Problems in Reconstructing the Social History of Buddhism in Orissa

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Introduction:

Attempts to carry out research on a comprehensive social history of Buddhism in Orissa involve several challenges. The foremost among them is the paucity of written documents. We get the first glimpses on Orissa Buddhism from Tripitaka texts like the Mahavagga and Majjhimanikaya. After this, the annals are blank till the time of Asoka. The Asokan edicts give us important information on some aspects related to the subject. This is followed again by nearly four centuries of silence. Some of the gaps in our understanding can be filled with the help of Srilankan Pali chronicles like the Dipavamsa, Mahavamsa, Dhattuvamsa, Buddhavamsa etc. Jataka stories like Kalinga Jataka and Kalinga Bodhi Jataka also contain bits and pieces of information. Besides, commentaries on canonical texts like Anguttara Nikaya and Theragatha come to our aid. But none of them enables us to reconstruct a clear chronological picture of the social dimension of Buddhism in the region. Even for the subsequent period, we are forced to rely on fragmentary materials like inscriptions and travel accounts of Hiuen-Tsang. A very important source of information is the historical account left behind by the Tibetan monk Lama Taranatha. But this was written in the 16th century and is not fully reliable. These are the constraints which researchers constantly face.

How do these difficulties affect our attempts to reconstruct the social history of Orissa Buddhism? In this paper, we will try to address this question.

At the outset we must clarify what social history means. Conventional histories are generally written from a political angle. In the context of Orissa, it is customary to periodise the past in terms of the ruling dynasties. Thus, historians talk about different periods like the Mauryan or Asokan period, Sailodbhava period, Bhaumakara period, Somavamsi period, Ganga period, Gajapati period etc. It is believed that the history and age can be captured by laying emphasis on the royal dynasties. A social history will be different from such dynastic histories. It focuses on the common people and the lives led by them in the past. Such a history is not concerned with kings and their heroic exploits, but with peasants, labourers, traders, artists, artisans, soldiers, women, travelers, poets, saints, tribes, outcasts and so on. It explores the dimensions of castes, class and gender, and raises questions related to dominance, resistance and subordination. Social history is also concerned with beliefs, customs, traditions, rituals, practices.
and life styles of the people. More importantly, it pays attention to social change and continuities across the centuries, which will give us a better picture of human history than the monotonous story of dynasties, kings, wars and conquests. All these make social history an exciting field of study. But it is also highly challenging because of the limited information available to us on many of the issues involved in it. What challenges do we face as far as the social history of Buddhism in Orissa is concerned? Let us try to explore this question.

**Caste:**

It is a well known fact that caste has been one of the biggest social realities in India since the ancient period. The Purusha Sukta of the *Rig Veda* tells us that Brahmans were born from the mouth of Brahma, Kshatriyas from His chest, Vaishyas from His thigh and Sudras from His feet. This is the first known reference to caste system in India. In the subsequent centuries, caste crystallized into a dominant social institution. Buddhism rose as a rebellion against the hierarchy prescribed in the Purusha Sukta. In the ‘Agganna Sutta’ of the *Digha Nikaya*, the Buddha has severally criticized the view that Brahmins came forth from the mouth of the creator. According to the Buddha, “it is common knowledge that the wives of the Brahmins having menstrual discharges are apparent, also they are becoming pregnant are apparent; also they are bearing children and nursing them are apparent. These Brahmins, although born from the female organs of generation, are saying, ‘only the Brahmin class is noble; other classes are lowly. Only the Brahmin class is fair; other classes are dark. Only the Brahmins are offsprings of the Brahma, who are developed in His breast, descended from Him, created by Him and heirs to Him’. They are slandering the Brahman, also telling lies and also bringing forth much demerit for themselves”. The above words make the Buddha’s views about caste systems very clear. There is severe criticism to caste system in this passage. All lofty claims made by Brahmins about their own status are set aside here. They are transformed into ordinary human beings who are not different in any way from men and women belonging to other castes. Thus Buddhism began as an eclectic religion which admitted people belonging to all castes and classes into its fold. We must now ask an important question. Did Buddhism flourish as an eclectic faith even in Orissa? In order to answer this question, we need at least some information about the following questions. What was the caste background of the monks and nuns who joined the Sanghas in Orissa? Did people belonging to lower castes occupy any high positions in the major monasteries and centers of learning like Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, Lalitagiri, Langudi, Khiching, Dhauli, Achyutarajpur etc? Were monks and nuns from lower castes marginalized in any way due to their Sudra status? Which were the castes that dominated Buddhist establishments in Orissa? Unfortunately, none of these questions can be answered satisfactorily. Information regarding them is not to be found in any of the available written sources. Inscriptions, religious and philosophical texts, travel accounts and other documents are entirely silent about them. As a result, it becomes impossible to estimate the impacts of Buddhism as a means of social emancipation in Orissa. This is not a small hurdle for those interested in the social history of Buddhism in the region.

**Peasantry:**

Let us now turn to the peasantry. All the Buddhist sites in Orissa are located in the vicinity of wetlands known for their long history of paddy cultivation. These wetlands are among the most fertile ones in the Indian sub-continent.
Throughout its history, paddy was one of Orissa’s chief commodities of export. It brought rich income to the State through land revenue and other internal tolls as well as through balance of trade. This paddy-centered economy was the result of a large peasant population without which it would not have been possible to carry out intensive agriculture. Paddy cultivation is labour intensive; unlike plantation crops, where the requirement of labour is relatively less.

Hiuen Tsang reports that there were hundred monasteries in Odra (central Orissa) with ten thousand monks. Monasteries and monks in Kosala (western Orissa) were also as numerous as is Odra. To maintain these large establishments, the constant supply of food grains had to be ensured. This might have been one of the reasons why monasteries were set up close to the paddy growing wetlands. The early sites of Dhauli and Jaugada were surrounded by paddy fields. Sites which came up later also follow this pattern. The Virupa-Chitrotpala valley in Jajpur district is highly fertile. Here, we come across Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, Lalitagiri, Langudi, Kolangiri, Vajragiri and so on. The Prachi valley of Puri district is another area rich in Buddhist antiquities. This area commands a huge output of paddy. Other examples include Boudh, Achiyutarajpur, Khiching, Tarapur, Ayodhya, Aragarh etc. All these point to a very close symbiotic relationship between Buddhist monasteries and the peasantry.

Now, what kind of relationship did the monasteries share with the paddy growing peasants? This is a vital question as far as the social history of Buddhism is concerned. The presence of monasteries as grain-clients helped to generate vast employment potentials in the local agricultural networks. In other words, it changed the life of the common peasantry to a significant extend by providing a constant source of livelihood. Yet, we do not have any written documents which can help us to narrate this story of change and transformation. The peasantry is absent in contemporary written records of ancient Orissa. As a result, this is not possible to draw a proper picture of the impacts of Buddhism on the peasantry or on the role of peasants in the maintenance of the monastic institutions. This is another huge obstacle for students of the social history of Orissa Buddhism.

This problem is not unique to Orissa or to the social history of Buddhism. Historians working on agrarian history and peasant history have been encountering this problem for a long time. Broad generalizations about peasants have been made by theorists and social scientists. They have also tried to understand the processes which transformed peasants into the working classes in the modern west. Yet, substantial research on their everyday life in the ancient and medieval periods is yet to commence. We cannot expect any first-rate study when written documents are not available to us. The same fate is shared by the peasantry in the social history of Buddhism in Orissa.

**Women:**

Caste and peasantry are not the only features missing in the written records on Buddhism from Orissa. Women are equally conspicuous by their absence. The existing documents do not give us enough information on women and their history in Orissa Buddhism. As a matter of fact, women have had a marginalized presence in the Buddhist Sanghas throughout India. We get information about some powerful lay women devotees like Khema, Patachara, Migaramata (Visakha), Uppalavanna and Ambapali. Apart from this, there is very little data...
on the social aspects of women and their presence in the Buddhist networks. Some historians have argued on the basis of inscriptions that women formed a considerable section of the donors to different monasteries and places of worship like Sanchi. Even then, very little is known about nuns and their socio-economic backgrounds.

It is believed that Buddha was opposed to the entry of women into the order. There is an interesting debate in the Cullavagga where Ananda makes a request to Buddha to allow women into the order. The Buddha is initially very reluctant to accept this idea. But Ananda manages to convince him.

The situation in Orissa does not seem to be different either. It is really unfortunate that we have absolutely no information on Buddhist women from the region. Not a single text talks about Buddhist nuns or lay women in Buddhist Orissa. The Dhattuvamsa says that Khema carried the tooth relic of the Buddha to the king of Kalinga. This is perhaps the only exception we have on hand. But Khema was not a resident of Kalinga. She belonged to the mid Ganga valley. We can, therefore say that women Buddhists in Orissa were among the most marginalized sections of the ancient Orissan Buddhist society. Reconstructing their history is not just difficult, but also impossible.

Artisans:

Orissa is known for its rich heritage of Buddhist art and architecture. A large number of images have been recovered from more than five hundred sites in the state. The lower Mahanadi valley is particularly rich in ancient Buddhist sites. Apart from the well known sites of Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, Lalitagiri and Langudi, there are many other locations like Radhanagar, Vajragiri, Khadipada, Kolanagiri, Gokarneswar, Kshmeswar, Kaima, Bhabanipur, Ganapatipur, Tarapur, Yogimunda etc known for their Buddhist antiquities. These are all in the Jajpur District. The neighbouring districts of Cuttack, Kendrapara, Jagatsinghpur and Puri are also rich in Buddhist remains. Mention may be made of places like Kendupatana, Baneswarasi, Salepur, Indupur, Icchapur, Maniabandha, Kalyanapur, Khaduapada, Mahanga, Jambu, Panasapur, Nikrai and so on.

Outside the lower Mahanadi valley, we have impressive Buddhist sculpture and architecture at places like Achyutarajpur, Khiching, Boudh, Ayodhya and other places. The sculptures include those of the Buddha in various postures like Abhaya and Bhumisparsha. Vajrapani, Padmapani, Tara, Vajratara, Heruka, Manjusri, Jambala and Hariti are some of the other deities represented in the sculpture. There are also a large number of finely carved pillars, reliefs, railings, votive stupas and door frames in different parts of the state.

We must ask an important question here. Who were the artists and artisans who made these sculptures? Where did they come from? Were they natives of Orissa or did they come from elsewhere? Who appointed them to execute these works? Was it the royal dynasties, local chiefs and elites, or the monasteries themselves? In what ways were they remunerated? Were they paid in cash or in kind? What status did these artisans enjoy in the society? Did they have a respectable status or were they subjected to oppression? All these are very important questions as far as the social history of Orissa Buddhism is concerned. But it is deeply disappointing to note that none of the written documents, including inscriptions, tell us anything about them. The artisans are totally invisible in written records. Not a single name has
survived. This is a pitiable situation. The artisans created great marvels of beauty which have survived for more than thousand years. But the memories of them are lost forever. The dreams, the anxieties, the passions, the pain and the joy experienced by these artisans can be recollected only through the speechless status they created. The world has been cruel to them in not preserving even the name of a single artisan.

Conclusion:

The purpose of this paper was to identify the problems which we face in studying the social history of Buddhism in Orissa. As we have seen, this is not an easy task. The non-availability of adequate written source is the greatest hurdle we encounter. Practically no information is to be found in any of the sources on the caste backgrounds of the Buddhist monks and nuns. Similarly, we know next to nothing on the role played by the peasantry in sustaining the great Buddhist centers of Orissa. Women are also thoroughly absent from all records of Orissa Buddhism. The artists and artisans who created hundreds of great monuments and sculptures have also remained outside the extant records. We can actually multiply the number of missing groups in these documents. For example, traders have made immense contributions to the growth and spread of Buddhism in the State. However, records are not very eloquent about them. Similarly, we have to rely only on speculation while discussing about groups like potters, carpenters, weavers, wood-cutters, coal miners, blacksmiths etc, who catered to the day to day requirements of Buddhist establishments. It is also difficult to say anything about tribes beyond the fact that they were being constantly transformed into peasants. Without proper knowledge about these groups, any attempt to write the social history of Buddhism in Orissa is bound to remain incomplete.

Notes:

1. In the context of Ganga valley, the existence of a wide range of sources helps overcome this problem to some extent. A very good study of Buddhism’s social dimensions in Ganga valley is Uma Chakravarti, *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism*, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1996.

2. For a survey of the sources on Buddhism in Orissa, see N.K. Sahu, *Buddhism in Orissa*, Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, 1958.

3. Many examples can be cited for such dynasty-based understanding of Orissa history. The most popular among them is K.C Panigrahi, *History of Orissa*, Kitab Mahal, Cuttack, 1981.


7. A survey of land forms in different parts of Orissa can be obtained from the State Gazetteer and respective District Gazetteers. Also see B.N. Sinha, *Geography of Orissa*, NBT, New Delhi, 1971.

8. Sahu, op. cit, p. 57.


13. Ibid.

14. This argument is made in an all-India context in Brajadulal Chattopadhayaya, *The Making of Early
Medieval India, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1994.

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His Excellency the Governor Shri Murlidhar Chandrakant Bhandare awarding the champion of the champions trophy to Mr. K. Kundru

Childhood is the kingdom where no one dies. - Edna St. Vincent Millay