

Buddhist Viharas and Sangha's Contribution to the Education in the Early South India & Ceylon: A Historical Study

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Introduction

The history of religions, one of the most ubiquitous patterns of socio-religious expression, is the articulation of a collective mythic consciousness which links an ethnic class, caste or national identity to the initial phases of a religious tradition, its founder, or even with the very cosmogonic origins of the world.

Buddhism has often been understood as an inclusive faith in India and Sri Lanka in particular for more than a millennium, which seemed to have left a profound influence on the history, culture and identity of its people. It is significant to note that of the 18 sects of Buddhism in India, nine had their base in South India and early *Andhradesa* in particular.

The *Suttanipata* story of Bavari mentions *Assaka* as an Andhra Janapada. In the *Suttanipata*, the land of domicile of the *Andhakas* is identified as Andhakaratta. 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*.

The trajectories of Buddhist monastic education and the ways in which its prominent scholars like *Acharya Nagarjuna*, made an incredible mark on the educational, socio-cultural and intellectual life of the people, need to be revisited largely due to the changing dynamics of historiography of Buddhism.

The great Buddhist monk and scholar Acharya Nagarjuna was a great Mahayana Buddhist. He was the author of several Sanskrit works like *Prajna Paramita Sutra*, *Maha Madhyamika Sutra*, *Dwadasa Nikaya Sutra*, *Suna Saptathi* and a famous *Suhrullekha*. He is related to the Madhyamika School. He took up his residence at the Buddhist monastery of "*Sripurvata*", now a days known as "*Nagarjunakonda*" in the *Andhradesa* in the early south India.

It is often argued that the Buddhist Monastery, popularly known as '*Vihara*' in ancient times continued to function as an inclusive educational institution. Andhra Pradesh is the richest regions in South India and over 80

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Buddhist monastic establishments have been identified in this region. Although, various *Samghas* and Monasteries like Nagarjunakonda and Amaravati in South India as well as *Abhayagiri Maha-vihara* in Anuradhapura (Ceylon / Sri Lanka) were identified as centres of education with international repute.

Objectives

The main objective is to reconstruct the Buddhist monasteries/viharas and Sangha's role for the development of education. Later, to reanalyse the duties and administrative responsibilities by the Bhikkhus/Gurus towards the students and the monasteries. Finally, to find out the relationship between the student and teacher in the monastery education system in south India and Ceylon).

Methodology

The present research study is qualitative and interpretative and also argues that the ways in which different types of Buddhist monastic educational teaching methods, most notably, oral method, self-study, debate and discussion, question and answer and many other methods reveal how the relationship between the teachers and the students through direct, cordial, intimate relationship and the crucial role played by the Bhikkhus, in making the Buddhist monastic education in the early South India in India and Anuradhapura in Ceylon.

Results

A monastic order was established by Lord Buddha, called as *Sangha* that included both male clergy (bhikkhu or monk) and female clergy (bhikkhuni or nun). The Sangha also included laymen and laywomen, who were personally dedicated to the discipline of Dhamma-Vinaya. Only during *Vassa* or Varsha, the season of the rains, monks used to take shelter in *Avasa*. With the increase in Sangha, the need of bigger and better place came in the form of *Arama*. So early Buddhist settlements developed from Varsha-arama to Sangha-arama. A reference to a large number of arama is found in the Buddhist texts like Vinaya Pitaka and Cullavagga. With the passage of time these Aramas developed into *Viharas*. The term "*Vihara*" is used for a Buddhist monastery.

Education in India and Ceylon

The ancient Buddhist education in India, can be equally well applied to ancient education in Ceylon. The bhikkhus began to take an active interest in educational and cultural activities of the country. The Buddhists have been the first to establish a well-organized monastic community in early south India, particularly in *Andhradesa*, many of which evolved into famous educational centres. A number of great monasteries and monastic universities like

Nagarjunakonda and Amaravati were developed, and these educational centres were renowned in the world.

The *Abhayagiri* Vihara Complex is situated in the ancient city of Anuradhapura (Ceylon). The *Pali* commentaries of the 5th century the term *Mahavihara* was never used for any place other than the Great Monastery at Anuradhapura (Ceylon). The *Abhayagiri* Vihara 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 centre consisting of four Mulas (faculties), namely, Uttara Mula, Vahadu Mula, Kapara Mula and Mahanetpa Mula, with branches established in South and Southeast Asia.

Although learning was chiefly in the hands of the monks, there ‘were among the laity, too, both men and women who were highly learned and cultured. The education of women was not far behind that of men. The queen of Jettha-Tissa-III entered the Order of Nuns and studied the *Abhidhamma* with its Commentary, a subject meant only for advanced intellects.

The academic monasteries are can offer academic degrees. These monasteries act as educational institutions and offer specialized study in various branches of Buddhism. The monasteries teach subjects like medicine, fine arts, Tibetan grammar, history, philosophy, logic and astrology, Maths, Geography, Science, Art and Literature etc. The role of these monks are also responsible for the maintenance of monastic complex.

The life of the monk is regulated by a strict discipline. The resident monk has to observe the basic rules of the Vinaya Pitaka. The Vinaya Pitaka is one of the Tripitaka texts written in Pali, it is also known as “basket of discipline”.

While every monastery in the country served the purpose of a free school, there were centres of learning holding the position of universities for higher studies and specialized knowledge. Chief among them was *Abhayagiri* Mahavihara at Anuradhapura (Ceylon).

Educational Methods

The Sigala-sutta of the Digha-nikaya says that the education and guidance of the laity is duty devolving upon the monks. The bhikkhus of *Ceylon* performed this duty by taking into their hands of this education of the whole nation. The rulers and leaders of the country as well as the commoners were educated and trained by bhikkhus.

Oral, debating, discussion and other many methods were very popular in the Buddhist system of education. During the ancient period, the relation between the teachers and the taught were extremely cordial and harmonious.

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 postponed his trip at once, went back a hundred yojanas again to his teacher Dhammarakkhita and had his doubt cleared.

In Ceylon, Memory played a much more important part in the ancient system of education than today. **Tipitaka Culabhaya Thera** could remember the names of all the citizens of Anuradhapura and could recognize them again if they were presented to him only once.

Conclusion

The monasteries were one of the main sources of education for the people in the ancient times. In the Buddhist period various Monasteries were developed which afterwards grew up as the biggest institutions. These educational centres were renowned in the world. The educational activities of these institutions are very high standard. Pupil from different parts of the world used to flock these educational centres for proper education. Even today people realize the importance of these Buddhist educational centres throughout the world.

Keywords - Buddhism, Ceylon, India, Sangha, Vihara

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