

## **A Note on Buddhism in Tamil Nadu**

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### **Introduction**

The history of Buddhism spans the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E to the present, starting with the birth of Buddha in Lumbini. This makes it one of the oldest religious practices today. The religion evolved as it spread from the North-Eastern region of the Indian Sub-continent through Central, East and Southeast Asia. A significant contribution of India to the world of religions is Buddhism through in the land of its origin it has virtually disappeared. The most difficult problem a student of history has to face while attempting to trace the origin, development and fall of Buddhism in South India particularly is the paucity of archaeological evidences. Since there is no follower of Buddhism and also no Buddhist monument in any part of Tamil Nadu one cannot come across any concrete evidence which may be helpful for this study. Under these circumstances one has to depend mainly on the scanty references in literature, travel records, place-names and a few Buddhist vestiges found in the area.

## **Epigraphical Information**

Regarding the introduction of Buddhism into Tamil Nadu one can trace it to the Third century B.C.E. When Emperor Asoka's Dhamma Vijaya occurred. The Edict No. II of Asoka speaks of the places where he sent Buddhist missionaries. It mentions the names of Tamraparni and the various dynasties of ancient Tamil Nadu namely Chera, Pandya, Satyaputra and Keralaputra. The name Tamraparni denotes Ceylon, for, the Greek historians had called Ceylon by the name Taprobane for several centuries. While Keralaputra denotes Cheras, Satyaputra has been identified by many scholars on philological grounds as Adiyaman, one of the groups of Chera dynasty.

Only one inscription has been discovered in the southern most part of India which makes a direct reference to Buddhism. This is the copper plate inscription of the Ay king Vikramaditya Varaguna of the 9th century C.E. who ruled South Travancore that is the present Kanyakumari district. The inscription begins with an invocation to the Buddha. This inscription brought to light that a Buddhist vihara flourished at Srimoolavasam and Vikramaditya Varaguna donated some landed property to the monastery.

In the inscriptions found in and around Therur the village is referred to as Theranur which means the place of Buddhists especially those belonging to the

Theravada school of Buddhism. The beautiful stone images of Avalokitha and his consort Tara devi are found in a temple locally known as Elaya Nainar Koil. The annual festival of the temple is conducted by the village people on the full-moon day of the Tamil month of Chithrai. (April- May), which is the birthday and also the day of Nirvana of the Buddha. On that day the devotees cook all kinds of Amaranthus and take only vegetable food. Perhaps this is an impact of Buddhism. It is learnt that even in 1919 a group of Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka visited this temple to worship the deities.

### **Archaeological Antiquities**

The *Manimekalai* describes the town of Kaveripattanam. Ancient ruins of a 4th-5th century Buddhist monastery, a Buddha statue, and a Buddhapada (footprint of the Buddha) were found in another section of the ancient city, now at Pallavanesvaram. The heritage of the town of Nagapattinam is found in the Burmese historical text of 3rd Century BCE, and gives evidences of a Buddha Vihar built by the great Ashoka. Nagapattinam was a Buddhist centre of the 4<sup>th</sup> - 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. Its stupa dates from this era. Buddhism disappeared from this city as of an unknown date, but was revived as of the 9<sup>th</sup> century C.E.

In the 11th century C.E, Chudamani Vihara, a Buddhist vihara (monastery) was built by Javanese king Sri Vijaya Soolamanivarman with the patronage of

Raja Raja Chola. “Anaimangalam Copperplate” of Kulothunga Chola notes that “Kasiba Thera” [Buddhist Monk] Renovated the Buddhist temple in 6th century C.E with the help of Buddhist monks of ‘Naga Nadu’. This ‘nagar annam vihar’ later came to be known as ‘Nagananavihar’. Buddhism flourished until 15<sup>th</sup> century C.E and the buildings of the vihara survived until 18<sup>th</sup> century C.E. The old name of Nagercoil is Kottar. At Kottar both Jainism and Buddhism flourished in ancient days. The Jain and Buddhist monks who were roaming in the streets of Kottar. Hence it can be inferred that Theravaada Buddhists lived in Kottar and the nearby village Therur. The southern gateway of the Nagaraja temple at Nagercoil known as Mahamerumaligai is like the entrance of a Buddhist Viharah.

There is one tank and street named Putheri near Kanchipuram. A research scholar Mayilai Seeni Venkatasamy has shown a Hindu temple which was once a Buddhist chaitya at Putheri. There is a place called Sakkiankodu near Mondaikadu. It is well known that Buddha is also known as Sakkiamuni. The temple of Vinayaka found at Sakkiankodu was once a Buddhist chaitya, for an image of Buddha adorns the vimana of the Vinayaka temple.

The Buddhists contributed a lot to the art and architecture in Tamilnadu. The influence of Buddhism is seen at its best in architecture and sculpture. The Buddhist style of building can be traced in the various styles found now in Tamil

Nadu “The apsidal ended temple, the pyramidal storeyed temple, the waggon headed roof and the circular shrine chamber found in some temples on the East Coast are so obviously Buddhist in origin” “The external design and ornamentation of the temples at Mahabalipuram, popularly known as the seven pagodas clearly speak in favour of Buddhist influence. The culture of Tamil Nadu is made up of three strands - Brahmanical, Buddhist and Jain. The great Pallavas contributed to synthesise these three elements.

The Buddhists gave importance to education, learning and care for the sick and poor. Two Buddhist pandits of Kanchipuram, Dingnaga during the Fifth century C.E. and Dharmapala during the Seventh century C.E. occupied the positions of Vice Chancellor of the Nalanda University in the Empire of Sri Harsha and his successors. It was because of the effort of Buddhist researches that the ayurveda system of medicine was developed and promoted. Buddhism flourished in the Tamil Country for more ‘ than a thousand years up to the Eighth century C.E. Kanchipuram Kaveripattinam, Nagapattinam, Vanchi and Srimoolavasan grew into centres of this religion and learning.

### **Tamil Literatures**

There is literary evidence to show that Moriyar (Maurya) came to South India crossing a huge mountain. Some scholars are of the opinion that the Mauriya

might have been the Emperor Asoka and the mountain referred to the Pothiya mountain Kanyakumari district. So there is every possibility to assume that Buddhism came to Tamil Nadu. The Sangam works furnish us with several evidences for the reconstruction of the history of early Buddhism in Tamil Nadu.

*Maduraikanchi*, a Sangam work composed by Mankudi Maruthanar describes, a Buddhist Vihara at Madurai which was worshipped by the people of Buddhist faiths. Another Sangam work *Nedunalvaadai* of Nakkeerar speaks about the Buddhist term pitakam (basket) There are many Sangham poets whose names are related to Buddhism in some way or other. There are names such as Sattan and Sattanar which we come across in *Ahananuru*, *Purananuru*, *Natrinai* and *Kurunthogai*.

The author of *Manimekalai* describes river flowing on the slope of the hill Pothiyil where the Buddhist monks observed meditation. He also utilised the word Pothiyil for Buddhist pallis. *Kurunthogai*, a Sangam work describes a Buddhist Vihara under a banyan tree at the top of the Pothikai hill. There information that God has disappeared from the mountain was found in *Ahananuru* and the fact that old men assembled and played dice in the dilapidated temple was described in *Purananuru*. All these facts show the growth and decline of Buddhism in the area.

According to Buddhist version Agastya was the disciple of Avalokitha. It is reflected in *Veera Choliyam*, a Tamil grammatical work written by Buddhmitra who belongs to 10<sup>th</sup> Century C.E. From this fact it is obvious that Pothiyil mountain was a sacred abode of Avalokitha for quite a long time and after the decline of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu it became the seat of Agasthya.

Tamil literary works like *Thirukkural*, *Silappatikaram*, *Viracoliyam* and *Kuntalakeci*. Besides, we can find reactions to Buddhism in the Tamil works like *Nilakeci*, a Jaina work, and *Civanana Cittiyar* a Sai va religious critical work. As a result of the advent of the Buddhists and; Jains Tamil literature was enriched and the five great kavyas in Tamil, *Silappadikaram*, *Manimekalai*, *Jeeevaka Chintamani*, *Valayapathi* and *Kundalakesi* were written by Buddhist authors while the rest were produced by the Buddhists and Jains.

The Buddhist impact on the ethos of ancient Tamil Nadu was immense. As the Tamils of those days hadn't adopted a stratified caste system, they were deeply impressed by Buddha's averment of equality of all humans as also by the high moral standards set forth. Buddhist monks did excellent work among all grades of people and were patronised by rulers, merchants and wealthy land owners everywhere. Not only humanitarian work, Buddhist monks set up centres of

learning and made education universally accessible to all. Some of the greatest literary masterpieces in Tamil were authored by Buddhist monks.

### **Hiuen Tsang Accounts**

The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang, when he visited Tamil Nadu in the 7<sup>th</sup> century C.E., found the Buddhists in Kanchipuram and Pandya country living in harmony in spite of sectarian differences among them. Particularly for the lay Buddhists of Tamil Nadu Buddhism was a happy blend of the healthy elements of the various Buddhist sects as well as the vital parts of Tamil culture. This religious tolerance and harmony was characteristic of Tamil Buddhism.

Hiuen Tsang recorded that he found at Kanchipuram hundreds of Buddhist monasteries and some ten thousand Buddhist monks of the Mahayana sect. Hinayana and Mahayana were the two sects of Buddhism - the first sought nirvana through self-perfection while the other through worship of the Buddha and his incarnations. It is clear that even by the seventh century Buddhism continued to flourish as a popular religion.

### **British Contributions**

The renaissance of Buddhism commenced in India from the 19<sup>th</sup> century when British civil servants started bringing to light its monuments scattered all over the

sub-continent. A number of rock-edicts and pillar inscriptions of Asoka were discovered in various parts of India commencing from 1750. Alongside of these archaeological discoveries, studies on Buddhism, Buddhology by scholars in India and abroad made great strides. Buddhist Associations and societies were founded which engaged in revival activities by publishing Buddhist texts, editing journals and running schools. The most important event in the history of the revival was the formation of the 'Maha-Bodhi society of-India by Anagasika Dharmapala (1866-1933) in the year 1891 at Calcutta.

Anagasika Dharmapala was invited to Madras city by Col. Olcott and Dr. Ayotheethoss, founder of the Madras Theosophical society, to discuss the revival of Buddhism in South India. Dharmapala visited Madras in the year 1898 and addressed a number of public meetings. Nearly a year, after on 28<sup>th</sup> September 1899 the Madras branch of the Maha Bodhi society was inaugurated with S.Singaravelu as its secretary. Dharmapala had a small vihara built in Perambur, Madras.

## **Conclusion**

Buddhism was originated from North India. Later on it spread to all over the world In the beginning, Buddhism had no faith on sectarian belief and rites and ceremonies. Buddhism preached only the moral teachings to the people and

exemplary of practicing such doctrines by the Buddhist saints in a large scale. Later its tradition had changed and absorbed certain beliefs and superstitious practices of other native sects. The Buddhist culture gradually entered in to Tamil Nadu around 3rd Century B.C.E and there developed. Historically, Tamil Nadu played a vital role in propagating the religious teachings of Buddhism in India and abroad. Buddhism was always a marginal religion amongst the Tamil people and played an important role in the Tamil society.

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