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A Study of Historiographical Characteristics of Buddhism from Western Perspective

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Abstract:

The Buddhism has been studied and interpreted particularly from socio-religious perspectives in the discipline of history. There is no denying the fact that the Buddhism spearheaded an obvious change in the socio-religious arena in India in the 6th century BC. It is all but natural that the socio-religious characteristics of Buddhism has remained more important than its philosophical characteristic in historical studies. But it is worth mentioning that the study of philosophical aspects of Buddhism also is very much useful and important in historical studies particularly from the standpoint of historiography. Buddhism as a philosophy puts forward a variety of ideas which are modern and progressive and are very akin to that of ideas and theories advanced in the modern western world by the philosophers like Henry Bergson, Jean-Paul Sartre and Ferdinand de Saussure. Thus by analyzing Buddhism we come across important theories of Humanism, anti-substantialism, causation and theory of meaning which are credited to have contributed to the historical genius in the west. So there is an important need to understand Buddhism from philosophical perspective in historical studies to bring forth its historiographical characteristics. The present paper may be construed as an attempt in this direction.

Keywords: *Buddhism, existentialism, humanism, theory of meaning, causation, anti-substantialism*

1. Introduction

Buddhism is regarded as an important socio-religious movement that emerged in the 6th century BC in India under the vibrant leadership of Mahatma Buddha. It was a philosophical response to the growing socio-religious and economic crises in India in the 6th century BC. The socio-economic discontent and religious dogmatism disillusioned a majority section of the society. The existing Brahminical Dharma was very much incapable of catering to the new emerging socio-economic realities. Mahatma Buddha emphatically rejected the Brahminical notion of hierarchical model of society and complicated ritualistic form of religion. He equally rejected the philosophies of Ajivikas and others which were isolated and detached from social reality and giving way to determinism, escapism and skepticism¹. Mahatma Buddha based his philosophy in step with the societal reality and attempted to address the existing socio-religious problems. It is no wonder that his philosophy drew the attention of a large number of people not only in India but outside of India as well. This socio-religious aspect of Buddhism has been discussed largely in historical studies but there are many other aspects of Buddhism also which have largely remained unexplored and unaddressed in academic and public discourse although these aspects have tremendous historiographical contents.

It is to be pointed out that Mahatma Buddha and later Buddhist Scholars propounded various theories which are supposed to be kernel to philosophy of history and need to be interpreted in the light of modern philosophical developments. If we analyze Buddhist philosophy from this standpoint, we find remarkably many ideas and theories that can be equated comfortably with the modern philosophical premises particularly of the western philosophy which are credited to have contributed to the development of modern historiography in the west. It is often put a blame on Indian philosophy that it was uncongenial to the development of genuine historical consciousness in India. This is another subject of debate which is not the concern of the present study. But it must be pointed out that without a proper analysis and comprehension of Indian philosophy a spurious generalization has been made by the western scholars and endorsed by the Indian scholars. But the philosophy of Buddhism is a brilliant example in this regard to expose the frivolity of the western notion of Indian philosophy being devoid of genius historical consciousness. We find in the philosophy of Buddhism those theories and ideas which were later explicitly put forward by the western scholars and which are supposed to be cornerstone of historiography in the west. These ideas are related to humanism, anti-substantialism, causation and theory of meaning etc. These ideas are said to help the development of modern historiography in the west. But surprisingly in spite of the existence of such ideas in Indian philosophy particularly in Buddhism, the charge of unhistorical tendency is made against Indian philosophy. The present paper attempts to highlight the presence of those ideas in Buddhism which have been helpful to historical consciousness in the west.

2. Metaphysics: Buddhism and Existentialism

Mahatma Buddha remained silent on metaphysical questions defined as indeterminable questions (Avyakrit Prasnani). He preferred practical problems being faced by human beings living in this world to philosophical discourse on soul, God and life after death. Buddha's such stance against metaphysics is pregnant with meaning. Buddha was much more concerned with the real problems of human beings living in this world and wanted to steer them out of despair and despondency. He firmly believed that human beings themselves could get rid of their problems through their own actions. So he did not involve himself in any metaphysical discourse. It must be pointed out that metaphysical discourse tends to focus on otherworldliness, human beings living in this world remain out of concern in such discourse. In metaphysics 'truth' becomes transcendental and all discourse lead to grasp this transcendental truth. There remains no scope for human beings with their individuality in such a discourse and human beings become stranger in their own world. Buddha's strategic silence over metaphysical questions is an outcome of the hollowness and frivolity of such discourse on the one hand and the need of focusing on real and substantive issues concerning human beings in this world on the other hand. He did not wish human beings being involved in the web of abstract and abstruse ideas.

It is noteworthy that out of such consideration the philosophy of existentialism emerged in the modern west. According to this philosophy metaphysical discourse and development of science and technology isolated, and detached human beings from themselves and this world. Human beings have lost their individuality. In the philosophical world of abstract ideas and concepts, the real problems of human beings in this real world remain unnoticed and consequently unaddressed. Their subjectivity and individuality become subjected to universality. The Philosophy of existentialism emerges as a response to the process of dehumanization². It attempts to establish human beings living in this world with all their individuality and subjectivity as the center of philosophical discourse in the same manner as previously attempted by Mahatma Buddha.

It needs not to be emphasized that the philosophy of existentialism as well as of Buddhism is very congenial to history as a discipline. Because history is related entirely to human beings living in this constantly changing world. The transcendental metaphysics inevitably obstructs the development of history and historical sense. History is required as well as possible only after the firm belief in the reality of this world with a focus upon human beings living in this world. Thus Mahatma Buddha's approach towards metaphysics like existentialism is very much useful and beneficial for history and history writing and such aspects of Buddhism need to be emphasized in historical studies.

3. Anti-substantialism and the Notion of Change in Buddhism

Substantialism or existentialism is always anti-historical. It is an anti-historical metaphysics which obstructs the growth of historical consciousness. According to this philosophy an object of genuine knowledge must be determinate, permanent and have a character of its own³. But history is related to human actions in the world of change. According to metaphysics of substantialism such things belonging to the world of change ought not to be knowable and, therefore history should be impossible. Human actions in the past belong to a world of change, there cannot be anything of permanent value in them for the mind to grasp. True knowledge must hold good not only here and now, but always and everywhere. History cannot partake of this character. The historical genius of Herodotus and Thucydides triumphed over such anti-historical philosophy and confirmed that the knowledge of the changing world is a form valid knowledge⁴. By skillful questioning he made it possible to obtain scientific knowledge of past human actions which had been thought to be impossible under the influence of substantialistic philosophy. Much after the classical age, once again in the 17th century AD, Rene Descartes (1596-1650) attacked history as he did not believe history to be a branch of knowledge at all. Descartes believed only in certain and secure knowledge and history according to him, could not claim truth, for the events which it described never happened exactly as it described them. But later on Vico challenged the Cartesian theory of knowledge that the criterion of truth is the clear and distinct idea⁵. Vico claimed that applying this theory of knowledge, even the mathematical knowledge was not possible. Vico had stood historical knowledge on the bedrock of the Verum-Factum principle that is man can have true knowledge of the things he himself has made. Vico thus proved that history was philosophically justifiable form of knowledge.

It is proved from the preceding discussion that substantialism both in metaphysics and epistemology is anti-historical. In the western historiography Herodotus in the classical age and Vico in the modern age attacked substantialism and believed in the notion of change and thus established history as a discipline and valid form of knowledge. In Indian philosophy, Buddhism never accepted substantialism either in metaphysical or epistemological form. Buddhism believed in the notion of change. According to Buddha all the things are non-eternal in every way. Whatever appears to be eternal and permanent is also perishable. This view is a middle way between the view of absolute existence and absolute nihilism. All things exist, this is one-sided view and nothing exists, this is another one-sided view. Leaving both these one-sided views, Buddha teaches the middle path and essence of the middle doctrine is that the life a becoming. It is bhava Rup⁶. Everything in this world is merely a conglomeration of perishable qualities. This doctrine of impermanence of Buddha was given the form of the doctrine of momentariness by his

disciples. As a matter of fact, the doctrine of momentariness follows from the principle of dependent origination. Whatever is born will also be destroyed and whatever may be destroyed may not be thought to be permanent. Hence everything is momentary. Thus the doctrine of momentariness goes further than the principle of impermanence. It not only means that everything is impermanent but according to it everything exists only for a moment.

Mahatma Buddha goes even further to reject the principle of eternal soul as believed in the Brahmanical philosophy. His no-soul theory broadly implies that there is no eternal existence of either of soul or of matter, Eternality is only an illusion whereas change or becoming is the ultimate truth. What is known and claimed as eternal self is nothing but subject to change according to the Buddhist philosophy.

It is appropriate here to mention the philosophical discourse that took place in the west in modern era. Descartes attempted to reach a secure and lasting philosophical foundation through a process of universal doubt. In this course he claims to get immediate, indubitable awareness of himself in the form of pure consciousness. In the same spirit as Descartes's method of doubt, Husserl developed a method of setting aside (bracketing) aspects of our perceptual experience that appear to involve presuppositions or interpretation. Thus Husserl gets the notion of pure consciousness.⁷ Sartre was influenced with the methods adopted by Descartes and Husserl but he maintained carefully that this pure consciousness should not be understood as a solid and definitive 'ego' 'self' or 'substance' of any kind. This Sartre's conception of a depersonalized and fluctuating consciousness was implicit in Bergson's view that consciousness is primarily a substantial and unchanging nature of consciousness and the history of Western philosophy, namely that there is a clear distinction between a thing's essential, unchanging qualities and a thing's accidental and challenging qualities. Mahatma Buddha much earlier than Sartre refuted this notion, accepted change as the supreme law and denied even the notion of eternal soul. Thus Mahatma Buddha's approach was very much anti-substantialism and he advocated the notion of change. His firm belief in the philosophy of change is very much congenial to historical sense as history is essentially related to the world of change. It has already been discussed that how in the Western historiography change was accepted and on this basis philosophical or epistemological foundation of history as a discipline was justified. We may easily find this philosophical foundation of history in the Buddhism with the intrinsic notion of change.

4. Humanism: Buddhism and Western Philosophy

According to R.G Collingwood one of the important characteristics of history is that it is humanistic⁸. It means that history is a narrative of man's deeds, man's purposes, man's successes and failures. There is no role of divine agency in to the deeds of men. The cause of all historical events must be sought in the personalities of human agents. The philosophical idea underlying it is the belief in the ability of human will to choose and pursue its own ends. This implies that whatever happens in history happens as a direct result of human will and man is entirely responsible for his own actions.

Collingwood observes that classical historiography had finally grasped humanistic characteristic of history. But the humanistic characteristic of history of the classical age gave way to salvation or providential history in the medieval age and placed god instead of man at the Centre of human affairs. Christian doctrine based itself on human insufficiency, and held that man's unaided intellect and efforts cannot plan and achieve ends without divine grace. This view of history governed Europe throughout the Middle Ages.

In the fifteenth century the great creative movement took place known as Renaissance which emancipated western thought from the shackles of medieval Christianity. The Renaissance represented a totally new spirit, a new confidence in man's limitless capacities. It was once again observed that man was endowed with free will so that he could be his own maker and moulder. Thus the Renaissance spirit made a great impact on historiography by restoring the humanistic view of history.

It is now abundantly clear that humanism is the most important characteristic of history. The philosophy of humanism not only helps the development of historical consciousness but firmly establishes history as a major domain of knowledge. We find the philosophy of humanism in the Buddhism very clearly and distinctly. Mahatma Buddha remained silent on metaphysical questions and disapproved of the existence of god as well as of permanent soul. By declining the existence of god he summarily rejected the role of any divine agency in the constantly changing world. It implies that Mahatma Buddha firmly believed in the capacity and efficiency of human beings to bring about change. He had full faith in the human will to plan and execute his own course of action. Buddha's famous saying 'Atma Dipo Bhava' clearly refers to human will to choose and pursue its ends. It also implies that man is solely responsible for his deeds.

It is noteworthy that the idea of freedom of will has been elaborately discussed in the philosophy of existentialism propounded by Sartre. Sartre, too, does not believe in the existence of god. He believes in the freedom of human will to such an extent that he declares that man is condemned to be free⁹. He is free to choose his course of action and implement it. He is the sole architect of his fortune. He does not see any role of divine agency in the life of man which he defines, directs and shapes according to his own free will. His success or failure is completely of his own and no one can be credited or blamed for it.

It is very surprising to see that the humanistic view of the Renaissance in the 15th century and of existentialism in the 20th century was propounded much earlier in the 6th century B.C. by Mahatma Buddha. So if the humanism is an important characteristic of history as observed by Collingwood, we can find it very much in the philosophy of Buddhism also. This historiographical characteristic of Buddhism is needed to be focused upon.

5. Law of Causation and Buddhism

Causation has very much importance in history. Thucydides was first historian who wanted to probe deeper, discover the motives and explain the processes behind human action. Analytical power enabled him to separate the deeper causes from the immediate occasion of an event and proceed to general conclusions. According to him history is an organic process, it is the study of events that are connected with one another in a rational, systematic and permanent order¹⁰. Later Polybius also elaborated the causal element in history to great lengths. According to him a bare statement of an occurrence is interesting but not instructive, but when this is supplemented by a statement of cause, the study of history becomes fruitful. He distinguishes between the historical causes of wars and their occasions or pretexts. He argues that cause in general has nothing mysterious and divine about it. Cause is natural and should be studied in apposition manner¹¹.

True it is the concept of cause that leads to explore the events deeper and distinguishes historical events from determinism or providentialism. The study of historical events in cause-effectual framework determines its progressive characteristic.

The philosophy of Buddhism believes in the theory of causation. It firmly believes that each and every event has its cause. The central Buddhist theory which is known as Pratityasamutpada is essentially the Buddhist theory of causation through which it explains the course of events. It is also through this theory Buddhist scholars explain the idea of dependent origination and thus put forward the notion of change, impermanence and momentariness. Later Buddhist scholars deliberated on the concept of causation with more sincerity. Particularly in the Sautrantic Sect of Buddhism which believes in Representationalism, that is the indirect knowledge of the external world, a great deal of thoughts on causation has been given. They explain the events through a set of four causes- dependent cause, parallel cause, efficient cause and associate cause¹². It is true that the Buddhist theory of causation is much more linked with philosophical concept but there is a point to explain that they were familiar with the concept of causation. Since they firmly believed in the notion of constant change so they must be aware of the necessity of explanation of change through causation which is supposed to be the main phenomenon of historical studies.

6. Theory of Meaning: Buddhism and Western Philosophy

Apart from exploring important features in Buddhism which are by no means anti-historical, it is now important to spotlight those features recently being debated in western historiography and trace their existence in Buddhism. In this regard the radical historical and epistemological relativism is of paramount importance which has a great bearing on historiography in the west. It is to be noted that post modernistic view regarding radical relativism is the progeny of the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure which was later extended by Jacques Derrida. Saussure's theory is regarded as the linguistic turn that inspired a number of theorists such as Claude Levi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, Ronald Barthes and Jacques Derrida. Interestingly we find practically the similar theory of Meaning in the Buddhist philosophy known as the theory of Apoha. It would be appropriate to have a comparative analysis of the linguistic theory of Saussure and the theory of Apoha as propounded by the Buddhist scholar Dingnaga.¹³

It is to be noted that the post-modernistic view of epistemological or historical relativism is the consequence of the Saussure's linguistic theory advanced early in the twentieth century. He believed that the relation of the words to their meanings was usually completely arbitrary, and the words or what he called Signifiers were defined not by their relation to the things they denoted the Signified, but by their differential relation to each other. Saussure's theory meant that it does not reflect the phenomenal world addressed by it. This was cue for Ronald Barthes, the French linguistic theorist, who in his essay 'Historical Discourse', mounted a frontal attack on history. Barthes showed that the Saussurean view radically undermined the naively positivistic conception of history as a faithful record of a world of objective facts.¹⁴

Published posthumously in 1916 as Course in General Linguistics, Saussure's linguistic theory was instrumental in inspiring French structuralist thought of the 1950s¹⁵. Prior to Saussure's linguistics, a prevailing view of language was that words serve primarily as labels for the things in the world and thus it refers to a real world. The assumption was that the daily world is divided naturally in to sets of objects and properties and that as these items are perceived, people use language to assign labels to them. Language is here understood to be grounded in the process of assigning labels to preexisting things and properties. Our words refer to these things and our accumulated vocabulary serves our interests in communication.

Saussure offers an alternative view of words, or what he calls 'linguistic signs'. He does not view words as sounds or inscriptions that immediately refer to the things in the daily world. He considers the nature of the signs themselves and maintains that each linguistic sign has a dual aspect. The first aspect of the linguistic sign is 'sound image' and the second aspect is a 'concept'. Every linguistic sign is thus regarded as a sound image fused together with a concept. Saussure refers to the sound image as the 'signifier', and he refers to the associated concept as the 'signified'. The sound images and concepts are fundamentally inseparable and thus language is necessary for any discriminate thought.

In reference to the relationship between sound images and concepts these sound images signify, there is almost complete arbitrariness. Saussure develops his idea that the sign is arbitrary by defining each sign in relation to other signs, and by establishing each sign's identity through its contrast with other signs. For example, to define the term 'red' it is not sufficient to point out 'red' objects, because the limits of the concept 'red' will still remain unclear. One person, for instance, could group together only bright red objects, while another could include reddish-orange or reddish-violet objects under the concept as well. Without an implicitly defined contrast between 'red' and 'not-red', and more determinately, a specified contrast between 'red' and 'violet', and between 'red' and 'orange' there would be no way in which a person could come to understand the concept which the sound-image 'red' signifies. Since each of the above-mentioned contrasts to the sound-image 'red' is an oppositional one, Saussure holds that the basic relationships within a linguistic structure are binary. Saussure concludes that what is fundamentally operative in the determination of meaning is the place of the sign within a system of linguistic oppositions. As noted, the sense-quality that we might call 'redness' is not what fundamentally determines the meaning of sign 'red'. What determines the meaning of sign 'red' in the linguistic system within which it is opposed to other signs such as 'not-red', 'orange', or 'violet'. The systematic network of opposing signs determines the boundaries of the concept signified, and it is this inter-systematic set of relationships that Saussure believes is what fundamentally determines a sign's precise meaning.¹⁶ It is remarkably almost the same theory of meaning propounded by Buddhist scholar Dingnaga known as 'Apohavad'.

Meaning has been defined by the majority of ancient Indian writers in terms of a relation. The great grammarian Nagesa Bhatta defines Meaning as a particular relation between the word and the object denoted. This relation is a power which exists in the object as signifiability and in the word as significativeness. It is only by the cognition of this relation that the presentation of objects by means of words is possible.¹⁷

While the Hindu and Jain writers on the philosophy of language define meaning in terms of a relation, Buddhist philosophy defines meaning as a negation. Moreover, while there is a consensus of opinion among the majority of Indian schools in favour of the reality of the relation between the word and the object denoted, the Buddhist school rejects this view, and holds on the contrary that no

relation, such as that of the significant and the thing signified, exists between the word and the object denoted. The word 'cow' does not denote the object 'cow'. It denotes, in the first instance, only the negation (Apoha) of objects which are not cow. It is only subsequently, by inference through this exclusion, that the denotation of the word 'cow' being the object 'cow' is arrived at.¹⁸

It is important to mention that Indian philosophers have attempted to address the problem of Universal (Samanya) with their respective metaphysical approaches. Jains and Advaita Vedantins view the Universal (Samanya) only as concepts. It is regarded by them as only internal relation among the individuals which is grasped by the intellect. The Universal has a relation of identity with the individuals. There is no real existence of the Universal (cowness) apart from and in addition the individual (cow).

The realist group which includes Nyaya, Vaisheshika and Mimamsa schools, maintains that Universal (cowness) has a real existence and words denote both Universals and individuals and both are the real objects to be grasped by the senses.¹⁹

The Buddhist propounded the theory of Apoha to solve the problems of Universal and the words and its meaning (sabdarthasambandha). The Buddhists oppose the realist view on the ground that Universals are not eternal facts. According to them Universal is not real but a logical construct. The Universal is in its very essence exclusion of the other. Apoha literally means differentiation or exclusion. It is based on the law of opposition (virodha). We derive the meaning of a word neither by the fact that it denoted particular object nor by the fact that the Universal (Samanya) is real and it resides in individual. For example, cowness is real and it resides in particular cow. So the word 'cow' denotes the both Universal (cowness) and particular cow and we derive the meaning of word cow as the object cow. In fact, we derive the meaning of cow by negation (Apoha) of all non-cow. The word cow does not refer to a real object cow but only refers to the negation of non-cow (a gau nishedah) and thus the concept of cow is determined. Clearly, the relationship between the word and its meaning is not real and eternal, it is defined by the differentiation or exclusion. This is pretty much the same theory put forward much later by Ferdinand de Saussure.

7. Conclusion

An in depth study of Buddhism has been attempted to explore its historiographical characteristics. In this course we come across a number of ideas such as anti-substantialism, law of causation, humanism and theory of meaning. These ideas have been explicitly put forward later on by different theorists like Sartre, Heidegger and Saussure reflecting in the philosophy of Existentialism and Structuralism. These ideas are supposed to be very congenial to history writing in the west. Particularly the ideas of humanism and anti-substantialism have been the fundamental precepts in history writing. It is very surprising that such ideas are very much present in the Buddhist philosophy which have not been focused on in historical studies. In India, scholars have never questioned the western notion of deficiency of historical sense in India. It is simply because of the fact that Indian scholars never took pain to undertake a comprehensive and thoroughgoing study of Indian philosophy from historiographical perspective and accepted western notion without questioning it. In this paper, the philosophy of Buddhism has been analyzed and a number of advanced and modern ideas have been explored to validate the important historiographical characteristics of the Buddhism. On the basis of this study it may easily be refuted the charge of western scholars on Indian philosophy of being uncongenial to the sense of history. On the contrary, it is firmly established that Buddhism put forward a number of such theories much earlier than in the west which are said to have established history as a valid discipline of valid knowledge in the west.

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