

**ADVENT AND RISE OF BUDDHISM IN SOUTH INDIA\*****Dr. Ravi Sankar K**Faculty, Assistant Professor, Government Degree College, [kothapalliravisankar@gmail.com](mailto:kothapalliravisankar@gmail.com)**Dr Ranjith Kumar Varre**Lecturer in History, Cumbum, Prakasam District,  
[ranjith.roy1982@gmail.com](mailto:ranjith.roy1982@gmail.com)**Abstract:**

One of the unique philosophies that emerged at the time of global intellectual ferment in the 6th century BC, much further impactful than Socrates, Plato, Confucius and Lao, was the idea of Buddha. His ideas were shaped into a religion after his death that eventually attracted the classes and masses alike. The success of the new religion is attributed to the desire of an individual to find solace and salvation in an entity that could satisfy their spiritual needs, cost less and enable equality. The excavated Buddhist sites of South India such as Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Jaggayyapeta, Salihundam, Sankaram, Sannati and Kanaganahalli reveal that Buddhism was active in the region from the third century B.C. There is a distinct relationship between the development of trade routes, brisk trade contacts between North and South and overseas trade with the spread of Buddhism in South India. The paper presents an overview of the advent of Buddhism in South India and the interrelationship of the Spread of Buddhism and Trade relations using the archaeological and literary sources of the period.

\*The geographical scope of the topic is as defined in the ancient times during the Mauryan and Satavahana times.

**Introduction:**

The Sixth century B.C. was an epoch in the annals of world heritage as it witnessed the advent of new technologies in the field of production, gradual transformation of petty kingdoms into empires and development of anxiety in the minds of kings, philosophers and common people about concerning changes taking place in the social and religious urges of the people's lives. Throughout the world people's minds were stirred up by the issues related to religion and salvation. In this context new thinkers like Mahavira and Gautama Buddha in India, Zoroaster in Iran, Heraclitus and Parmenides in Greece and Confucius and Lao Tse in China came out with new religious philosophies which were supposed to be the religious behaviour to be observed by the people to resolve the then existing confusion and chaos in the society. In Indian context too, similar changes like gradual disintegration of old tribal politics leading to the emergence of a large number of regional kingdoms, advent of new agricultural techniques, growth of trade and urbanization, proliferation of castes, questioning of orthodox religious practices and rise of new religious philosophies took place.

The new religious ideologies, Jainism and Buddhism which got originated from the lap of royal *Kshatriya* community spread deeply into the nook and corner of India down to the *Deccan* in South India and even beyond soon after the death of their proponents, Mahavira and Gautama Buddha respectively<sup>1</sup>. The messages given by both these religious leaders attracted the populace as they addressed their then socio-religious cravings. Of these two, the behavioural code embedded in the religious creed of Buddha became widely popular because the messages given by him were mostly in the form of oral narratives, like the *Jātaka* tales-the birth narratives of Buddha. The language which he used in his renderings was Pali, the spoken language of the commoners of the region. Moreover each *Jātaka* tale is an experiential expression of Buddha which reflects the major propositions of his religious thoughts and practices. This narrative mode of transmission through popular language contributed much for the penetration of Buddhist philosophy deep into the lives of the populace ranging from the lay to the elite alike. However, besides the ideological underpinnings, the contemporary conditions of those times demanded much to the emergence of Buddhism as an alternate religious belief that appeased the people who were disgusted with the orthodox ritual centered dogmas.

### **The socio-economic and politico-religious backdrop for the emergence of the Buddhism as a predominant religious:**

By the first quarter of the first millennium B.C. the egalitarian nature of the tribal society was being gradually replaced by the *Varna* hierarchy. The later *Vedic* society was based on the four fold *Varna* system and *Jati* paradigm, the former and latter respectively represents ‘ritual’ and ‘actual’ statuses. The four *Varnas*: *Brāhmaṇa*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaiśya* and *Śūdras* were not homogenous and were divided and subdivided into different *jātis* basing on their professions. In due course the *jātis* were crystallised into different castes, each of which were further branched off. The social life was regulated by *Varnasrama dharma*, wherein each *Varṇa* was assigned a well-defined *dharma* to be observed during each *āsrma* (hermitage) - *brahmacharya* (celibacy), *grihasta* (house holder), *vānaprastha* (preparation for renunciation) and *sanyāsa* (renunciation) to make society function well without conflicts. These four *āśramas* are to be harmoniously synchronised through the successful observance of *Shōdasa samskāras* (sixteen sacraments) which finally leads to salvation. Thus the life of an individual in every social order is kept busy through rights and responsibilities by performing rites and rituals. The trespassers of the

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<sup>1</sup> Both these philosophers were for many years contemporary- they were born, lived, and died in or near the kingdom of Magadha, the modern Bihar. Mahavira, the son of a nobleman from Vaisali, the famous city on north of the Ganges, was a near relative to the royal family of Magadha. Gautama Buddha, although born farther north, in the Sakya territory at the foot of the Nepal hills, underwent his most memorable spiritual experiences at Bodh Gaya in Magadha, and spent many years of his ministry within the limits of that state. The Buddhist and Jain books, therefore, tell us much about the Vrijjian confederacy, of which Vaisali was the capital, and about Magadha, with its subordinate kingdom of Anga. A. Vinsent Smith, *Story of India, From the Sixth Century B. C. to the Mohammedan Conquest, Including the Invasion of Alexander the Great*, Vol. II, New York: Cosimo Classics Publishers, 2008, pp.10-12.

*varṇāśramadharmas* were penalised as per the punishments prescribed by the legal texts to different *Varnas*.

The *Puruṣasūkta*, in the tenth *mandala* of Rigveda, narrates the hierarchy of the caste system. It says that from the mouth, shoulders, thigh and feet of primeval (*Viratpurusha*), the *Varṇas: Brāhmaṇa, Kshatriya, Vatsya* and *Śūdra* emerged respectively. Among these four only the first three ranks were given the status of *dvija* (twice born) because they were sanctioned to undergo *upanayana*, a sacrament (*samskāra*) that initiates one into first order of *āśrama* (*brāhmacharya*) and later eligibility for next sacrament, the marriage.

In the age of the Buddha, the *Mahājanapadas* situated to the North of the Vindhya and the region extended between the North West Frontier and Bihar were in a flourishing state. The *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, a Buddhist text substantiates the existence of *Shodasa Mahājanapadas*, the sixteen *Mahājanapadas*. By the sixth century B.C. of those sixteen, only Kāśi, Kosala, Magadha and Vajji retained their prominence. Later on Magadha could successfully absorb all the above domains into its authority, thereby establishing Magadhan hegemony in north-eastern India (present Bihar and Bengal regions). The newly emerged Magadha Empire required the absorption of tribal kingdoms along with their culture into its authority to lay foundations to a strong centralised administrative bureaucracy.

In fact, the monarchical states fostered religion as political ideology to bring forth moral binding and ethical code on the rulers and the ruled. Actually the need of the religion was two-fold for the states: firstly religion should somehow foster to promote large revenues to State to maintain its administrative and military mechanisms and secondly religion should prevent too great accumulation of wealth and power in the hands of non-state groups. But the existing Vedism did not cater to any of the above mentioned needs of the state. Rituals and sacrifices sanctioned by it emptied the state's treasury and likewise its injunctions on many economic activities affected the State's resources. Hence the ruling class too awaited such new religious philosophies that would accommodate the above mentioned two demands.

New technological advancements, tools and implements in agrarian operations contributed to surplus agricultural production for consumption as well as for exchange. The exchange relations led to the development of trade and commerce at different levels- local, itinerant and international. It further contributed to the fragmentation and segmentation of society into different caste cum professional organisations, guilds, each of which was consolidated into a distinct social group- *samaya*; with its own norms and values- *samayadharmā*; being regulated by its office- *samayasabha*. Examples abound in *Jātaka* tales with regard to the extensive influence exerted by the guilds on several issues of the professional and personal activities of their members. Further, migration of people from rural to urban areas and extensive commercial activities brought influential changes in the social life of the people. Caste infiltration due to territorial expansion and integration of tribals into the state and society and migration of people in the name of trade and commerce to different places contributed unrest in the psyche of the people for there was no alternate religious thought that could appease their souls and guarantee a peaceful spiritual life. It

is because the requisites of Vedic religion- norms of purity and pollution, hierarchy of social system, and ritual centrality in religious observances- were not suited to the people in such a caste proliferated society. Hence they craved for a religious ideology that could satisfy their spiritual needs with less or no emphasis on caste or class. In these circumstances the newly emerged heterodox sects, Jainism and more Buddhism found to be better to appease their social, political and economic needs. It can be surmised that the arrival of new people and new technologies, created multi-dimensional conflicts within the society like racial, social, economic and cultural or otherwise Aryan versus non-Aryan, Brahmin versus Kshatriya and Brahmana-Kshatriya versus *Vaisya-Sudra* as well as rural collectivism versus urban individualism.

From the Buddhist texts like Jātaka stories, one could get the information about the improved trade & commerce. During this period the important trade routes came into existence. Buddhist & Jaina monks followed the routes, which were being used by merchants. Buddha followed a long route from Rajgrih to Kusinagar. The story of a physician Jīvaka, informs an important route that existed between the region Taxila to Rajgrih and to Sravasti. The famous *Uttarapath* (Northern route) has been mentioned even by Panini. Buddhist texts shed information even on those merchants, who were carrying their tradable items even in thousand crafts. Thus the economic transformations due to agricultural advancement, urbanisation, organised trade and commerce through highly hierarchised caste cum professional bodies, the guilds added flavour to the social life of the people and necessitated new spiritual ideologies to negotiate conflicts. Such unrest contributed for the emergence and popularisation of neo- religious ideologies which were expected to smoothen the discrepancies in different realms of the society.

At this juncture, Buddhism with its egalitarian ideology that centred ‘human’ as a Supreme Being could fascinate different sections of populace in the society and negotiate their religious anxieties. The entire doctrine of Buddhism is carved according to the needs of the individuals. The space given for freedom of thought and expression in Buddhist paths are unparalleled elsewhere in the history of the religions. Hence Buddhism attracted classes and masses alike and established itself as a predominant creed.

### **Advent of Buddhism into South India:**

In South India the onset of Buddhism and the process of urbanization appeared to coincide with one another. The excavated Buddhist sites of south India such as *Amaravati*, *Nagarjunakonda*, *Jaggayyapeta*, *Salihundam*, Sankaram, *Sannati* and *Kanaganahallire* reveal that Buddhism was active in the region from the third century B.C. Trade, especially oversea trade gave fillip to Buddhism. It is also believed that the disappearance of trade with Rome sometime in the third century A.D. was concomitant to the disappearance of Buddhism. The conditions in the Southern dominions of India were quite different from that of Northern India in many dimensions. The period from 800-400 B.C. refers to the Megalithic period indicating transition from chalcolithic times. Archaeological evidences suggest that the migration from the neighbouring Karnataka towards east, gave rise to the development of protohistoric settlements along the banks of the rivers Krishna and Tungabhadra in Andhra. Several such cities like Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda,

Dhulikatta, Kotilingala, Budigapalle, and Dharanikota were unearthed in excavations from *Āndhradēśa*. These sites belong to the early fourth century B.C. They contain the remains of fortifications and extravagant buildings, underground sewage systems, well planned roads, highly organised water supply mechanism, technologically advanced metallurgy and industries. The racial infiltration of communities contributed for the emergence of new *jatis* taking varied profession in these places.

Almost all of the towns and cities cited above developed as well established Buddhist centres. These sites were situated along the ancient trade routes and linked to the network of land and navigational routes leading to different parts of the subcontinent. In addition, the port towns, the prominent cities and urban centres were well connected with one another by land routes. The development of a network of trade routes enhanced the inland and foreign exchange relationships. These trade routes linked the North and the South. The excavations from many Buddhist sites of Andhra revealed northern black polished ware (NBPW) treated with copper riveting. They were akin to NBP ware found in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab. In addition, the uniformity of punch-marked coins belonging to fourth century B.C. found in many regions of the northern and southern India, Bead making industry from *Peddabankur* and terracotta figurines located in the mound of *Yelesvaram* establishes the exchange of commercial and social relationships of Buddhist institutions between Southern and Northern India.

The megalithic communities often used the *svastika* pattern in the construction of multi-chambered cists. The influence of megalithic structures at the Buddhist sacred places is seen in the *svastika* shaped bases of the *stupas* found at Nagarjunakonda and Peddaganjam.

Interestingly, the architectural and structural adoptions from the earlier megalithic remains give distinctiveness to the Andhra Buddhist structures. The tree and *naga* (hooded serpent) sculptural motifs of Buddhism spread beyond the boundaries of Andhra. Fergusson gives a vivid account of the *naga* and tree cults that were prevalent in pre-Buddhist societies of Andhra at Amaravati and the *stupa* decoration at Sanchi. Fergusson held that the domination of *Nāga* motif at Amaravati gives an impression on whether the *chaityagriha* is dedicated to either Buddha or Naga. Both the *naga* and tree cults received veneration by the common folk throughout many parts of India. It seems that the local beliefs like *naga* and tree cults were integrated into the Buddhist mode of worship to accommodate the new entrants into the faith and make them homely with the new cult.

Though there are records that speak of royal support to Buddhism along the Krishna river valley, the surviving inscriptional evidence from the region reveal that Buddhism was first attracted by traders and then gradually permeated deep into the grass roots of the society. It is because the religion itself was a solace for the then infiltrated society that required a spiritual and ethical control for regulation of values and norms. The traders who had a lot of scope to travel across the world were in need of a religion that reiterates their personal and professional lives. Thus Buddhism with its egalitarian as well as restrictive behavioural practices was found suitable for the business communities to flourish in their activities. Hence, the liaison between Buddhism and

trade was quite evident. The literary tradition affirms that the initial converts of the Buddha soon after his enlightenment were two merchants Tapussa and Bhallika. They became the first lay supporters of Buddhism. From the above discussion it is evident that Buddhism entered and advanced in South India along with the increased trade and commercial activities probably around the fourth century B.C. or even before.

The exchange of relationship between the traders and the Buddhist institutions on one hand and on the other with the rulers was quite evident in the inscriptions belonging to the Satavahana and pre-Satavahana periods. Inscriptions at Amaravati<sup>2</sup> and Bhattiprolu<sup>3</sup> refer to the gifts made by the political chieftains of those times in support of the Buddhist *sangha*. The numismatic evidence speaks about the lead of the rulers towards the growing trade relations.

According to literary sources, Buddhism was well established to the south of the Vidhyas, even during the lifetime of Buddha. *Suttanipāta*, a Buddhist text, holds that even during the lifetime of Buddha his teachings were more popular in *Āsmaka*, the only Maha-Janapada located towards the south of Vindhya Mountains on the banks of the Godavari. It is revealed that a Brahmin by name Bhāravi lived at Potāli on the banks of the river Godavari, between the Janapadas, *Āsmaka* and *Mūlaka*. Once he dispatched his disciples by name Ajita, Tissa Metteya, Punnaka, Upasiva, Nanda Dhotaka, Hemaka, Todayya, Kappa, jatukami, Udaya, Bhadravudha, Posala, Mogharaja, and Pingiya to the holy presence of Buddha at Srāvasti. It appears that out of the sixteen disciples sent to the Buddha, Pingiya alone returned to Bhāravi at Potali and revealed the message of Buddha; while the remaining stayed back after embracing Buddhism.

The archaeological excavations at Kolhapur, Pittalkhora and Sopara in the west and Amaravati, Jaggayyapet and Bhattiprolu in the east reveal that even long before the third Buddhist council and the reign of Asoka and also prior to the rise of the Satavahana in Deccan, *Āndhradēsa* was as a strong hold of Buddhism. *Kathāvattu*, mentions that the *Andhakas*, the Buddhist monks from *Āndhradēsa* took active part in the deliberations of third Buddhist Council. Non-inclusion of *Āndhra* among the regions to which Asoka sent his *dhamma-mahamatras* for the propagation of Buddhism and mentioning in his XIII rock edict that people in his imperial domain, *Āndhra*; were following Buddha *Dhamma*, corroborates the statement. The Chinese traveller, Yawan Chwang holds that Buddha visited and preached *dhamma* in *Āndhradēsa*. He describes a monastery in *An-To-Lo* (*Āndhra*) where Buddha preached, displayed miracles and received into his religion countless multitudes of people.

The Ceylonese chronicles, *Mahāvamsa* attests that Mahadeva who was sent as a *dhamma mahamatra* to *Mahismandala* had a large following in Pallavamogga (present day Palnadu) wherein the famous Mahāyāna Buddhist centre Nagarjunakonda is located. The chronicle further

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<sup>3</sup>A. Buhler, 'Bhattiprolu Inscriptions', *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. II, (1894), No. 6, p. 328 and in No. 9, p. 329. These two inscriptions record donations given by a ruler called Kubiraka to the Buddhist stupa.

attests that Mahadeva was accompanied by 14,60,000 followers to Ceylon from Pallavamogga for the consecration of *suvarnamanadala* stupa at Anuradhapura. It is evident that Mahadeva appears to be the custodian of the *Āndhradēśa* with regard to the missionary activity of Asoka *Dhamma*.

The *Satavahana* dynasty was the first political power that could establish its might in the Deccan, and continued the legacy of Buddhism in South India after the fall of Mauryan Empire. They erected Buddhist *chaityas* and *vihārās* and also endowed them with lavish donations.

It can be surmised that the rulers did not disturb social life by offending Buddhist and Jain religious activities, rather protected their interests by extending their royal support. The political institutions balanced revival of Vedic ritualism with that of the popular heretical religions and could win and appropriate the support of all to sustain their power in the society

### Conclusion

The advent of Buddhism in South India was indeed due to the desire of the people towards an egalitarian society, a cry against heavy ritual dogmas and sanskritisation. The spread of internal and overseas trade contributed in creating awareness of this alternative religion as a value based religion. The archaeological excavations at Kolhapur, Pittalkhora and Sopara in the west and Amaravati, Jaggayyapet and Bhattiprolu in the east reveal that even long before the third Buddhist council and the reign of Asoka and also prior to the rise of the Satavahana in Deccan, *Āndhradēśa* was as a strong hold of Buddhism. Though Buddhism entered South India even during the times of Buddha, it could get royal support only during the times of Satavahanas. The support rendered by the Vaishyas and Kshatriyas enabled its growth and wide spread movement prior to the age of Satavahanas. Buddhism with its egalitarian as well as restrictive behavioural practices was found suitable for the business communities to flourish in their activities.

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