

The Buddha's Approach of Globalization: The First Indian Political Philosopher

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Abstract-

The Buddha also known as Siddharth Gautam was a spiritual teacher and founder of Buddhism. While Buddha is primarily known for his teachings on the nature of existence, his teachings on politics have been largely overlooked. Buddha is not considered as a political philosopher though scholars like Gail Omvedt and Kanchallaiah do recognize Buddha as a political philosopher. Politics and Buddhism might seem antithetical but in truth Buddhist practice is inherently political. This research paper proves that politics has always been a part of Buddhism. Buddhism has both influenced governments and been identified by govts. as a source of their authority and legitimacy. The relationship between Buddhism and democracy has a long history with many scholars claiming that the very foundations of Buddhist society were democratic. This paper considers Buddha in an altogether different light that of a political thinker.

Key Words: Sangh, Vajjians, Dhamma, Vihara.

Introduction

Most of the scholars, academicians, religious leaders and common men treat Gautam Buddha as a saint and a religious thinker and not as a revolutionary against the contemporary religious faith and beliefs or as a political theorist. The colonial as well as nationalist scholars are responsible for this misrepresentation or lack of factual presentation. Hardly any scholar turns his attention to ancient Indian political philosophy and when he does so the focus of his attention is extremely limited. The only two ancient India political philosophers on whom some studies have been conducted are Manu (Manu Smriti) and Kautilya (Arthashastra), though it is proved beyond doubt that the Buddha lived before Manu and Kautilya. In fact, Buddha pre-dated most of the western political philosophers e.g. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Chinese historical records show that Buddha even pre-dates Confucius. Thus, if through this research paper it is established that he was a political thinker, Buddha would become the forerunner of all known political thinkers.

The purpose of this paper is to establish the essential political nature of Buddha's philosophy so that scholars of political science can study him as a political philosopher and not marginalize him as a mere religious reformer.

Buddha was a political thinker, and a forerunner to Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Confucius and many others. Global economic, political and social systems of today institutionalize capitalism, democracy, pluralism and socialism. As these systems time and again suffer crises, the transformative discourses are attempted again and again by many reformists. Now people need to draw lessons from ancient thinkers.

Buddha's perception of State

Origin of the State

If Hindu Political thought associates origin of the state with Arajakta, Buddhist political thought associates it with the fall of man or corruption. Corruption comes into existence because of the emergence of materialism. Buddhism represents Republican tradition. The king is known as Mahasamrat which

shows that the king has been elected by the council. Buddhist king resembles Plato's philosopher king. People have chosen the noblest of all. The king embodies wisdom. The king is a source of knowledge. Purpose of knowledge is to check corruption since knowledge enforces morality. Other ancient Indian thought provided us only with the most primitive divine origin theory that was designed in such a manner that they stopped all further arguments and any understanding of politics. Buddha's imaginative parable of the shares of rice is a useful instrument to construct a picture of the ancient Indian state. Though the Sangha was established as a model institution, Buddha had a clear perception of the state and society that surrounded them. Western political scientists have identified the social contract theory of the state as a product of the Renaissance and Reformation, which culminated in the growth of science, reason and the Enlightenment. Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau were products of this socio-economic transformation and transition from feudalism to capitalism. In other words, the Western contractualists were products of socio-political ferment in the 16th and 17th centuries but it is not an exaggeration to say that similar ferment was at work in India around the 6th century BC when Buddha constructed his social contract theory of the origin of the state. His social contract theory, seen against the theory of the divine origin of the state, is grounded in his perception of pre-state society, a time when 'all was well with all'. Earlier ethereal bodies were free from every impurity with faculties unimpaired. The individual conduct was moral and they were abided by the principles of Dharma. There was peace and harmony in society. Later people became selfish, egoist and hence anarchy emerged in the society and for maintaining social order, state became necessary. It is the result of the conduct among the people. The changed conditions such as increasing population and decreasing food resources forced the people to enter first into an agreement to recognize the institution of

property. Subsequent to this the people made another contract to create an Authority or the State. Thus, the finest, the handsomest and the one who knew the law of the land was elected the ruler. The people also agreed to pay taxes for the maintenance of the state.

Functions of the State

The functions of the state were similar to those of Arthshatra and Dharmashastra. Buddhist tradition too believes in the concept of welfare state. Primary objective of the state is the well being of the people. Buddha's vision of the democratic functioning of the state was based on his belief in tribal republicanism. He made every attempt to save the tribal democratic states from the onslaughts of imperial monarchical states; his efforts to save the Vajjians and his warnings to Ajatasatru not to attack them were a case in point. Secondly, the democratic procedure that the Sangha adopted to assemble, debate, vote and decide on every major issue produced a treasure house for India's ancient democratic practice. The admission of individuals to the Sangha, punishment to members or expulsion of members from the Sangha and so on was decided by vote by the Sangha assembly according to written rules and guidelines. Thus, the morality of public institutions that Buddha built into his model Sangha is entirely different from the morality that ancient Indian thinkers built around the kingship or even around institutions like rishihood or the temples. Brahmanical morality had no concept of public accountability, while in Sangha morality it was one of the first principles.

Evolution of Sangh

The evolution of Sangh refers various forms of govt-

A. Buddha himself was the leader of the Sangh. He alone decided the initiation in Sangh. There was no consultation with other monks. Sangh was not based on any formal rules and regulations It was fully controlled by him. Politically it can be considered as monarchical form of govt.

B. With increase in size of Sangh, functions of Sangh were transferred to monks. Training and supervision of monks was given to senior manager monks. Power of Sangh now lies in a group of monks. Politically it can be considered as an aristocratic form of govt

C. Now Sangh became more organized, like admission and training of monks belong to the entire community. Community stands for Sangh. Now the entire power of decision making is given to the entire community. This is very similar to Republican or Democratic form of govt.

Buddhism and Liberal Democratic Thought

Buddha's political thinking parallels western liberal democratic thought with its emphasis on equal rights, protection against tyranny via equality before law and participatory and deliberative governance. Buddha's dhamma was clearly a means to establish a just society. While the ancient Indian thinkers used dharma and danda to mean two sides of the same coin, Buddha repeatedly stressed the pre-eminence of dhamma alone. There was not much space for danda in Buddha's theory. For brahminical thinkers maintenance of varnadharma and strict adherence to caste rules were justice. Contrary to this the Buddhist justice was anti-varnadharma and anti-caste. For him everyone, irrespective of caste, creed and sex, had the right to association, the right to freedom of speech and expression. His justice was an embodiment of human freedom. Buddhist justice was a non-religious socio-political concept. The argument that ancient Indian political thinkers were more concerned with the art of governance and administration than with the philosophy of the state cannot be applied to Buddha. Buddha on the other hand visualized an ideal state which aims at establishing a society based on equity, austerity and non-violence. The Sangha was the epitome of such an ideal. Thus the state in Buddhist philosophical discourse arises out of human necessity and is a result of

human rationality. Thus Buddha stands far above all Divine Right theories.

Buddhist Concept of Democracy

The relationship between Buddhism and Democracy has a long history with many scholars claiming that the very foundations of Buddhist society were democratic. In his teachings and prescriptions, Buddha endorsed democratic principles such as citizen's participation and free expression of opinion, deliberation, consultation and consensus building, voting and respect for popular consent, transparency via face to face meetings and public debate, primacy of the rule of law.

Buddha's concept of democracy flows from his concept of justice. In order to show a structural alternative to the imperial state system, Buddha established the Sangh. Admission of members to the Sangh was based on democratic principles, while qualification for admission was based on character of the individual seeking membership. Even that was decided by majority vote by the Sangh members. The laws pertaining to the maintenance of discipline and decorum within the Sangh were based on the principle of equality. One person one vote, and one vote one value was the Sangh democratic and political principle.

The Sangh democratic structures were embodiments of legislative, executive and judicial powers. Buddha functioned as one among equals. The Sangh assemblies would regularly meet and enact the Sangh laws, which were subject to constant modification and change according to the needs of the Sangh. It was never a rigid system, almost like modern socialist law which constantly underwent change. The Sangh system never depended on mere laws, as the Sangh believed in creating a democratic culture and democratic interpersonal relationships. Buddha believed that the Sangh system should have its own administrative network. The maintenance of viharas, the maintenance of records, the proper accounting for money and grain collects as alms, and the commodities produced by

collective production, was done with a well maintained administrative structure.

Buddha's Views on Power and Authority

Buddha's teachings on power and authority are an important aspect of his political thought. According to Buddha power should be used for the benefit of all people and not just for the benefit of a few. He also believed that those who have power should be humble and use it wisely. Buddha's teachings on authority also emphasized the importance of rule of law. He believed that the laws should be Just and that everyone regardless of their social status should be subject to them.

Buddha's Views on Governance

Buddha's teachings on governance were also highly influential. He believed that good governance requires that the rulers should be honest, compassionate and wise. He also believed that the rulers should also listen to the needs of their people and be willing to make changes when necessary. Furthermore Buddha believed that governance should be based on principle of non-violence. He opposed the use of violence and war as a means of resolving conflicts and instead advocated for peaceful means of conflict resolution.

Buddha's Views on Social Justice

Buddha's teachings on social justice are perhaps his most important contribution to political thought. He believed that society should be based on equality and justice and that all people regardless of their social status should be treated with dignity and respect. He also believed that poverty and inequality were the root causes of social unrest and that society should work to address these issues. He advocated for the redistribution of wealth and resources to ensure that everyone had access to basic necessities such as food, shelter and health care.

Buddha's Views on Property

Yet another key aspect of Buddha's philosophy was the question of property. This paper dispels the myth that Buddha was sanyasi like the Hindu rishis; on the contrary, he was a system builder. Buddha's

understanding of property reveals two important aspects

A. He and his Sangh were strong propagators of the communal ownership of property. Though the Sangh owned hardly any landed property (though at a later stage the Sangh also owned landed property donated by kings, nobles, etc. for the maintenance of viharas), through the generosity of its patrons it accumulated vast amounts of non-landed mobile and immobile property. Buddha himself took the initiative in enacting the laws relating to regulation, distribution and maintenance of the Sangh property.

B. The Buddhist perspective of communal ownership emanates from Buddha's conception of the division of labour. He sees nothing wrong with the division of labour as production needs special expertise in each field; the farmer, the teacher, the barber – each was as important as the other. But he was opposed to breaking up the functional divisions of the society into immobile social groups, just as he was against the degrading of productive labour. Buddha saw social relations from a materialist perspective combined with pragmatism. He saw a radical rupture between sacrificial spiritualism and the pragmatic existentialism of contemporary social forces. At a time when the state appeared to be acquiring land only to bestow benefits on the ruling class, Buddha seemed to have differentiated between social ownership of land and state (monarchical) ownership of it. He saw tribal communal landholding on the one hand, state ownership on the other, and preferred the former because it preserved equality while the latter destroyed it. He realized that the monarchical ownership of property was creating class rule.

While Buddha was opposed to both state and private property ownership, he seems to have preferred communal ownership of landed property by the people themselves. He seems to have realized that state ownership of property might also lead to authoritarianism. This is why he constructed

a people's collective in the form of the Sangh which combined the characteristics of civil society and the embryonic state. He attempted a balance between the rights and duties of citizens. If Sangh practice was any indication, social, economic and political equality were the keys to social life, while austerity was the core concept. Food, clothes, furniture, every item that was available in the viharas was distributed on the principle of equality. Buddha made it a point to reduce needs to a bare minimum and commodities were distributed to meet the basic needs of the members. Contemporary life is increasingly torn between the unlimited desire to lead a 'good' life and the ever-increasing demands of that life. The conflict between materiality of life and the imbalance that material life produces in the social environment by pushing the dispossessed into a situation of nothingness—poverty, destitution, alienation—creates a spiritual conflict in one's own life. India has become a classic example where the rich live in world class comfort while their poor neighbours starve. It is here that Buddha's Sangh way of life can redeem their morally empty lifestyles.

Though ancient in nature and small in size, the Buddhist Sangh system seems to provide a clue to resolve this contradiction, there seems to be a ray of hope in Sangh practice.

Buddha's Views on Rights and Duties

Buddha approached the question of duties by stressing equally the importance of right in the Sangh. It is important to balance between the rights and duties of the people and the rulers. Even in terms of consumption Buddha was one among equals. He was subject to the same duties and eligible to exercise the same rights as any other bhikkhu. The political decadence of any system starts with the leaders or rulers assuming themselves to be more equal than other. If present day 'democracies' thrive on the principle of one individual or one class being more equal than others, socialist systems are collapsing under the contradiction between stated dogmas of equality and the unstated practice

of rulers becoming a class into themselves. In this situation of despair it is important to study the Buddhist understanding of property, rights and duties more seriously.

For the Buddhists, rights and duties were two side of the same coin. The apparent stress on duties in the day-to-day practice of the Sangh was a reaction to the all-pervasive cultural hegemony of the imperial state and society and to Hindu spiritualism which rendered that society irresponsible. Buddha set himself the task of saving society from the culture of aggrandizement and violence. He believed in creating islands of alternative culture (the Sangh) amidst the Hindu hegemonic cultural sea. The creation of an alternative culture is possible only when the emphasis is on moral responsibilities and duties of both individuals and the system as a whole. This was one of the reasons why Buddha appears to have emphasized moral responsibilities in the form of moral duties. But such duties went hand in hand with moral rights. Thus the violent enemy was to be defeated by the non-violent methods of this alternative culture and way of life. The rights and duties of the Sangh members revolved around this transformation of the value system itself.

Buddha had decided to forge a united front of all those who were opposed to brahminical ritualism, imperial stateism and cultural hegemony of the ruling and priestly classes. Hence he decided to establish a bhikkhu and a bhikkhuni Sangh where caste division were to be obliterated. He was not so much against the class system, nor was he against Brahmins as people, as he was against Samana Brahminism. He was a supporter of the growing mercantilism but at the same time opposed to slavery in the form in which it existed at the time. He not only admitted people of all castes into the Sangh but created a leadership from all castes. Moggallana, a Brahmin ananda, a Kshatriya, and Upali, a barber, were encouraged to become leaders and did become the foremost intellectuals of the Sangh. Devadatta, his cousin, who wanted to usurp the Sangh leadership using dynastic

connections (to Buddha), was completely marginalized in the Sangh. Buddha who did not believe in nepotism cut Devadatta down to size.

Buddha's Views on the Rights of Women-

The last but most important aspect of Buddha's political philosophy consists of his views on women's rights. He admitted them in the Sangh against all the opposition and declared that women could attain Nirvana. The Buddhist Sangh gave them the freedom to read and write. Thus, the first generation of women intellectuals in India emerged from the Buddhist Sangh. For example, Ambapali, Sumangala, Mathika, Ishidasi, Subha and many other women not only acquired the skills of composing songs but assumed enormous importance in Sangh life. The bhikkhuni Sangh encountered enormous problems because of the unequal treatment meted out to women. The male members of the Sangh found it difficult to overcome the patriarchal culture around them, and this culture inevitably found its way into the Sangh. Time and again Buddha made laws to overcome these problems. He attempted to encourage women to address Sangh meetings and allowed them to take the initiative in Sangh activities.

Conclusion-

The Buddhist political philosophy rests on the ideas which are both similar to and

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different from the concerns of western scholars that politics is necessary but not very important and that moral values are advice for wise living rather than categorical obligations. Buddha's political thinking parallels western liberal democratic thought with the emphasis on equal rights, protection against tyranny via equality before the law and participatory and deliberative governance. Although best understood as an extension of his teachings on human liberation, Buddha was also an original, social and a significant political philosopher. Buddha teachings parallel modern democratic thought, mixed market economics and cosmopolitan internationalism in the west. Buddha was indeed the first political thinker, his teachings on power, authority, governance and social justice continue to influence political thought and practice to this day. The Buddha's teachings on non-violence and social justice have inspired many political movements including civil rights movement and the struggle for independence in India. The Buddha's emphasis on compassion, humility and wisdom as essential qualities of good governance are also important lessons for leaders today.