

# HOW BUDDHISM WAS RE-DISCOVERED IN MODERN INDIA

**6th Kripasaran Memorial Lecture  
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(English Version)

A few days ago, the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh did a bhoomi puja at a site in Guntur district that he called the new city of Amravati, the new capital of Andhra. It is interesting because it was in this area that Col. Colin Mackenzie had stumbled upon some puzzling ruins in 1798, about which he had heard from local villagers. He was in the Guntur-Nellore region, as part of the British campaign against Tipu Sultan of Mysore, and he had thus to move on with his troops for the assault upon Tipu Sultan at Srirangapatnam. But something must have twirled in Mackenzie's mind, because he revisited the area several years later, in 1816: in his new capacity as the Surveyor General of India. For the next four years, he made several illustrations of what he thought were some old ruins of Deccan Jainism and he presented his documents and 85 sketches of Amravati before the Asiatic Society in Kolkata.

No one understood then that these findings actually related to another religion that India had almost forgotten, Buddhism. It was soon to come back silently, to haunt India's historical landscape from which it had disappeared a thousand years ago, as silently. So effectively had Buddhism been "forgotten" that very few people had even a proper idea of what had been its phenomenal

contribution to art and architecture. Almost all the grandeur that existed in pre-Islamic India, like the mighty stupas at Sarnath and Sanchi or the ancient universities of Taxila and Nalanda had been lying covered under centuries of neglect or destruction, or both. The mighty stupas of yore had become ghostly ruins from which some would steal bricks. They were reduced to just names like dhansa-stupa, which could mean “the stupa that was destroyed”, as well as “the ruins of a stupa”. Very interesting! Even place names like Paanch-tupi (five-stupas) and Bhilsa Topes meant so little, and the majesty of early Indian architecture and the sculpted arts of Ajanta or Sanchi, had little relevance to Indians, just two centuries ago.

How many knew where the great temple of Bodh Gaya ‘the veritable Vatican of Buddhism’ had disappeared? Buddhism had survived and prospered outside its homeland, but in its cradle and nursery its existence was snuffed out: not only physically but in terms of history, education and popular memory. So strong was the power of ‘amnesia’ that when some officers of the Madras Army stumbled upon some caves in the Bombay Presidency in 1819, no one could even recall its name. So the site had to be denoted by the name of the nearest village: Ajanta. Even after that, it took another eighty years more for the British and Indians to understand and appreciate the real purport of what was unearthed at Ajanta. It was only after that could we start telling the whole world that it was this magnificent Ajanta art of India that had influenced the religious art of more than one third of human race.

Let us quickly recapitulate some of the other major Buddhist monuments that were discovered in less than a century from Mackenzie’s Amaravati. The next significant discovery made by General Ventura in 1830 who uncovered the

Manikyala Stupa at Taxila. This very ancient city, was said to be the capital of Parikshit, the grand-son of Arjuna of Mahabharata, and Vyasa is reputed to have had organised the first recital of the epic poem here. It had been an important Buddhist centre and the Jataka tales describe it in great details. Taxila had seen Darius of Persia and Alexander the Great. Taxila carried valuable evidence of several periods, pre-Mauryan, Indo-Greek and Kushan. This ancient centre of India's first university had been destroyed by the Huns in the 5th century CE, but it lay in ruins for 1400 years. They had been lying close to the Grand Trunk Road and so near Rawalpindi: yet, no one was really bothered to excavate the area and to rediscover its past glories. It appears, therefore, that India had not only forgotten its Buddhist centres, but had at times also forgotten a large part of its non-Buddhist history.

But how did the British find out what Indians had forgotten? One was their boundless curiosity and the other was their scorn for Indian concepts of 'purity' and 'impurity', as well as for ghosts and evil spirits that prohibited Indians from venturing into ruins. Cobras, and other dangerous creatures that inhabited these ruins did not deter them either. But in all fairness, some British scholars and archaeologists did utilize Indian or Chinese texts, that provided valuable clues to many historical sites. The question here is: Why is it that the British used texts that were available to us, but we had chosen to ignore?

Alexander Cunningham, who later became the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India depended a lot on the testimony of Chinese pilgrims and their travel accounts of the Buddhist sacred places in India. By using the bearings and distances mentioned by travellers like Fa Xian and Xuan Zang, Cunningham succeeded in fixing the locations of many of the famous sites

mentioned in ancient Indian texts and thus rediscovering them. These records, of course, had their own limitations which resulted in all kinds of controversies as, for instance, the identification of Kapilavastu. Here, for instance, the field of speculation was very wide because the bearings in the accounts of Chinese pilgrims were not consistent.

Cunningham unravelled the mighty Dhameka Stupa at Sarnath in 1835, which was quite unlike other hemi-spherical stupas, because it was cylindrical. It marked the spot of the 'Deer Park', where Buddha gave his first sermon after attaining his enlightenment. Dhamma-Cakkappa-Vattana Sutta containing the 4 noble truths. And yet, it lay in complete ruins that had to be rediscovered afresh.

But it was James Prinsep's remarkable discovery of the Brahmi script two years later in 1837 that really shook our history. Just the words 'Devanampiya Piyadasi' which translate as "Beloved of the Gods of Gracious Mein" brought Ashoka, out of the dark recesses of history. He had been mentioned in the Buddhist chronicles of Sri Lanka by the same epithet, but he could now be fixed with historical accuracy. After so many years of speculation, Ashoka Maurya was finally demystified and firmly established on the throne of Buddhism and India. This helped in joining the dots of the missing grandeur of India's real heritage, for none personifies the plural soul of India more than him.

Cunningham's discovery of Sanchi Stupa in 1851 was perhaps the most educative of all our stupa sites, and here again, we find that its name was lost from our memory. When one glances through the pages of James Fergusson's History of India and Eastern Architecture one would observe that even as late as the mid-19th century, this mound was in ruins and its toranas and vedikas were covered with vegetation all over. ASI's restoration has indeed done wonders and we are now

able to recognize the characters from the Jataka Tales that embellish the gateways. In 1854 he published the *Bhilsa Topes* which attempted to establish the history of Buddhism based on whatever architecture and archaeology evidence so available up to that point of history. In fact, Himanshu Prabha Ray mentions Sanchi with special emphasis in her significant work *'The Return of the Buddha: Ancient Symbols for a New Nation'*.

Cunningham's doggedness led him to rediscover and re-excavate Bodh Gaya in 1861 that Hamilton Buchanan had reported half a century ago as a place covered by a thick forest. He had also remarked with sadness that there was no trace or respect for the faith of the Buddha, at all. One may be justified in feeling that as a symbol of defiance, Bodh Gaya required more than just the forces of nature to be obliterated from human sight and mind. Cunningham's further discoveries in 1862-63 were as important in the treatment of historical memory loss. He, identified Ramnagar as the ancient 'Ahich-chatra'; Kosam as the great 'Kausambi' and Sahet Mahet as the historic 'Sravasti'. These jewels from our past had all to be discovered by the British, who actually retrieved them on the basis of textual evidence and archaeology, what India had chosen to forget.

The indefatigable Cunningham then moved to the Bharhut Stupa and physically uprooted large numbers of stone carvings from this site, in true imperial style, and transported them to Calcutta's Indian Museum. They served there as a 'classroom' and exhibition of the excellence of Buddhist art and architecture. Succeeding generations of art historians, archaeologists, museologists and connoisseurs derived their education from these eloquent stones in Kolkata. Thus, within just eight decades, Buddhism "that had died a natural death in India" was suddenly brought back from the graveyard of our memory, and resuscitated. These

structures and sculptures of Buddhism compensated somewhat for the apparent lack of outstanding tangible cultural heritage that stared blankly at us from the end of the Harappan period: which, itself was yet to be re-discovered properly, until the 1950s. Thus, if the grandeur of Buddhist architecture and cave temples had not been discovered, the present country called India would not have much to show by way of its grandest architectural heritage for about nearly two millennia years, starting from 1500 BC: except for a few temples at places like Ellora, and those of Pallavas.

It is still open to speculation as to whether the Buddhist edifices that British archaeologists, especially the Scots who went about with a mission, took pains to unearth had actually crumbled into unrecognisable ruins. Was it just because patronage had shifted to a revived and recharged Brahmanism? Some felt, however, that many Buddhist sites were still better off as compared to quite a lot of neglected Brahmanical spots. The former had, at least, some continuing patronage from pilgrims from Ceylon, Thailand and other countries. It is of course, a fact that Indians were not unduly bothered about this history, until Western education did the job and therefore, it may not be surprising that there was no serious interest in rediscovering and reclaiming our past glory. But, is rather surprising that while Ellora, that lay on the trade routes, was never forgotten, Ajanta which is just up the hills some distance away, lay completely obliterated from memory. We had surely exported the most significant intellectual and cultural contribution to the world, the religion of Buddha and of universal peace. But why did we lose the material civilization of Buddhism almost forever, until the spade of the British archaeologists hit stones under the ground? Charles Allen touches this issue in his “The Buddha and the Sahibs” as well as in his “Ashoka: The Search for India’s Lost Emperor ” It is recalled that for nearly a thousand years, between the reign of

Emperor Ashoka in third century BCE to the death of Harsha Vardhana in 647 AD, Buddhism had ruled the minds of innumerable Indians. What happened during this dark interregnum of nearly twelve centuries, between Harsha Vardhana and Amaravati that Buddhism was forgotten, so vigorously?

One can see signs of both 'destruction' and 'preservation' quite prominently. No statue or icon of any deity has been beheaded in such large numbers as those of the Buddha. In fact, many actually associate him not with a full bodied statue, but with a decapitated head. We see these truncated heads of Buddha in hundreds in museums and galleries all over India and the world but do we ask who beheaded such a large number of Buddha sculptures? The second tendency of 'preservation' of Buddhist statues has often been for appropriating them within the larger religion. Kalyan Kumar Dasgupta (1985, 6-7) cites several sculptures of Bodhisattva Avalokiteswara have been taken into temples and worshiped as the popular Lokeshwara Siva in Bengal. The assimilation of diverse beliefs, or even appropriating their best features, has been intrinsic to Hinduism and several of the great contributions of Buddhism like ahimsa and vegetarianism, the saffron robe, the institution of monasteries and monks have been internalised by the major religion of India. To most common Indians, there was really no great conflict between (say) Shaivism and Vaishnavism or even Buddhism or Jainism, as all had the same Indian appearance and rituals.

Is there any evidence that Buddhism was physically eliminated? This is not the subject of the present talk and this question is an explosive one. But one would just touch upon the issue and cite the legend of Mihirkula, the Hun ruler who was converted to Brahmanism in the 6th century AD. He is reported to have unleashed a wave of violent destruction of Buddhist monasteries in Punjab and

Kashmir (Berzin 2001) and this is quoted by Kalhana in his *Rajatarangani* some 600 years later. The deeds of Pushyamitra Sunga, the Brahmin minister who overthrew the last Mauryan Buddhist ruler in Magadha are also cited (Omvedt, 2013) to prove the first 'anti Buddhist reaction'. Shashank, the ruler of Gaur-Bangla, took pride in the destruction of many stupas and cutting down the sacred Bodhi tree at Gaya. Even the historian SR Goyal mentions that "according to many scholars, hostility of the Brahmans was one of the major causes of the decline of Buddhism in India" (Goyal, 2002).

Epigraphica India (Vol XXIX P 141-144) records that Vira Goggi Deva, a South Indian king, described himself as..."a fire to the Jain scripture.....and adept at the demolition of Buddhist canon". It also records "the deliberate destruction of non-Brahmanical literature like books of Lokayat-Carvaka philosophy by Brihaspati that was mentioned by Alberuni in the 11th century" (Mookerji: ). Similarly, AN Longhust, who conducted excavations at Nagarjunakonda, recorded (1938, 6) in his *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India* that "the ruthless manner in which all the buildings at Nagarjunakonda have been destroyed is simply appalling. This cannot represent the work of treasure-seekers alone since so many pillars, statues, and sculptures have been wantonly smashed to pieces." There is no doubt that Islam did play a major role in physically destroying Buddhist centres like Nalanda and Odantapuri, and also in slaughtering thousands of monks as well driving them away from India.

The point here is that there may have been occasions when over-zealous groups have attacked or destroyed some of the edifices of Buddhism, but this does not appear to be the usual *modus operandi*, before the arrival of Islam. A recent study of the Bengal Puranas indubitably shows that the Buddhists were mocked at,

cast as mischievous and malicious in Brahmanical narratives, and subjected to immense rhetorical violence. But rhetorical attacks are not the same as physical destruction. The silent word-of-mouth stigma that the very sight of any image or likeness of Buddha was 'inauspicious' was perhaps more dangerous and more effective in removing his memory from the minds of Indians, than any real physical assault. That the Brahman did not like the Sramana (Buddhist) is clear from a lot of stories and sayings, though among the thousands of pages of sacred Hindu literature, there is hardly any exhortation to go and destroy the structures of someone else's religion. But one cannot vouchsafe what small overzealous groups may have committed though it is best not to enter into speculation, as to what could have happened more than a millennium ago. Because at that time, there were reports of strong sectarian conflicts even between different groups of Hindus and medieval passions are difficult to re-examine, in the modern context.

When we use the term 'amnesia' we relate to memories of architectural and artistic grandeur of India that was definitely Buddhist, in origin and development. We are not discounting the fact that Pala Kings of Bengal had continued to support Buddhism between the 8th and early 12th centuries, i.e, well after the rest of India had moved away from Buddhism. It created the 'Pala School of Sculptural Art' and some of the gigantic structures of Vikramshila, Odantapuri and Jagat Pala are evidence of their munificence. In fact Dharma Pala's Buddhist Vihara of Somapura in Paharpur, Bangladesh, is considered to be the largest such structure in the Indian sub-continent and is now a "World Heritage Site". The Palas were better known for sculptures, and these consisted of both Buddhist and Brahmanical deities as the Palas were rather even handed when it came to patronage of the arts. But let us not forget that even the Viharas and other architectural creations of the Pala era lay under tons of earth once they were destroyed by the forces of

Bakhtiyar Khilji in the first decade of the 13th century. Six hundred years is a long enough time for people to forget even the last gasp of Buddhism in India, especially if the mainstream of Indian memory, attention and discourse moved away so drastically from Buddhism, even though Southeast Asia, China, Japan and Tibet continued to follow the Pala style of architecture.

What is interesting is that once Buddhism was rediscovered, however, several Indians came forward to celebrate its glory. Most of them incidentally belonged to the Brahmanical castes that earlier had been accused of having “taken pains” to erase the glory of Buddhism from public memory. The first name that comes to mind is Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933), the Sri Lankan Buddhist revivalist and Writer who pioneered the revival of Buddhism in India and was the first Buddhist in modern time to preach this religion in the West and other parts of Asia. As Anagarika Dharmapala has recounted, Neel Comul Mukherji was one of those who helped him settle down and says that when he had visited Buddha-Gaya in January 1879 and witnessed the abandoned and neglected condition of the central shrine of Buddhism and resolved to restore it, it was Babu Neel Comul who had “remained true and loyal, encouraging and protecting at all crises in the subsequent history of the Maha-Bodhi Society. Such sweet sympathy and so much human love I was shown that the utopian idea of the resuscitation of Buddhism in the land of its birth actually came into objectivity”.

When the Buddha Gaya Maha Bodhi Society was founded in Sri Lanka on May 31, 1891, its cause was taken up not only by Buddhists, but also by other genuine souls like Mary Elizabeth Foster and Col. Henry Alcott (1832-1987). While the former was often called the foster mother of Dharmapala, the latter was complimented as one who had “dedicated his life to Buddhism and the people of

Asia”. Madam Blavatsky (1831-91) identified herself as a Buddhist but not “with the sorry state of the Buddhist community” that they found even in Sri Lanka in the second half of the 19th century. Alcott and Blavatsky set up the Buddhist Theosophical Society in June 1880, though Anagarika did not join it for ideological reasons.

One year after the founding of the Maha Bodhi Society, Karmayogi Kripasaran Mahastavir (1865-1926) founded the Bengal Buddhist Association in Kolkata. We are fortunate to get this opportunity to celebrate the 150th Birth Anniversary of Kripasaranji this year when Sir Asutosh Mookherjee was elected Life President of the Maha Bodhi Society in 1916 unanimously, Anagarika Dharmapala said: “We thought it an honour to have the foremost personality in Bengal as the President of the Maha Bodhi Society. He was at heart almost a Buddhist, he openly confessed his love for the Lord Buddha and was always prepared to help the cause of Buddhism. The introduction of Pali in Calcutta University was due to his personal effort.” We must also remember the role of Ven. Kripasaran in this momentous decision of Calcutta University and in starting the study of Pali in the schools and colleges. He urged Sir Asutosh to extend affiliation to numerous schools and colleges. Unlike the sophistication of Anagarika Dharmapala, the approach of Kripasaran Mahasthavir was essentially vernacular and more earthy. He came from Chittagong, the only district in the whole of ‘mainland’ India that had a very sizeable population of Buddhists for several past centuries. His preachings were essentially in Bengali and his own dialect of Chittagong, which may explain why his fame has remained largely confined mainly to Bengal.

Kripasaran's tireless efforts helped in producing generations of scholars who studied the Buddhist texts once again and conveyed the sublime messages to the modern world. Ven.Kripasaran also selected three young students to go to the University of London for higher studies on Government scholarship, and one of them was the iconic Benimadhab Barua. Kripasaran was successful in convening a World Buddhist Conference, where monks and lay congregated from many parts of the world and Buddhism was back on the radar. In the early part of the 20th century, the Barua Buddhists of Chittagong followed Kripasaran to set up several Viharas and in many cities of India, like Lucknow, Hyderabad, Shillong and Jamshedpur. While the Maha Bodhi Society had attached the educated and upper castes of India to part-take in the glory of Buddhism, Mahasthavir was perhaps the first Indian Buddhist leader who spoke for the downtrodden.

The revival of Buddhism in the 20th century was also due to great social reformers like Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) and Periyar Ramaswamy (1879-1973) who relied upon Buddhist egalitarianism as indigenous counterpoise to brahmanical casteism in India. Movements for 'self-respect' like the Dravidian one or the Dalits utilized Buddhism extensively and Mahima Gosain of Odisha even rejected Hinduism altogether in favour of the new Buddhist creed. The Sakya Buddhist Society in Madras and similar groups came up all over India to espouse Buddhism, around this time.

Bodhanand took up the case of Dalits and this is where the largest support base would be coming from in modern times. His associate, Chandrika Prasad, founded the Bahujan Kalyan Prakashan in UP.

Kripasaran Mahasthavi's disciple, Bodhanand Mahastavir (1874-1952) was ordained in Kolkata in his presence in 1914, though he was born into a Bengali

Brahmin family. The last name that I would mention is that of Acharya Ishwardatt Medharthi of Kanpur (1900-1971) who also took up the cause of Dalits and Buddhism most passionately.

We may leave the link with the Dalit movement at this stage and return to where we were, i.e, the celebration of the re-discovery of Buddhism in modern India.

We can go on endlessly with this list and among those who made Buddhism their central theme were scholars like Haraprasad Sastri and several others of the Asiatic Society as well as the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad.

But, Amiya Samanta reminds, "Few had appreciated the teachings of Buddha so deeply as Rabindranath, whose creative genius drew inspiration from Buddha's teachings on social equality and universal love and produced magnificent literature. To Tagore, Buddha was the greatest human being and before whose image at Bodh Gaya he chose to prostrate himself, an act which Tagore never did again in his life"(Samanta, 1991). Tagore said with deep emotion: "I am a disciple of the Buddha. But when I present myself before those holy places where the relics and foot-prints of the Buddha are found I come in touch with him to a great extent". On 8th May, 1935, the Buddha Purnima Day, Tagore said, "On this full-moon day of Vaisaka, I have come to join in the birthday celebrations of the Lord Buddha, and to bow my head in reverence to him whom I regard in my inmost being as the greater man ever born on this earth". One of the most important statements made by Tagore: "Materials of different shades of Indian thought and culture are confined in Buddhist literature and due to the lack of intimacy with them, the entire history of India remains unfulfilled. Being

convinced of it, cannot a few youths of our country dedicate themselves for the restoration of the Buddhist heritage and make it a mission in life?”

Mahatma Gandhi went one step further and said “what passes under the name of Buddhism now may have been driven out of India, but the life of the Buddha and his teachings are by no means driven out of India”. “Buddha never rejected Hinduism but broadened its base. He gave it a new life and a new interpretation”. Pacifism was impressed as part of India’s International Dharma along with the Panchsheel Route. India appeared to have made up for all the loss in just one century that started from the 1880s and went up to the 1980s.

Pandit Jawhar Nehru was profoundly influenced by the Buddhist philosophy said that “The story of Gautam Buddha has influenced me right from childhood and I liked the scientific and ethical attitude”. On Oct 3, 1960, Nehru declared before the United Nations General Assembly: “In ages long past, a great son of India, the Buddha, said that the only real victory was one in which all were equally victorious and there was defeat for no one”.

Thus, even if there may have been some feelings of bitterness a millennium ago, there was no rancour in the minds of any Indian, Hindu or Buddhist, when this great religion was re-discovered. In fact, the name of Buddha continues to be a favourite among people of this State who name their sons as ‘Amitabha’, ‘Gautama’, ‘Buddhadev’, ‘Siddhartha’, ‘Tathagata’ and so on, as Buddha is now the collective pride of all Indians. Plays and dance dramas abound on his life and the Bengal and other schools of art took him to great heights.

But it still remains a major mystery as to how he and his contribution, as well as all major Buddhist monuments and art was almost forgotten so completely, for a thousand years. Scholars need to work seriously and come up with credible answers.

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