
A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE BUDDHIST HISTORIOGRAPHY IN INDIA**Anamica Dubey**

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It is still a popular belief that the Indians were an a historical people and kept no records of their history. It is true that most of their writings and records do not deal with political events and activities, but these are very much concerned with the nature of genealogies, legends, cultural and monastic chronicles- all legitimate constituents of a historical tradition. History is not just a dry narration of events of the past nor an assemblage of information derived from written chronicles. It has to be built up, especially in an ancient land like India from a wide range of sources. Literature is just one of them. At a time when much headway was registered in the task of compiling history in countries like Greece, Italy and China, the study of the discipline, in question, was in its infancy in the Indian subcontinent. The ancient Indians, doubtless to say, evinced interest in their ancestors and past but for several centuries' interest in the past was severely circumscribed by a mythic view of life and cosmos, and was totally bereft of the spirit of rational enquiry. Consequently, early Indian interest in the past did not develop into what may be called history.

In India, historical records were usually called vamsas. But the Buddhist vamsas were often much more than genealogies. In the case of religious schools they recorded the descent of the tradition (āgama) from its origins in ancient times, with all the attendant circumstances which threatened to interrupt it, but were successfully overcome. "There were, however, other categories related to historical composition, such as the apādāna or legend of the remote past, the akhyāna or epic tradition of the more recent past, and the traditions of the Brahmanas known as itihāsa-purāṇa. The tradition concerning the origins of society is called agganna." As noted above, vamsas, apādānas, etc. of various kinds existed in India in the Sthaviravāda Canon and, at least after c. 350 B.C., in the Commentaries which grew up in the School. "They also existed in the traditions of other Schools of Buddhism. In India itself all this literature vanished with the great monasteries in which Buddhist learning had been accumulated. Sthavira literature was taken to Sri Lanka during and after the third century B.C. and much of it has been preserved there.

As regards the means of gaining historical knowledge it is obvious that the past cannot be a matter of direct perception. But in Buddhist view direct and perceptual knowledge of past events cannot be altogether ruled out in the case of those who are sufficiently advanced on the spiritual path. It is believed that the Buddha and some of his disciples could recall their countless former lives in all their details. The idea of foreknowledge and the power of prophecy, so widely employed in the elaboration of legends and myths and in the attribution of importance and significance to events and persons, were partly based upon the belief in the cycles of ages and the repetition of the historical process. "This seems also involved with the theory of Karma. The knowledge of the past and the future, however, derives from the belief in the six supernormal powers of Buddhas and Arhats. The occurrence of auspicious signs and symbols too, implies a preordination of events by cyclic or karmic force. The connection between these is never clear. In the narration of events,

however, there is no conception of fatalism discernible” (Pargiter.1910:52). Further such knowledge, though spiritually of great importance, from the point of view of historical reconstruction is of little consequence.

In Buddhism “the object of history is to convince the faithful, persuade the skeptical and produce a feeling of joy in the minds of the devout. History, in this context, naturally partakes of the characteristics of a *subhāṣita* as one which is aptly phrased, is filled with dhamma, is truthful and is palatable. On this score a historical account, in the Buddhist view, must not only contain facts but also that the facts must be so chosen as to inculcate a sense of morality and strengthen the faith of the believers. It is inevitable that in the pursuit of spiritual elevation through historical writing, Buddhist historiography was the hagiological need felt by the early Buddhist communities of monks and nuns” (Radha Krishnan.1962:272). The monks could not desist also from drawing moral lessons from history and using it for edification. By the time, historical tradition came to be firmly established, and was distinguished from pure hagiology, the concept of the Buddha had undergone a profound change. He was no longer the simple teacher of moral values but a *Mahāpurisa*, greater than the god’s themselves (Ibid.:175). In this thinking the Buddha and Dhamma are fully capable of possessing miraculous qualities. It was bound to influence Buddhist historiography to a considerable degree. As a result, the line between the human and the non-human became vague and tenuous. To Buddhist monks, it was well within the realm of possibility that gods, men, and demons could meet within the historical plane and also that men and animals could consort with each other. Though they would have recognized the rarity or even impossibility of these things within their own experience, outside it, in the past, the possibility would never be questioned (Pargiter.1910:59).

In Buddhist historical works political lessons are hardly ever drawn from history. Though the political function of the king was recognized “as giving happiness to the people, maintaining law and order and giving protection, it is only when conditions get so disorganized that life becomes impossible that these ideals find specific mention, but even then there is no didactic purpose.” Similarly, it can hardly be said that patriotism was a motive for the Buddhist authors. The objection to foreign rulers, whether in India or Sri Lanka, seems to be not so much that they had foreign blood, but that they did not patronize the *saṃgha* or destroyed or plundered the *vihāras* and shrines.

However, they are usually faithful in recording the abuses within the *saṃgha* as well as its purifications by regulative acts of kings that were necessary from time to time. “It is perhaps natural that their belief in Karma, that no deed fails to bring its appropriate recompense, should produce a detached view in the records of the Buddhists, but such detachment is not always found, and became very rare in texts written in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, where the *Samgha* was usually closely dependent on a single state and tending to become a ‘national church’-consequently itself playing a leading part in the politics of the country. In India, which was normally divided into several states, the *Samgha* remained detached, as it was at its origin. Its relations with kings were carefully defined, so that all kings might tolerate it. It not only accepted the laws of any country as binding on all communities resident there, but allowed kings to interfere in its internal affairs also. In this way a democratically organized community compromised with autocratic monarchy to secure toleration” (Goyal.1984:87).

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