
EMERGENCE OF BUDDHISM

N.H. Santani

Buddhism was born in India in the 6th century B.C. Appearance of every religion at a particular period of history must have some rationale behind it. Every religious movement becomes successful only when it answers the call of time. Buddhism was also a need of time. Buddhism was also a need of time and came at a right moment to satisfy the urges of people.

Now, let us see what were the conditions prevalent before the rise of Buddhism in India and why this new religion, in spite of its heterodox theories regarding God, soul and prevalent rituals, could get a foothold in the face of entrenched orthodox Brahmanism and other extremist religious forces.

The Brahmanical hierarchy was so strong and well organised before the appearance of the Buddha that existence of any other religious movement could hardly be allowed to grow in the Indian soil. Still the dissenting voice of the Buddha won many votaries. Undoubtedly the master had a new message which appealed and went down deep to the hearts of people. Now let us have a cursory survey of the beliefs of people before and at the time of rise of Buddhism.

Vedic Religion :

Vedic people worshipped natural forces like sun, fire, wind, earth, etc., and sang their praises. However, there are a few hymns which hint at monotheism i.e. belief that there is one God above all gods and natural forces. In the Rigvedic period, there was no animal sacrifice. But gradually sacrifices entailed much cost and they lasted from one day to one Year and necessitated animal victims. The observance of minute details became the main religion of post-Vedic Indians. References to performance of sacrifices by Brahmans have been given at many places in Pali canonical texts with the names of sacrifices such as '*assamedha*' (horse sacrifice), '*purisamedha*' (human sacrifice), '*aggihoma*' (sacrificing to fire), etc. *Brahmajala-sutta* of Dighanikaya refers to various rituals and spells (*mantras*) of Brahmans that were performed for acquiring desired objects and averting evils. *Suttanipata* regretfully tells us that the old ideal of asceticism, self-control and study in Brahmans gave way to pleasure seeking and they induced kings to celebrate the performance of sacrifices which involved slaughter of animals so that they could get good food and money as donation from the king. In these sacri-

fices, Brahmans received as fees gold, women, chariots, cows, etc.

Gradually these sacrifices were given philosophical interpretation and these rituals were identified with *Prajapati* (Creator of the universe) and considered symbolic representation of cosmos. They brought to sacrificer complete deliverance from worldly existences.

Upanisadic Period :

In the Upanisadic period, the shift from ritualism to knowledge was quite marked. Although efficacy and importance of sacrifice was not denied but more emphasis was laid on the quest of the truth. However, the sacrifices continued to be the core of religion. But for the first time, serious philosophical speculations regarding God, soul and liberation (*moksa*) commenced with the age of Upanisads. This changed the outlook of men on life. Early Vedic optimism gave way to pessimism. Life with suffering due to old age, disease and death was no longer regarded as desirable and people were asked to look for a life which was eternal, free from sufferings and beyond disease and death. Main teaching of the Upanisads was that the ultimate reality was the Absolute, the Brahman, out of which appeared the world of beings and objects. The absolute was also called *Para-Brahman*, *Paramatma* (Great soul) and it was the truth, unborn, immanent, timeless, free from evil and suffering, old age and death. The individual soul (*Jivatma*) ultimately merged into the supreme soul (Paramatma). From such

theories came the oft-quoted phrase '*Tat tvam asi*' (Thou art That). Thus was enunciated the theory of the identity of the individual self with the universal one.

In spite of the pessimistic view of life, the Upanisads did not teach complete renunciation of householder's life. The life of a man was divided in four *asramas* viz. *Brahmacarya* (life of celibacy and study), *Grhastha* (householder's life), *Vanaprastha* (solitary life in forests), and *Sannyasa* (complete renunciation). Many of the upanisadic teachers were married. Asceticism was post-Upanisadic.

Caste System :

Transcendental philosophy of Upanisads notwithstanding, caste system was never given up. Brahman occupied the pre-eminent position. He was claimed to be born from the mouth of the Creator and was repository of wisdom and knowledge. The Ksatriya (Warrior class) was placed in the second position followed by Vaisya (trader class) and Sudra (serf) in the third and fourth position. The last one was destined to serve the first three classes. Thus a mere birth from a Brahman family made the man superior to others.

Purification through rituals :

There are many references in Pali texts which show that people believed in the outer purification. A dip in the river Ganga, Sarswati, Phalgu on a particular day would lead a man to purification and a life in heaven. Buddha called this belief as *silabbataparamasa* (wrong belief in the efficacy of rituals).

Non-Brahmanical Sects :

Besides Brahmanism, there were non-Brahmanical sects whose teachers are mentioned in Pali texts. They were the six contemporaries of the Buddha who had also large following. They had their own views on world and life. They were *Purana Kassapa* (who belived in non-existence of karmic effects) *Makkhali Gosala* (founder of Ajivika sect who was a fatalist), *Nigantha Nataputa* (founder of Jainism, also called Mahavira, who believed in four restraints and purification through asceticism), *Sanjaya Belatthiputta* (Agnosticism), *Ajita Kesakambali* (Annihilationism = *ucchedavada*) and *Pakkudha Kaccayana* (eternalism of seven elements).

Besides the doctrines of these six teachers, there were prevalent in the time of Buddha some other views regarding the world and soul and *summum bonum* of life of a man which have been given in *Brahmajalasutta*. There were about sixty-two views regarding world and soul. Some believed that world and soul were eternal while others thought body was not eternal but consciousness was eternal. Some held the view that soul was conscious after death while others thought that soul was unconscious after death and so on. All these views in Buddhism are called *micchaditthis* (wrong views).

Dynamic teachings of the Buddha:

Now in the sixth century B.C., when the Buddha appeared on the scene, people of Magadha and Kosala must have been preplexed with widely diverging and

conflicting religious and philosophical views as described above and felt the need of a teacher who could give them the right direction and lead them to ultimate goal.

At the foot of mighty Himalayas at Kapilavastu in the Nepali Terai appeared in mortal frame the Great Being, who who was destined not only to give a turn to the course of history in India but to influence and re-orient the thoughts of whole of eastern Asia in the centuries to come.

Buddha was well-acquainted with religious beliefs and philosophical speculations prevalent in his days. He experimented with traditional methods of salvation but was not satisfied and found them to be inefficacious for attending the goal. He did not completely denounce all the traditional beliefs but accepted only those which appeared to him reasonable and fitted in with his line of thinking. He rejected eternalism, annihilationism, fatalism, materialism and hedonism.

Buddha observed that all phenomenal objects including the worldly beings were constituted of various mental and material elements, which however changed ceaselessly and were devoid of any permanent substance like the soul or the elements. He developed therefrom his theory of dynamism and arrived at the conclusion that a being should rise above the changing state (*anicca*) to an everlasting unchanging state of rest and peace (*nirvana*). He propounded the theory of causation known as *Paticcasamuppada* viz. that the things of world are interdepen-

dent or the things of the *world have only relative existence.*

Buddha attacked superstition, useless ceremonies and priestcraft and all the vested interests that went with them. He challenged for the first time the claim of superiority of the Brahmins by birth. He discouraged metaphysical speculations which did not bring one nearer the truth. His appeal was to logic, reason and experience. His emphasis was on ethics, and his method was one of psychological analysis and a psychology without any permanent soul. Jawaharlal Nehru, in his book 'Discovery of India', rightly remarks:

"His whole approach comes like a fresh wind from the mountains after the stale air of metaphysical speculation."

p. 75, Anchor Paperback Ed.
1960, New York.

Chain of Causation and Anatta :

As regards the doctrine of the causation as conceived by Buddha, it is possible to say that it was the result of analysis of various speculations current in his times. It stands to reason to say that philosophical ideas do not grow out of vacuum suddenly but grow out of old ideas. However, there is no definite indication in pre-Buddhist literature of the theory of *anatta* or the doctrine of no soul. There are vague references in the Upanishads, particularly *Brhadaranyaka*, that the

body consists of four or five elements, that at death it dissolves back into these elements, and that no element of consciousness (*samjna*) remains after death. This doctrine, however, cannot rightly be said to be the source of Buddhist doctrine of *anatta*. The most that can be claimed is that it is at the root of notion that all worldly objects are transitory and that there is no transmigration. This, however, has to be admitted that the doctrine of *anatta* was a major breakthrough in the cobweb of speculations about Soul.

Jainism and its influence :

We cannot deny the influence of Jainism and Jain ideas on the Buddha. Mahavira, founder of Jainism, was a contemporary of the Buddha and was slightly older than him. He preached ethical doctrines viz. Not to kill living beings, not to take articles of use unless they are given, not to tell lie, not to have worldly possession (*aparigraha*). Some of them have been incorporated in the Buddhist ethics. But Jainism believed in severe physical penances, which according to its founder led to purification of individual soul. Also they believed in multiplicity of permanent individual souls.

Thus, we see that different teachers at the time of the Buddha held extreme views and it was given to Buddha to proclaim the middle path (*majjhima patipada*) which avoids extreme of pleasure seeking (*kamasukhallikanuyoga*) and that of self-mortification (*attakilamathanuyoga*).