lord Buddha, e.g., principle of non-violence. The Buddhism by 7th century had adopted tantric practices which were not in conformity with the original doctrines of Buddhism. Having taken the vow to remain as celibate for the whole life, monks turned into 'Married Monks^[iv]. Once refraining from animal Killing and avoiding meat eating Buddhist openly started flesh eating. This practice is commonly seen amongst all Buddhist countries. Well known author Brijlal Verma in his works while quoting Fahian and Hian Tsang says that during early ages of Buddhism, no one consumed meat. Meat eaters were considered as Chandalas and they were considered as outcastes who were forced to live outside the city limit^[v]. The practice of living on alms and charity by Buddhist monks gradually started disappearing. The practice of living on alms and charity by Buddhist monks gradually started disappearing. The large monastic establishments instituted by Ashoka, were all repositories of learning's. Their influence was everywhere superior to the power of the King and the people accepted their monarchs at the bidding of the monks^[vi]. In due course, the gap between the general public and the monks widened and ultimately the influence of austerity and sage hood of Buddhist monks diminished almost completely. Similarly the influence of monks on the ruling classes also started vanishing.

Additionally, the philosophy of Buddhism got restricted to the monks while common man had hardly any access to that. After monks stopped living on charity, their common bonds or ties with masses also started shaking. Monks who were living lavishly on state funds were being considered as a parasite or a burden rather than as a helping hand. The system of admission into Buddhist Sangh also suffered a setback. In the early ages of Buddhism, only those people were permitted to get admission into a 'Sangh' who were fully capable of living the austere life of an ascetic. With the passage of time persons of dubious character, thieves, robbers, opportunists, disgruntled and discarded elements started becoming monks in order to enjoy the life without putting any hard work whether physical or intellectual.

The comparatively pure Theism and practical morality of Buddha were first encountered with the mild quietism of the Vaishnavas, and at last deformed by the wildest extravagances of the Tantrists[vii]. Men crossed by Fortunes and disappointed in ambition, wives neglected by their husbands, and widows by their children, the sated debauchee, and the jealous enthusiast, all took the vow of celibacy, abstinence and poverty[viii]. The desire of possession not the desire for salvation became attracting factor for the masses for Monasteries. Ultimately the inclusion of Tantric Practices, adultery, alcoholism etc lead to moral degradation and total wipe out of right conduct from Viharas. The people looked upon unmoved, and would not defend what they had long ceased to respect; and the colossal figure of Buddhism, which had once bestridden the whole continent of India, vanished like a sudden rainbow at sunset. Beyond any doubt one can say that if Lord Buddha had been alive to see such deteriorating conditions of moral values in his Viharas, he would have immediately closed them.

The patronage towards the spread of the message of Lord Buddha started during the reign of Asoka. We can learn from the records that Asoka was found to be unusually spending the state resources on Buddhism[ix]. The Buddhist prose romance, named Asokavandana (being part of the Dirgavandana) tells a long story of Asoka's senile devotion to the church and consequent waste of the resources of the empire, which went so far that the ministers were compelled to remove him from power and place Samprati, son of the blinded Kunala, on the throne[x]. This fact is supported by the facts that it is believed that Ashoka build about 84,000 Buddha Viharas in whole country thus spending large part of the state resources on propagation ignoring the other important state tasks[xi]. The condition was so dreaded that the whole army of soldiers were transformed into shaven head monks leading to loss of military power of the state. Soldiers were denied using arms as even training with arms was considered equivalent to non violence. The result was weakening of the defensive force of our country. The other Jain kings also adopted same policy as Buddhist Kings. The Doctrine of non violence was forcibly implemented on the general public and even punishments were announced for those who break the rule. We can understand the impact of this rule by these examples. In the Twelfth century Kumarapala, King of Gujarat in Western India, after his conversion to Jainism in A.D. 1159 took up the doctrine of the sanctity of animal life with the most inordinate zeal and imposed savage penalties upon violators of his rules. An unlucky merchant, who had committed the atrocious crime of cracking a Louse, was brought before the special court at Anhilwara and punished by the confiscation of his whole property the proceeds of which were devoted to the building of a temple. Another wretch, who had outraged the sanctity of the capital by bringing in a Dish of raw meat, was put to death[xii].

The degree of loss of defensive power of Maurya Empire can be understood by the fact that Salisuka Maurya in B.C. 216 who was descendant of King Asoka (once the supreme ruler of the country) was

defeated by Kharavela the king of Orissa[xiii]. Among many reason one of the reason was that Asoka grandson Samprati left Buddhism and adopted Jainism. He was such deeply influenced by Jainism that he ordered dissolving of all forces and conversion of all soldiers to Jain monks and he himself died after prolonged fasting in a Jain muth in South India[xiv]. The result was the gradual weakening of the strength of the forces. During the reign of Brihadratha his military chieftain Pushyamitra Shung found Brihadratha the Maurya King as inefficient as had showed no interests in defending of the country especially by the Greeks. Pushyamitra killed him and ascended himself to the throne. He started mass capturing of the Greeks who were hiding in the grabs of Buddhists in Vihar. Few Historians considers Pushyamitra as Brahmin King and his campaign as persecution of Buddhists but in reality it was an act of self defence. Sir Vincent Smith claims that the self appointment of Pushyamitra as king and his action against Buddhists are exaggerated[xv] statements supporting Buddhist persecution. Pushyamitra provided equal patronage to both Buddhist as well as the Brahmins of his age. This fact is proved by his involvement in construction of one of the biggest Buddhist Stupa of his ages. Sir Vincent smith clearly writes that the persecutions were so rare and that a rule the various sects managed to live together in harmony, and in the enjoyment of fairly impartial official favour[xvi]. The invasion of India by Greek Menander and his defeat by the forces of Pushyamitra is a perfect example to prove his dedication for transforming the country into a strong and unified nation as it was during the reign of Asoka. The Greeks after the loss under Menander never tried to reinvade the country[xvii].

The later rulers supported both Buddhism as well as Vaishnavism equally. The mentioning of Lord Buddha as one the Avatars in Puranas shows that the society of those ages was not hostile to Buddhism in spite of the fact that whoever was the ruler a Brahmin or a Buddhist King. Historians give another view point that Chandra Gupta, the ruler from Gupta Dynasty may have professed Buddhism in the early part of his reign and Vaishnavism in the later part; for the differences between the two is more nominal than real[xviii].

Slowly the patronage to Buddhist monasteries reduced due to lack of understanding between the rulers and the monks. The main reason was decline in the impact of Buddhist monks on the rulers. The General conduct of monks suffered heavily that they started indulging in tantric practices rather than the Damma as taught by Buddha. The introduction of tantric practices by Vajrayana sect of Buddhism, the inclusion of Alcohol, Meat eating and uncontrolled relationships with women which were strictly forbidden was the last blow to the falling standards principles of Buddhism[xix]. A valid point is sometimes asked that Jainism also flourished along with Buddhism in the middle ages. Then how was Jainism able to survive? The reason was simple that the followers of Buddha stopped the practice of abstinence, poverty (minimal requirements) and the morality. They confined themselves to the Viharas rather than teaching the common man living outside Viharas. The followers of Jainism maintained their lives with austerity and dedication thus surviving even in incompatible circumstances.

The invasion by the outsiders is also an important cause of decline of Buddhism from our country. In 10th and 11th century Buddhism in Kashmir faced serious challenges by the invasion of Huns who weakened its roots in the Northern part of India[xx]. Subsequently by the 12th Century Buddhism was confined to the lands of Bihar and Bengal. The last blow which wiped out Buddhism from the land of its origin was Islamic invasion leading to destruction and mass killing of Buddhists. In Bihar and Bengal both rulers Palas and Senas were swept away by the torrent of Muhammadan invasion at the end of the twelfth century, when Kutub-ud-din General, son of Muhammad Bakhtyar stormed Bihar in or about A.D. 1197, and surprised Nudiah (Nadia) a year or two later. Great quantities of plunder were obtained, and the slaughter of the shaven head Brahmins, that is to say the Buddhist monks, was so thoroughly completed, that when the victor sought of someone explaining the content of the books in the libraries

of the monasteries, and not a living man could be found who was capable of reading them. It was discovered, we are told, 'that the whole of that fortress or the city was a college and in the Hindi tongue they call a college Bihar'. This crushing blow, followed up, off course, by similar act of violence, destroyed the vitality of Buddhism in the ancient home [xxi]. The remaining Buddhist Monks after widespread destruction like Shakyam Shri Bhadra, a Kashmiri in origin from Vikramsheela University shifted to Jagtala Vihar in Bengal. He had to even migrate from there to Nepal and finally he died in Kashmir. Similarly Buddhist monks spread out to the distant lands of Tibet, Nepal and survived outside India as staying here was invitation to death by the hands of Islamic invaders. As no tutors were left to teach the Dhamma of Buddha ultimately Buddhism disappeared from the land of its origin in almost 100 years of Islamic Invasion.

Need not to mention that one of the causes of the loss of social support of Buddhism from general public was the organization efforts by the Brahmins and foremost name which comes in front of us is of Adi Shankracharya. Believed to be born in Kerala in 8th century Adi Shankracharya well versed in Vedic philosophy toured throughout the country and started debates and dialogues with Jain and Buddhist monks. The famous one was arranged by the Ruler of Ujjain King Sundhava. After the victory of Adi Shankracharya King embraced himself the Vedic dharma and declared it as his state religion. These attempts were like winning state patronage and support for the propagation of Vedic Dharma. Needless to say that it was the scholarly efforts and hard work by Adi Shankracharya which enabled him to win over the rusted mind of so called Buddhist scholars who had left practicing the real message of Buddhism since ages. None of any historical documents till date provides any description of forceful killing or armed struggle by any King against the Buddhists during the lifetime of Adi Shankracharya. Fa Hian, a renowned Chinese pilgrim and traveller who came to India early in the fifth century, found Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries in every great town in Northern India, and does not record one instance of hostilities or persecution. And all the great dynasties of the age those of Chandragupta and of Kanishka, the Andhras, the Guptas, and the Shah Kings, encouraged the holy men of both religions, and bestowed valuable gifts of land and property on Brahmins and Buddhist monks alike [xxii]. We can easily infer that Shankracharya did not destroyed Buddhism but he debated with the decaying and rotten structure which was mere symbolic remnants of the original Buddhism. Moreover Buddhism was still prevalent in centuries after the death of Shankracharya in the country.

Rahul Sankrityayan confirms this statements by providing existence of Buddhism till 12th centuries.. He mentions that for four centuries from 8th to 12th centuries we found Buddhist kings like Palas in Bihar under their rule the learning seat of Nalanda produced scholars like Shantrakshit and Dharmotara. He even credits the Gaharvar rulers of Northern India as a supporters of Buddhism and even mentions the queen of Gaharvar rulers Kumar Devi established Dharmachakra Mahavihar in Sarnath and King Govind chandra donated to Jaitvan Mahavihar. In southern India in Konkan Shilahar rulers were supporters of Buddhism. Even in the land of Shankar in Kerala there were supporters of Buddhism. The famous work of "Manjushree" was secured by the Brahmins of Kerala is an example of lack of any enmity between Brahmins and Buddhists in those ages [xxiii].

To sum up we need to understand that the Buddhists were never persecuted in India. No one can uproot a strong Banyan Tree. Only when it becomes hollow from inside by infestation of termites its life comes to end. Similar was the fate with Buddhism. It weakened due to its own internal causes like loss of morality, loss of conduct and other ill practices in Viharas. The weakened structure instead of acting as a light house became burden on the society. Thus social and ruler support extinguished with the times. The remaining skeleton was just like a feather which was flown with the wind of Islamic invasion. This fact is enforced by Historian R.C.Dutt as "During a thousand years Hinduism was influenced by

Buddhism, until Hinduism adopted all that had made Buddhism popular, and thenceforth Buddhism declined. It is a mistake to suppose that Buddhism was stamped out in India by persecution; except in very rare instances, when conquerors indulged in cruelty and massacres, there was no religious persecution in India. Buddhism disappeared from India because its mission was fulfilled. Hinduism had adopted joyous celebrations and vast pilgrimages, Hinduism had assumed image-worship and popular rites, Hinduism had reunited the Aryans and the Hinduised non- Aryans into one homogeneous community, and thenceforth Buddhism declined in India because its mission was fulfilled and it ceased to be necessary.[\[xxiv\]](#)”

We consider Buddhism as a reform movement against animal killing, untouchability and superstitions on name of Dharma widely prevalent in those ages. The basic teachings of Lord Buddha are inspired from the Vedic philosophy in terms of attainment of Moksha, Right Conduct, knowledge and following the right Path[\[xxv\]](#).

[\[i\]](#) J. Pali Text soc,1896,pp.87-92

[\[ii\]](#) Page 368 ref Vincent Smith, The early History of India

[\[iii\]](#) Page 454-455 ref Vincent Smith, The early History of India

[\[iv\]](#) Page 367 ref Vincent Smith, The early History of India

[\[v\]](#) Page 26,27 ref The Fahian and Hian Tsang visits to India by BrijMohanlal Verma, 1928

[\[vi\]](#) Page 125 ref Alexander Cunningham, The Bhilsa Topes; or, Buddhist monument of central India

[\[vii\]](#) Page 158 ref Alexander Cunningham The Bhilsa Topes; or, Buddhist monument of central India

[\[viii\]](#) Page 168 ref Alexander Cunningham The Bhilsa Topes; or, Buddhist monument of central India

[\[ix\]](#) Page 98-100 ref Alexander Cunningham The Bhilsa Topes; or, Buddhist monument of central India

[\[x\]](#) Page 192 ref Vincent Smith, The early History of India

[\[xi\]](#) Page 37 ref The Fahian and Hian Tsang visits to India by BrijMohanlal Verma, 1928

[\[xii\]](#) Page 181 ref Vincent Smith, The early History of India

[\[xiii\]](#) Page 197 ref Vincent Smith, The early History of India

[\[xiv\]](#) Alexander Cunningham, The Bhilsa Topes;or,Buddhist movement of central India

[\[xv\]](#) Page 202 ref Vincent Smith, The early History of India

[\[xvi\]](#) Page 203 ref Vincent Smith, The early History of India

[\[xvii\]](#) Page 199 ref Vincent Smith, The early History of India

[\[xviii\]](#) Page 157-158 ref Alexander Cunningham, The Bhilsa Topes; or, Buddhist monument of central India

[\[xix\]](#) Page 68 ref Mahapandit Rahul Sankrityayan, Buddha Sanskriti

[\[xx\]](#) Page 409-410 ref Vincent Smith, The early History of India

[\[xxi\]](#) Page 403-404 ref Vincent Smith, The early History of India

[\[xxii\]](#) Page 60, 61 ref The civilisation of India by R.C.Dutt published in 1900 from London

[\[xxiii\]](#) Page 67,68 ref Mahapandit Rahul Sankrityayan, Buddha Sanskriti

[\[xxiv\]](#) Page 68 ref The civilisation of India by R.C.Dutt published in 1900 from London

[\[xxv\]](#) Ref Buddha an Aryan Reformer by Dr Dharamdev Vidyamartand

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