



A Historical Review of the Origin and Growth of Buddhism in India

Raj Kumar

Assistant Professor in History, Government Girls College, Rewari, Haryana, India.

Received: 27 May 2025; Received in revised form: 22 Jun 2025; Accepted: 25 Jun 2025; Available online: 30 Jun 2025
©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license
(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— Today, the majority of scholars and historians concur that Buddhism is a religion, or more accurately, dharma, that encourages thoughtful reflection, strong living free from materialistic cravings, and has established a range of methods, practices, beliefs, artwork, and writing to ensure that there is as little suffering and suffering as possible for humanity. It exhorts people to choose a 'style of life' that values life in all its forms and invites them to conduct self-reflection in order to gain life lessons through practicing moral principles. By following the teachings of the Buddha, a person learns how to protect themselves from all problems and suffering. Buddhism states that internal growth ensures harmony and joy in a person's life rather than external events or advancements in worldly possessions in determining personal fulfillment. Actually, if we incorporate Buddha's teachings into our daily routine, we will genuinely wish to address all of our inner problems that irritate us and interfere with our activities. Harmony will come naturally to us since we will sincerely want to achieve a certain goal. It is necessary to learn about the standards of the Buddhism Center and truly understand the directives in order to complete all of the stated tasks. There is a great deal to learn about this religion that dates back 2,500 years and has gained significant international recognition. This research study focuses on the origin and development of Buddhism in India.



Keywords— belief system, religion, monks, stupas, philosophy of buddhism, sangha.

I. INTRODUCTION

It is a well-known fact that India is a land of different religions. In this regard when we talk about Buddhism, we come to know that Gautama Buddha, an ascetic and spiritual teacher from ancient India who lived in the sixth or fifth century BCE, is closely linked to the ancient philosophy of Buddhism. It is said that as a fully enlightened individual who taught a route to 'Nirvana' (moksha) freedom from ignorance, craving, rebirth, and suffering; he is regarded by the followers of Buddhist philosophy in India as the founder of Buddhism. Furthermore, the whole history of Buddhism, which is practiced by approximately 500 million people throughout the world now, dates back to India around 2500 years ago. Nowadays, Buddhism has become a routine of daily life and it can be identified as a theory of daily human life that is both scholarly and easy to follow, and it is thought to be unconstrained by time, place, race, or culture beyond all doubts. It is estimated that for

approximately a millennium, Buddhism flourished and expanded throughout India. In the era of the kingdom of emperor Asoka the Great, this religion reached its peak. Actually, during this time, the extraordinary scholars, incredible spiritualists, and incredible sages from different lands, by their exceptional keenness and preeminent insight established an incredible connection upon the prospect of individuals; the stone workers and specialists. Meanwhile, Buddhism slashed extraordinary cavern sanctuaries and 'Stupas' which are right up till now among the extraordinary accomplishments of the human race in some parts of India. In its lengthy historical journey, it came to conclude that Buddhism became the official religion of India during the political influence of King Asoka. It reached its zenith under the rule of the last Buddhist Emperor, Harsavardhana during 606–647 C.E.

II. THE ORIGIN OF BUDDHISM

Here it is noteworthy to say that Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, was born into a wealthy family in 563 BCE. An incident in his childhood compelled his soul to think that this world is a homeland of sorrows. Consequently, he abandoned his affluent lifestyle and adopted a plainness, or outrageous self-control, lifestyle. After 49 consecutive extended periods of introspection, he became the Buddha, or 'illuminated one'. Therefore, around 528 BCE, he publicly declared this, gathered followers who later became Buddhist monks, and traveled throughout northern India to spread his teachings among masses. One of Buddhism's main advantages is that everyone is responsible for their own happiness in day-to-day living. Buddha established the 'Four Noble Truths' as fundamental principles: experiencing occurs in daily life; want is the cause of enduring; completing want means completing enduring; and leading a controlled and moderate lifestyle will eliminate want and, consequently, languishing. Buddha established the 'noble eightfold path' to achieve these goals: right samadhi, or thought; right conviction; right aim; right discourse; right lead; right occupation; right exertion; and right care. According to Buddhism, following the 'noble eightfold path' will ultimately result in liberation from samsara, the cycle of reincarnation and languishment. It is likely assumed that a large number of followers of this method of enlightenment participated in a newly emerging, fervent Buddhist tradition. Moreover, it is also true that religion is a rigid way of life that involves giving up everyday activities and committing oneself to supernatural endeavors.

Furthermore, in the present madness of warfare situations throughout the world, Buddhism actually asserts and concludes that its great and ultimate goal is the profound betterment of the human race on this planet. Buddhists don't believe in God; instead, they focus their efforts on expanding the true understanding of deeper concepts through introspection. As we know that India is a homeland of Buddhism and its origin can be traced to the Lumbini forest area, where in the sixth century BC a man named Siddhartha Gautama was born as the head of the Shaykha tribe. It was said that if Siddhartha left the royal home, his family would undoubtedly lose the realm. As a result, the lord kept him safe at the castle, where he lived a luxurious lifestyle and had all of his needs satisfied; but Gautama was a man of substance. In spite of this, he believed that there was more to life than simply leading a lavish lifestyle. As a result, he made a few trips outside of the royal home and encountered various aspects of daily life. Moreover, he experienced mental agony and suffering as he grew older, experienced terrible health, and died. He pondered why there were so many hardships in this world and decided to

seek right answers. In order to accomplish this, he renounced his throne and set out to locate someone who could answer his questions. He continued his investigation in a manner like that of a traveler, eventually arriving at a plain and engaging in prolonged contemplation with the aim of gaining edification. Then after about a month, he was finally edified and became Buddha, also known as the lighted one. Now he understood the essence and value of human life and taught his followers this.

III. THE PHILOSOPHY OF BUDDHISM

According to Buddha, the four worthy tidbits of knowledge encapsulate his teachings are:

> **All life is dukka:** This suggests that there is a great deal of suffering, anguish, and suffering in life.

> **Dukka is motivated by a desire for:** Buddha acknowledged that life was filled with hardships, primarily due to our own sexual and material desires. As far as humans are concerned, the world is filled with suffering and agony because of our tendency to have more of everything.

> **The cessation of yearning coincides with the termination of dukka:** We must give up all of our desires if we wish to get rid of all of our annoyance and suffering.

> **The following eight-overlap methods can reveal a cessation of hankering:** The eight overlay method is the method for giving up all desires. Below, eight overlay ways are seen as:

a.] **Samma-Ditthi:** Whole or perfect vision.

b.] **Samma-Sankappa:** Perfected expression or sentiment.

c.] **Samma-Vaca:** Complete or perfected speech.

d.] **Samma-Kammanta:** An essential task.

e.] **Samma-Ajiva:** Appropriate Subsistence.

f.] **Samma-Vayama:** Total or total effort, vitality, or necessity.

g.] **Samma-Sati:** Total or complete awareness.

h.] **Sammadhi:** Holistic and integral Samadhi.

It was around the 6th century BC when Buddhism developed into a distinctive form and started out as a small group based on its growing popularity and support into the different parts of India as well as abroad. Meanwhile, a question arises: what was it that made Buddhism so well-known. Here, we need to acknowledge the ancient belief system in India. It is said that there was most likely something in the pre-sixth-century social structure that prevented people from rebelling and forming independent organizations. In this sense, the rise of these groups generally, and Buddhism in particular, is closely linked to

the arrangement of the 'Varna' system and in the later years caste system.

IV. THE GROWTH OF BUDDHISM IN INDIA

Most of the scholars agree with the fact that the 6th century BC was the peak time for the expansion of Buddhism in India. According to the social and religion based studies we come to know that people living in the social system during this time, had enough weird beliefs, complicated rituals and traditions, and blind beliefs. That is why; the message of the Buddha was a remarkable relief to many who were then suffering greatly from the supremacy of Brahmanism in all parts of India. Moreover, they were deeply attracted by the simplicity of Buddhism and its uncompromising fortitude. And also, a greater proportion of people found the fundamental principles and basic philosophy of Buddhism more acceptable to their daily life. Likewise, the state also fully supported Buddhism; King Ashoka adopted Buddhism in 260 BCE after the bloody battle of Kalinga, a medieval region. He declared Buddhism as the official religion in order to disavow cruelty, and also made all possible efforts to unite people from all segments of the society under a common faith in his kingdom. The following may be considered as some of the main reasons for the growth of Buddhism in India:

Role of Buddha: It is true that Buddha's confidence and moxy enchanted the rest of society. The Buddha was himself sacrificial and sensitive, therefore, most of the people in his kingdom were drawn to him because of his reticent demeanor, beautiful manifestations of his direct style of thinking, and renunciated lifestyle. He himself prepared all the ethical answers to people's problems and also traveled from place to place to convince others with his words and teachings. Actually, on its fundamental level, Buddhism was more simple than Jainism, therefore, people weren't confused by its 'eightfold path' and 'thought of serenity'. On the contrary, all the common masses who had grown weary of the Brahminical dominance of Vedic religion recognized Buddhism as a calm and revitalizing religious force in daily life.

Effect of Prakrit Language: All the preachings of Buddha were spoken in the Prakrit language used by people in a daily routine life. However, the Brahmins' syndication of the Sanskrit language was necessary to comprehend the Vedic religion and philosophy; but Buddhism was simple to understand, and after being persuaded by its core philosophy with a simple message to life.

No Caste Discrimination: The fact is that Buddhism was a strong opponent of all the caste distinctions, rather than it treated everyone equally and went against the caste system in India at that time. That is why; its followers gathered,

stood apart, and discussed ethics and morality. Consequently, its overlap particularly appealed to non-Brahmins, and it quickly gained a great deal of notoriety.

Patronage by the State: Nobody can deny the fact that the rapid growth and spread of Buddhism in India happened due to royal patronage. Moreover, Buddha himself belonged also to a Kshatriya dynasty; some of the rulers such as: Bimbisara, Ajatasatru, Asoka, Kanishka and Harshavardhan promoted Buddhism and helped it spread throughout India and abroad. To promote Buddhism, emperor Asoka dispatched his son and daughter (Mahendra and Sanghamitra) to Sri Lanka.

Role of the Universities: A number of scholars have concluded that the well-known universities such as: Nalanda, Taxila, Pushpagiri, and Vikramsila played a vital role in the spread of Buddhism. Some of the historians agree with the fact that a large number of the students attending these universities, from various parts of India as well as abroad, were attracted towards Buddhism. Consequently, they shared the same commitment to promoting Buddhism in their respective native areas. The famous Chinese explorer Hiuen Tsang visited India and attended Nalanda University. Meanwhile, there were some of the famous and well-known scholars named as: Divakamitra, Chandrapala, Dharmapala and Shilabhadra dedicated to the spread of Buddhism in different parts of India.

Buddhist Monks and Sangha: The Buddhist monks and sangha played a vital role in spreading Buddhism and provided their invaluable support for the expansion of Buddhism. Likewise, among Buddha's disciples were Ananda, Sariputta, Maudgalayana, Sudatta, and Upali, and their commitment to spreading Buddhism throughout India was unwavering. In other words, throughout India, the Buddhist sangha expanded its branches, and these sections of Buddhist philosophy immediately drew the attention of the rural masses. They continued to live frugal lives as priests (bhikshu) or lay devotees (Upasakas), and their devotion encouraged more and more individuals to follow the Buddhism rapidly spread in many parts of India.

Buddhist Councils: The teaching and development of Buddhism in India were largely dependent on the Buddhist Councils. The First Buddhist Council convened at Rajagriha, the capital of Magadhan, in 487 BC following the death of Lord Buddha (Mahaparinirvana) under the guidance of the Mahakashyapa and Ajatasatru. It is said that about 500 Buddhists who had approached the meeting. Meanwhile, the Buddha's teachings were collected and organized into books called the 'Tripitaka', which were part of the Sutta Pitaka, Vinaya Pitaka, and Abhidharma Pitaka. Here Vinaya Pitaka depicted the principles and conventions of the sangha; Sutta Pitaka included the guidance of the

Buddha; the Abhidhamma Pitaka served as a reminder of the Buddhist style of thinking.

Lack of Strong Rivals: Since its inception in the sixth century B.C., Buddhism has had no adversaries to contend with. Despite Jainism's rise to prominence, some were turned off by its harsh rules. The evangelistic fervor of Buddhism was remarkably lacking in contemporary Hinduism. The masses lacked a reformer to cleanse them of their Brahmanical confidence and restore it to its ideal form. Christianity and Islam had not yet been developed. As a result, Buddhism gained unparalleled influence throughout India.

Contribution of Asoka: According to traditional Buddhist writings, emperor Asoka was a prominent early supporter of the samgha and he made a remarkable contribution to the growth and development of Buddhism. It is depicted that Asoka organized the first assembly of stupas in order to justify the relocation of the Buddha's relics into 84,000 stupas that he allegedly created around his kingdom. The 'Stupa at Sanchi' is arguably the best example of these. In order to clean the samgha, Asoka is also credited for hosting the 3rd Buddhist Council at Pataliputra in 250 BCE. Meanwhile, the sending of preachers to different countries around the world to spread Buddhism was another devastating effort of the emperor Asoka; he also carved various declarations on rocks and support points, many of which mention his Buddhist approach. The 'Bhabra' declaration, for instance, recommends seven pieces of literature for Buddhist priests and laypeople to read. The 'Kausambi' proclamation, which advises dissenting priests to return to lay life, contradicts the samgha. Asoka increased the size of a stupa dedicated to a former Buddha named 'Konagamana', according to the Nigilva carving. As we know that Buddha was born in Lumbini town the 'Rummindei' engraving highlights how Asoka reduced the town's revenue by one-eighth. Buddhism became a pan-Indian religion during the Asoka era.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Now we can point out that Buddhism is one of the world's major religions that originated in ancient India, and spread out through land and sea routes connecting China, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and India. The establishment of the silk route as a means of cross-cultural trade coincided with the rise of Buddhism in China and Central Asia. Actually, by dispatching monks and his family members to neighboring countries to disseminate the teachings of the Buddha, Ashoka stimulated the growth of Buddhism. Consequently, a wave of radical change caused Buddhism to spread both in India as well as abroad.

Today its resurgence is driven by Dr. B. R. Ambekar for 'Dalit Empowerment' and its current status as a relatively small but culturally crucial part of India. 'Four Noble Truths', 'Eightfold Path' and the due importance of 'Ahimsa' (non-violence) still today guide the human race at the global level. And also its iconic structures like the 'Sanchi Stupa' give us a message of universal brotherhood and compassion.

REFERENCES

- [1] Ahir, D. C. (2013). *Buddhism Declined in India: How and why*. Buddhist World Press, Delhi.
- [2] Chakravarti, Uma. (1987). *The Social Dimensions of Early Buddhism*. Oxford University Press, Delhi.
- [3] Chandra, L. (2003). *Buddhism in Global Perspective*. Somaiya Publications, New Delhi.
- [4] Gethin, R. (1998). *The Foundation of Buddhism*. Oxford University Press, Delhi.
- [5] Gombrich, R. F. (1971). *Buddhist Precepts and Practices: Traditional Buddhism in the Rural Highlands of Ceylon*. Routledge, London.
- [6] Joshi, S. (2017). "Vajrayana Buddhism and its Influence on Newar Practices." *Buddhist Research Journal*. Vol.15 (2).
- [7] Lama, T. (2022). *Festivals of Kathmandu Valley: A Culture and Religious Study*. Kathmandu University Press.
- [8] Pradhan, S. Y. (2024). "The Evolution of Buddhism in India and Tibet." *Asian Journal of Advance Research and Reports*. Vol.18 (8).
- [9] Ray, R. A. (1994). *Buddhist Saints in India: A Study in Buddhist Values and Orientations*. Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York.
- [10] Samuel, G. (2012). *Introducing Tibetan Buddhism*. Routledge, London.
- [11] Sharma, N. (2018). "The Evolution of Newar Buddhism in Kathmandu." *Asian Cultural Review*. Vol.11 (3).
- [12] Thapar, R. (1983). *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*. Oxford University Press, Delhi.