

## Impact of Buddhist thoughts on Cultural Nationalism of India

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### ABSTRACT

The colonized nations saw a rise in nationalistic feelings during the height of colonialism in the middle of the 19th century, putting special stress on the concept of shared ancestry, culture, and language. It is important to note that this idea has strong roots in India, where there is a plethora of ancient literature that emphasizes on cultural nationalism, whether it is Vedic, Jain, or Buddhist. In most regions of the continent, Buddhism has had a major geographic and historical presence often for very long times. Additionally, it has had a significant impact on the creation of particular states as well as less formal interpretations and shaping of social and political processes, and this influence has persisted to the present day. It promoted the notion of tolerance and diversity and integrity. Asoka, Kanishka, and Harshavardhan became passionate nationalists who sought to reunite India under a unified state. Both the Mughals and the British did this afterward.

Thus, it seems likely that Buddhism contributed to national cohesion. Buddhism has a significant impact on Indian society and culture in every way. The restrictions placed on the populace by the Latter Vedic religion society and literature was lifted. It advocated for social harmony and spoke out against the caste system. Buddhism has had an impact on a variety of art genres, including painting, sculpture, literature, and architecture. Buddhism promoted unrestricted trade between India and other nations. Buddhist monks began disseminating the Buddha's teachings to other countries in the third century B.C. and pilgrims and students from other Buddhist countries began travelling to India to further their education. When foreigners visited India, the rich culture of Buddhism engulfed them; they abandoned their own identities and creeds in favour of Buddhist names and the faith. These outsiders included the mythical Kushana ruler Kanishka and Greek emperors. Buddhism thus had a significant influence on the synthesis that led to the development of contemporary Indian civilization.

This paper highlights Buddhism's history, including its rise and fall, as well as how Buddhist teachings have influenced cultural nationalism of India.

**Keywords:** Desh, Buddhism, Culture, India, Nationalism

## Introduction

In 19<sup>th</sup> century the idea of nation-states initially emerged in Europe, and it was at this time that people first realized how important a connection existed between culture and nationalism. Nation-states originally appeared in Europe in the 19th century, according to traditional thinking, all sorts of culture—including literature, the visual arts, music, dance, and folklore—are interrelated and represent each country's unique national identity. Then, National Culture proclaimed that it alone possesses the power to speak on behalf of all nationals. The coherence and togetherness promoted by national culture served as the foundation for the nation-political state. It was possible for this group to create and demand its own forms of government. The League of Nations was established as a result of the credibility given to nationality, nationalism, and nation-states. Colonial societies aspired for nationhood throughout the 20th century. Every single one of us in the contemporary age has a fundamental need that is satisfied by nationality and national identification. Gellner acknowledged this and remarked - "A man must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears." (Gellner, 1983, p. 6)

Gellner observed that nationalism is an inevitable and desirable response to the contemporary industrialized and urbanized world. He focuses on how industrialisation is generating a homogenization process that is modifying how people work and how they consume goods. In the faceless, impersonal realm of urban existence, cultural communication is based on a shared linguistic culture. The state promotes mass public education that is standardized, which helps this linguistic community grow. The "high culture" of the academy is copied by newcomers to the city, and eventually it spreads to the countryside. The result is the birth and ongoing rejuvenation of the new modern country. (Gellner, 1983, p. 6) Hobsbawm and Ranger emphasize the significance of nationalism as invention. They see nationalism as a constructed concept endorsed by the nation-state and invented by the bourgeoisie as an approach to controlling the "masses". (Ranger, 1983) The government offers funding for initiatives like elementary education, community meetings, and the mass manufacturing of monuments in order to construct and perpetuate national cultures. They serve as a reminder that, in order to safeguard its very own legitimacy and cohesiveness, the nation-state has a vested interest in keeping nationalism.

India is well known for being a real paradise of cultural diversity and pluralism. India has historically been home to numerous unique castes and sub-castes, tribes, ethnicities, languages, and religions. Language, tribe, and, to a lesser extent, religion, are essential components of India's cultural variety since they serve as solid pillars for the development of nationality and important indicators of group identification. Indian dialects and tribal identities are particularly distinctive because they are tied to a particular area or a sense of "homeland" or "desh." The term "desh" refers to a people, a language, a way of life, and a cultural pattern in addition to a nation in the meaning of the word that is commonly used in Europe. (Nanda, 2006, pp. 22-44) Deshpande asserts that the words "desh," "nadu," and "Rastra" are few examples of how the idea of "homeland" is expressed in Indian civilization. Each ethnic and linguistic group in India has its own history, culture, mythology, symbols, and values. India is made up of several different ethnic groups. India's multiethnic identity and its cultural ethnicities with geographic roots are the result of the interaction of these factors. Any attempt to sever the inherent ties between language, culture, and nation will cause disaffection among the vulnerable populations because of the complex socio-cultural

reality. Actually, it was the colonial period in India that first shattered this inherent connection between geography, language, and culture. (Nanda, 2006, pp. 22-44)

Colonial civilizations also engaged in nationalism and endeavor to establish contemporary national cultures. Due to the state's lack of support and the rate at which homogeneity was growing, their path to nationhood was challenging. A culture that was both solidly traditional and forward-looking was essential for the nation. The country is an idealized community, according to Anderson, which makes the greatest sense in this situation. Anderson claims that the emergence of print capitalism made it possible to imagine the nation. According to him, print culture produces a literary idiom that can act as a national culture and speak for the people. It also standardizes language, increases the reading public by circulating books and newspapers written in the local language. (Anderson.B, 1983)

The best place to start a debate on how Indian cultural identities altered during the time of colonial modernization is with *Chatterjee's* criticism of Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. Anderson claims that nationalist movements in formerly colonial states made a deliberate choice to adhere to the modular framework of European nationalism, but the author denies this claim. Even while conventional political histories of India would do so, Anderson contends that a closer examination of cultural processes does not lend credence to his ideas. Western European nations, according to Chatterjee, do not encourage the development of an Indian nationalist identity; hence the colonial state was essential. Therefore, before engaging in a political conflict with the imperial administration, the nationalist intelligentsia must establish its own area of sovereignty inside colonial society. The uses of social institutions, as well as spiritual and materialistic behaviors, are employed to achieve this. It was necessary to acknowledge Western superiority in this area (the subject) as well as to extensively examine and imitate Western accomplishments. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an internal setting that exhibits the "fundamental" traits of a specific culture. The creation of a "modern" non-Western national culture is nationalism's "most robust, inventive, and historically significant enterprise" in this interior sphere of national culture. (Chatterjee, 1996, p. 217).

India unified as a political entity under British rule. However, the British deliberately kept "Indian India" and "British India" apart. It was made possible to have direct control over "British India" by establishing administrative provinces. Indian India was split up into 562 princely kingdoms under British rule, each of which was led by a local monarch. (Bandyopadhyay, 2006, pp. 113-117) It's likely that the colonial plan to divide "British India" into Indian states was implemented to stop nationalism from spreading throughout the entire nation of India. But nationalism spread swiftly over all of India. In India, nationalism did not develop as a result of industrialization or the bourgeois revolution to seize power, in contrast to how it occurred in Europe. (Athreya, 2016, p. 4:165) It was mostly brought on by the cultural setting of a worldwide environment and the unavoidable political structure of colonialism. Indian nationalism, which unmistakably embraced a liberal-political attitude, emerged from both a sense of geopolitical unity among all of India and from an anti-colonial perspective held by people with various cultural nationality backgrounds. It goes without saying that the idea of an all-Indian country was primarily articulated by the nationalist elite, which were composed of various Indian middle class. (Nanda, 2006, pp. 24-44)

Cultural nationalism causes a growth in historical records and literature as intellectuals provide venues for culture to progress and "produce" the concept of the nation as a living principle in the lives of the people. Indianness has been perceived to be primarily

present in linguistic, literary, and aesthetic contexts. Given that nationalism must justify its distinctiveness while abiding by laws that grant it the right to exist and present as other nations, it is critical to carefully analyze Chatterjee's thesis on the desire for independence from the colonial state. Since colonization influenced how people thought of their country, it was an experience that could not be voluntarily forgotten. (Chatterjee, 1996, p. 217)

### **Contributions of Buddhism on cultural nationalism**

India has one of the oldest and most distinctive cultures. Incredible cultural diversity can be found all over India. (Gore, 2002, pp. 1-10) Nearly every state has carved out its own unique cultural niche, and the South, North, and Northeast all have distinctive cultures of their own. India's culture is one of the most diverse and distinctive in the entire planet. There are many different geographical features and climate conditions in the large nation of India. Some of the world's oldest civilizations, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, are found in India. (Joseph, 13 March 2018) After the Gupta period, in 7<sup>th</sup> century CE Buddhism as a distinct and established religion lost popularity. It made a great influence before moving away from its original location in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and starting to decay. Buddhism has all but disappeared from India, with the exception of the Himalayan regions and southern India. (Sarao, 2012, pp. 16-30) In the Himalayan regions, particularly in Ladakh, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, the Darjeeling Hills in West Bengal, and the Spiti and Lahaul districts of upper Himachal Pradesh, Buddhism is still practiced. (Gautam, pp. 61-83) According to the 2011 census, 8.4 million individuals, or 0.7% of India's population, identify as Buddhists. The Neo Buddhists, who make up more than 87% of the Indian Buddhist population, outnumber traditional Buddhists.

Buddhism is a spiritual path that broadens understanding of the true essence of existence. Meditation and other Buddhist practices can help you make the required changes to improve your consciousness, generosity, and understanding. The experience accumulated within the Buddhist tradition over thousands of years is an unrivalled resource for all individuals who choose to pursue a path that ultimately leads to enlightenment or Buddhahood. (Bomhard, 2012, pp. 1-27). A person who has gained enlightenment behaves completely naturally and in accordance with their conviction that reality is perfect and clear just as it is right now. This is the goal of the Buddhist spiritual path and signifies the cessation of suffering for anybody who attains it. Buddhism does not entail the concept of worshipping a creator god, hence some people do not regard it as a religion in the traditional sense of the word. The three main precepts of Buddhism are that everything is in flux, nothing is unchangeable or irreversible, and that actions have consequences. All people can benefit from Buddhism as a result, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, caste, or ethnicity. It provides people with practical tools to comprehend and put its concepts into practice in order to enhance experiences and fully take charge of their lives. (Bodhi, 2016, p. 5)

Buddhism has had a significant impact on Hinduism. Now the Indians could practice a simple, well-liked religion. It denounced ceremonies, offerings, and the authority of the priestly caste. Additionally, it has changed Indian religious thought forever. Buddhism gained appeal due to its use of monastic system, common language in its writings simplicity, and teachings. Buddhism made a big difference in society. It considerably strengthened social justice and democratic values. (Joshi, 2008, pp. 7-15) Shudras and women were welcomed inside. Buddhism promoted equality for all and the eradication of class divisions. There were

educational uses for the Buddhist viharas. Cities like Nalanda, Vikramshila, Taxila, Udyantpuri, and Vallabhi developed as important centres of Buddhist scholarship. (Dehejia, 1992, p. 35) Buddhism had an impact on the expansion of literature published in the native dialect of the people. Scholars from the Hinyana and Mahayana religions made significant contributions to the development of Sanskrit and Pali literature. Some of the Buddhist writings from India include the *Jatakas*, *Tripitakas*, *Buddha Charita*, *Miliand Panho*, *Mahavibhasa*, and *Lalit Vistara*. India is a country with a significant Buddhist and Jain cultural influence. The people of India were enthralled by the Buddha's life and teachings. Both the governing class and the common public supported Buddhism. In the end, Buddhism had a significant influence on Indian culture and civilisation. (Hazra, 1984, pp. 209-210)

In simple terms, Gautam Buddha preached his beliefs. He started speaking in Prakriti right away. He eventually began speaking Pali. Later, Sanskrit replaced other languages as the primary language used to disseminate Buddhism. This is how languages evolved. Sutta Pitaka, Vinaya Pitaka, Abhidhamma Pitaka, and other canonical Buddhist works were composed in Pali. A Buddhist text written in Sanskrit is called "Mahabivasha." Buddhism is also covered in various Sanskrit works, including "Sariputta Prakarana," "Vajra Suchi," and "Sutralankara," among others. Therefore, a vibrant literary tradition developed alongside the growth of Buddhism. Buddhism is a fairly straightforward faith. It follows pretty straightforward rules. It was easily followed by the crowd. In comparison to Vedic religion, it was simpler. And there were no ceremonies. It expanded as a result of Buddha's charismatic presence throughout India. Because it was so simple, people accepted it. (Thapar, 2013, pp. 381-400)

Buddha strongly denounced the gender discrimination and caste system in Indian society, which at the time was a rude tradition. This pattern persisted, and Mahatma Gandhi and Ambedkar both embraced this Buddhist philosophy and rose to prominence in society. Buddhism emphasized several virtues such as compassion, brotherhood, non-violence, truth, and non-possession. The goal of all these virtues was to strengthen human character. These traits were mostly fostered by the society's inhabitants. With noble thought, civilization grew. By developing their character, people contributed to the development of a wholesome community. (Singh, 2012, p. 495) Buddha was mercy manifest as a human. His order of monks accepted nuns. By doing this, he made a heroic effort to advance the social independence of women. At this time, women did not view themselves as inferior to men. Buddha promoted the advancement of women in all spheres. (Basham, 1954, pp. 177-180)

Buddhism emphasized the importance of all living things and nonviolence. The Ahimsa Paramo Dharma philosophy was propagated. Cattle are said to be the source of nutrition, beauty, and happiness, according to some of the earliest Buddhist writings, including the "Suttanipata," which offers more evidence of their abundance. Buddhism urges the protection of animals. Buddhism caused Hindus who had previously eaten meat to turn vegetarian. Buddhism had an impact on India's history. Due to Buddhist influences, King *Ashoka* after the Kalinga war became *Dharma-Ashoka*. *Kaniska* and *Harshavardhan* were also lured to Buddhism. After learning about the Buddhist idea of Ahimsa, *Mahatma Gandhi* started the nonviolent struggle for freedom against the British Raj.

Buddhism had a significant impact on the development of both art and architecture. Asoka was the first to use rock to carve sculptures and make structures. On rocks, several pillars, Chiatyas, and stupas have been built. Buddhist architecture and artwork can be seen in

Sanchi, Dhauri, Saranath, Mathura, Kanheri, and Gandhara. Over time, these traces expanded. The development of art and architecture in our country was greatly influenced by the rock carvings of the Buddha and Bodhisattva, Gandharva, Yaksha, trees, birds, and other creatures. The Buddhist artwork that may be discovered in the Buddhist sites of Ajanta, Ellora, Karle, and Bagh is one of the outstanding instances of Indian artists' talent. As a result, Buddhism influenced the creation of architecture, painting, and other aesthetic forms. Indian culture developed significantly as a result of Buddhism. Buddhist nuns and monks lived in the monasteries. The democratic strategy was first found in a Buddhist monastery. A blatant example of the democratic spirit was the decision to elect the leader of the monastery by vote as opposed to selection. Later, this idea was also embraced by other religions. Sankaracharya created four branches of mathematics in four separate parts of India. It was later conceivable because of the impact of Buddhism.

Buddhism placed a high priority on unity. Asoka was ardent in his efforts to develop Buddhism and foster a sense of interconnectedness among all people. It is worth to mention that he dispatched his own daughter Sanghamitra and son Mahendra to far-off Ceylon to spread Buddhism. Buddhism was afterwards practiced in a great number of other places, including Burma, China, Japan, Tibet, Java, Sumatra, Bali, Borneo, and Champa. As a result, Buddhism contributed to the spread of India's distinctive concept of universal brotherhood. (Harris, 2007, pp. 1-9) The secret regions of India were overrun by Buddhism. It emphasized the value of racial harmony and integrity. Asoka, Kanishka, and Harshavardhan developed into fervent nationalists with the goal of unifying India under a single political structure. The British and Mughals later carried this out. Thus, it seems likely that Buddhism contributed to national cohesion. In every way, Buddhism has had a tremendous impact on Indian society and culture. The constraints of the Vedic faith were lifted from people. In addition to speaking out against the caste system, it promoted social peace. Buddhism had an influence on literature, architecture, painting, and sculpture.

Buddhism facilitated close ties between India and other nations. (Long, 2021 eBook, pp. 36-41) Buddhist monks began disseminating the Buddha's teachings to other countries in the third century B.C., and foreign Buddhist pilgrims and students began travelling to India to study Buddhism. The European immigrants who came to India were enslaved by its rich culture; they gave up their own identities and creeds and adopted Hindu names in addition to the Hindu religion. Buddhism thus played a crucial part in the process that resulted in the formation of the modern Hindu society. (Joshi, 2008, pp. 7-15)

## **Conclusion**

Buddhism consequently had a significant influence on Indian culture. It enhanced Indian religion, sculpture, language, and literature. Buddhism is a missionary religion that aims to spread awareness of the Buddha's teachings all throughout the world. The rise of Buddhism had a profound effect on India's political, cultural, social, and religious environment. Buddhism developed into a faith that was open to all people and did not call for intricate rites that could only be carried out by members of the priestly elite. The concept of ahimsa, which the Buddhists had so vehemently emphasized, zealously championed, and honestly lived, was later physically accepted by Brahmins. By embracing the custom of making idols of personal gods and erecting temples in their praise, Hindus emulated Mahayana Buddhists. In the areas of architecture and sculpture, Buddhism had the most

impact on Indian culture. The stupas in Sanchi, Bharhut, and Amravati, the Asoka stone pillars, and the cave temples in Kanheri (Bombay), Karle (Pune), and Nasik are considered the outstanding examples of Buddhist art. The Sanchi Stupa is well recognized for its elaborately carved doors and railings across the world. The most significant fact is that Buddhism has proven to be one of India's biggest contributions to its neighbour's civilization. India's seclusion was broken by Buddhism, which also improved ties with other nations. India's biggest gift to the outside world was this. During the reign of Asoka, Buddhist missionaries started spreading Indian culture and civilisation to China, Korea, Manchuria Mongolia, Japan, Java, Burma, and other nations.

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