

Book Review

THE RISE AND FALL OF BUDDHISM

Lessons from the History of Bengal

By Muhammad Aktheruzzaman

The Rise and Fall of Buddhism in South Asia: A Study in History by Dr M. Abdul Mumin Chowdhury, published by London Institute of South Asia, pp358, HB, 2008.

Dr Muhammad Abdul Mumin Chowdhury is a sociologist by training and an Executive Member of the London Institute of South Asia (LISA). He has a PhD in sociology from Exeter University and has taught at several universities including University of Dhaka and the University of London. Despite being a social scientist by training, he has been a keen observer of political events and activities in the subcontinent in general and especially Bangladesh. He has therefore published a number of books and articles highlighting aspects of the social, political and historical trends in India and its neighbouring countries. Currently, he is working on a series of articles on the socio-political situation in Bangladesh and its long-term implications for that country.

In the book under review, the author has provided a historical analysis of the rise and decline of Buddhism in South Asia with particular emphasis on the factors that led to the decline of this faith in that region. The author has used a wide range of sources to present a critical but detached picture of what had happened to that religion over time. He has effectively made an effort to put right the biased and distorted views presented by some historians especially the modern Indian writers.

To contextualise his subject, the author has given a detailed account of the original inhabitants of South Asia (the Dravidians). He has also highlighted the subsequent invasions and colonisations by the Aryans and their likes, and its effect on the socio-political and religious life of the indigenous people. Although it has been claimed by some Indian historians that the Mulbasis (original inhabitants of South Asia) have been culturally, economically and socially very inferior, archaeological findings have confirmed that the people living in the Ganga-Jamuna delta had large population centres. These people had an elaborate social and agricultural system, thus they developed and used a range of tools to make progress. This was as early as the 15th century BCE.

By contrast, the Aryans had arrived in the subcontinent around 1500 BCE (although some claim that it happened around 4500 BCE) as small bands, after crossing the Hindu Kush, they slowly gained control over the Indus Basin. The Aryans gradually expanded their sphere of dominance by using superior weapons and by exploiting the disunity amongst the natives.

After consolidating their hold on power, the Aryans devised and enforced the Varna scheme, thus creating four separate castes: Brahmins (priests), Rajanyas (rulers), Vaishyas (cultivators) and Shudras (das serfs), thus developing a racialistic segregation in society characterised by different rights and duties. The ethnic Mulbasis (or the original inhabitants of the land) were included under the Shudra category and they thus became relegated to the lowest level of the Aryan-Brahmin social order.

Initially the Brahmins helped the rulers as advisors; however, over time they started to impose their authority and eventually they became Mantris or Ministers. Thus many of the rulers became dependent on them for power, succumbing to Brahmin hegemony. Siddhartha Gotama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism rose from among the Indo-Aryan race during the middle of the first millennium BCE (around 6th century BCE). The creed he preached was a critique of the excesses of the rites and beliefs of the Aryan people. The core of this creed was an eightfold path, namely

- 1) Proper vision to stay away from the world of lust,
- 2) Proper aims not to seek luxury at the expense of others; to increase happiness to others;

- 3) Proper speech, to tell the truth, not to hurt others by saying things;
- 4) Proper action, not to engage in immoral activities;
- 5) Proper livelihood, to lead a pure and honest life;
- 6) Proper thinking, to think of doing good to others;
- 7) Proper awareness, to be conscious of evil things around and to meditate upon ways of staying away from these evils; and
- 8) Proper meditation, to undergo mental training in concentration.

The main message was to build a society based on morality, social justice and compassion towards fellow human beings. There was a strong emphasis on being good to one another to build a solid family. This creed also stressed the importance of being generous to one's fellow human beings, instructions for rulers to be kind to their subjects and for the state employees to be gentle to their workers. It was advised that the best ways to spend surplus wealth was to undertake public works such as digging wells, water ponds and planting groves along trade routes.

Two hundred years after Gotama, Buddhism became recognised as the state religion of India. The role of Mauryan Emperor Asoka (268-232 BCE) and the later monarchs encouraged the expansion of Buddhism into Asia through their religious ambassadors. Bimbisara and Ajatasatru of Magadha and Prasenajit of Kosala were only a few of the numerous rulers who converted to the new religion. The support of the ruling class would become significant to the propagation of Buddhism, but it was only one of many factors that helped promote the religion.

Buddhism was established in the ancient region of Magadha (Uttar Pradesh) and Kosala (Bihar) by Gotama Buddha. Over the next 1500 years, it became one of the region's most influential religions, spreading across the Indian subcontinent. But the glory of Buddhism did not last forever and a number of external and internal factors were responsible for the decline.

Soon after Asoka, Buddhist monks became divided amongst themselves. Some monks (the Hinayana) were very strict in their belief. They believed that only monks could reach Nirvana whereas other people could only experience that in the next life, thus they would become monks to escape from the cycle of rebirth. The other group of monks (the Mahayana) were less strict and believed that even by leading a comfortable and happy life, they could find salvation. Resulting rivalries between sects accelerated the downfall of Buddhism.

Buddhism brought a notion of social equality to the people and this was a key factor in its success. The establishment of the “Sangha” also gave it strength and the religion spread quickly and flourished for centuries. However, the subsequent corruption of the Sangha was a major cause for its decline; the fall of Buddhism was also triggered, according to the author, by the influential Brahmins. The religion could not withstand their intrigue, accompanied by the popularity of the reinvigorated Hinduism. As an essentially non-theistic religion, it could not achieve the same success with the masses as Hinduism. The moral corruption of Buddhism also caused intellectual degeneration, while Hinduism had a strong scholarly foundation.

After Asoka, the majority of Indian rulers supported reformed Hinduism and it also had the patronage of the Gupta rulers. Hinduism also incorporated aspects of Buddhism such as preaching monks and religious processions; it further claimed that Gotama Buddha was one of the incarnations (avatar) of the lord Vishnu. Therefore common people could not see any great distinction between Hinduism and Buddhism. This precipitated the decline of Buddhism and this continued after the fall of the Pala dynasty in the 12th century CE and the emergence of the Senas. During the Muslim rule in Bengal, however, a congenial atmosphere promoted Muslim-Buddhist interaction leading to a harmonious social and economic environment.

By tracing the rise and fall of Buddhism, the author has highlighted an important part of the history of the subcontinent. According to Dr Chowdhury, Buddhism represented a powerful resistance movement of the pre-Aryan natives of South Asia against the encroachment of the Aryan-Brahmins. The author has highlighted the methods used by the Aryan-Brahmins for undermining Buddhism in their efforts to subjugate the peaceful and civilised pre-Aryan natives. This has had very negative consequences on South Asian culture and society.

The author has also discussed the rise of Hindu nationalism and the role played by the Brahmins in supporting the installation and maintenance of British rule in India. In this book,

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the author has outlined many important lessons for the people of this region. Like the Buddhists before them, the Muslim rulers in India paid a heavy price for making the same mistakes; we never learn lessons from our past, do we?

This book is a scholarly and timely presentation of an important period in the history of the subcontinent in general and Bengal in particular and, for this reason, it needs to be read. It is not only a valuable study of history but also an insightful analysis of our past which has a direct bearing on our present condition and future possibilities.

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