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Linguistics

BEYOND THE BOUNDARIES: UNDERSTANDING BUDDHIST DEVELOPMENT FROM ORIENT TO OCCIDENT WITH REFERENCE TO ITALY AND DANTE

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ABSTRACT

On the viewpoint of topographical location Orient and Occident are two sides of the globe. Socially, culturally, linguistically, traditionally, politically, philosophically and psychologically both are two entirely different entities. Rudyard Kipling wrote the poem titled 'The Ballad of East and West' in which he said "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" (Jouhki, 2006, p 01). However, when the matter of meditation, religion, spirituality, devotion, high spirits, deep feelings and beliefs etc. arises it is observable that Occident tends to go in line with Orient. But unfortunately due to false beliefs both eastern and western scholars took no importance of East on the West and it has been made to notice that only Orient has learnt from the Occident. Kipling expressed further "But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth, When two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of the earth!" (Jouhki, 2006, p 15). The present paper tries to explore the influence of Orient to Occident especially in the frame of the reference of Buddhism

INTRODUCTION

Today Buddhism is known as one of the most important religion in the world apart from Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. Lord Buddha is the most important figure in Buddhism. He was born at Lumbini situated near the city of Kapilavastu in Nepal and attained full enlightenment under the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya in Bihar, India. After the enlightenment he founded Buddhism and started to share his insights and wisdom with everyone. His teachings gave a positive influence on everything from a variety of other faiths to literature to philosophy within India and farthest reaches of Western world. His preaching is not only limited to the 6th century B.C., but it is a timeless, immortal, unending and infinite teaching which is practiced even today in 21st century and will be followed also in many centuries and millennia to come. Today Buddhism performs a fundamental role for the social advancement of the modern world and it has a productive influence on the fundamental notions of modern science. In this regard Einstein says "If there is any religion that could cope with modern scientific needs it would be Buddhism because Buddhism, like science, is entirely concerned with understanding the world around us" (Abeysekera, 2003).

Nowadays, many forms of Buddhism are practiced around the globe that is why it is known as religion of diversity and its diversity contributes to its richness. "Buddhism today is very diverse; this diversity contributes to its richness" ... (Erricker, 2001, p 01). Moreover, Alexander Berzin, a well-known British scholar on Buddhism affirms: "To each new culture it reached, the Buddhist methods and styles were modified to fit the local mentality, without compromising the essential points of wisdom and compassion. ... Each country to which it spread developed its own forms, its own religious structure and its own spiritual head" (Saiyasak, 2011, p 03). It is not confined to any limitations, differences, boundaries, borders, status, cultures, class, caste and creed, religious and regional differences: "Buddhism has from the very beginning been a religion without borders" (Pommaret, p 89). Moreover, it offers teaching and practices to anyone who has a little curiosity, goodwill, determination and willingness to follow its steps towards freedom of heart and mind and to accept that the modern world can be benefited from ancient and timeless wisdom. It can be practiced by anybody who can be man, woman, even a child. The path of Buddhism is made for every ordinary people. Generally, it is seen that all Buddhists don't follow the same teaching and texts but for all the core principles of Buddhism are the same.

Expansion of Buddhism in Asian Context

There is a debate among the scholars to decide its beginning. Some of the historians claim that it started to spread from 5th

century B.C., whereas some of them consider its beginning from 6th century B.C. For the very first time it took root on the east side of Ancient India and around the kingdom of Magadha which is known as Bihar today. From the beginning it was a missionary religion. In order to expand the teaching of Buddha thousands of missionaries went out and fascinated millions of people not only from Indian territory but also from countries like China, Sri Lanka, Japan, Indonesia, Korea, Tibet etc. During its expansion it encountered much diversity but due to its flexibility in nature it is easily merged with different linguistic, cultural, historical and geographical diversities and developed new forms and made it richer and prosperous. In comparison to the Western countries, the transmission of Buddhism in Asia was straight in one direction: "In Asia, while Buddhism was transmitted from India to other cultures, there was a very little or no back - influence from those cultures on Indian Buddhism or, for that matter, any such back - influence anywhere along the chain of transmission" (Garfield, p 06). In Asia, there are three main cultural regions (Southeast Asia, Eastern Asia and Tibet - Nepal area) where Buddhism has spread. The early form of Indian Buddhism is preserved in Southeast Asia, the middle form went into Eastern Asia and the later form of Indian Buddhism went into Tibet and Nepal.

In the period of 3rd century BCE, Buddhism started to expand beyond India. It took root in Sri Lanka, flourished there and made it a great centre of Buddhist teaching. Today around seventy percent of the citizen of Sri Lanka are Theravada Buddhist. The followers of this form of Buddhism are very conservative in nature towards the matter of doctrine and monastic discipline.

During the Han dynasty it reached to China through Silk route. From there it entered to Korean peninsula and thence to Japan. In these countries the form of Buddhism constitutes a similarity as they practice a common form i.e., Mahayana Buddhism. It is a form of Buddhism which accepts canonical texts of Theravada tradition. It is also known as *Great Vehicle* and played a significant role in Chinese Buddhist tradition.

Another form of Buddhism is Vajrayana. The word Vajrayana is formed with the combination of two words *Vajra* and *Yana*. In Sanskrit *Vajra* means diamond and *Yana* means vehicle. Thus it is called as *Diamond Vehicle*. Furthermore it is also known as Tantric Buddhism due to its reliance on sacred texts known as *Tantras*. It is a form of Buddhism that predominantly developed in the Himalayan region of Nepal, Bhutan, and Mongolia and especially in Tibet. It can be said that for the development of Buddhism, Tibet was a *tabula rasa* because when it came there, Tibetan were ignorant with written language. They had a very less political and geographical

unity. There was neither philosophical nor religious tradition. Dalai Lama is the most eminent spiritual figure of Tibetan Buddhism who exiled in India due to Chinese occupation in 1959. He himself said "When we Tibetans decided that we needed a civilization, we decided we needed three things; we needed a religion, we needed clothes and we needed food. We looked East to China; they had the best food so we took that. We looked North to Mongolia; they had the best clothes, we took those; and we looked South to India; they had the best religion, so we took that." (Lama)

Expansion of Buddhism in the Western Context

According to many historians, "The earliest European contact with Buddhism is likely to have been around the beginning of the third century BCE..." (Gethin, 1998, p 273) when Megasthenes, the Greek historian and the ambassador of Seleucus Nicator arrived to the court of Chandragupta Maurya in Pataliputra. He had written many things on Indian life which were the prime source of information about India in ancient Europe. After Megasthenes, none of the record of direct contact found between European and Asian Buddhists for the time span of fifteen hundred years. During this period the knowledge of Indian and Chinese culture was unknown to Europeans. But again with the gradual increase in trade, missionary activities and European colonialism in thirteenth century they came in contact with Buddhist tradition and knew it deeply. They also left some references and written accounts of their experience with Buddhist culture in which the most acknowledged account is of Marco Polo who was a Venetian merchant traveller came in China in second half of thirteenth century. But unfortunately information and knowledge provided on Buddhism by these travellers are limited. Perhaps the sustained attempt to understand Buddhist tradition by any European is represented by Ippolito Desideri, who spent five years as an Italian Jesuit at Lhasa in the beginning of eighteenth century. After Ippolito Desideri, many other western scholars like William Jones (1746 – 1794), Arthur Schopenhauer (1788 – 1860), Friedrich Max Müller (1823 – 1900), Hermann Oldenberg (1854 – 1920), Giuseppe Tucci (1894 – 1984) etc. have played a key role in bringing knowledge of Buddhism to the Western countries.

Buddhism in the Context of Italy and Italian Culture

It has been seen that there is a very strong historical relationship between Buddhism and Italian culture. In Italy the importance of Buddhism lies in three main areas of study for those who especially involved in philological and anthropological research, psychology and Asian studies. The earliest contact between Italy and Buddhism is partially visible since the time of Marco polo. His evidences provide a mesmerizing view of Buddhist religion, customs, ceremonies and way of life to Italian people. He was completely captivated by Buddhism and life of Buddha. In his masterpiece 'The Travels of Marco Polo' (in Italian titled as *Il Milione*) he described the figure of Buddha as "... Questo Sagamoni fu il primo uomo che sia stato fatto idolo. Perché, secondo la leggenda, è stato l'uomo migliore che abbia mai vissuto; e fu il primo che gli idolatori abbiano venerato come santo, e il primo idolo che abbiano avuto..." (Polo) ("...The first man to be idolized. According to legend he was the best man ever lived; for his followers he was the first idol who was worshipped as Saint, the first idol that they ever had had..." (Polo)

Much later, in seventeenth century, Ippolito Desideri who was an Italian Jesuit arrived in Lhasa with motive to convert Buddhist people into Christianity. But fortunately, by a group of Buddhists he was suggested to learn about Buddha. He took it very positively and spent five years in Buddhist monasteries and universities. After knowing and learning Tibetan language and culture, he was so captivated by the Buddhist thoughts that he wrote some books on it in which 'Mission to Tibet' is the most remarkable. In this way the accurate account of Buddhist customs and religion has been brought back to Italy. He is considered as the first Western scholar of Tibetan Buddhism.

Later Professor Giuseppe Tucci has investigated oriental culture especially Tibetan Buddhism and Eastern religious world. In 1925 he came to India and taught Italian language and literature at Visva – Bharti and Calcutta University: "... in 1925 he went to India, where he taught Italian language and literature at the universities of Shantiniketan and Calcutta" (Petech, p 137). His long stay in Orient gave him an intimate knowledge about Buddha and Buddhist culture. As an explorer of eastern world Professor Tucci succeeded to enliven interest for Buddhist custom and tradition in Italian population.

The notable presence of the Buddhism in Italy started to begin during the second half of the sixties: "From the 1970s, Buddhism has increasingly become an established religious identity within European countries; firstly, with the arrival of substantial migrant groups from traditionally Buddhist countries and secondly as European converts struggle with how to bring up their children" (Cox). Many Italian scholars, psychologists, philosophers, writers, authors and even common people got attracted towards Buddha and Buddhist studies and culture. Though, traditionally Italy is a locus of catholic countries, but still due to flexibility in nature Buddhist tradition easily amalgamated with catholic tradition. In this connection Marcello Zago, an archbishop of Catholic Church himself said "Christians and Buddhists can help each other to "grow together", because "the inter – religious dialogue suppose affection and deepening of one's own faith and sincere respect for the faith of others" (Heng Ru).

Today in Italy Buddhism is the third most spread religion, next to Christianity and Islam. In 1960 the Buddhist Italian Association (*Associazione Buddhista Italiana*) is founded. Later in 1985 Italian Buddhist Union (*Unione Buddhista Italiana*) was founded in Milan and at the beginning of 2000 the Italian Parliament accepted an agreement between the Italian Buddhist Union and the government. Italian Buddhist Union is a legal body that serves in many areas related to Buddhism, including promotion of Buddhist culture and tradition in entire country. *Paramita*, a trustworthy Italian periodical gives space and voice to Buddhism. Moreover, *Fondazione Maitreya*, Buddhist Cultural Centre also actively spreads Buddhist culture and teaching there.

Dante's Connection to Buddhism

The direct or indirect influence of Buddha and Buddhist philosophy can be observed on many Italian writer, poet, and philosopher including Dante Alighieri. Dante Alighieri commonly known as Dante was a poet, writer, political thinker, philosopher, and statesman and language theorist during the Late Middle Ages. He was born in 1265 at Florence and sent to exile in 1302 to Ravenna in North Italy where he wrote 'The Divine Comedy'. He died in 1321.

The Divine Comedy (*La Divina Commedia*) was originally entitled *La Commedia*. The adjective *Divina* was added by Giovanni Boccaccio who was an Italian poet, writer and Renaissance humanist. This epic poem is the masterpiece of Dante and considered as one of the greatest work in world literature. It is a long narrative poem written between 1308 and 1321.

It is a visionary journey of Dante through three realms of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. It is framed by Dante's spiritual beliefs, the dogmatic theology of Christianity during mediaeval period. It is a classical piece of literature which is divided in three major sections – Hell (*Inferno*), Purgatory (*Purgatorio*) and Paradise (*Paradiso*). There are thirty – four cantos in *Inferno* while in *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* there are thirty – three cantos in each which are narrated in the form of journey where Dante was guided by Virgil, a classical roman poet and Beatrice, the ideal woman of Dante. Throughout the poem, Dante depends upon the vivid description of each scene to express emotions that range from fear and isolation to wonder and awe of the spiritual world.

After his journey through Hell and Purgatory, Dante arrived to Paradise which is formed by a series of concentric spheres surrounding the Earth. In the canto XIX which is the sixth sphere of heaven also known as the sphere of Jupiter, Dante makes an indirect reference of Buddha.

ché tu dicevi: "Un uom nasce a la riva

de l'Indo, e quivi non è chi ragioni

di Cristo né chi legga né chi scriva; (Alighieri, Par XIX 70 – 72)

English Translation

"In fact you said: A man is born on the shores of India, where nobody knows about Christ, no one teaches and speaks about Jesus;"

Canto XIX of the *Paradiso* is dedicated to the mystery of divine justice in Christianity. Here Dante makes to understand poetically that Christianity before being a doctrine is a sentiment rather than a structured religion. The feeling of love is in fact the essence of Christianity like Buddhism. Being a Christian means essentially knowing how to love, respect and serve humanity. Therefore, all those who have love and respect for others can consider themselves Christians. In the opinion of Dante, Christians are not just the baptized who follow the formal doctrine of Christianity, but can be called Christians who are loving in nature and believe in humanity even though follow other faiths and religions. The holy Indian man of canto XIX is certainly Buddha who is a symbol of what Saint Thomas Aquinas defines as implicit faith that is a faith without any doctrinal knowledge.

Interpretation of Buddhism in Global Frame

Today, Buddhism is recognized as one of the greatest religion throughout the Western world. It left an indelible mark on every aspects of western life. In the course of its transmission it did not follow single lineage or a single tradition like Orient. However, during its transmission in the West it encountered certain Christian ideology. Both are two different religions and share different faiths, believes, traditional prejudices, conceptions, people and culture but their core principles are same to achieve peace for mind, body and spirit in personal, social and universal sense. As Aloysius Pieris wrote "Buddhism and Christianity. East and West. Worldviews developed worlds apart. Delve deeper to discover ways they overlap, complement and unite in their common goal: Peace." (Bennett, p2) Moreover, Dalai Lama says "... all of the major world religions, whether Christianity or Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism, are directed to the achievement of permanent human happiness" (Lama, p 538).

In the modern era of 21st century Buddhism continues to gain wider acceptance in the Western world as the core teachings of Buddha are very relevant as they are broadly based on human himself. Humans are born and reborn and there is no end to this cycle unless one attains *Nirvana* (salvation). The Buddha always encouraged open discussion which included different viewpoints and gave freedom to analysis Buddhist ways of peace, humanitarian and responsibility on own ways.

CONCLUSION

By exploring the origin of Buddhism in India; its expansion throughout Eastern world, its arrival to Occident particularly in Italy with the consequences of influence on contemporary world, it can be said that Occident learnt many things from Orient. Occident and Orient are the two sides of the same coin with their own strength. Both play a kudos role in the development of modern world. Nowadays whole world became more complex due to mindless killing, destruction, violence, loss of human values etc. Neither Orient nor Occident is left free from the scourge of brutality. In this situation Buddha's preaching for peace works as panacea as it gives solution to all kinds of conflict and violence which are menacing to humanity and human values.

(Translations from Italian, unless otherwise mentioned, are by the present writer).

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