History of Buddhism in India with Reference to the Culture in Tamil Nadu

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Abstract
Buddhism was one of the centrifugal forces of Tamil Nadu. The role of native scholars of Tamil in Buddhism is notable and invigorated by this religion at a point of time. These studies are by and large either historical or academic criticisms of the literary merits of works of Buddhist content and orientation in Tamil. In this context, this paper attempts at studying the logic and philosophy as expounded in the Tamil Buddhist texts with special reference to Manimekalai, Tolkappiyam, Maturai Kanci and a few other texts. This paper also explains about the introduction and importance of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu along with how it spread through the Tamil nation and in special the paper portrays the strand of Buddhism in Cankam age and how the Buddhist scholars broadened their process of Nativization along the Tamil nations with an emancipator dialogue as propounded by Ayothee Thassar.

Keywords: Tamil Nations, Cankam Age and Tamili or Dravidi, Nativization

Introduction
Buddhism has been one of the centrifugal life forces of Tamil culture and Literature. The Tamil language and its literary and grammatical traditions had their veins fertilized and invigorated by this religion at a point of time, so much so that we have today several art works and ideas that bear an inerasable Buddhist imprint. Many native scholars have examined the role of Buddhism in the building up of the Tamil culture. Notable among them are Pandithar Iyothee Thass, Dr. Krishnawamy Iyengar, Mayilai S. Venkatasamy, Dr. C. Meenakshi, T.N. Ramachandran, Dr. Vasudeva Rao and Dr. S.N. Kandasamy. These studies are by and large either historical or academic criticisms of the literary merits of works of Buddhist content and orientation in Tamil. There are also attempts at studying the logic and philosophy as expounded in the Tamil Buddhist texts, especially in the epic Manimekalai.

This paper analyses the two great Tamil epics Cilappatikaram and Manimekalai as the primary material for this study. The evidences culled from them have been constantly placed in a larger context of the elements of Buddhism and their literary and epigraphical representations. Buddhism in Tamil Nadu was not an isolated phenomenon, but an integral part of the main stream of Buddhism. Such a study helps one to see the unique characteristics of Tamil Buddhism as much as their indebtedness to the main stream of
Buddhism. As such, it has become inevitable that one should draw profusely on materials from Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese, Japanese and Tibetan Sources (Hikosaka Shu, 1989 : 1-2).

The land of the Tamils has been called Tamilakam, which means a land where the language Tamil is spoken. The prologue to Tolkappiyam, the earliest extant grammatical work in Tamil, gives a brief account of the boundaries of the ancient Tamil Speaking country. According to it ‘the virtuous land in which Tamil is spoken as the mother tongue lies between the northern Venkata hill and the southern Kumari’ The Tamil epic Cilappatikaram also follows the same tradition and refers to the above borders of Tamilakam. Furthermore, the epilogue of Cilappatikaram specifies both the eastern and western limits of Tamilakam namely, the eastern and the ancient Tamil country: Tamilakam was a region which had to northeast Venkata hill or the Tirupati Hill, the southern part of the modern Andhra Pradesh, as its northern border, Kanniyakumari or Cape Comerin as the southern border, the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian sea as its eastern and western borders respectively. It is obvious that the ancient Tamilakam encompassed Kerala too. Tamilakam is actually located in the Southern part of the Indian peninsula. This paper aims at analyzing Buddhism, which had flourished in this Tamil Country.

Buddhism as a Universal Religion

Buddhism founded by Gautama Buddha with the Ratnagraya, viz. Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, is a religion of humanity and equality, advocating a humanitarian approach to all problems of life. It seeks to realize the middle path in religious approach and propagates the concept of Anatman, the Four Noble truths, the Twelve linked chains of dependent origination and the Eight-Fold noble path, which are the main tenets of early Buddhism. When we think of Buddhism as a universal religion, we must have in mind the two features which are indispensable for a better understanding of Buddhism – the teaching of equality and the proclamation of the missionary.

According to Lakshmi Narasu in his Religion of the Modern Buddhist, The retrieval and reconstruction of Buddhism in modern India have taken two related yet distinct routes. The first was pioneered by the European orientalists and their Indian followers, from the late eighteenth century and supported by the colonial government. They went about digging up the historical Buddha. Their preoccupation was reconstruction of the original circumstances and message of the great teacher, revealed some six hundred years before Christ, in its pristine form.

What they eventually succeeded in was setting up a discourse of Buddhism as one of the major religious of the world, casts much in the same model as that of the others with a founder, a sacred language, a sacred book and a history of rise and fall. This route could be termed as the academic-historical.
The second route, through liberally availing of the findings of the first, and starting somewhat later, was led mostly by men of generally subalternized communities, scattered across the subcontinent. Caught up in the mega colonial process, of widespread “peasantization of the economy and brahminization of society”, which did not spare the religio-cultural spheres, these men found in the Buddha and his teachings a warm refuge from their own socio-cultural degradation and economic-political deprivation as well as a vehicle for their emergence into a new and modern religio-cultural, and eventually socio-political, subjectivity. Their preoccupation has been the construction of the contemporaneously authentic in the Buddha who could address and redress their existential problems of the day. Anchoring themselves solidly on the obvious resonance of the Buddha’s core social message to that of modernity (in the sense of social rationality or egalitarianism) the colonially subalternized communities, therefore, went about the process of constructing plural forms of Buddhism with the limited cultural resources at their command. This second route could be termed as the existential-religious (Narasu, Lakshmi, 2002 : 15-16).

These two directions of the modern invention of the Buddhist tradition in the subcontinent, as suggested, certainly were mutually related in history; and several intermediary positions and attempts could also be identified.

**Introduction of Buddhism into the Tamil Country**

The introduction of Buddhism into Tamil country, According to Shu Hikosaka, can trace it to the third century B.C. when Emperor Asoka’s Dhamma Vijaya occurred. The Rock Edicts II and XIII of Asoka speak of the provinces in his own empire as well as abroad where he sent Buddhist missionaries. These two Rock Edicts are of particular value on account of the information they contain about his missions to the Tamil country and Ceylon. Rock Edict II mentions the names of the following dynasties of the Tamil country and Ceylon namely, the Chola, Pantiya Satyaputra, Keralaputra and Tamaparni. Among these names, the Chola, Pantiya and Keralaputra are well known as the three principal dynasties of the Tamil country who ruled Cholanatu, Pantiyanatu and Cheranatu respectively. The last name Tamraparniis identified as Ceylon.

**Spreading of Buddhism in the Tamil Country**

The evidences for the early phases of the spreading of Buddhism in the Tamil country can be seen mainly from the epigraphical sources found in its ancient caves and stone-beds. A number of caves with Brahmi scripts have been found in Tamil Nadu in Madurai, Tiruchi, Tirunelveli and Chingleput districts. It is a known fact that the Brahmi script was popularized by Asoka through his Dhammavijiaya. Such scripts are found in abundance in almost all parts of India as well as in some places in foreign countries. The Brahmi
Scripts which have been found in south India are somewhat different from the North Indian Brahmi scripts. This South Indian Brahmi is called by the name Dravidi or Damili (Tamili). This name is seen in the Jaina works like Samavayangasutta and Pannavanaasutta and also in the early Mahayana Buddhist work Lalitavistara.

Among the Characteristic features of South Indian Brahmi or Dravidi, the following are the most significant.

1. Of the hare consonants ka, ca, ta, ta and pa, only the initial or primary letters and found in the Tamil Alphabet, i.e., the Varga prathamas of the Sanskrit alphabet are found in them.

2. The soft ones of the third letters, i.e. the Varga tritiyas of the above consonants in the Sanskrit, are absent.

3. Of the aspirated varieties, i.e. the second and the fourth letters of these consonants, the letter tha is found used sparingly in two or three places while dha may also be taken as having been used in one place (Arittapatti A). The others are not met with.

4. Sa and sa are also not found. Only sa is occasionally met with.

5. No ligatures or conjunct consonants are seen.

6. Among the vowels only au is not found; similarly, the r and I of the Sanskrit alphabet as also the anusvaraam and the visarga ah are absent.

**Buddhism During the Cankam Age**

The first three centuries of the Christian era of the Tamil country are sometimes called the Cankam age, because it is believed that the Cankam poems were composed during this period. Besides, the Tamil Academy, which is called by the popular name Cankam also flourished during this period. The Cankam literature can be treated as an authentic literary representation of the culture of the epoch. The following works are considered to compromise the Cankam literature: 1. Akananuru, 2. Purananuru, 3. Narrinai, 4. Kuruntokai, 5. Ainkurunuru, 6. Patirruppattu, 7. Paripadal, 8. Kalittokai and 9. Pattupatu. Tolkappiyam the grammatical treatise is also considered to have belonged to this period. The Cankam poems furnish us with several evidences for the reconstruction of the history of early Buddhism in the Tamil country.

There is a poem in Purananuru (182), which according to tradition, was composed by one Pantiya king of the name Kataluml Ilampuravaluti. This poem speaks of the concept of Intiramam (Indra amrta) which means the ambrosia of Indra. According to this poem, this world exists because of the honest and righteous people living in it. They are selfless and live for the sake of others. Even though the ambrosia of Lord Indra is given to them, they would not take it for themselves; they would share it with their fellow men.

S. Vaipapur Pillai is of the opinion that this concept of the ambrosia of Indra has entered into the Cankam literature either due to the influence of
Buddhism or Jainism, since there is no such concept which is related to the brahminical god Indra. Yet, we are not able to come across this concept much in Indian Buddhism in general. It may be considered one of the distinctive concepts of South Indian Buddhism.

*Maturaikkanci*, a *Cankam* poem composed by Mankuti Marutan, describes the life in the city of Matura from the dawn of the next day. While portraying the evening scene, the poet describes women, accompanied by their children and husbands, visiting a Buddhist *vihara* with flowers and incense to offer their vesper worship to the Buddha. From this, we are able to know clearly that there was a Buddhist *vihara* in Maturai, which was worshipped by people of Buddhist faith in that city. The same poem is composed in Kancitinal, a poetic theme which speaks about the transient nature of the earthly things including the humans. After giving a graphic description of the splendor and the luxurious life of Maturai, the poet exhorts the king as follows: “Oh king! Don’t develop excessive attachment towards these pompous and beautiful things as well as towards the victories which you got into battles. All these things are not permanent, but ephemeral. They are just like a dream and hence impermanent and illusory”. What is significant to note here is that the theme kan.ci is somewhat alien to the spirit of the ancient Tamils, who were very materialistic in their attitude towards life. There are several reasons to presume that this theme might have entered into the literary tradition of the Tamils due to the influence of either Buddhism or Jainism.

*Tolkappiyam* speaks about poetic themes in its *Porulatikaram*, in Purattinai of which there are seven sub-divisions, viz, Vetci, Karantai, Vanci, Kanci, Ulinai, Tumpai and Vaikai. Among them, Kanci is a theme suitable for reflective poem, which dwells on the transient nature of life. If we attribute pre-Buddhist origin to Tolkappiyam, then there are possibilities to say that this theme might have entered into the text of Tolkappiyam in a relatively later period.

Nevertheless, we may say that the poet of *Maturaikkanci* had come under the influence of Buddhism. The above concept as regards the transient nature of life forms the basic tenet of Buddhism. According to the Mahayana Buddhist text *Gandavyaha* “every dharma is like phantom; all the living beings are like dream; all the earthly objects are like magic”. It is not known why the important Buddhist centre in Tamil Nadu is called by the name Kanci, which is the name of the poetic theme treating of illusion, one of the important aspects of the Buddhist religion.

Another *Cankam* poem *Netunalvatai* which is traditionally attributed to Nakkirur speaks about *pitakam*. In this, the poet uses the term *pitakam* in the sense of the basket. This word *pitaka* is a Buddhist technical term which is seen both in Pali and Sanskrit forms such as *Sutta-pitaka*, *Vinaya-pitaka*, *Dhammapitaka* and *Tripitaka*. Here again, it is used in the sense of box or
basket. From this, we can say that the Buddhist term *pitaka* was very popular among the Tamil people during this period.

There are many *Cankam* poets whose names are related to Buddhism in some way or other. There are names such as Cattan and Cattanar, which we come across in *Akananuru, Purananuru, Narrinai* and *Kuruntokai*. This is supposed to be the Tamilized form of Sanskrit word *Sasta*, which is one of the attributes of Buddha. There is a poet of the name *Ilampotiyar*, which literally means the man of the young Bodhi the sacred tree of Buddhism. The name *Palakkautamanar*, a poet of the *Cankam* anthology *Patirruppattu*, means the Gautama of *Palai* (theme) (Venkataswamy, Mayilai Seeni, 2015 : 3-4).

But, there is a problem in accepting these names as belonging to the *Cankam* period. According to some scholars, the *Cankam* poems had been transmitted through oral tradition for a long time till they had been compiled. Probably, the compilation should have taken place either in the sixth or seventh century A.D. There is every possibility to say that the compilers had given these names since such names never occur within the texts.

**Buddhist Scholars and the Process of Nativization**

As already discussed, the earliest scripts used by Buddhists people in South India are called by the name *Tamili* or *Dravidii*. These scripts are different from the so called North Indian *Brahmi* script. From this we can learn that Buddhist monks in South India, especially in the Tamil country, had engaged themselves in nativization from the very beginning. When we referred to Dhammapala, mention was made of his attempt to translate certain Buddhist works into Magadhi (Pali). At that time he might have used the same sources that were available in the South Indian languages too. We can therefore infer that certain Buddhist works had been written in South Indian languages—in Tamil, Telugu or Canarese, around the fifth century A.D.

Viracoliyam the Buddhist grammatical work reveals unmistakably that a distinct Tamil grammatical tradition existed among the Tamil Buddhists. There is every possibility to say that Cattanar also followed and established Tamil Buddhist tradition when he composed his epic *Manimekalai*.

The impact of Sanskrit grammatical tradition can be seen in *Tolkappiyam*. According to Panamparanar’s prologue to this work, the author of *Tolkappiyam* was well versed in *Aindravyakarana* of Sanskrit. According to tradition *Aindravyakarana* was composed by Indra and it is said to be anterior to Panini’s Sanskrit grammar. *Tolkappiyam* itself bears testimony to the fact that its author was familiar with the Sanskrit rules on grammar. In many a place *Tolkappiyam* tries to compare and contrast Tamil grammatical categories with those of Sanskrit. This tendency is more conspicuously seen in Puttamittiranar’s *Viracoliyam*. In this treatise, Puttamittiranar himself attests that he composed *Viracoliyam* drawing on both the Sanskrit and Tamil grammatical traditions. Many a Sanskrit grammatical term as well as
conception is found used in this Buddhist Tamil grammatical treatise. The most significant feature of this work is that it deals with several colloquial usages of Tamil. This feature clearly demonstrates the attitude of the Tamil Buddhist scholars towards the common people of the Tamil country. Since they had taken to propagating Buddhism through the language of the common man, they paid serious attention to the spoken Tamil. This bears witness to the deep interest shown by Buddhist people towards nativization (Venkatasamy, Seeni, 2002:13).

The increasing tendency of using Sanskrit in Tamil Buddhism is seen after the composition of Dignaga's logical treatise. His works were actually written in the Sanskrit language. This type of fascination for Sanskrit started exerting its impact on the Tamil Buddhists too. This period also marked the emergence of the new movement of Hinduism in the Tamil country which also gradually started using Sanskrit as a medium for the expression of religious and philosophical concepts. One could say for certain that the hybrid style Sanskrit-Tamil or Pali-Tamil was developed in the earlier period by the Tamil Buddhists in their nativization of Buddhism. This tendency is strikingly seen in Manimekalai.

Mayilai S. Venkatacami points out that many words of North Indian origin found in Tamil have their roots in Pali and not in Sanskrit. If we compare these lexical items with those in Pali and Sanskrit, we can easily trace their original forms in Pali. For instance, Tamil words such as "attam, cattam, tannam, ilakkanam," and "vannam" are derived from the Pali words "attha, sabda, damma, lakkhana," and "vanna." The Tamil words of Pali origin have come into the Tamil language with the advent of Buddhism in the Tamil country. They bear testimony to the impact exerted by Buddhism on the Tamil culture.

It is necessary to examine why Pali Buddhism witnessed the kind of development it had in the Tamil country. We have seen earlier that there existed a close relationship between the Tamil Buddhism and the Ceylonese Buddhism. Since Pali was accepted in the Ceylonese Buddhism as the second language, naturally the Tamil Buddhists, influenced as they were by the Ceylonese Buddhism, also showed keen interest in Pali. This is considered to be one of the main factors that contributed to the proximity of the Ceylonese Buddhism to the Tamil Buddhism.

We may however, add one more linguistic reason to the above mentioned factors. A casual comparison of Tamil with Pali shows many phonetic and phonemic similarities between these two languages. These similarities might have helped the Tamil people to respond to Pali Buddhism more easily than to Sanskrit Buddhism in the early stages. Again, these similarities might have enabled them to absorb and assimilate Buddhist doctrines on the one hand and to pronounce the technical terms without much of difficulty on the other. Consequently, Pali tended to serve as a better medium than Sanskrit in the propagation of Buddhism in the Tamil country.
Among the Dravidian languages, Telugu and Canarese have more or less similar scripts as well as phonemes with those of Sanskrit. In this respect, Tamil differs from these two languages. This can be regarded as one of the main reasons for the popularity of a hybrid style with native and Sanskrit lexical items in other parts of South India. For this reason the Sanskrit-Prakrit hybrid style of early Mahayana Buddhist sutras such as *Astaghasrika Prajnaparamita* and *Gandavyuha* was popular in the Telugu and Canarese areas. Even though Pāli Buddhism flourished in Nagarjunakonda, Amaravati and other Buddhist centers in the Andhra country, it had not developed as considerably as it had done at Kanci and other Buddhist centers in the Tamil country. One may give other socio-religious reasons for the development of the above kinds of linguistics oriented sects of Buddhism in South India. We cannot, however deny the influence of this linguistic factor in the development of Pāli Buddhism in the Tamil country (Aloysius, G., 2002 : 2).

Thus, it is remembered with pride that Buddhism was flourishing in the states of Tamilnadu, Kerala etc. As many dilapidated Buddha viharas are seen even today, we can know that Buddhism was prospering in the neighboring states of Andhra and Karnataka. Venkatarami indicates that in ancient days Buddhist works inhabited at Thirukkaazhuk-kunram of Chengalpattu district and still many places are unknown in Tamil Nadu. Before him, Pandithar Iyothee Thass has referred to Tirupathi, Mahapalipuram, Chidhambaram, Srirangam, Kancheepuram, Pudukkottai etc. as centres for Buddhists.

According to S. Venkatarami, in Tamil Nadu innumerable Thevargal had written several works. We do not know the history of Buddha Sikaa Jyothi Baalar, Iraakula Therar, Poorvaasiriyar, Mahaavajira Buddhi, Kalla Dharma Baalar and others. A text called *Kirandha Vamsam* states that besides those scholars, other twenty scholars wrote books at Kancheepuram.

It has been stated that the Buddhists authored several works which have been destroyed in the passage of time, but the Pāli works written by the Tamil scholars and preserved by the Buddhists of other countries alone were not destroyed. Works such as *Neelakeri, Veera Sozhiyan, Kundalakes* were destroyed, but works like *Manimekalai* are available today. It is felt that works such as *Siddhaanthathagai, thiruppathigam, Vimbisaara Kathai* have been destroyed due to the enmity of the followers of rival faiths. However, at the land of India and the world as well, innumerable Buddhist literature survives even today. It is to be borne in mind that a Buddhist scholar known as Lalmani Joshi who had conducted research on the Indian Buddhist culture during 7-8 century A.D mentions about many teachers of Buddhist philosophy and many of their contributions.

In Tamil Nadu the following villages in Buddhist names such as Buddha nearu, Buddankulam, Buddhham thurai, Buddham sirai, Buddhham Tharuvai etc. and the names of general public such as Gunavan, Buddhham arivaalan, Buddhham Raase singan, Buddhhanadi Vizhup-paraiyar,
Buddhanarattan, Buddhi Buddhavan, Thirumaal Buddhavan, Buddhan Udhaya Pulum, Bhagavan Sathi, Bhagavan, Thanma, Piriyan, Gauthaman were prevalent. One could know the above information from the temple inscriptions in Tamil Nadu and hence the above are the evidences to hold that Tamil Nadu was a Buddhist country.

Tamil Buddhism as An Emancipatory Dialoge

Tamil Nadu had become the citadel of Buddhism even before India became the Buddhist country. Before and after the period of Asoka, when several religious institutions began to widespread, Buddhist culture anchored in Tamil Nadu. It is a matter of investigation as to how be Tamil culture prior to the period of Tamil academy (Cankam). As we could not specifically determine the period of the three imperial dynasts, we are unable to reveal their cultural heritage accurately, we could discern this truth from the expositions of scholars that still Tamil’s history has not been completely written and comprehensively.

The most significant of such forerunners is a group of dalit-subalterns of the Southern India, centered around one Iyothee Thassar (1845-1914), a Tamil savant, Siddha medical practitioner and socio-political activist, some fifty years before the mass diksha at Nagpur. The story of the dalit-subaltern thrust, towards an inclusive religio-cultural subjectivity, affecting also, the conceptualization and configuration of the larger polity and society at least of the Tamil culture region, has been documented and interpreted in detail elsewhere. And it is not to be repeated here. Only a few salient points of emergence, section, and as expressed in the thought, articulation and activity of Iyothee Thassar, will be highlighted.

In brief, the modern Tamil Buddhism became a reality with the formation of sakaya (and later South Indian) Buddhist Society in 1898 under the charismatic leadership of Iyothee Thassar with the support and encouragement of Colonel Olcott of the Theosophical Society. The movement did not take much time to capture the imagination of the dalit-subaltern communities in the northern-Chinglepet, Madras, Arcot, Kolar, Bangalore and Hubli-districts of the Madras Presidency and also to spread overseas to Burma, Srilanka, Fiji, Malaysia and South Africa where the subaltern Tamils had migrated as labourers. In these far and near places, branch societies were established, viyarams constructed and new social-religious communities formed. A regular weekly journal Tamilan published by Iyothee Thassar from the headquarters in Madras knit the different communities together. Socio-religious and polemical tracts proliferated from the pen of the Pundit and his colleagues and were distributed in thousands. The Buddhist Press and the Gautama Press in Madras and the Siddhartha Press later in Kolar Gold Fields became the rallying point for the propagation of the new social and religious worldview and ideology. The movement, through basically a response of the
dalit-subaltern communities to the colonial contradictions, sought to embrace in the typical Buddhist fashion, the entire society (Warder A.K., 1991: 1-2).

The associates of Iyothee Thassar were drawn from all castes and communities as well as different walks of life. The movement was multi-pronged in its ideological thrust; attempted a systematic and historical deconstruction of the dominant Hindu religious premises, esoteric interpretations and exclusivist cultural practices; proposed a passionate and all-embracing alternate worldview; and sought to drastically revise and modernize the textual as well as traditional Buddhist religion-cultural practices. The substantial issues of this ideological and organizational intervention included: casteism and religionsim, re-discovery of the original and casteless Tamil/Dravidian or Buddhist identity, construction of a rational-religious philosophy and practice and a re-interpretation of the sub-continents religio-cultural second and the third decades of the previous century. Devolution of power in subsequent years, its trajectory became refracted from the religio-cultural to socio-political; and in the forties, Tamil Buddhism largely transformed itself into the foundation of the emergent Dravidian Nationalist Movement as well as the Ambedkarite political formations such as the Labour and Republican Parties.

Mayilai Seeni Venkataswamy in his book Buddhism and Tamil states that Buddhism and firm roots in the Tamilakam can be known from the texts like Cilappathikaram, Manimekalai, Thevaram, Nalayira Pirabandam, Periyapuranam and Nilakesi.

**Conclusion**

The argument that India was susceptible to rain as thought of a few is an idea due to ignorance. Buddhism never insists not to protect one’s territory, anywhere. The principle of Buddhism is that it is the primordial duty of the ruler to project the nation. The view of Dr. Kailashnath Katju that it caused for the alien ruling of our country is to be contemplated. Internal enmity and non-unity are the reasons for the fall of India. India had lost its independence on several occasions. Indians must keep in mind the caution of Dr. Ambedhkar that we must preserve the present independence obtained by great efforts of our forefathers, till our last drop of blood. Seldom can be triumph over enmity through enmity. Buddhism emphasized it should not be done. It insisted that love will win over everything and discipline will over even love. Hence human solidarity and affinity are the essential requirements of the present day world. This is the message impinged upon by the world Buddhism.
References