

JAGAJYOTI

Journal on Buddhism since 1908

A collection of selected essays on Buddha and Buddhist philosophy published on the occasion of 125 years (1892-2017) celebration of Bauddha Dharmankur Sabha

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PREFACE

It is my honour to write a few words as a preface to a very prestigious publication of Jagajjyoti, which will accommodate some of most iconic articles published on Buddha and Buddhist philosophy in this respected journal in the past. This is, indeed, a very welcome enterprise, as many readers like me who may not have been aware or could locate and access specific articles of great topical interest in this area would have them readily available in one handy volume. It reminds of a saying that what one writes belongs thereafter not to the author but to humanity at large, for all time to come. It is equally true that humanity also needs an occasional reminder of what valuables lie in its treasure-house, so that knowledge receives a fresh lease of life, and what held good at the time of its composition is adjusted and appraised into the present circumstances. This is why we need to sincerely compliment the Bauddha Dharmankur Sabha of Kolkata for taking the onerous effort of locating those writings that require to be presented before every generation, especially the present.

I have neither the competence nor the audacity to comment of Buddha or Buddhist philosophy, but I consider it my duty as a student of political science, history and sociology to draw the attention to a topic that is hardly ever discussed or mentioned. As the world's first non-State organisation in the world, the monastic units of the Buddhist Sangha inspired the structure and functioning of numerous non-State brotherhoods in the world. Gautama Buddha set up the Sangha in the fifth century BC, to provide a means to those followers to practice his lessons on a full-time basis, with proper discipline and restraint, free from the burden of household life. Needless to say, it is the Sangha that actually preserved, propagated and explained the teachings of Buddha to succeeding generations of followers, in dozens of countries, for over two millennia. Many non-State organisations copied the pioneering and practices and institutions created by the Buddhist monastic order — like entrance tests for those keen to join; a period of training and probation; insistence on complete and unquestioned obedience; suffering penalties for breaches of discipline and conduct, as well as the provision for increasing responsibilities and transferring to distant places. One could look at a core State organisation like the

Indian Administrative Service (IAS) for the same operational principles, but more interestingly, even structured gigantic non-State institutions like the Christian Church or even the Communist Party, or for that matter, the Ramakrishna Mission, appear to have followed the model of the Sangha. Of course, there are variations also depending on the task of the individual organisation, but as the Buddhist Sangha was surely the first non-State player to be formed, there is every likelihood that subsequent structures drew or copied from it. The tragedy is that no one acknowledges the pioneering role of the Buddhist monastic organisation.

Let us now take a glance at what Jagajjyoti and this current volume are all about. For those who are new to this area, let us recall that the Bengal Buddhist Association or Bauddha Dharmankur Sabha was established in Kolkata in October 1892 by Karmayogi Venerable Kripasaran, which makes it 128 years old. As an organisation dedicated to the pursuit and propagation of Buddhist heritage of the Indian subcontinent, which was then one, it was meant to revive the basic and theological principles of Buddhism in India and also to encourage studies in the field of Buddhism. To understand the mood of Indians and Bengalis at the end of the nineteenth century, one has to go to 1819-20, which is exactly two centuries ago. It was then that two major lost treasures of Buddhist art and architecture were discussed with excitement and interest by the Asiatic Society and other learned circles. General Mackenzie made his presentation on his discovery of the stupa and the other Buddhist buildings that he had made, almost by accident, at Amaravati in Andhra country. Its exquisite carvings and sculpture appeared to be divine to the European scholars and administrators, but what followed next was more incredible. In that very year, 1819, a British captain chasing a deer near Aurangabad in today's Maharashtra had stumbled upon the incomparable art work that decorated the Buddhist caves of Ajanta, that the whole world had forgotten. So great was the inertia, especially among Indians, that it took several decades more to understand the real impact of these discoveries.

We must bear in mind that historic amnesia, natural or induced, was deeply embedded in the minds of Indians, at least about the glorious

Buddhist past of India. Even a century and a half ago, Indians were certainly not aware of the architectural magnificence of Buddhist India, which enjoyed a millennium of brilliance, from the 3rd century BC to the 7th century AD — even though there were no parallels for it in Hindu architecture. It was only in the 7th century AD and thereafter that Hindus started building free-standing temples began in right earnest and the real momentum was picked up almost half a millennium later. Therefore those who wish to savour the grandness of Indian architecture built during the millennium preceding the 7th century, there is no option but to fall back on Buddhist construction. But, by the 19th century, these were all in various stages of ruin after several centuries of neglect. As we have touched upon, what was worse than ruins was collective amnesia. Indians had forgotten (or were made to forget) about these magnificent buildings, crafted with peerless skills by artisans of those days.

Over the next six decades from 1820, the spade of British archaeologists uncovered what Indian memory had all but forgotten. One by one, magnificent stupas were unearthed — at Dharmarajika (Taxila, near Rawalpindi), Dhameka (Sarnath), Sanchi and Bharhut which helped reestablish the past glory of India Buddhism in India. At long last, Indians were able to establish beyond doubt that Ashoka had established a grand civilisation in the third century before the Christian Era that had gifted the world with the idea of pacifism and fraternity. It was evident that architectural splendour of the period surpassed anything that the British could dream of at that stage of history, or even for a millennium thereafter. Most Indians are surprised to learn that even Emperor Ashoka had been completely lost in the amnesia, inadvertent or otherwise, that overtook India after the decline of Buddhism from the beginning of the last millennium. Had it not been for the tireless efforts of James Prinsep in unravelling the Old Brahmi and Kharoshti scripts and the Ceylonese Chronicles, we may never have re-discovered the greatest Indian, and the mightiest emperor in the 2750 years of Indian history, from the Aryans to Akbar. Never before had the entire Indian nation risen, without question or debate, to bask in the sunshine of the sublime message that Buddhism had to offer. Thus, a renewed interest in Buddhism that was quite evident in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, that could finally combat the well-ingrained amnesia about our Buddhist past, and give it its due recognition.

This is one of the reasons why Ven. Kripasaran chose the last decade of the 19th century to establish the Bouddha Dharmankur Sabha. In 1903, the Sabha set up the Dharmankur Buddhist Temple in the Bow Barracks, Kolkata. But the best contribution of the Sabha that celebrated the renewed upsurge in Buddhism was the launching of the Jagajyoti journal in 1908. It was meant to focus on various aspects of Buddhist philosophy, religious tenets, holy books, Buddha's incarnations, the Jataka stories, Buddhist pilgrimages, Buddhist education, and the patrons of Buddhism. It contained news, comments poems and letters on topics relevant to the months and devotees, including theology and the instructional Jatakas, Buddhacharitamala and others. Jagajyoti also played a sterling role in recounting the deeds of Emperor Asoka and several contributors explained his 'Anushasanas' (instructions) and his religious philosophy of anti-elitism, anti-ritualism, pacifism and brotherhood. There is an invaluable amount of historical and archival materials available from the past issues of Jagajyoti like reports of the monthly meetings of the Bouddha Dharmankur Sabha, which needs to be worked upon.

We need to trace the second phase of Buddhism in India that began with the discoveries and the revival of interest in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the commemoration of the 2500 year celebrations; the setting up of new stupas and memorials all over India and the voluntary acceptance of this religion of liberation by millions. Among the giants who contributed to Jagajyoti were Ashutosh Mukhopadhyaya, Ishan Chandra Ghosh, Santosh Kumar Mukhopadhyay, Gajendralal Chowdhury, Khetranath Bandyopadhyay, Pramathanath Tarkabhushan, Anukul Chandra Bhattacharya, Benimadhab Barua, Krishna Prasad Ghosh and Agrabansha Vidyavinod. In later years, other stalwarts like the Dalai Lama, Ven. Kushak Bakula, Lokesh Chandra, Swami Prajnananda, DC Ahir, Anisuzzaman, Dipak Kumar Barua, Hiren Mukherjee, Hemendu Bikash Chowdhury and Gopalkrishna Gandhi enriched the journal.

This volume brings together many of the invaluable articles written in English in Jagajyoti in the past and deserves the richest of commendations. We need not hunt old volumes any more, for they are now available in this landmark volume, thanks to Shri Hemendu Bikash Chowdhury and his worthy colleagues.

Jawhar Sircar