



The Rise and Teachings of Buddhism and Its Impact on Indian Society

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Abstract

Buddhism, founded by Siddhartha Gautama in the 6th century BCE, emerged as one of the most significant reform movements in ancient India. It arose as a response to the complex ritualism and social inequality of Vedic society. This paper examines the rise of Buddhism, its key teachings such as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, and its profound influence on Indian religion, philosophy, art, and culture. Through a historical and analytical lens, this study highlights how Buddhism reshaped the moral and social fabric of India and left a lasting legacy across Asia.

Key Words: Buddhism, Gautama Buddha, Four Noble Truths, Eightfold Path, Middle Way, Sangha, Mauryan Empire

Introduction

The rise of Buddhism during the 6th century BCE marked a major turning point in the spiritual history of India. At that time, Indian society was dominated by the Brahmanical order, rigid caste hierarchy, and sacrificial rituals that had become burdensome for common people. The socio-religious atmosphere was ripe for reform. Against this backdrop, Siddhartha Gautama—later known as the Buddha, or “the Enlightened One”—preached a path of simplicity, compassion, and ethical conduct. His message rejected the authority of the Vedas and caste distinctions, advocating instead for individual liberation through self-effort and moral discipline.

Literature Review

Scholars such as Rhys Davids and T. W. Rhys Davids in *Buddhism: Its History and Literature* emphasize the socio-economic and religious discontent that gave birth to Buddhism. Historian Romila Thapar in *Aśoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* notes that Buddhism represented a moral and political alternative to Brahmanical orthodoxy. Other modern thinkers like B. R. Ambedkar viewed Buddhism as a social revolution aimed at equality and justice. Collectively, these perspectives show that Buddhism was not merely a religion but a comprehensive reform movement that transformed Indian society.

Teachings of Buddhism

Buddha's teachings centered on human suffering (*dukkha*) and its cessation. The **Four Noble Truths** explain the reality of suffering, its cause (craving or *tanha*), its cessation (*nirvana*), and the way to end it—the **Eightfold Path**, consisting of right understanding, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and concentration.

He rejected the caste system, animal sacrifice, and elaborate rituals, emphasizing instead morality (*sila*), meditation (*Samadhi*), and wisdom (*panna*). Buddha also denied the existence of an eternal soul (*atman*) and a supreme creator, focusing instead on practical ethics and self-realization.

Impact on Indian Society

1. Social Impact

Buddhism challenged the authority of the Brahmins and the rigidity of caste, promoting equality and compassion. It opened the spiritual path to all, including women and lower castes, fostering a more inclusive society.

2. Religious and Philosophical Impact

Buddhism led to the development of rich philosophical traditions such as *Abhidhamma*, *Madhyamika*, and *Yogachara*. Its emphasis on non-violence (*ahimsa*) deeply influenced Hinduism, Jainism, and later Gandhian philosophy.

3. Political Impact

Emperor Ashoka's adoption of Buddhism in the 3rd century BCE gave it state patronage. His inscriptions spread Buddhist ideals of tolerance, peace, and welfare across the Indian subcontinent and beyond.

4. Cultural and Artistic Impact

Buddhism inspired magnificent art and architecture—Stupas at Sanchi, rock-cut caves at Ajanta and Ellora, and statues of Buddha in Gandhara and Mathura schools. It also encouraged the development of the Pali and Sanskrit literary traditions.

5. Global Impact

Through missionary activities under Ashoka and later through maritime routes, Buddhism spread to Sri Lanka, China, Japan, Tibet, and Southeast Asia, shaping their art, ethics, and philosophy.

Conclusion

Buddhism was not only a religious movement but also a force for moral and social transformation. It stood for compassion, equality, and rational inquiry, offering an ethical alternative to ritualistic orthodoxy. Though Buddhism declined in India after the 12th century due to the revival of Hinduism and Islamic invasions, its spiritual and philosophical influence continues to resonate globally. The message of the Buddha—of peace, tolerance, and self-awareness—remains as relevant today as it was 2,500 years ago.

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