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## IDEOLOGICAL AND EMPIRICAL DIVERSITY IN BUDDHISM IN KERALA: A STUDY IN AND THROUGH CULTURAL ASPECTS

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**Abstract:** Impact of Buddhism in Kerala culture can be seen in every part of our life. The customs and traditions that we are following today are the parts and parcels of Buddhist culture. Buddhism which prevalent in Kerala was entirely different from what Buddha exactly preached. The Buddhist influence we find in our culture is Mahayana Buddhism. Buddhism in Kerala is entirely from what Buddha exactly preached. The proposed research is an attempt to analyse whether Buddhism in Kerala contradicts from Buddhist ideology and if yes, how far both contradict each other? It further analyses the cultural influences of Buddhism that can be seen in our culture.

**KEY WORDS:** Buddhism, Diversity, Culture

### INTRODUCTION

Buddhism which occupies a unique place in the history of Indian religions, it was developed around 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE when Varna divided society created schism among the society. The personality of Buddha and the method adopted by him to preach his religion helped the spread of Buddhism. Emergence of Ashoka, the famous Mauryan king considered to be the turning point for the history of Buddhism. Two hundred years after the death of Buddha, Ashoka said to have embraced Buddhism. Prevalence of Buddhism still in Ceylon, Cambodia, Central Asia, China, Malay, Thailand, Turkistan, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, Manchuria, Tibet, Nepal, Japan, Korea, Mongolia can be seen as a result of Ashoka's effort of sending Buddhist missionaries to various countries. Buddhist groups are having peculiar culture, which is entirely different from the culture of other groups. According to Robert Kohl's culture can be defined as,

'an integrated system of learned behavior patterns that are characteristic of the members of any given society. Culture is the total way of life of particular groups of people. It includes everything that a group of people thinks, says, does and makes- its systems, attitudes and feelings. Culture is learned and transmitted from generation to generation'. Culture of the same group will differ according to the region they live. Likewise Buddhist culture of India will be entirely different from the Buddhist cultures of other foreign countries even though they are following same moral code of law. Ideological and empirical difference of Kerala Buddhism from Buddhism can witness from our culture. Ideology is referred as, 'a systematic body of concepts especially about human life or culture or a manner of the content of thinking characteristic of an individual, group or culture'. From 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE to 12<sup>th</sup> century AD Buddhism was the main religion of India. By 14<sup>th</sup> century Buddhism became a religion only in name. Complete history of Buddhism cannot be studied without understanding its cultural aspects. Greatness of history coalesced with greatness of its culture. An enquiry into the cultural aspects of particular group brings their complete history.

## **Buddhist culture in Kerala**

There are various views regarding the origin of Buddhism in Kerala. The one and only reliable source which relates Buddhism with Kerala is Ashoka's 'Grinar rock edict' in Gujaraath, which mentions about 'Keralaputras'. 'Sreemulasa Vihara' was the most famous Buddhist monastery in Kerala but that was taken by sea, Vikramaditya varaguna's 'Paliyam copper plate and Mooshikavasham' are also giving reference about this monastery. 'Agastyamala' in Thiruvananthapuram was once the centre for Buddhists. The one and only copy of 'Sreemulakalpam' the Buddhist holy book also found from Kerala. We can also see the propagation of Buddhist messages in Sangam literature, 'Manikekhalai' mentions about the number of Buddhist monasteries in 'vanchi' town (present Kodungallur). A.R. Gopinathan in his 'Malayala Basha Tholkapiyathil' mentions that, 'The word sangha is used in Manimekhalai to denote Buddhist sangha' (P.46). Buddhism which got popularised in entire Kerala, this was evident from the discovery of Buddhist idols from different parts of Kerala. Origin of Buddhism in Kerala is a still debated one. Some historians opines that Buddhism reached Kerala from Srilanka, while some on the view that Buddhism which emerged in Kerala during the time of Ashoka itself. Dr. Sugathan in his Buddha matavum jati vyavasthayum mentions that, 'Theravadis were the first Buddhist group who reached Kerala, later onwards Mahayana Buddhism got strengthened'. A Sreedharan in his 'Kerala Samskaram' points out that Buddhism reached in Kerala from the time of Ashoka itself. K.P. Padmanabha Menon in his 'Keralathinte samskaraika charithram' mentions that during the reign of Godhakabhayan (AD 302-315) Srilankan Buddhism witnessed a rift, as a result of this king deported 60 Mahayana Buddhists from Abayagiri Vihara to opposite bank. This Mahayana Buddhists reached Kerala and propagated Buddhism.

Buddhist influence can be seen in almost every parts of our life. The festivals, rituals, customs that we engage in, the place names that we often heard of, the temples we visit.. etc are the part and parcel of budhist influence. For example 'procession over elephant', 'kettukazhcha', 'ratholsavam', 'deepavali', 'mamankam', 'kathinolsavam', 'Aandupirappu', 'pooram', 'maramadi maholsavam', 'Shagotam', 'Koothiyottam', 'Thalapoli', 'Annam kettu' etc in all these things we can find Buddhist influence. P.C Alexander in his 'Travancore census Report('1931) quotes that, 'Rituals of present worship- temples, idols, procession, festivals- are almost copied from Buddhism'. The place names with the word 'palli', 'vattam', 'cheri', 'kutti', 'kulangal', 'kadukal' has close affiliation with Buddhism. Malayalam language has adopted many of the words from pali language, still we are using it without knowing its exact origin. Buddhist influence also can be seen in art forms like 'Mohiniyattam', 'puppetry', 'koodiyattam'. More than this Buddhist influence can also be seen in traditional medicinal practice called 'Ayurvedam'. Many of the hindu temples that we see today were once Buddhist monasteries. The best example for this are Vadakkumnatha temple, Cherthala Bagavati temple, kodungallur.etc. Budhist monastries in Kerala also once fuctioned as hospitals, treatments that are seen in 'Thakazhi', 'Thiruvizha', 'Ettumanoor', 'Mannarashala', 'Panachikal', 'Guruvayoor', 'Mukambika', 'Pallipurathu kavu'..etc are having Buddhist influence. Even in the field of education Buddhist influence can be seen, when the children were taken for Vidyarambam ceremony they were written 'Nanam monam' which was seen as a salutation to Buddha. Observing vegetarianism in holy days and wearing yellow robes are the parts nd parcel of Buddhist influence. P.C Alexander in his 'Buddhism in Kerala' quotes that, ' Buddhism didn't fully disappear from Kerala, further it merged in sea of Hindu religion.....Kerala Hindu religion had the power to absorb any kind of religious system. With absorption of Buddhism, Hindu religion also ready to continue the popular festivals and worship patterns in temples'. Buddhist artefacts were discovered from somany places like Pattanam, Keezhadi, potsherds Kayamkulam krishnapuram palace, Buddhist idol in Ambalapuzha karumadi village, Mavelikkara Bharanikavu, Nepier Museum in Thiruvanathapuram, Thiruchirapalli government museum, Thrissur Sakthan Museum, Madras Government museum, Thiruvanathapuram Museum, Thanjavoor palace museum, Buddhist statue in marayur kovil kadavu.

When it is focused on Buddhism of present and past centuries, we come across influence of Buddhism in several famous personalities and in organisations. For example Sree Narayana Guru, even though he didn't give any direct specification about Buddhism, Influence of Buddhist ideologies can be seen in his messages. Such influences can be seen in his disciples, followers and in admirers like Kumaranashan, A. Ayyappan, C.V Kunju Raman, Dr.Palpu, Judge E.K Ayyakutti, C.Krishnan. Another best example for neo budhist was of B.R Ambedkar. Several oraganisations were come up to propagate Buddhist ideologies like Bhimayanism of Ambedkar, Mahabodhi Buddhist mission, Buddhist Theosophical league..etc. influences of our culture are needed to be explored. It is important to study cultural influence of Buddhism in Kerala. Buddhism in Kerala is entirely different from what Buddha exactly preached. Impact of Buddhism in Kerala culture can be seen in every parts of our life. The

customs and traditions that we are following today are the parts and parcel of Buddhist culture. The main deities and sub deities in the temples of Kerala which are in the posture of meditation can be the transfigured version of Buddha. Buddhism which prevalent in Kerala was entirely different from what Buddha exactly preached. The Buddhist influence we find in our culture is Mahayana Buddhism and Tantric Buddhism.

There are so many misinterpretations in Kerala culture by relating everything with Hindu traditions, when we explore cultural influence of Buddhism such misconceptions will be cleared. Buddhism has a impact on everything that we do in our everyday life. Festivals, art forms, literatures, sculptures, scripts, agriculture, vaidyam which has close affiliation with Buddhism. So it is important to have a good understanding of Buddhism and its cultural influence in Kerala.

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