

## An Aspect of Buddhism in Assam

Nikhileswar Sengupta

*This present paper deals with the disguised Buddhism in Assam. It may be contemplated that Bengal and its contiguous states viz. Assam, Bihar and Orissa were the lands of Mahayana Buddhism but the rise of Brahmanism swallowed Buddhism. Haraprassad Shastri's discovery of living Buddhism in Bengal and his theory of disguised Buddhism in the society are significant attempts in the socio-religious study of Eastern India which make us awakened to raise some questions on hidden Buddhism in Assam.*

A few hundred years back Buddhism expanded its prominence in Eastern India. It, practically, stood as a protest against the Brahmanism and gradually stretched directly or indirectly in the cultural life of the society. Buddhists were not only a religious sect but also an astringent of some rites and rituals which formed a completely different culture from the cultural phenomena of the Brahmanas. The hard-nut caste-distinction system, namely, the discrimination of so-called upper and lower castes of the Hindus created an aversion among the people, so that they renounced their traditional religion and took shelter in Buddhism. It is presumed that the heterodox Buddhism induced a large number of people of Eastern India in Buddhism and they formed a religious community which had a strong cultural base. This pliable religion activated the converted people in the socio-cultural arena. However, Buddhism became wrapped from Eastern India due to Brahmanical dominance. Not only the Brahmanical dominance but also the Muhammadan conquest destroyed Buddhism.<sup>2</sup> But it may be presumed that Buddhism was never abolished from the Society. It has some remnants.<sup>1</sup> Once Haraprassad Shastri showed the existence of living Buddhism in Bengal in his famous monograph *Discovery of Living Buddhism in Bengal*.

According to Shastri, the worship of Dharma Thakur proves the existence of Buddhism in Bengal. Manik Ganguli and Ramai Pandit's poetical works on Dharma Thakur are very much significant in Bengali literature and those works had proved the exist-

tence of Buddhist culture. Bihar and Orissa were obviously the lands of Buddhism. The Mahayana Buddhism grew there in its own way. This obliterated religion was unearthed by Brian Houghton Hodgson from Nepal and Alexander Csoma do Koros from Tibet. Their continuous process of research and investigations in the early 19th century threw a new light on the conception of Buddhism.

Now a question may arise : was Kamarupa (presently Assam) the land of Buddhism ? Assam is the contiguous area of Bengal. So it might have happened that Buddhism flourished in Kamarupa or Assam. Yuan Chwang, the Chinese pilgrim of the 7th century A.D. was invited by the King Bhaskaravarmana in Kamarupa. He was cordially received there. Yuan Chwang's note on the travel in Kamarupa is significant. He observed that Buddhism was not a prevalent religion in Kamarupa. Bhaskaravarmana himself was a Brahmin and stood in favour of Brahmanism. But he honoured the Buddhist Sramanas. According to Watters the people of Kamarupa "worshipped the devas and did not believe in Buddhism. So there had never been a Buddhist monastery in the land and whatever Buddhists there were in it performed their acts of devotion secretly." <sup>3</sup> Colonel Shakespeare stated that Buddhism was not unknown in Kamarupa. A section of people had faith in Buddhism but they performed worship secretly. Edward Gait also did not believe that Buddhism was a prevalent religion in Kamarupa. According to him, "They (the people of Kamarupa) adore to Devas and have no faith in Buddha ; hence from the time Buddha appeared in the world, even down to the present day, there never as yet has been built one *Sangharam* as a place for the priest to assemble. . . . The King is fond of learning and the people are so likewise in imitation to him. Though he (Bhaskaravarmana) has no faith in Buddha, yet he much respects Sramanas of learning." <sup>4</sup> The series of negative ideas about the existence of Buddhism in Kamarupa came from Yuan Chwang's description. Perhaps he was not aware about the position of the Buddhist religion in Kamarupa. Apart from Bhaskaravarmana's own religious performances, he might allow his people to perform explicitly other religion, namely, Buddhism. It can be said conspicuously that on the basis of Yuan Chwang's misconception the erroneous theory became established.

Taranath observed that Buddhism was established in Kamarupa. Brahmanas were turned into Buddhists. Some of them built viharas and led life of Sanghas. According to him "in Kama-

rupa, in the East, there lived a *brahmana* called *siddha*, who was as wealthy as a great King and thousands of attendants. He used to worship the Sun. Once, while he was worshipping the sun, *arya* Dhitika, by his miraculous power, made himself emerge as it were from the solar region and sat in front of him, radiating lustre. Taking him to be the sun-god, he (*Siddha*) bowed down to him and worshipped him. He (*Dhitika*) delivered Sermons to him. When the *Brahmana* was full of reverence, the *arya* revealed his real self and preached the Doctrine ever again. The *brahmanas* realised the truth and With great reverence built a *vihara* called *Mahachaitya*. He also lavishly entertained the *sangha-s* all around. Thus the law of Buddha was widely spread in *Kamarupa*.”<sup>5</sup>

It is not merely a story. The incident which is cited above shows how Buddhism prevailed and renounced in *Kamarupa*. It may be taken as symbolic story. Again *Taranath* speaks about *Upasaka bhattaraka* who was born in a merchant-family and “he became a follower of the *Mahayana* quite early in life. He received the vision of *arya* *Manjusri* and could recite from his memory about fifty *sutra-s*. He never deviated from the ten-fold virtue. He preached the Doctrine to a thousand *upasakas* and a thousand *upasikas*. Once he went towards *Kamarupa*. His disciples reached a place in the den of a poisonous *Ajagara* snake . . . . .It sniffed the human smell, swallowed some of the *upasakas* and bit many others.”<sup>6</sup> This incident is also symbolic. Perhaps Buddhism was spreading there enormously and the growing Buddhism did face a tremendous opposition from the *Brahmanas* of *Kamarupa*. Here “den of a poisonous *Ajagara* snake” means a powerful orthodox *Brahmin* King and the *Brahmanical* society. It signifies a conflict between the *Buddhist* and the *Brahmanical* society. However, *Taranath*, the *Tibetan* Lama, believed that Buddhism could spread its dominance in *Kamarupa* or *Assam* against the malicious non-*Buddhist* sects.

An erroneous belief among some *Tibetans*, *Bhutanese* and *Hungarian* scholar *Alexander Csoma de Koros* was evolved about the death-place of Buddha. They thought that Buddha ‘died in *Gauhati* under a pair of *Sal* tree’<sup>7</sup> but their conjecture is absolutely an error in fundamentals because historical evidences do not approve of their ideas. It is proved that Buddha expired at *Kusinara* (presently *Kasia* of *Deuri* district of *Uttar Pradesh*) which is situated 32 miles far from *Gorokhpur*. Its antique name was *Kusavati*. It is not possible to substantiate the ideas of the above mentioned people who believed that *Gautama Buddha* expired in *Gauhati*. However,

it can be claimed that the Buddhist had connection with Kamarupa because there are some other evidences. For instance, the copper-plate inscription of Indrapala (1050 A.D.) shows the evidence of Buddhism.

The existence of Buddhism in Kamarupa is seen in the copper-plate of Indrapala which was discovered by Edward Gait and deciphered by Augustus Frederich Rudolf Hoernle. Indrapala was the worshipper of Siva but in the later period he became a devout Buddhist. "To test him, he was placed with a Darika, a public woman. But he proved himself true; so he was taken into the monastic order and renamed Darika-pala and in this name the King of Kamarupa composed many songs on Buddhism." Perhaps Darika-Pala and Darika of Chaurasisiddha is the same person. He was the disciple of Lui Siddhacharya. Lui was the *Adi Siddhacharya* and the *guru* or preceptor of other *siddhacharyas*. "Darik, another *siddhacharya*, says that it is through the grace of Lui that he has attained the twelfth stage of progress and has now become fully equal to Buddha."<sup>9</sup> However, Darika was the composer of *Charyagiti*. Haraprasad Shastri got a *pada* of Darika from Lama of Nepal. And a list of writings of him is found in the *Tangur*.

In the later period Buddhism took different shapes and many anecdotes were in vogue. In the eighteenth century, when Raja Siva Singha ruled over Kamarupa, a significant poetical work named *Dharma-sambad* was written. Here we find that Yudhisthira was engaged in a religious sacrifice or *Yajna*. Many Brahmins were assembled there to take offerings or *dana*. In the mean time a *chandala* appeared there but he was not allowed to enter in the place of sacrifice. As a result a long discussion between the *chandala* and Bhima was started. At the end of discussion the *chandala* passed a remark that all Kings are profane. So nobody should accept the *dana* or offerings from any King. Hearing this all Brahmins who participated in the ceremony of sacrifice and were present there mainly for taking *dana*, had left without taking any offerings of the King Yudhisthira. As a result, the sacrificial ceremony remained incomplete. Then the King worshipped Dharma who assumed the form of *chandala*. Here we find that Brahmins give much importance to the words of *chandala*. The *Chandala* is Dharma and Dharma is Buddha.

Similarly, the worship of Dharma in Bengal is a common feature. The priest or the preceptor of the Dharma-puja is *chandala* or any one from lower-caste people. Mahamahopadhyay Haraprasad Shastri showed in his monograph *Discovery of Living Budd-*

hism in Bengal (1897) that the disguised Buddhism is lying in the form of *Dharma*. Once he said "that the Dharma cult might either be a remnant of decayed Buddhism or that it might be same form of non-Aryan worship. But the discovery of the *mantra* and the fact that the annual festival is held on the birth-day of Buddha leave little doubt of the Buddhistic origin of this cult."<sup>10</sup> Again he puts another identical remark in his esteemed paper "Buddhism in Bengal since the Muhammadan conquest". According to him, "a sort of corrupt Buddhism mixed up with a variety of Aryan and non Aryan forms of worship, still obtains in Bengal amongst a very large number of lower class people."<sup>11</sup> Dharma of Assam may also be identical with the Dharma of Bengal.

Narayanadeva and Durgavara of Assam have pained a god named Niranjana in their poetical works. Niranjana is one of the gods of Dharma-cult. Of course, he is a Buddhist deity. Niranjana is also found in Bengal. And the Buddhist philosophy *Sunya-vada* was not unknown in Assam. In eastern India, Buddhism was manifested in various ways. Buddhist tantricism is one of the way which led a new type of worship and it had a great impact in the society but a sea-change was made when Hinduism received its own position. As a result, the temple of Kamakhya and many other temples were built on Buddhist ruins.<sup>12</sup>

Buddhist rites and rituals may be found in the Vaisnava faith of Kamarupa. Sarat Chandra Goswami examines the four *Sarana* of the Vaisnavas and draws a conclusion that "the famous Triratna (three jewel) of Buddhism are the Dharma, the Buddha and the Sangha, that is, the Teaching (Dharma), the Teacher (Buddha) and the Order Sangha. It is striking that excepting the Sarana in Hari or God-head, the other three *saranas* are exactly identical in Buddhism and Kamarupa Vaisnavism."<sup>13</sup> Apart from the practices of *saranas* there were other evidences i.e., icons of Janardana, Haya-griva, Visnu, Dhyani-Buddha etc., and the Tamol-Nokhowa sect of Upper Assam. Like Dharma-cult Tamol-Nokhowas decline to recognise Brahmins. So they do not appoint Brahmins as priest in their ceremonies. They have their own priests. Perhaps they are also the remnants of Buddhism. Similarly, we find Natha-cult in Bengal. Matsyendranatha of Nathapanth was born in Bengal but he preached his scriptural teachings at Kamarupa. We get this information from *Kaulajana-nirnaya* which was written in the middle of the eleventh century.<sup>14</sup>

If the Hindu rituals of Kamarupa be examined minutely, a conclusion may be drawn that Hinduism was exuded by the Buddhist

rites and rituals. The worship of Dharma Thakur, the Vaisnava faith and movement, the religious performances of Tamol-Nokhowas, the presence of Niranjana and Sunyavada (nothingness) philosophy in the literature are, no doubt, the stigmas of Buddhism. Not only Bengal was the land of living Buddhism but also its contiguous areas (here we should mention only the name of Kamarupa or Assam) were flooded by Buddhism. And Buddhism imbibed to some extent, the whole society.

#### Notes & References

1. Nihilswar Sengupta, "Revival of Brahmanism in Bengal Under the Aegis of Bhavadeva Bhatta," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 48th Session. Goa Univeersity. 1987, pp. 145-46.
2. Haraprasad Shastri. "Buddhism in Bengal since the Muhammadan Conquest," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1895.
3. T Watters *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, Vol. II, London, 1905, p. 186.
4. Edward Gait, *A Distory of AssaG*, Calcutta, 1967, p. 29.
5. *Taranath's History of Buddhism in India*, ed. by Debiprasad Chattopadhyay, Calcutta, 1980, p. 47.
6. *Ibid*, p. 253.
7. Colonel Shakespeare is quoted in *Indian Historical Quarterly*, 1927, p. 749. (Hereafter *IHO*).
8. Sarat Chandra Goswami, "Hidden Traces of Buddhism in Assam," *HIQ*, 1927, p. 756.
9. H. P. Shastri, "Bengali Buddhist Literature." *The Calcutta Review*, 1917.
10. See *Proceedings and Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1894.
11. *Journal of the Asistic Society of Bengal*, 1895.
12. *IHU*, 1927, p. 756.
13. *Ibid*, p. 754.
14. P. C. Bagchi ed. *kaulajnana-nirnaya and some minor texts of the school of Matsyendranatha*, Calcutta, 1934.