FROM TRADITION TO TRANSFORMATION: CRITICALLY EXPLORING THE INFLUENCE OF BUDDHIST EDUCATION ON INDIN SOCIETY

Pratyashi Saikia Tandon*

Abstract: India's well-endowed history is fashioned by the admixture of various cultures, religions, and philosophies. One of the prominent religions – Buddhism- profoundly impacted the socio-cultural and religious structure of Indian society. Lord Buddha's teachings emerged as a glowing light that led people to elevate themselves from the systemic and oppressive practices prevalent in the society of those times. In this article, I will explore critically the influence and transformative role of the Buddhist education system on the ancient traditional Indian society, its fundamental features, and its relevance in modern times. Based on secondary sources, the paper adopts a secondary critical analysis approach in reviewing existing literature and content relevant to the study.

Introduction

The Buddhist education system is founded on the life experiences of Mahatma Buddha. It was the first institutionalised residential educational system in India that intended to impart knowledge through teaching, lecturing, instructing, training, studying, learning, etc. (David & Stede, 1975). The objective of Buddhist education is the holistic development of a child, including moral, intellectual, mental, and physical development. Buddhist philosophy had its genesis in India around the 6th century B. C. It developed as a backlash against the orthodoxy of Brahmin beliefs and dogmas and raised human thoughts to higher levels of depth and refinement.

The Indian society during the time of Lord Buddha was hierarchically divided into four strata defined by a person's birth and profession. The Brahmins occupied the uppermost position in the social rung and established societal supremacy. The Brahmin-dominated stratification system led to widespread discrimination against those belonging to the lower strata, especially the Shudras. They were denied educational and social rights and treated as "untouchables." Against this dominance and oppression, Buddhism emerged as a religious doctrine. This doctrine or philosophy provided the edifice upon which the Buddhist education system in ancient India developed. Buddha asserted that the highest knowledge, or "Anuttara-Samyak-Sambhodi,*"* cannot be bequeathed from outside. However, it is a man's fundamental and underlying nature, and anyone who aspires to explore it must essentially dig deeper into the domain of the self.

I. Fundamentals of Buddhist Education

The three intersecting pillars grounded in the Buddhist education system were knowledge, wisdom, and reasoning (manasikara). Education was disseminated through sanghas or assemblies at both primary and higher levels. 1) Inclusive Education: A distinctive facet of the Buddhist education system was that it embraced students from all sections of society, irrespective of caste or creed. 2) Community Learning: Education was disseminated at monasteries or viharas, which were established as centres of learning during the Buddhist period. This replaced the Vedic Gurukul system of education with an institutional system. Students acquired education together in congregations. 3) Span of Education: The total span of education was 22 years, comprising 12 years of primary ordination and 10 years of higher

* Dr. PRATYASHI SAIKIA TANDON, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Kamla Arya Kanya P. G. College, Mirzapur, Uttar Pradesh, Email: tpratyashi@gmail.com.

ordination when the student is conferred the status of *Bhikshu* or *Monk*. 4) Ascetic Approach to Learning: A student was ordained into a sangha or monastery as a novice through the *Pabbajja* Sanskar. Through this ordination procedure, the student takes refuge in the Triple Gem (Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha). The student leads an ascetic life and undertakes an oath in Pali:

Buddham saranam gacchami
Dhammam saranam gacchami
Sangham saranam gacchami
Dutiyampi …
Tatiyampi …

The second level of Buddhist Sankara is *Upasambada*, or higher ordination, by which a novice monk attains the status of a Bhikshu. It takes place when a student reaches the age of 20. 5) Learning together through Teacher-Student Interactions: The teacher-student relationship in Buddhist education is based on mutual assistance, affection, love, and respect. Teachers accord students comparable respect and are conferred identical affection by the students. This helps establish a disciplined life. A teacher was seen as the Supreme Guru and transmitter of learning, wisdom, and dharma. 6) Teaching Method: Buddhist education included theoretical and practical learning methods. Teaching was generally verbal, and emphasis was given to searching for meaning rather than rote learning. It included several methods, such as lecture, discussion, practical, problem-solving, and remedial methods (Ravipati, 2020), as well as an inductive method. 7) Curriculum: The Buddhist education system introduced an organized curriculum with two levels of education: primary and secondary. The curriculum included Sutlanta, Vinaya, and Dhamma as primary study subjects. In contrast, other subjects covered were Brahmanic education, such as Vedas, Puranas, Jyotish, Yoga, Ayurveda, etc., religious and material education, sports and games, military training, and vocational studies like agriculture, commerce, animal husbandry, etc. 8) Qualities of a Teacher: Buddha describes the qualities of a good teacher in the *Anguttara Nikaya Gautama.* A teacher should explain things or events in a sequence as they occur; a teacher should be dedicated and teach with kindness, care, and compassion in heart and devotion to help others; a teacher should not teach just for material gains and rewards; lastly, a teacher should not criticise others. Moreover, a teacher is expected to lead a simple life, possess good character, be concerned about the well-being of students, and share a parental relationship with students. 9) Rules of Discipline: Buddhism's education system prescribed specific rules of discipline during education and afterwards in life, such as living a simple and pious life, following the eight-fold path of Buddha, adhering to the Ten precepts, not stealing, lying, drinking, or speaking I will of anybody, avoiding luxurious life, not engaging in leisure activities, and not exercising corporal punishment. 10) Astanga Marg: Buddhism aimed to impart the eight-fold path to its followers through proper training and education: (1) Right view or proper education (samma dithi); (2) Right intention (samma sankalp); (3) Right speech (samma vacha); (4) Right conduct (samma kamant); (5) Right living (samma aieet); (6) Right efforts (samma vyaayam); (7) Right-mindedness (samma sati); (8) Right meditative absorption (samma samadhi). 11) Four Noble Truths: All life knows suffering (Dukkha). The source of suffering is ignorance and attachment (Samudaya). There is cessation of suffering (Nirodha). There is a path to the cessation of suffering (Magaya).

II. Purpose of Buddhist Education

The Buddhist system of education was grounded on the basic principles of life. It aimed to develop knowledge by understanding life's realities and the fundamental nature of truth. This education focused on a person's spiritual, moral, and physical development and character building. It also aimed to educate people on the preservation, refinement, and expansion of

culture; open new socio-cultural and economic horizons; cultivate decent social attitudes, morals, and practices; and promote the welfare of society and social development. The core objective of the Buddhist Education system is to assist in the comprehensive and integrated growth of an individual's personality, be it intellectual, moral, physical, or psychic development.

Buddhist education emphasizes gaining knowledge through the Buddhist scriptures called Tripitaka, which are based on the teachings of Buddha. This education system focuses on incorporating mutual reverence and harmony for the progress of all. A key purpose guiding Buddhism's teachings going forward is congregation, i.e., bringing all human beings into a homogenised footing and encouraging the utmost culmination of human contentment and perfection through wisdom, consciousness, meditation, and self-contemplation. The idea of Buddhist education—whether modern or traditional—is to get the student to this liberated state. The technique, or spiritual prescription, combines three different aspects: faith (belief in Buddha-nature, which involves emotional conviction and joy at the possibility of being released from suffering); understanding (knowledge of the Buddhist scriptures); and practice (application of the Eight-fold path, which entails ethical morality). Buddhist education aimed at both individual and social advancement. Emphasis was laid on building the moral character of individuals, while cultural promotion and social efficiency were stressed for realising social goals. The objective of education rested on disseminating worldly and realistic knowledge (Nayak, 2012).

Thus, the purpose of education and learning under Buddhism rested on realizing the highest level of wisdom intrinsic to man. True wisdom facilitates the solution of all human problems and translates suffering into happiness. In contrast, a lack of wisdom leads man to develop mindless perceptions, outlook, and behaviour and thus suffer the fallout induced by inappropriate actions. According to Buddha, "If we have wisdom, our thoughts, viewpoints, and behaviour will be correct; how can we suffer when there are no ill consequences? Of course, we will be happy." Thus, Buddhist teachings emphasized uncovering the causes of suffering, i.e., delusion, and acquainted man with the truth that the derivation of happiness lies in man's cognizance of wisdom.

III. Influence of Buddhist Education in India

Lord Buddha spread his beliefs and thoughts through education. As stated in the Buddhist canon, "it is the astonishing feat of instruction" (*anusasani patihariya*) which Buddha used to propagate education amongst people. Dhamma education or spiritual knowledge was important during this period and contributed to students' growth and self-realization. Some influences of Buddhist education in India can be enumerated as follows: Buddhist education *emphasized equality and freedom*, and considered all human beings as adherents of one community. It was free from the communal narrowness of the Brahmanic social system and laid the foundation for a *cosmopolitan society* in India. 1) Buddhism's moral teachings generated a stream of qualities like compassion, nonviolence, and the pursuit of truth in society. These beneficial traits proved pivotal in shaping human personality and character in then-Indian society. 2) Buddhist education introduced the system of *organized institutional learning* in India. Monasteries and viharas, as opposed to the ashrams of the Brahmanic period, were used to impart knowledge. 3) Buddhism gave Indian society the concept of *collective learning*, as education was collectively provided to groups of students. This differed from the prevailing Vedic education system, in which a student received education by staying as a member of the Guru's family. 4) Everyone could receive Buddhist education irrespective of caste, creed, religion, or wealth.

Lord Buddha taught that every individual's mind had the potential to learn and understand; they only needed a teacher. Therefore, Buddhist education showed India that education can never be restrictive and prejudiced and can be freed from the shackles of wealth and authority. Thus, the Buddhist education system did away with harmful educational

discrimination rooted in the Hindu Brahmanic society's prevailing socio-cultural and traditional prejudices.

Until the rise of Buddhism, Sanskrit was the medium of instruction. However, during the Buddhist period, education was imparted through the common man's language, such as Prakrit and Pali. 1) The Buddhist education system also introduced a new teaching and learning pedagogy. It stressed meditation and learning through self-study. It also accommodated practical and vocational subjects in its curriculum to help students develop holistically and equip them to earn a livelihood. 2) The Buddhist education system inspired the rise of organized public educational institutions in India. This contributed to augmenting the efficacy of the Indian higher education system worldwide, which drew students from different countries like China, Korea, Sri Lanka, and Java. 3) Buddhist education also *bridged the cultures of India and other East Asian countries* by connecting people, events, activities, collaborative relationships, and intercultural understanding. Buddhist institutes of learning created the cultural belongingness that exists today. Buddhist education also developed Hindu logic and philosophy by fostering comparative *study.*

IV. The Transformative Role of Buddhist Education in Indian Society- A Critical Analysis

The spread of Buddhist knowledge and teachings led to specific discernible alterations in India's educational system, which was in vogue during the pre-Buddhist days. Contrary to the Gurukul system of education which was domestic in structure and function as the pupil resided at the residence of the teacher as his family member during the entire span of his education, the Buddhist system of education was monastic education where education was imparted by to *Bhikshus* at monasteries and viharas which developed into educational institutions. There was an increase in the number of subjects taught in Buddhist educational institutes that enabled the transmission of knowledge in multifarious areas and disciplines for the all-around development of individuals. In the Buddhist schools, the study of literature came to be accorded more prominence. In the ancient education system, the study disciplines included the Vedas, Vedangas, and miscellaneous systems of science and philosophy (Maheshwari, 2012).

During the later periods around the fourth century B.C, studies also included “Varta”- Living or Livelihood, which included subjects encompassing agriculture, animal husbandry, cattle rearing, and trade, and “Dandaniti”- Punishment and Force, comprising the subjects of law, politics, and government. In the Buddhist educational monasteries and viharas, each pupil was invariably a young or old monk. The teachers, too, were vowed monks, whose prime tasks consisted of “giving of recitation, holding examination, making exhortations and explaining Dhamma” (Coomaraswamy, 1964). Sanskrit was replaced as a medium of education in the Buddhist institute schools by using vernacular dialects.

Though the Brahmanic and the Buddhist systems of education were similar in many respects, there also existed differences in that Buddhism brought education to the reach of ordinary people. The Buddhist education system played a transformative role in the then prevailing society and social system by engendering marked changes in the organisation, structure, and administration of education. The social caste system, as described by Hindu Dharma, was likely one of the most significant factors in the development of Buddhist thought and practice. Buddhism’s influence on ancient Indian education resulted in a peculiar coalescence of educational experience. It promoted anti-caste and casteless ideas that were inextricably linked to its values. The hegemonic Brahmin caste system, which formerly authorised the Brahmins' unmediated access to the divine power through customary rites and practices, became discredited as a privileged class in the Buddhist period. Under Buddhism, anyone with the ability and inclination to comprehend the teachings of the Buddha might achieve emancipation and liberation. Buddhist teachings addressed the true nature of an individual’s existence and offered means by which human sufferings might be transcended.

Reducing Buddhist morals into numbered lessons made them easier to remember and recite by all and sundry.

The Buddhist educational system supplanted the previously independent and autonomous educational institutions. It established a federated education system with all educational institutions functioning under a common organisation, the *Sangha*. The Buddhist education system introduced the concept of *"democratic and egalitarian education"* in form and spirit, against the predominant *"elitist education"* of the time. The essence of education lies in democratic practices and doctrines like liberty, equality, brotherhood, companionship, cooperation, sharing, and responsibility. Unlike the Gurukul system, where the Guru enjoys the last prerogative concerning all matters related to education, the Buddhist educational system was administered on more democratic lines by giving pupils the right to vote in the decisions and discussions of the *Sangha*. It can be said that Buddhist education introduced democratic principles and values in place of the autocratic and monarchical rule of the Guru or Brahman.

As laid down in the Upanishads, Hindu philosophy teaches that the only truth or reality is the eternal *"Atma"* or Brahman. It is the transcendental reality, consciousness, and bliss. The Buddhist philosophy and scriptures teach the opposite truth. Buddha says all things are impermanent; the permanent self is non-existent. The self is a temporary complex of mind and body. Buddhist philosophy does not believe in the existence of God as the initiator of the world. The world exists independently without any fore and after. Life is rife with suffering resulting from the desire or urge to live. The desire to live springs from ignorance and flawed knowledge of the ephemeral as eternal and lasting. By removing these delusionary beliefs that unshakeably influenced the earlier society's general thoughts and ideas, Buddhist teachings aimed to liberate people from suffering and attain enlightenment.

Contrary to the pre-Buddhist beliefs and ideologies, Buddhist education taught people to understand the true essence of the world and attain liberation for themselves. Thus, the Buddhist scholastic system worked towards providing individuals with a pragmatic view of life and the world. The Buddhist moral education paved the way for emancipation from grief, despair, old age, and death. It taught people to do away with the hegemonic Brahmanic system and its oppressive practices by understanding the causes of suffering and the path to remove them. The Eight-fold path is, therefore, regarded as a classic course for spiritual education.

In the pre-Buddhist society, the pupils had to board with the Guru for 12 years after he is admitted into the Gurukula. On consummation of their studies, they preferred to return to their families and live worldly lives. So, household and domestic life constitute a principal component of the Vedic system. On the other hand, resigning from family life and relationships was the cornerstone of the Buddhist system. Even after completing studies at the Viharas, the pupils were not permitted to return to their homes except in certain emergent circumstances. They needed to take on a journey of propagation and spreading Buddhist teachings. Therefore, comradeship and brotherhood were established under the Buddhist education system by fracturing the delicate and natural bonds of consanguinity and family relationships (Pendharkar & Manmode, 2024).

V. Buddhist Education in Modern Indian Context

Modern Indian society is dominated by science and technology, technological information, cultural globalisation, regional identities, degeneration of religious and moral values, modern lifestyle, intolerance towards others, and the like. It is a constantly changing society, guided by scientific reasoning and rational thinking. Buddhist teachings come as a beacon light in showing the path of individual inquiry to deal with the constantly changing and complex life situations. This pathway has its roots in direct knowledge. The conventional Buddhist education methods, like mind-training, contemplation, and meditation, could significantly influence people's lives. These methods could be included in the pedagogy of present

educational institutions to teach students the path to achieve happiness, equality, freedom, and salvation. The perception of the fundamental nature of individual awareness, which acknowledges the logical and demonstrative faculty of the mind, can highly benefit modern society, which is unduly fragmented (Son, 2021).

Buddhism espouses a pathway of training the mind, or mindfulness, and teaching is considered the path to achieve it. Gautam Buddha expounded the eight facets of the path in diverse ways and in discrete words to different people under the degree of acquaintance, understanding, and development they had reached. According to him, all of them have to be cultivated and illuminated simultaneously because they are integrally associated, and the education of one assists in the development of the other. Thus, the Noble Eight-Fold Path is practical for a stress-free, tranquil, and harmonious life. This method of mindfulness ushers in peace, happiness, concentration, etc., and helps develop an enlightened mind in students belonging to diverse educational systems. This method of education is essential for people in modern societies to acquire factual education. In the fast-moving modern life, Buddhism suggests focusing more on the human element of life. In other words, one should seek the mind, instead of following after events and material goods.

Therefore, Buddhist educational philosophy and methodology are essentially progressive and non-dogmatic as they teach people to look within themselves to get an essential view of reality and human life. Its philosophy is that by enlivening innate wisdom and compassion, people can elevate their situations and capacitate themselves to help and serve others. It is affected not by rote learning but by furnishing them the tools that spawn self-knowledge in them and animate their implicit potential. The aim is not to dictate conventional truths and beliefs but to induce and illuminate the eternal truths in the inner self. This corresponds with the meaning of "education (educere)," to "draw out." Such education rightly does not propagandize views and beliefs but ingeniously disentangles from material value-violating beliefs; it enables one to detect the true nature of man and wipe away the darkness obscuring sustainable inherent qualities (Martin, 2022). It is worth noting that Buddhist education has opened a new vista of knowledge to the world, which can lead even ordinary humans to sublimity in contemporary globalised and multicultural settings.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the Buddha, besides being a profound thinker, was a great teacher and a unique pedagogue. For Buddha, education should be a means to make the student self-reliant. The aims of education should be to dedicate one's life to the good of others. Good education should lead us to emancipation or salvation. Buddhist education system, thus, attempted to reclaim man's intrinsic qualities. It also taught parity and tolerance, which stemmed from Lord Buddha's realisation that all conscious beings have this deep-seated essence and wisdom. In short, a Buddhist education provided the context that espoused self-discovery, stimulated true and correct knowledge, and cultivated an urge to help the world.

It cannot be denied that the modern world and its unprecedented progress and development have nothing but uncertainty, instability, and antagonism, as well as worries, despair, and ennui. Buddhism offers a few very ingenious and constructive methods to counter these. Therefore, it can incontestably be said that Buddhism plays a significant role in the present time. It is important to propagate Buddha's Dhamma amongst humanity so that it continues to enlighten the lives of mankind anywhere in the world.

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