

---

---

# Double Tragedy: A Reappraisal of the Decline of Buddhism in India

K.T.S. Sarao \*

---

---

Though the term 'decline' has been used in various contexts in Indian Buddhism<sup>1</sup>, the idea of imminent decline in the Pāli text refers to the cosmic cycle of evolution and devolution spanning vast expanses of time<sup>2</sup>. Differing perceptions of decline and its causes elicit differing responses from the traditions that espouse them. (Jan Nattier, 1991) The same may be said about the decline of Indian Buddhism. For instance, in the case of the Theravāda Buddhists, the idea of inevitable decline led to "a fierce conservatism, devoted to the preservation for as long as possible of the Buddha's teachings in their original form. Set within the cosmological framework...(according to which ours is an age of general decline) and anticipating the disappearance of the Dharma within a finite number of centuries, this historical outlook views change of any kind as being -- by definition -- change for the worse. Thus, the impulse to preservation (and, accordingly, the tendency of deny any change that may actually have taken place) is both understandable and expected."(D.W. Chapel, 1980:122-154) Whereas some scholars perceive the decline of Buddhism as resulting from "just old age or sheer exhaustion,"(E. Conze, 1960:86) others feel that it was the multiplicity of different causes that "must have been in operation for a pretty long time."(P.V. Kane, 1930-62:1003) Regarding the time of the decline of Buddhism, if some scholars believe that "both the rise and decline of Buddhism began almost simultaneously"(Umesh Mishra:111-112) and thus the decline is put at the very beginning,(L.M. Joshi,1968:302) there are other

---

\* Professor, Buddhist Studies / University of Delhi

<sup>1</sup> The *Vinaya* refers to the decline of *brahmacariya* and the anticipated collapse of *saddhamma*.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the *Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta*(D.III,no.26) and the *Aggañña Sutta*(D.III,no.27).

---

---

scholars who put it not earlier than the seventh century AD.<sup>3</sup> However, it is generally agreed that whatever may have been the time of the beginning of its decline, it collapsed rather quickly and comprehensively towards the end of the twelfth century.

Moral and ethical degeneracy of Buddhists is seen by some scholars as one of the most important causes of the decline of Buddhism. (K.W. Morgan, 1956:48 ; R.C.Mitra, 1954:2) Even the earliest Buddhist texts divulge an awareness of proclivity towards dereliction and iniquity with the *Samgha* that grew to the point where large numbers of monks were garnering individual or community wealth and engaging in several other indiscretions. Jātakas also acknowledge that some people entered the *Samgha* because they found living easier inside the *Samgha* than on the outside.(*Jātaka* I :311) A young man in one of the *Jātaka* stories say: "Day and night I am toiling away with my own hands at all sorts of tasks, yet never do I taste food so sweet. I must turn Brother myself."(*Ibid.*) Some renowned monasteries are known to have issued their own seals and coins.<sup>4</sup> Monasteries even started owning land, village, pasturage and cattle etc. for the maintenance of their residential monks.(P. Niyogi, 1973:535) Chinese travellers Faxian, Ijing and Xuan Zang talk about the feudal character of monastic institutions which had considerable real property and assets.<sup>5</sup> Big monasteries with their own property of various kinds were able not only to attain self-sufficiency, but were also a position to extend their power and influence in their respective localities.<sup>6</sup> There are also references to Buddhist monks visiting sex-workers, consuming alcoholic drinks, working as match-makers, indulging in theft, robbery and farming.<sup>7</sup>

In one text it is lamented that "*bhikṣus* will have taken up the homeless life in order to acquire advantages and ensure their subsistence. They will

---

<sup>3</sup> E.g. P.C. Bagchi; "Decline of Buddhism and its Causes," *Asutosh Mukerjee Silver Jubilee Volumes*.III: 412.; R.C. Mitra: *The Decline of Buddhism in India*, Calcutta: Vishva Bharati Studies: 1954: 2

<sup>4</sup> P. Niyogi, "Organization of Buddhist Monasteries in Ancient Bengal and Bihar." *Journal of Indian History*, LI(3):1973:531-557. "Endowments in Favour of Early Buddhist Monasteries in Bengal and Bihar," *Journal of Ancient Indian History*, Vol.VI, Parts 1-2, 1972-73, Calcutta, 1973: 160-165.

<sup>5</sup> Legge, *The Travels of Fa-hien*, 43;Takakusu(tr.), *A Record of the Buddhist Regions*, 193; Beal, *Life of Hieun-tsiang*, 112-13.

<sup>6</sup> P. Niyogi, "Endowments in Favour of Early Buddhist Monasteries in Bengal and Bihar," *Journal of Ancient Indian History*, Vol.VI, Parts 1-2, 1972-73, Calcutta, 1973: 164.

<sup>7</sup> See L.M. Joshi, *Op. Cit.*: 305ff.

---

---

lack diligence in reciting the holy texts and will not seek solitude in order to meditate and reflect. During the day, they will gather in order to discuss worldly matters(*lokadharmā*), they will become excited and give confused cries; during the night, tired and lazy, they will prolong their sleep. They will be devoid of reasoning (*vitarka*) and reflection (*upanidhyāna*). Since they will all neglect the true teaching of the Buddha, they will no longer follow the practices.<sup>8</sup> However, it cannot be overlooked that most religious communities go through phases of decadence; those that come out unscathed ostensibly react to such predicaments through spontaneous internal reform. Decadence itself need not be lethal. The incompetence of the Buddhists to generate any pithy and purposeful reforms must be attributed to other causes.(P.S. Jaini, 1980: 81ff)

Some scholars hold *Tāntricism* responsible for the decline. There was a time when monks often used to visit their teachers with their female partners. All the 84 *Siddhas* of *Tāntrika* Buddhism were either married or had yoginīs as their partner. The Vajrayāna is often blamed for abetting a moral anarchy and "the abuses of Vajrayāna perhaps occupy the foremost place."*(Ibid:311)* However, Tantra could not have led to the decline of Buddhism. For example, according to Alex Wayman, "Quite apart from the fact that there are different classes of Tantra, and that the more reprehended practices or tenets are not ubiquitous in the range of Tantra, the judgement takes no account of the striking and inescapable fact that the Tantra in its Hindu form has enjoyed great popularity, and apparently has not contributed to the demise of Buddhism in any observable amount... Accordingly, while not denying that the Tantra was sometime followed in a degenerate form, one must look elsewhere for the reasons of Buddhism's decline in India."*(A. Wayman, 1980: 360-361)*

The animosity of the *Brāhmaṇas* as is sometimes held responsible for the decline of Buddhism in India.*(T.W. Rhys Davids, 1896:87-92)* It is argued that the *Brāhmaṇas* normally despised the Buddhists. Though undoubtedly there are examples where Buddhist monks were persecuted or held in ridicule, and occasionally even killed, but hostility was altogether of a different kind. Had the Buddha been hated by the *Brāhmaṇical* society, he would not have been accepted as an incarnation of *Viṣṇu* by the same society.

---

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from the *Vibhāṣā* at E. Lamotte, *History of Indian Buddhism: From the Origins to the Śāka Era*, Sara Webb-Boin(tr.), Louvain-la-Neuve: Insitut Orientaliste: 1988; originally published as *Histoire du bouddhisme indien: Des origines à l'ère Śāka*, Louvain: Bibliothèque du Muséon, vol. 43, Louvain: 1958: 199.

---

---

The malevolence appears to be directed primarily at the monastic movement and the comparative opulence of the monasteries. Lack of royal patronage and persecution of Buddhism by some *Brahmanical* kings is also seen by some scholars as an important reason leading to its decline in India. Though it cannot be denied that royal patronage was a significant positive factor during the formative years of the Buddhist movement, but this does not hold good in the case of the decline of Buddhism. Survival of Jainism at the same time as Buddhism and Hinduism at a later time, belies this hypothesis. Similarly the case of persecution does not appear to be very strong. The persecution by the *Hūmas* and *Gau* as may have resulted in the destruction of some monasteries and the death of some Buddhist monks, but this could not have given a severe blow to the movement<sup>9</sup>. The Buddha was seen as one form within the family. Very few disliked him, but most tolerated him.

Some scholars ascribe the decline of Buddhism to division and fierce disputes within the *Saṅgha*. By the seventh century, Buddhism presented the scene of a house divided. Schism had been visualized by the Buddha himself as one of the five deadly sins. Various sects of the Buddhists fought amongst themselves as bitterly as with non-Buddhists. Charles Eliot feels that within "it was to the corruptions of the Mahāyāna rather than that of Hīnayāna that the decay of Buddhism in India was due"(C. Eliot, 1954:6)

L.M. Joshi too agree with Eliot and considers Mahāyāna responsible for qualitative decay. (L.M. Joshi, *Op Cit*: 309) But not all scholars see sectarian rivalry as indicative of internal weakness. E.g. P.S Jaini feels that "When dealing with the kind of non-centralized movement that Buddhism comprised, the emergence of numerous sects should probably be taken as a sign of both intellectual and spiritual vigour. Even more important, Buddhist sectarianism was confined to interpretation of texts; members of all school more or less accepted the validity of the basic *Tipiṭaka*, shared an almost identical code of conduct, and moved easily among each other's communities... such divisiveness cannot, therefore, reasonably be suggested as central to the downfall of Buddhism in India." (P.S. Jaini, *Op Cit*: 84)

Some scholars believe that the Islamic invasions were primarily responsible for the disappearance of Buddhism from the main land of India. Nālandā was sacked by the Turks in 1197 AD. Vikramaśilā too met with the same fate shortly afterwards. Bodhagayā was also ransacked. Nālandā was pillaged again in 1235. Monks in large numbers were exterminated in a very

---

<sup>9</sup> See P.V. Kane, *Op Cit*: 1010

---

---

cruel manner. Their holy books too met with same fate. Those who managed to save themselves did so by running away to the interiors of the Himalayas, Nepal and even Tibet. A quintessential example of the systematic method with which Buddhist establishments were razed to the ground can be seen in the moving account of Tibetan monk Dharmasvāmin. (G. Roerich:64-95) When Nālandā was attacked again in 1325, all the odd seventy students took to their heels leaving Rāhulaśrībhadrā, the old and helpless ācariya to his fate. Dharmasvāmin toted the old monk on his own shoulders to safety. The Buddhist institutions were pillaged and torched by the invaders resulting in the disappearance of Buddhism in its ecclesiastically established form. But a close examination of the impact of the attacks on Buddhist institutions points out that they only worked as a *coup-de-grace*. These attacks only delivered Buddhism from its painful sufferance in which it had already entered. In fact, by the time the so-called Islamic onslaught began, Buddhism had already become an endangered species. The importance of such a cause also become less important when one realizes that Jainism faced the same kind of dilemma and came out unscathed.

The decline of Buddhism appears to have taken place at two different levels: decline from below i.e. at the devotee level and above i.e. at the monastic level. These two phenomena worked not only at different times but also resulted out of different causes.

### **DECLINE FROM BELOW**

Whereas some scholars consider Buddhism as a "social failure", (G.C. Pande, 1963:491-492, D.K. Barua:39-44) others go to the extent of not seeing Buddhism even as a social movement. (N. Dutt, 1973: 97) There appears to be some truth in this allegation. The laity appears to have never given up the existing practices and ceremonies prescribed by the *Brāhmaṇa* priests. This proclivity was conspicuous from an early period. The term 'Buddhist' in itself largely signified those who had actually forsaken household-lives and become monks. While there were undoubtedly large number of lay-followers who patronized Buddhism, there were no exclusively stipulated criteria like social codes, modes of worship etc whereby these individuals could be identified as a separately identifiable religious group. The sense of religious identification felt by the Buddhist laity was often a weak one at best. Thus, when a person, say a *Brāhmaṇa*, became a lay-devotee of the Buddha it only indicated that he expressed his respect to the Buddha as a 'holy'

---

---

man.(B.G. Gokhale,1965: 376.) It is nowhere said that such *Brāhmaṇas* ceased to hold the *brahmadeya* lands or ceased to be *purohitas*. This meant that such *Brāhmaṇas* continued to devote themselves to the Vedic learning and train their disciples in it. In the case of Sunīdha and Vassakāra, there is no definite reference showing that they ever formally pronounced themselves to be upāsakas. Nor is it necessary to presume that their *conversation* signified any spectacular transformation in their traditional beliefs and social status. (*Ibid.*) Their becoming lay-devotees did not signify their giving up the old 'caste' status.

It is also important to remember here that adherence to the Buddhist faith did not in any way make it obligatory for the devotee to reject his ancestral beliefs or repudiate the religious practices customarily performed in his fraternity. By one of those compromises of which India supplies so many examples, each person is allowed to venerate, in addition to the *Triple Gem*, the deities of his own region, caste or choice and to worship them in the appropriate way. Therefore, in the course of history, one can see some excellent examples of the Buddhists continuing their adoration of sprites, *nāgas*, and *yakkhas*. The higher castes were always to call upon the great Vedic and Brāhmaṇic gods: Indra, Brahmā, Māra etc. Neither did the advent of Buddhism lead to the decline in importance of such gods nor did the Sākyamuni ever oppose the deities of *pagan Brāhmaṇism*. He accepted that "revered and honoured by man, the divinities in turn revere and honour him."(Vin.i.229; D.ii.88; Ud.89) He refused to castigate the customs of paganism as a whole: bloody sacrifices which led to the death of living beings are to be deprecated, but peaceful offerings which do not involve cruelty are to be recommended.(A.ii.42f;S.i.76;Dh.v141;Sn.v249)

The Buddha was committed to the higher ideal of self-denial. Thus, those who gave up family life in order to adopt a life of homelessness, were held in higher esteem than those who remained in the world and led the lives of householders. It has rightly been remarked that in other religious orders, such as that of the Jainas, the laity frequently associated much more closely with the monks than was the case among the Buddhists. This kind of weakness of the links between the priestly class and the laity appear to have been the *raison le plus décisif* which contributed to the disappearance of Buddhism in India at the level of laity, while Jainism survived.

The votive inscriptions from Sāñcī and Bharhut contain evidence of gifts to these Buddhist vihāras by persons who do not seem to have been even lay-devotees. Thus, it may not be going too far if one were to say that

---

---

the *conversion* of a follower of *Brahmanism* to Buddhism did not mean anything more than showing respect to the Buddha and his *Sanha* and making donations to the latter. Such *conversions* did not result in the creation of distinct and separate *religiously* or socially identifiable community of Buddhists especially when one were to compare this phenomenon with other religious like Islam or Christianity where the demarcation was exclusive and watertight. Thus, Buddhism failed in establishing an organized group of lay-devotees who, on their *conversion*, regarded themselves, other than in their frequent or periodical visits and donations to Buddhist shrines, as socially different from the rest of the community. (B.G. Gokhale, 1965: 376) Among the lay population, it appears, Buddhism remained a *sampradāya* and once the monastic communities disappeared, the lay supporters gradually got absorbed into the general *Brahmanical* community which, in turn, had already assumed the shape of a Juggernaut as far as indigenous faiths were concerned.

Religious propaganda at the time of Aśoka was not focused on the noble truths, but on the general principles of natural law. In vain would one look in Aśoka's inscriptions for the profound ideas and basic theories of Buddhism: they neither mention the Four Noble Truths, nor the Eightfold Path, nor the Doctrine of Dependent Origination, nor even the supernatural attributes of the Buddha. They merely describe the precepts of universal morality as they had already been formulated for the use of the laity in the canonical writings: the *Lakkhaṇa* (iii.142-72) and *Siṅgālovāda* (D.iii.180-193) of the *Dīgha Nikāya* and the various *Gahapativaggas* (M.i.339-413; S. ii.68-80; A. iv.208-235) of the *Majjhima*, *Saṅyutta* and the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*. The Buddhist monks themselves, when setting out on the spiritual conquest of India, sought less to instruct their listeners in the truths of the faith than to attract their adherence by means of homilies, with little dogmatic scope, but suitable for terrifying the minds and striking the imagination: description of the pangs of death and the torments of hells, stories of ghosts, edifying tales and fables. The principal aim of the monks was not to tear the Indian population away from its ancestral beliefs and superstitious practices, but to secure for the congregation of the Sākyaputtas a growing number of dedicated sympathizers and generous donors. (E. Lamotte, 1958:78) Householders who adhered to Buddhism did not forswear their former convictions as such. Few sought to penetrate the mysteries of a doctrine formulated by monks for other monks. As long as they had taken refuge in the *Triple Gem* and generously presented the congregation with clothing,

---

---

alms, seats, beds and medicines, they considered themselves to have completely fulfilled their duties. Secular life made it, if not impossible, at least very difficult to practise the virtues required of a monk: mortification, chastity, poverty, composure and meditation. They gained in active virtues what they lost in passive ones and, in their opinion, the former were equivalent to the latter. (*Ibid.*) "It remains nonetheless true that the *upāsaka*, whose religious instruction leaves much to be desired, will rarely break away from the popular circle into which his roots are plunged and establish a kind of compromise between the Buddhist Dharma and the superstition of paganism." (E. Lamotte, 1958:69)

The excellent quality of Buddhism at adaptability led to its success and spread in foreign lands. But the same quality vis-a-vis *Brāhmaṇism* appears to have become its bête noire in India and at the laity level changed its complexion beyond recognition. "The Great Vehicle laid emphasis on the image-worship, prayers and incantations, pompous ceremonies and rituals: it incorporated many folk-beliefs and made room for the emotional demands of the laity, and in doing so, the Buddhists made a near and clear approach to Hinduism; this process ultimately led to the destruction of distinction between the two faiths. The laymen and lay-women of India found no difference between the worship of *Viṣṇu* and Buddha, of Śiva and Avalokita, and of Tārā and Pārvatī." (L.M. Joshi: 309) Development of doctrines like that of Bodhisattas appears to have speedily carried Buddhism into the *Brāhmaṇical* fold. The great Bodhisattas were described as completely supra-mundane by nature; rather than providing a human model of struggle and attainment, they became virtual gods, who dispensed worldly boons and even spiritual grace in a manner not unlike that of the *Brāhmaṇical* deities. At last, the place of the historical Buddha himself was usurped by these figures; although the Buddha remained nominally the most hallowed of beings, the bulk of popular interest and devotion was centred not upon him but the great Bodhisattas, especially Mañjuśrī and Avalokiteśvara. As a result Buddhism laid itself open to subversive synthesis with *Brāhmaṇa* beliefs and practice. The acknowledgment of the Buddha as and incarnation of *Viṣṇu* by *Brāhmaṇism* removed the ground from under the feet of Buddhism. "*Vaiṣṇavas* and Śaivas crept up softly to their rival and drew the vitality out of its body by close and friendly embraces." (M. Monier-Williams, 1995: 170) In the post-Gupta period the Tantra customs blended the two-ups so comprehensively that the existence of Buddhism as a distinct entity at the level of the devotees might have seemed pointless or even infeasible.



---

---

## DECLINE FROM ABOVE

Buddhism does not appear to have become a dominant religious at any time in India. It appears to have been primarily confined to urban centres, where only a small percentage of the population lived. A statistical study of the *Vinaya* and *Sutta Piṭaka* shows that of all the settlements mentioned in these texts as many as 95.37% were urban. (K.T.S. Sarao, 1989: 44) Similarly, if one were to look at the places of birth of the various personalities mentioned in the *Vinaya* and *Sutta Piṭaka*, 57.34% of them came only from six urban centres viz. *Bārāṇasī*, *Sāvattī*, *Rājagaha*, *Kapilavatthu*, *Vesālī* and *Mithilā*. (*Ibid.*, 45) Right from its inception, Buddhism appears to have been popular amongst royalty, business magnates and bureaucrats. The urban and elite character of Buddhism appears to have kept it out of touch with the common masses. This factor may have aggravated its difficulties when urbanism was on the decline. Buddhism which provided the ideological superstructure of the growing urbanization (D.D. Kosambi, 1950:100-10) and depended increasingly upon it for its own sustenance and growth, finally may have become its victim in decline (B.G. Gokhale, 1982:7-22) Monastic institutions were the only place where Buddhism could be distinctly observed as different from other religious orders. However, the decay of urbanism appears to have hit this very aspect of Buddhism rather hard, as it sapped some of its socially vital foundations.

In conclusion, it may be said that the decline of Buddhism took place at two different levels separated by chronology and circumstances: decline from below and decline from above. The decline from below i.e. at the upāsaka level began almost simultaneously with its origin. It lay hidden in the very nature of Indian Buddhism as founded by the Buddha who did not carve out a distinct Buddhist community of lay-followers as distinct from the followers of the main stream *Brahmanism*. The decline from above began with the ruin and abandonment of the monastery. The most important reason for this appears to have been the decline in urbanization to which the monastic institutions of Buddhism appear to have been inextricably linked.

## References

---

---

*Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta*(D.III,no.26)

*Aggañña Sutta*(D.III,no.27).

*Jātaka*

*Vinaya piṭaka*

*Dīgha Nikāya*

*Udāna*

*Aṅguttara Nikāya*

*Samyutta Nikāya*

*Dhammapāda*

*Suttanipāta*

*Majjhima Nikāya*

- Jan Nattier *Once Upon a Future Time: Studies in a Buddhist Prophecy of Decline*, Berkely: Asian Humanities Press.  
1991
- D.W. Chapel "Early Forebodings of the Death of Buddhism," *Numen*,  
1980 27
- E. Conze *A Short History of Buddhism*, Oxford  
1960
- E. Lamotte *History of Indian Buddhism: From the Origins to the Śaka Era*, Sara  
1988 Webb-Boin(tr.), Louvain-la-Neuve: Insitut Orientaliste
- P.V. Kane *History of Dharmasāstra Vol.V, Part 2*, Poona  
1930-62
- Umesh Mishra *Journal of G.N.Jha Research Institute IX*
- L.M. Joshi *Studies in the Buddhist Culture of India*, Delhi  
1968
- P.C. Bagchi "Decline of Buddhism and its Causes," *Asutosh Mukerjee*  
1954 *Silver Jubilee Volumes.III*, R.C. Mitra
- P.C. Bagchi *The Decline of Buddhism in India*, Calcutta: Vishva Bharati  
1954 Studies.
- K.W. Morgan *The Path of the Buddha*, New York  
1956
- R.C.Mitra *The Decline of Buddhism in India*, Calcutta: Vishva Bharati  
1954 Studies.
- P. Niyogi "Organisation of Buddhist Monasteries in Ancient  
1973 Bengal and Bihar", *Journal of Indian History*, Calcutta
- P. Niyogi "Endowments in Favour of Early Buddhist Monasteries  
1973 in Bengal and Bihar," *Journal of Ancient Indian History*,

---

---

Calcutta

- Legge *The Travels of Fa-hien*, Takakusu(tr.), *A Record of the Buddhist Regions*
- P.S. Jaini "The Disappearance of Buddhism and the Survival of Jainism: A Study in Contrast," in A.K.Narain(ed). *Studies in History of Buddhism*, Delhi
- 1980
- A. Wayman "Observations on the History and Influence of the Buddhist Tantra in India and Tibet," in A.K. Narain (ed.), *Studies in History of Buddhism*, Delhi
- B. 1980
- T.W. Rhys Davids "Persecution of Buddhist in India," *Journal of the Pāli Text Society*.
- 1896
- C. Eliot *Hinduism and Buddhism*, Vol. 2, London
- 1954
- G. Roerich *Biography of Dharmasō min: A Tibetan Monk Pilgrim*
- N. Dutt *Buddha Jayanti Souvenir*, Calcutta
- 1973
- B.G. Gokhale "The Early Buddhist Ēlite," *Journal of Indian History*, XLIII
- 1965
- M. Monier-Williams *Buddhism: In its Connection with Brahmanism and Hindūism, and its Contrast with Christianity*, N. Delhi
- 1995
- K.T.S. Sarao *Origin and Nature of Ancient Indian Buddhism*, Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers,: 44.
- 1989
- D.D. Kosambi *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India: Bombay*
- 1950
- B.G.Gokhale "Early Buddhism and the Urban Revolution," *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 5(2)
- 1892