

Buddhist Monastic Education of South India & Sri Lanka: A Historical Study of the Past and Present Perspective

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Introduction

The Buddhists have been the first to establish a well-organized monastic community in South India, many of which evolved into famous educational centers. A number of great monasteries like Nagarjunakonda and Amaravati in south India as well as *Abhayagiri* Mahavihara in Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka) were developed. The *Kumbha* and *Samkicca Jatakas* refer to the Andhakas as Andhra country. The *Bhimasena* and the *Serivanija jatakas* describe the Bodhisattva's journey to Andhradesa in the south India. Andhra Pradesh is the richest region of South India so far as the occurrence of Early Historic sites are concerned. Over 80 Buddhist monastic establishments have been identified in this region. Many of them belong to Pre Ashokan times. For more than a millennium, Buddhism was the dominant faith in the South India, and it left a profound influence on the history and culture of its people. The great Buddhist monk and scholar Nagarjuna was a great Mahayana Buddhist and the founder of the Madhyamika School. He was the author of several Sanskrit works like *Prajna Paramita Sutra*, *Maha Madhyamika Sutra*, *Dwadasa Nikaya Sutra*, *Yogasastra*, *Rasaratnakara* and a famous *Suhrullekha*. He lived at the Buddhist monastery of *Sripurvata*, now known as Nagarjunakonda in the south India.

The *Abhayagiri* Mahavihara Complex is situated about 85 metres above mean sea level to north-ward from the ancient city of Anuradhapura. The *Pali* commentaries of the 5th century, the term *Mahavihara* was never used for any place other than the Great Monastery at Anuradhapura. The *Abhayagiri* Mahavihara was established by the King Vattagamini Abhaya (103 BC and 89 -77 BC). Towards the 7th century AD, this Vihara had developed as a national and international center consisting of four Mulas (faculties) in South and Southeast Asia.

Objectives

The main aim is to explore the Buddhist monasteries and the education imparted by them with special reference to the *Andhradesa* in south India and Anuradhapura in the Sri Lanka especially. The area is still unexplored from the

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historical perspective from the long-time. The most important reason for choosing the region for this study is as several monasteries were well flourished and served as educational centers in these regions.

Methodology

The present research study is qualitative and it comprehensively investigates the Buddhist monastic education that dawned in *Andhradesa* in south India and *Abhayagiri* Mahavihara in Anuradhapura in the Sri Lanka, with the historical perspective and in the past and present time period particularly.

Results

Trade routes of ancient times played an important role in the spread of Buddhism and growth of Monastic **viharas** or educational institutions. Through these trade routes merchants and guild came in contact with monks. Many viharas were built by kings, and rich merchants as merit-producing gifts. With the development in Buddhist philosophy, Buddhist schools and sects, the architectural plans of these viharas also developed. The material of construction also changed from wood to rock and lastly to brick. Material used for building the vihara depended upon the availability. The term *Vihara* is used for a Buddhist monastery. These viharas served as a center of meditation, religious activities, residence for monks and monastic educational centres. The development of viharas resulted in the emergence of great ancient universities like Nalanda Maha-vihara in India and *Abhayagiri* Maha-vihara of Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka as centers of learning.

Educational Methods

Oral, debating and discussion methods were very popular in the Buddhist system of education. It is interesting to mention here that though the art of writing developed in ancient times but the art of writing was not considered as pure education. So, during that period, oral device was main method of teaching. Later, debating and discussion and other methods are also become popular.

Monastic Education

The academic monasteries are those monasteries, which offer academic degrees. These monasteries act as educational institutions for the monks. The main function of these monasteries is to teach monks, religion along with other secular subjects. The monastery, teaches medicine, fine arts, Tibetan grammar, philosophy, logic and astrology. The subjects like Maths, Geography, Science, Art and Literature are also taught in the monastic centers. Besides getting education, the monks also perform many administrative duties of the monastery. Thus, the

role of these monks is not only limited to study and meditation, but they are also responsible for the maintenance of monastic complex.

The resident monk has to observe the basic rules of the Vinaya Pitaka, which is one of the Tripitaka texts written in Pali, it is also known as “*basket of discipline*”. The bhikkhus of Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka) performed this duty by taking into their hands the education of the whole nation. The rulers and leaders of the Ceylonese country as well as the commoners were educated and trained by bhikkhus. The senior monks or fully ordinate monks, act as the teachers and spiritual gurus for the junior monks and lay followers. In short, novice monks are the students, semi-ordinate monks are scholars.

In the ancient period, the relation between the teachers and the Pupil or student were extremely cordial and harmonious as well as the student enjoyed the full-right. There is a reference in the *Vibhanga Commentary* to a student-monk, whose name was Tissa, after his education in Ceylon, went to India to study further under the celebrated Yonaka Dhammarakkhita Thera. After completing his education there, on his way back to Ceylon, when he was about to embark on a ship, a doubt arose in his mind regarding a certain point. He post-poned his trip at once, went back a hundred yojanas again to his teacher Dhammarakkhita and had his doubt cleared and started his journey back to the Sri Lanka.

Buddhist educational samskaras

The Buddhist education system had also characterized by numerous educational rituals or *samskaras* and had its own importance. It purifies and regulates the life of a student. A high sense of duty and morality was developed during the life after the performance of these samskaras. The Buddhist educational rituals are ***Pabbaja*** (initial ordination) and ***Upasampadā*** (final ordination). These were the main educational rituals in Buddhist period. The ***Pravrajya*** or going forth were the preparatory ordination for education in Buddhist system of education. The candidates, those who performed the Pabbaja ceremony, had to leave all the visible marks of his previous life when he was admitted in to the order. It was the first step of “going forth” for the ultimate “going out of his Worldliness”. All the Varnas equally perform the Pabbaja ceremony. Upasampada ceremony was equivalent to Samavartana ceremony. The Upasampada exercised lifelong binding upon the Monk. After the twelve years of education, a novice was allowed to perform the final ordination. He was now learned competent bhikṣu. A person between fifteen and twenty years of age could perform the final ordination.

Conclusion

During the ancient period aims and objectives of Buddhist education are very high standard. The Buddhist education system tries to make their students of sound mind with developed personality. That means, the student should be well-behaved, respectful towards their teachers and above all the students should know duties and responsibilities. Besides, they should respect the culture and heritage and try to preserve the same.

Today the society is changed and the man is changing accordingly as well as his beliefs, sentiments and aspiration have also changed. Western influence has disturbed the mind of young people and neglected the Buddhist educational practices nowadays. That is the reason, in the present days, the people are not performing all these Buddhist educational Samskaras. But these ceremonies are essential. It nourishes the pious feelings in pupils' mind. It develops the young pupils' mental and moral attributes.

Keywords - Abhayagiri, Buddhism, Education, South India, Sri Lanka

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