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Rabindranath Tagore and Buddhist Culture

Rabindranath Tagore, whose birth centenary is being celebrated this year (1961), went through all the vital stages of Indian culture. Beginning from the Vedic age, he went through the Buddhist period, the age of the great epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, and the age of the mystic saints of the Middle Ages. Even the most distinctive thoughts of resurgent India stirred him and found expression in his writings. He is the symbol of the true spirit of Indian thought throughout the ages. The inner voice and vision of ancient India manifested and found exalted expression in Gautama the Buddha and his exponent, King Asoka the Great. The poet was very much impressed by the glory of the Buddha and Buddhist India.

Eclipse and Revival of Buddhism

At certain times the Buddha was almost eclipsed in the land of his birth due to Brahminical, social, and

political opposition. Buddhism had to face many difficulties in India due to the ascendancy of Hindu religious leaders like Shankara and Kumaril Bhatta on one side, and the Muslim invasion on the other. In one of the chapters of the Ramayana, it is stated:

*Yathahi cora sa tathani Buddhas
tathagatam nastikamatra biddhi. [1]*

Buddha is like a thief. Know Tathagata
[Buddha] to be an atheist.

The so-called “moderate Vaishnavas” of the Middle Ages went some steps further. The famous Vaishnava epic Chaitaniya Bhagavat of Vrindavan Das bears evidence of it:

*Tave Nityananda gela Bauddher bhavan, dekhilen
prabhu basi ache Bauddhagan, jigjnashen prabhu keho
uttar na Kare, Kruddha hai prabhu lathi marilen shire.*

Then Lord Nityananda, disciple of Chaitaniya, went to the house of the Buddhists. He asked them but they did not reply [out of fear]. Being enraged the Lord [Nityananda] kicked on their heads. [2]

But this tendency against Buddhism could not last long. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, with the reawakening of our national life, the greatness of

the Buddha and Buddhist culture that hitherto had guided the destiny of India in the right direction emerged from the ashes like the Phoenix. Buddhism in retrospect blossomed forth in Girish Chandra Ghose's Baddhadev Charita (1292 Bengali Era), Nabinchandra Sen's Amitava Kabya (1302 Bengali Era), Satyendranath Datta's Buddha Baran and Buddha Purnilna and Satyendranath Tagore's Bauddha Dharma (1308 Bengali Era). It was his family that influenced the religious trend of Tagore's mind towards Buddhism and this is discernible in the work Bauddha Dharma of Satyendranath Tagore, elder brother of the poet.

Buddhism In Tagore's Work

Examples of Tagore's devotion to Buddhist culture is found through his various works. In his critical appreciation of the Dhammapada he says: "As the preceptor of the Geeta has endowed in it Indian thought with a precise religious shape, so in the Dhammapada a picture of the mental make-up of India has been delineated."

He further says in this connection:

Materials of different shades of Indian thought and culture are confined in Buddhist literature and due to the lack of intimacy with them the

entire history of India remains unfulfilled. Being convinced of it, cannot a few youths of our country dedicate themselves for the restoration of the Buddhist heritage and make it a mission in life?

At that time Tagore introduced Buddhism as a special course of study for the students of Santiniketan. To widen the knowledge of Buddhism he deputed Prof. Nitai Benode Goswami to go to Ceylon, the bastion of Buddhism,

The centre of Buddhist studies augmented by Tagore at Santiniketan is today one of the greatest symposiums of Buddhist culture.

Apart from Indians, there are today a good many scholars from Ceylon, Cambodia, Thailand, Japan, China etc. deeply interested in Buddhism. To quote Thomson, "He [Rabindranath Tagore] is almost more Buddhist than he is in sympathy with many forms of Hinduism that are most popular in his native Bengal."

On the occasion of the consecration of the Mulagandha Kuti Vihara at Sarnath, where the Buddha preached his first sermon, Tagore's poem on the Buddha reads:

Bring to this country once again the blessed name
Which made the land of thy birth sacred to all

distant lands!

Let thy great awakening under the Bodhi-tree be fulfilled.

Sweeping away the veil of unreason and let, at the end of an oblivious night,
Freshly blossom out in India thy remembrance! [3]

Never did words reveal themselves better as are expressed in these lines. The message of love of the Lord Buddha in a world which is wild with “the delirium of hatred” cannot but be quoted:

All creatures are crying for a new birth of thine.
Oh, thou of boundless life,
save them, rouse thine eternal voice of hope.
Let love’s lotus with its inexhaustible treasure of honey
open its petals in thy light.
O Serene, O Free
in thine immeasurable mercy and goodness
wipe away all dark stains from the heart of this earth. [4]

On 8th May, 1935, the Buddha Purnima Day, in his presidential homage to the Blessed One, Tagore says:

On this full-moon day of Vaisaka I have come

to join in the birthday celebrations of the Lord Buddha, and to bow my head in reverence to him whom *I* regard in my inmost being as the greatest man ever born on this earth. This is no formal demonstration of adoration on my part, befitting the occasion. I offer him here, today the homage I have offered him again and again in the deep privacy of my soul.

Buddha Gaya and Borobudur

Tagore fostered a very high respect for Buddha Gaya, Saranath, and other Buddhist holy places. He expressed it with deep emotion: “I am a disciple of the Buddha. But when I present myself before those holy places where the relics and foot-prints of the Buddha are found I come in touch with him to a great extent.” [5]

With reference to Tagore’s visit to Buddha Gaya, Mr. Krishna Kripalani writes: “Only once in his life, said Rabindranath, did he feel like prostrating himself before an image, and that was when he saw the Buddha at Gaya.” [6] Through the mighty pen of Tagore, his homage to the Buddha (the living image of Indian culture) in Java, Bali, Siam, Burma, Japan, China, and other places abroad, has been perennial, undimmed by the lapse of time. On the occasion of his

visit to the famous Borobudur temple in Java he observes:

Man today has no peace,
his heart arid with pride
He clamours for an ever-increasing speed in a
fury of chase,
for objects that ceaselessly run, but never reach a
meaning.
And now is the time when he must
Come groping at last to the sacred silence,
which stands still in the midst of surging
centuries of noise,
till he feels assured
that in an immeasurable love dwells the final
meaning of freedom,
whose prayer is: 'Let Buddha be my refuge.' [7]

Pilgrim in Siam

When the poet went to Siam as a “pilgrim” he expressed his great satisfaction on observing Buddhist culture and civilization. Finding a real manifestation of Indian culture in Siam he exclaims; “If one likes to know the real wealth of India one should go overseas—the field of our gift. The picture of India as we see it here is rough atmosphere; a more distinct and glazing form of eternal India may we find from outside.”

Greater India

Lord Buddha liberated mankind from the different forms of ritualism and superstitions and destroyed racial barriers between man and man. Here his reasoning, message of compassion, and ideal of non-violence, won over all. He made vehement objection to outward conventionalism:

*Kim te jatahi dummedha, kith te ajinasatiya
abbhantaram te gahanam bahiram parunajjasi.*

O thou witless man, what avails thy matted hair and deerskin? Within all is darkness in thee, while outwardly thou cleanest thyself! [8]

On the other hand Lord Buddha proclaimed the gospel of an immeasurable love for all beings:

Sabbe satta bhavantu sukhitatta

How broad is this address of good-will. How deep is this love!

*Mata yatha niyam puttam
ayusa ekaputtam anurakkhe
evam pi sabba bhutesu
manasam bhavaye aparimanam*

Just as with her own life

a mother shields from hurt
her own, her only child,
let all-embracing thoughts
for all that lives be thine. [9]

Non-violence and Renunciation

This non-violence and compassion have had inimitable expressions in the works of Tagore. So the poet prays for a new birth of the Blessed One in this world which is now “wild with the delirium of hatred.” Even the animal sacrifice that mortally pained the poet is vividly reflected in his works, specially in *Rajarshi* (a novel) and *Visarjan* (a play). Animal slaughter is strictly prohibited within the precincts of Santiniketan.

Sacrifice is co-related with non-violence and compassion. Tagore’s oft quoted line *tena tyakteno bhunjatha* (enjoy him through sacrifice) from the Upanishads is the key-note of his life. So the poet sings in obeisance:

Thou giver of immortal gifts
Give us the power of renunciation
and claim from us our pride.

O Serene, O Free.

The historical background of his work entitled *Katha* (a collection of verses based on mostly Buddhist stories) represents a model of renunciation. In Srestha-Bhiksha, Mastakbikray, Nagarlaksmi, Mulyaprapti, Pujarini, etc., the glory of renunciation as depicted in the verses inspired by the ideal of Lord Buddha has no parallel in the history of the world. Here we see that a poor girl can dedicate her only piece of cloth to the Buddha and a mighty king wearing the clothes of a beggar becomes a recluse. Inspired by this ideal of renunciation, the dancing girl Sreemati can defy the royal sceptre of King Ajatashatru and sacrifice her life for worship at the feet of Lord Buddha. Tagore gleaned all of these historical events of Buddhist India.

Universal Love

Universal love in Buddhism has taken deep root in India. So we find after abandoning the royal pleasures, the prince and the princess of a mighty monarch went to Ceylon for the propagation of Buddhism. And the old and invalid Atisa Dipankara crossed the insurmountable Himalayas and lighted the lamp of Buddhism in Tibet.

Tagore, who travelled all over the world many times with the message of universal good, had in him the main object of universal love. This is exactly what

the Lord Buddha propagated 2,500 years ago and handed over to posterity. So the poet naturally discovered an affinity of mission and declares with all the emphasis he commands:

Buddhism was the first spiritual force known to us in history which drew close together such a large number of races separated by most difficult barriers of distance, by differences of language and custom, by various degrees and divergent types of civilization. It had its motive power not in international commerce, nor in empire-building, nor in scientific curiosity, nor in a migratory impulse to occupy fresh territory. It was a purely disinterested effort to help mankind forward to its final goal. [10]

The laws of harmony of all human beings is at the root of this universal brotherhood. Lord Buddha tied the whole world by the bond of unity and it touched the inner depth of the poet's heart. In Siam the poet discerned the power of a single-pointed devotion to one Dhamma, one Sangha and one immortal Teacher. India had accepted all men as kin. India ignored none and, therefore, remained unacknowledged by none. The barriers of race and country were swept away by the flood of truth, and India's message reached men of all races in every land. [11]

The theme of the build-up of an indivisible unity

lies at the root of Tagore's devotion to literature and culture. The most unique efflorescence of this prowess of cohesion is to be seen from the constructive activities of the Buddhist Sangha:

When the thunder-voiced prayer of the Three
Refuges
rang from sky to sky across deserts and hills and
distant shores
the awakened countries poured their rejoicings
in great deeds, and noble temples,
in the rapture of self-dedication, in mighty words,
in the breaking of the bond of self. [12]

Peaceful Conquest

The Buddhist power of concentration has no parallel in the annals of the world. In this conquest there was no bloodshed as in the battles of Ohod and Badar, and no inhuman torture as in the crusades. Buddhism has a bloodless record in the history of the world. In this expedition for the propagation of Buddhism, Asoka the Great, Gunavarman, Kasyapmatanga, Kumarajiva, Dipankara, Mahendra and Sanghamitta, and the Chinese monks Fa-hsien, Yuan Chwang, and I-Tsing were at the head. Great empires of Caesar, Napoleon, Hannibal, and the Nazi dictator Hitler sank into oblivion, but the empire of love of the Buddha and his

followers shines for ever.

Some think that Buddhism is merely a religion for one who has relinquished all. But Tagore knew that this religion is not an object of illusion and delusion. This religion is not meant for the weak—it is based upon strength. Tagore observes: “The spread of industry, science, commerce and imperial power was never so prominent in this country as it was during the rise and under the influence of Buddhism.” [13] Therefore, it is quite natural that Tagore should have great reverence for the Buddha who is the source of inspiration of this great power.

Caste System

The course of the caste-system, colour bar, and untouchability in the social life of the country pained him deeply. Sacrilege under the veil of religion, malpractices in the name of scripture, and profligacy under the garb of convention, retard progress in every sphere of social life. “The cruel stupidity of wicked racial discriminations and caste and colour bars, parading as religion, has stained the earth with blood; mutual hatred, more deadly than mutual violence, outrages humanity at every step.” [14]

The poet also accuses the Indian Brahmins who erected artificial walls of difference between man and

man. In India, Buddhism has liberated men from the slavery of Brahminical religion. Lord Buddha proclaims:

One does not become a Brahmin by birth.
One does not become an outcaste by birth.
One becomes a Brahmin by act,
One becomes an outcaste by act. [15]

So the Poet paid homage to the Blessed One who placed supremacy of action above the so-called aristocracy of birth.

Tagore glorified the eternal virtues of Buddhism through the Malini, Chandalika, and Natir Puja, three dramas based on Buddhist stories. In the Malini, universal Buddhist toleration is established against narrow sectarianism of the Brahmanical religion. In the Chandalika, the revolutionary spirit of Tagore is manifest through the character of Prakriti, a Chandala girl low-born and untouchable. She bursts out "Many Chandalas abound in the country in the houses of Brahmins; I cannot be a Chandala."

In the Natir Puja, when Princess Ratnavali ironically expressed her disregard for Bhikkhu Upali, born of the barber Sunanda (a son of a milk man) and Sunita (an untouchable), the nun Uppalavanna, replied: "Oh Princess! They are all equal in caste; you have no

knowledge of the yard-stick of the aristocracy.”

Here the inner self of Tagore reveals itself.

In reply to the witty expressions of Ratnavali, queen Lokeswari tauntingly said: “Oh! the follower of this dancing girl! You will cause that to happen and that religion is apprehended in which the fallen will come with the gospel of emancipation.”

By the touch of the Great Emancipator a good number of fallen women attained salvation, paved the way, and shed the lustre of emancipation to many others.

Buddhist Humanism

Buddhism has restored human rights to the deprived, to those who were trampled under feet by the so-called high-ups of society.

This humanism is what deeply impressed Tagore, who is himself a great exponent of humanity. Today the world is very much injured with violence: humanity is narrow-minded. So the poet implores the Buddha to wipe “all dark stains” from the heart of this earth:

Man’s heart is anguished with the fever of unrest,
with the poison of self-seeking,

with a thirst that knows no end.

Countries far and wide flaunt on their
foreheads the blood-red mark of hatred.
Touch them with thy right hand,
make them one in spirit,
bring harmony into their lives,
bring rhythm of beauty. [16]

A deep and expansive analytical exposition of the glory of the Buddha Dhamma and Buddhist culture by Tagore is an invaluable treasure in Bengali literature and, as a matter of fact, in any literature of the world.

Tagore has once again deeply ingrained within us the impact of the Buddha Dhamma and Buddhist culture, which pervaded the length and breadth of India as the sun pervades the earth and every grain upon it.

Notes

1. *Valmiki: Ramayana, Ayodhyakanda.* [\[Back\]](#)
2. *Chaitanya Bhagavat, Part I.* [\[Back\]](#)
3. *Parishes, poem 37.* [\[Back\]](#)
4. *Natir Puja, poem 84.* [\[Back\]](#)
5. *Samalochana, 1888.* [\[Back\]](#)
6. *Visva Bharathi Quarterly, April 1943.* [\[Back\]](#)
7. *Parishes.* [\[Back\]](#)
8. *Brahmana Vaggo, Dhammapada.* [\[Back\]](#)
9. *Metta Sutta, Sutta Nipata.* [\[Back\]](#)
10. *Buddha and Buddhism 1.* [\[Back\]](#)
11. *Buddhadev, p. 6.* [\[Back\]](#)
12. *To Siam.* [\[Back\]](#)
13. *Jattar Purbapatra Pather Sanchay.* [\[Back\]](#)
14. *Buddhadev, p. 7.* [\[Back\]](#)
15. *Vasala-Sutta, Sutta Nipata.* [\[Back\]](#)
16. *Natir Puja.* [\[Back\]](#)

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