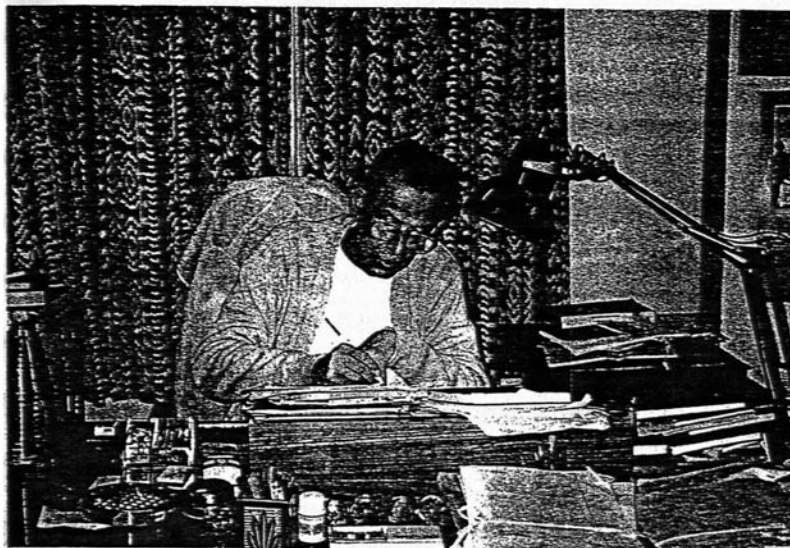
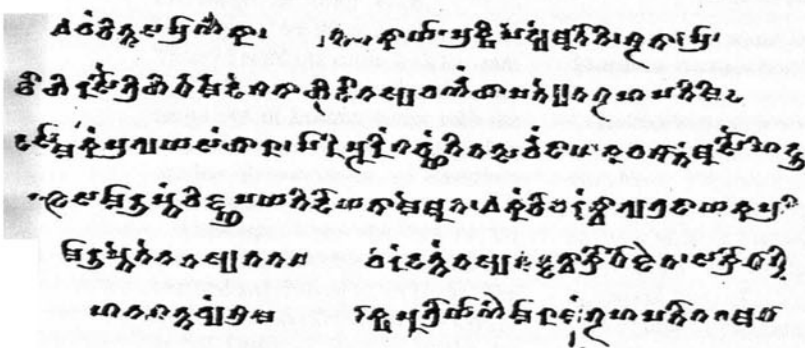


Buddhism in India

A View from Rare Indian Scripts



Most people believe that the Pali and Tibetan languages are the only vehicles of Buddhist textual traditions. But that is not true. In Sanskrit, in eight ancient scripts, much of Buddhist thoughts are encoded most of which are yet to be deciphered! Dr. Satkari Mukhopadhyay, a Sanskrit scholar, historian and linguist, who knows some 12 languages and 13 scripts of the world, explains the nuances of those scripts and manuscripts in an exclusive interview to Dr. Gautam Chatterjee.



Late Brahmi script developed in Central Asia

G.C.: Will you kindly elaborate the textual tradition of Buddhism from the perspective of manuscriptology?

S.M. Common belief is that all Buddhist works are in Pali. That is untrue! Pali language originated as the language of Theravada School which encompasses scripts of Sinhalese, Cambodian, Burmese etc. Ninety-nine percent of Pali literature is published. On the other hand in North India Sanskrit remained the initial linguistic vehicle wherein Buddhism travelled very deep at the conceptual level but much is unpublished. Since the Gupta period of 1st century BC to the medieval era, Sanskrit remained the main language which even spread up to Central Asia. Sanskrit not only catered to the development of Buddhist thought but later became a vehicle of Buddhist cultural exposition.

Do we have the total textual tradition in Sanskrit intact?

No. During the Muslim invasion many monasteries were destroyed especially of Nalanda, Vikramshila etc. so we have lost much of them. However, there were monks who escaped and carried some manuscripts to Nepal and Tibet. The Sanskrit manuscripts which went to Tibet remained unnoticed until this century when Rahul Sankrityayan photographed them. Those texts are in Newari script and Old Bengali script i.e., Gaudi. These rare manuscript photographs are available at B.R. Research Society, Bihar. Today 28 Buddhist texts are available in print but much is yet to be deciphered. For example, in Newari script, the Buddhist Mahayana text — *satasahasrika Prajnaparamita* — which runs into 100,000 verses like the *Mahabharata* is yet to be deciphered. Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts has undertaken the

Will you tell us about the ancient scripts in Sanskrit and Pali which carried the Buddhist traditions down the ages?

It is important to know that except for Kharosti script all other scripts in Sanskrit and Pali evolved out of Brahmi script which we find in Ashoka edicts.

Script remains a vehicle for religio-cultural expansion of Buddhism in South-East Asia. How do you look at it as a linguist?

Initially oral tradition continued until Thumi Sambhota came with his team to Northern India to develop a Tibetan script out of Brahmi script with the help of Indian pundits. This led to further development of Buddhist textual tradition.

Similarly, from the 3rd to 1st century BC Buddhist oral tradition reached and thrived in Sri Lanka. The Buddhist canon *Tripitaka* was written in Sri Lanka in Brahmi in the 1st

रक्षति ॥ श्रीगणेशाय नमः ॥ ॥ छिंदु मे वं न
 भूदृष्टं वं म विनय कर्मा ॥ देवदूतं उषे वा मुं जवे
 दं अणपदनी ॥ ॥ देवदूतं उषे वा मुं जवे
 भूदृष्टं ॥ जमलाष्टन एकेयं उष्टे गुप्तामीधिक ॥ ३ ॥
 एकमः श्रीकृष्णं गणेशं भूदृष्टं मातुरं गतः ॥ जगद्भिः
 उवे, उचिचुरं श्रीकालिदास, भूदृष्टी भवलि किं वान ॥
 एतद्भुवः वदुः गणेश ॥ उमः भगवत्प्रेक्षितं प्रय
 भीमं भागीदृष्टं वा दृष्टि, भापी प्रुति, निरगम ॥
 भद्रकविः श्रीकालिदास, भूदृष्टं प्रभुवं चिदृष्टं
 वदुः वली उकभः ॥ यमकै, दृष्टं काष्टं, अणप
 दगष्टं, निवचनं ॥ उवदृष्टि प्रयभील दल
 भद्र ॥ जगद्भिः दृष्टं, पतिदं मातुरं गतः ॥
 दृष्टं वणिदं माभः प्रुक्षितं प्रयभीभडा ॥ भगवत्
 मेभागीदृष्टं, भूदृष्टं, श्रीकैः, प्रभुवं, भापी प्रुष्टं वागी ॥
 नर, वदुः भनवदृष्टि, भद्रकष्टं लदल, मि
 दृष्टं, दृष्टं, अणपदगष्टं, लदल, उभदृष्टं
 कष्टं ॥

Sarda script

Will you cite some landmarks of Buddhist textual traditions?

In Kharosti script we have the 2nd century AD manuscript known as Gandhari Dharmapada. The 4th century Kalpanamanditika in Brahmi script is another landmark. From the 1st century BC we find Buddhist canonical texts of Northern India in Late Brahmi script. Aurel Stein found these immensely valuable manuscripts

Two important works are Asvaghosa which were found in Nepal in Newari script which contains 2nd century works like Buddhacaita and Saundaran.

Another important manuscript discovered in Tibet is Pramanavartika, a work on Buddhist logic which was written the 7th century but this manuscript was of the 13-14th century AD.

Being a historian of religion can you compare Buddhism with Hinduism. We have been told that Lord Buddha was a critic of the Vedas and his religious movement was a rebellion against Vedic religion. Do you subscribe to this theory?

In a nutshell Buddhism and Hinduism are not two separate creeds as Islam and Christianity. They drew from a common heritage like different branches of a Banyan tree. So both share points of agreement and disagreement. In Hinduism we find the importance of God at spiritual and

cosmological levels. In Buddhism the God element is missing at both levels and God is replaced with Buddha's personality which has touched the heart of all. In later years Buddha himself became an icon. Actually Gautam Buddha revived the older Vedic values and opened the path to *moksha* (salvation). Hinduism talks about the four-fold *Purashartha* namely, *dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*. Buddhism indicates towards

moksha only and is a monastic religion.

Then was Gautam Buddha an atheist or *nastik*?

The English word 'atheist' and the Sanskrit *nastik* carry different meanings. Let us trace the meaning of *nastik* from Panini's perspective. It says 'He who believes in life after death is *astik* (Believer). Buddha believed in incarnations and rebirths so how can we say Gautam Buddha was a *nastik*?

Does the Buddhist tradition subscribe to Avatara-bada or incarnation theory?

Yes! As you know from common inheritance Hinduism and Buddhism believe that there is propagation of dharma at the first level then at the second it flourishes and deviation follows so there are falls and fallacies creeping in. In Hinduism Vishnu incarnates and in Buddhism Samyaksambudha comes to set the world order in correct direction. It is said before the appearance of Gautama Buddha there were 25 earlier Buddhas and the process is on. In Hinduism we find the transcendental Hiranyagarba who is omnipotent and cause and result of all. Likewise Buddhism talks about Adi Buddha who is similarly transcendental.

What about Buddha being a critic of the Vedas?

It is true Buddha criticised the Vedas but only on the score of animal sacrifice. Jayadeva, the author of *Gitagovinda* says that Buddha criticized only those portions of the Vedas which prescribe animal sacrifice and that he did out of compassion. Ramachandra Kavi-

Bharati, a Buddhist poet who lived in Sri Lanka in the 14th century echoed the same view.

Buddha supported pantheism and talked about worshipping some deities to get certain results. He praised Vedic scholars so he actually praised the *Vedas*.

Will you throw some light on the pantheon angles and rituals?

In the Rig Veda we find that there were some 33 gods which later it is said became 3,300,00000! Since the earliest days of Buddhist tradition

dichotomy. In the Hindu way of life the four tier system of social order was out of *guna* and *karma* and the hereditary trait continues. In Buddhism the Kshatriyas are very proud of their genealogical lineage as Gautama Buddha was from a family of Kshatriyas. And you will be surprised to know that in both Sanskrit and Pali literature I have discovered that in the Buddha tradition of reincarnations it is said that in the future Buddha would take birth in a Kshatriya or Brahmin kula family only. Thus you see that Sanatan Dharma remains so in the belief system wherever Buddhism went.

Today the knowledge of scripts is passing into oblivion and direct access to the source material is becoming difficult for scholars. How do you see this situation?

For Indological and Buddhist studies access to original records are very important but it is

true day to day scholars are forgetting about the knowledge of those scripts. In India around 90 percent of Indologists do not know various scripts so interpretation becomes difficult. In the third quarter of the 19th century knowledge of scripts was greater amongst Indians. In our days those who studied Pali knew various scripts. But today, scholars only know the regional and Devnagiri scripts. The study of palaeography has declined steadily. In Indian universities students of Pali study Devnagiri and Roman scripts with diacritical marks. We are trying at our level to equip scholars with the knowledge of scripts. For example, IGNCA, in collaboration with other universities and academic institutions, are holding workshops to teach these scripts in palaeographic perspective. But much is yet to be done.

gods like Indra, Varuna, Ishana, Yama etc. were accepted in Buddhism. In Hinduism Vishnu, Saraswati, Shiva, Maha Shakti came up. In Buddhism down the ages similar things happened as pantheons with their incorporated philosophy changed their iconographic appearance but remained almost the same. Regarding rituals and mantras, Hinduism and Buddhism have similar records and perhaps some of the rituals were borrowed by Hinduism from Buddhist traditions.

You have traced the cosmology and spiritual perspective but what about life for the common man that is Sanatan Dharma at the social level?

If one embraces Buddhism one is not cut off from the social structure, however, there are elements of

