

# **"Engaged Buddhism in India and Role of Theravada Buddhism: Perspectives and Prospects"**

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Engaged Buddhism, as a specific term, was originally coined by noted Vietnamese Zen teacher Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh. As we know, during the Vietnam War when he and his Dhamma friends were engrossed in their meditative practices and surrounding society was afflicted with the sufferings of the war, the question arose in their mind regarding the objective of their religious life. They thought that when the other part of the society is enveloped with fear, pain and suffering so would it be appropriate for them to confine themselves to their spiritual practices, hiding from the external world? They decided to expand the field of their actions. As an ideal monk to do the spiritual practices so that they could understand the grief and agony of others, and on the other hand, to go out of their Viharas to offer their services to the common people of the society and they gave this way of life a new Chinese term, translated as Engaged Buddhism into English, although not considered to be very accurate translation.

Engaged Buddhism, as a specific term might have emerged in the recent times but, undoubtedly, as a concept it had already begun with the departure of Gotam, the Buddha from his householder life to the society, to humanity. It was the first example in the history of humanity by anyone to reject the interest of 'I' and 'mine' for the whole of the humanity. It is needless to reiterate that, Buddhist scriptures are flooded with the stories of the devotion and commitment of the Buddha as well as his disciples to the society, not only in the form of ideas, but also in the form of action. What can be the better example from the detailed illustrations of the Pāramīs in the different Jātaka stories.

The plan of action, Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh chose to apply was adopted in the situation of war, but in the normal situations, Buddhists can engage themselves even in much wider social perspectives. Active engagement of Buddhist ideas can be divided into two levels: spiritual development and social development. Since the term pertains to the Buddhists who seek ways to apply the insights gained from meditation practices and Dharma teachings to situations of social, political, and economic suffering and injustice, these two can not be seen as distinct to each other. Both of these compliment each other and, therefore, both are interdependent to each other.

The revived Buddhism in India has not travelled a very long journey in India. Archaeologically, the gradual and slow revival of Buddhism in India continued from 1750 to 1890 led by the British scholars like James Prinsep, Alaxandar Cunningham and several others. Religious revival of Buddhism in India began with the arrival of a young Sinhalese Buddhist named Anagarika Dharmapala, who, inspired by an article of Sir Edwin Arnold written in The Daily Telegraph on pitiable condition of Bodh Gaya, established the Maha Bodhi Society in Ceylon on May 31st, 1891 and his contribution to the revival of Buddhism at a historical level is outstanding.

But, the first example of the active application of the social doctrines of Buddhism on the mass level was seen by the Indian people during 1950s because of the efforts of a legendary personality named Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. He was born in the 1891 in a family of Mahāra cast which was considered as untouchable during that time. Born as a part of Hindu society, he felt that there was no right or freedom to study and to live with the common society. The lower caste people and, especially, untouchables were being treated very cruelly by some feudal minded people of upper caste. He, having got the higher education somehow, tried to improve the condition of the suppressed class within the Hindu society and in this context; he had a conflict with the Hindu freedom fight leaders like Mahatma Gandhi on several occasions. But the status of Dalits could not be upgraded barring a few incidental successes.

Dr. Ambedkar decided to renounce the Hindu religion on Oct. 13, 1935, saying: "I was born as a Hindu but I will not die as a Hindu, for, this is in my power." He had been studying about other religions for a long time and he began to do so with more commitments so that he could choose the appropriate religion for himself and his followers. He became greatly impressed by studying Tipitaka, the collection of Buddha's words, and he decided to convert to Buddhism. In 1950, Dr. Ambedkar made known publicly his determination to revive Buddhism in India. He made his followers aware of the Buddhist doctrines by his lectures and writings and established that the social equality can only be accessible through the path shown by the Buddha.

In a talk "Why I like Buddhism", given to B.B.C. London on May, 12th, 1956, he says: "I prefer Buddhism because it gives three principles in combination which no other religion does. All other religions are bothering themselves with 'God' and 'soul' and 'life after death'. Buddhism teaches 'Prajñā' (understanding as against superstition and supernaturalism). It teaches 'Karunā'(love). It teaches 'Samatā'(equality). This is what man wants for a good and happy life on earth. These three principles of Buddhism appeal to me. These three principles should, also make an appeal to the world. Neither God nor soul can save society".

Declaring, religion is for man and not man for religion, and announcing: "there was only one man who raised his voice against separatism and untouchability and that was Lord Buddha", Dr. Ambedkar, with half a million followers of him, took refuge in Buddhism on October 14th, 1956. He popularized Buddhism to a great extent among the masses of modern India. It was the first ever application of Buddhist doctrines at the social level in modern India. By getting strength from the Buddha's teachings under the extra-ordinary leadership of Dr. Ambedkar, the down trodden masses of that time could be successful in getting back their lost dignity to a large extent, and later became a powerful force in the political system of India. Undoubtedly, whenever the major events related to the history of Engaged Buddhism in India and world in the modern time would be counted; the name of Dr. Ambedkar would be among the foremost of names.

In shaping up and modifying the mindset of intellectual community of India, the contribution of three heroes of Buddhism, namely; Rahula Sankrityayana, Bhikkhu Jagdish Kassapa, Bhadanta Ananda Kausalyayana have been

stupendous. They draw attention of the whole of Indian academia towards the depth and magnificence of the Pali literature, Theravada Buddhism and Buddhism in general, by their writings mostly in the Hindi language.

It is worthwhile to mention here that all the above personalities got their education and training of Buddhism by the help of Pali literature, and applied those teachings under the shade of Theravada tradition. Therefore, it can be said that Theravada Buddhism played a paramount role in the conditioning of all the Indian Buddhist scholars in modern India and it has great prospects to offer to the next generation also.

Every country has its own history, its own culture, and its own geographical structure and, therefore, the people of each country maintain a certain kind of mental formation. Every society has its own social structure and, resultantly, its own kind of problems also. India is suffering from population explosion whereas several countries are facing the problem of declining rate of child birth.

In India, a sixty year old person does not dare to take any major decision for the family if someone elder than him is alive in the family to take decision, whereas, in many of the European countries it is considered as a healthy tradition to endorse the power of taking independent decision to a son or daughter as soon as he or she enter the age of youth.

There are several similar issues which can draw our attention if we compare any two societies. The way of social application of Buddhism, the level of that application and the limitations can not be decided overlooking the space and time in this world. The statements of the Buddha are sometimes expressed considering the local and spontaneous situation and if we do not understand the core of the Buddha's teachings and its methodology and we pick up every line of text and put our energy and time to justify that in each and every situation, then it would not be the right understanding of the Dhamma.

Buddha's teachings are not merely the counting of the philosophical, spiritual, social and moral teachings but are the treasure of the solutions of the problems, and moreover, the Buddha had established the proper methodology to understand the problems and to find their solutions. As the land, time and situation become different, the application and solution also may be selected accordingly. In the words of Dr. Ambedkar, The teachings of Buddha are eternal, but even then Buddha did not proclaim them to be infallible. The religion of Buddha has the capacity to change according to times, a quality which no other religion can claim to have.

In the recent times, Buddhism, undoubtedly, is being paid special attention in the whole world. We often come across statements by different people, saying, that Buddhism is getting very fascinating for the non – Buddhist westerners. The adoption of Buddhism by the Hollywood stars or any interview given in the favour of any particular form of Buddhism by any Hollywood actress adds additional glamour to Buddhism. If any progressive, rational and open-minded person inculcates likeness for Buddhism by understanding its characteristics and

virtues, then it is unquestionably appreciable and commendable. But it should not have happened out of just glamour.

Sometimes ago, five star hotels had started the trend of organizing concerts of Indian classical music for the elite and rich class, born and brought up listening to western pop music. It became a fashion among that class to say that they listen to classical music and this or that vocalist is a wonderful singer. But that added glamour could not stand long because that was not erected on real solid ground. Yes, Indian classical music is still lovable and admired among its real lovers because of its amazing melodious effect and so is the case with the Theravada Buddhism.

Theravada Buddhists should understand the strength of the Buddha's teachings and apply those teachings to the society in a humane way as much as possible rather than attaching the artificial glamour to it for short-term popularity.

What can be the method, instruments, level and limitations of Engaged Buddhism in India? These issues have certain similarities and dissimilarities, if we compare with the common problems of the whole world. The message of Brahavihāras (Mettā, Karunā, Muditā, Upekkhā), mental purifications, peace and conflict management, self-sacrifice for the sake of the others are universal values as well as of local. But if we take the Indian society into consideration then we will have to accept that many of the Indian social problems are little different and, sometimes more intricate from common social problems of the world. The feeling of the superiority or inferiority on the basis of caste, spread of Dowry system that take epidemic proportions when marriages are considered, increasing trend of superstitions and blind faith and religious fundamentalism are a few of major Indian social problems.

The religious superstitions, false propaganda in the name of religion and blind faiths have dramatically taken new shape in India, rather than decreasing with the technological development, in the last few years with the emerging trends of globalization. The rituals and other religious activities which were once a personal way of worshipping the God in India, are being obsolete. I was born in the most orthodox locality, placed on the bank of the river Ganga, of one of the most orthodox and religious city of Hindus, Varanasi. The area was the abode of mostly famous Brahmin priests and astrologers. In my childhood I used to observe that they would perform their Vedic chanting in groups and take bath in the adjacent Ganga (river) peacefully. They would perform their religious activities according to their tradition. One might have differences with their belief and rituals but those activities would neither interfere with others religious believers nor do any propaganda to improve its popularity.

But, in the last 10-12 years the noticeable increase in the fuss and showoff on the name of religion is baffling for any sensible, progressive and unprejudiced person.

Adorned with the crown full of diamonds and jewels, a holy man, comes in the most expensive car to the stage and narrates the Hindu philosophy preaching

the sermon to be detached from the desires. He suddenly begins to sing and dance even using God-worshipping lines derived from the music of any Bollywood's popular song. Disciples also start singing and dancing. A full fledged orchestra may be arranged by the Babas (so called holy men) themselves. Thousands of the followers also start singing, dancing and crying.

A famous satirist of India named, Harishankar Parasai, had once commented on these kinds of characters – "All the mad of the whole world are considered as pure mad but in India they are considered as spiritual." Most of the Babas own large personal property like CEOs of multinational companies, some are facing several criminal charges of murder, capturing the illegal lands, kidnapping and rape. Interestingly, this whole scenario is closely associated with the market forces.

Whatever is popular is saleable - adopting this theory, all the hundreds of TV channels are flooded with the advertisements of the magical stones, gems, lockets of the pictures of the Gods and Goddesses claiming that these may change your destiny absolutely. Even the news channels also have started inviting Tarot card readers, Numerologists, Astrologers, Crystal ball readers to seek their forecasting on the serious issues of the politics, economics, etc.

I still remember the propaganda that took place on September 21, 1995 when the rumour spread across India that Lord Ganesha's statues are drinking milk. Even the IT professors and Medical Doctors of my university ran and queued up among the rows of the people offering milk. The temple's ground was overflowing with the milk poured by the people but who had the common sense to find the scientific truth behind the rumour?

This syndrome of creating religious propaganda is spreading out like plague in other religions also. Last year, the sea water behind a mosque in Mumbai became sweet and Muslims started drinking and storing gallons and gallons of the water considering it as a miracle of the Allah. Indian scientists kept on appealing to the common people that it happened because of some chemical reaction and the water can be hazardous for health but it hardly affected the ears. Exactly, next day, the falling of tears was seen in the eyes of mother Mary in a Church. Fortunately, nothing like this has happened with any Buddhist temple.

The most paradoxical situation with the Buddhism in India in recent times has been that the Buddhist tradition in India has been mostly studied as an offshoot of the Hindu tradition. Most of the Indian scholars, especially those who have been trained in the Department of Indian Philosophy studying later Mahayana texts, and have no previous knowledge of the Pali tradition. Thus, they put all their effort to establish that Buddhism has nothing new to offer except what it has borrowed from the Vedic tradition. On the other hand, the largest number of the Buddhists in the Indian population, the follower of Dr. Ambedkar, have made Dr. Ambedkar their God. Without any proper training of Theravada Buddhist tradition most of them can not defend the Buddhist standpoint on any issue when it comes to the controversial issues like of the Buddha being an incarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu and so on. Therefore, there is a great need for

establishing a pure Theravada Buddhist University in India which could provide the authentic knowledge of Buddhism through the Pali texts and tradition to the knowledge seekers. Let me assure here that one such step can revolutionize the state of Buddhism and Buddhist study in India.

When ever we should talk of the engaged Buddhism in India, we should always consider the socio-religious condition of the time of the Buddha and his method of action in that society. The Theravada Buddhist tradition is firmly rooted in the rationalistic, scientific base of Pali literature and it has all those characteristics which the world can ever imagine of as a future religion for the humanity. The Theravada Buddhists residing in India should think how they can go to the public to remove the blind faiths, superstitions, religious fanaticism and intolerance of the people. They should enter the villages and towns to perform true social service and conducting the common awareness programme regarding health, education and social evils. The members should take the resolution that they would not practice any kind of discrimination on the basis of caste, religion or financial condition of beneficiaries.

The Theravada Buddhist organizations also should not only think of establishing the temples, but also to setting up the charitable hospitals, schools and social welfare societies to reach the common people with the message of the Buddha. The schools established by them should have the provision of the study of the Pali language and literature in order to bring the glory of Theravada tradition back to its motherland. The social service should not be in the form of religious propagation of the Buddha Dhamma because as soon as the people would be free from prejudices, taboos and blindness of the mind, naturally it would be the success of the teachings of the Buddha.

The teachings by the Buddha himself were delivered to be followed by the people, not to convert the people. Conversion was natural phenomena which took place after people understood the Dhamma (teaching). Buddha's Dhamma, like a raft, is for crossing over, not for carrying over. The central objective of the Buddha's Dhamma is not to make others a Buddhist just by their faith, but to make them a perfect human being. In the modern context, the meaning of crossing over can be taken as to get freedom from evils, inside and outside.

As far as the application of the Buddhist doctrines at spiritual level is concerned, it is my own observation and humble request on the basis of that observation, that the respected scholars of Buddhism and monks should follow the true teachings of the Buddha. It has to be based on the Buddha's own teachings, free from Tantra- Mantra, magic, miracles, superstitions and religious propaganda. And Theravada Buddhism has all that capacity.

If any form of Buddhism tries to seek attention and popularity through short-cut methods of ritualistic miracles, providing external means of purification, esoteric methods, and astrology and so on, then, I do not see any hope for the success of that form of Buddhism in India at least, as Indians already have enough of those things in their Brahmanical tradition.

Moreover, those things will justify the claims of the Hindu fundamentalist forces that the Buddhism is not much different from Hinduism and it is an offshoot of Vedic Brahmanism.

The students and teachers of Buddhism can certainly play an active role as a part of engaged Buddhism in India, but the foremost role can only be played by the monks because, since the time immemorial, it is in the psyche of the Indian people that they pay more attention to the words of those who have renounced the householder life for the society. The active role of the Buddhist monks in India, whether they are Indian or foreigners, on the social issues is needed to be enhanced in the Indian society.

Buddha never settled only in a monastery expecting others to come to him and receive the knowledge. He went out and approached the people walking around the villages and towns. Had Buddha not interfered during the conflict of Rohini River, uncountable Sakyans and Koliyas would have been killed in the war. Had Buddha been a neutral spectator of all the social evils, he would also have been counted just as one of the many philosophers, logicians and teachers of ancient India. The Buddha's own life has a lot to learn from for the modern citizen of today.

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Created on Tuesday, 29 October 2013