

# BUDDHISM AS A CULT OF ANCIENT ASSAM: A HISTORICAL STUDY

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**Abstract:** Buddhism has made an important contribution to the development of Indian culture and civilization. Protect against the Vedic religion led to the emergence of a number of new religious creeds, viz- Buddhism, Jainism, Ajivikatism and devotional creeds like Bhagavatism and Saivism. It is true that Buddhi has almost disappeared from its birth place, but it is still a popular religion and is counted among the eleven major religions of the world. The greatest contribution of Lord Buddha was the establishment of popular, easy, intelligible and simple religion. The Buddha prescribed a simple code of ethics for his devotees. From the very ancient times different system of religious belief have been prevalent in Ancient Assam, Buddhism also one of them. Assam is a land of Brahmanical religion from very Ancient time and rise of Buddhism was not a very easy way in that time. In that period kings of the land also were the staunch follower of vedic rites. Evidence of those times also recognized the Brahmanical culture of ancient Assam. But there are many references about the Buddha's religion and its prosperity in Kamarupa. The impact of Buddhism in the culture and life of the people of this land also noticeable. We are trying to spread a light on the development of Buddhism and its impact on the people of Assam.

Key words: Buddhism, Religion, contribution, culture, Impact

## Introduction:

Buddhism is a path of practice and spiritual development leading to insight into the true nature of reality. Buddhism began in India 2500 years ago and remains the dominant world religion in the East. It is a major global religion with a complex history and system of beliefs. It is the religion to about 300 million people around the world and it is a religion that encompasses a variety of traditions, beliefs and spiritual practices. Buddhist practices like meditation are means of changing oneself in order to develop the qualities of awareness,

kindness and wisdom. The course of Indian history was greatly influenced by the principles of Buddhism. The principle of Ahimsa affected the history greatly. Buddhism did not remain confine within India only. Many foreign travelers came to India and embrace Buddhism, thus friendly relations were established. India came to be known as the teacher of the world in field of spiritualism. It is very significant that Buddhism carried the trace of Indian culture and religion abroad. Thus the contribution of Buddhism to spread the Indian culture abroad is most praiseworthy. In the whole domain of cultural history of Assam the extent of the prevalence of Buddhism is highly controversial. Our essay is to throw a light on the evidences of Buddhism and the popularity of the religion in ancient Assam.

**Objectives:** The objectives of the study defined as follows-

- To see the origin of Buddhism in ancient Assam
- To see the various relics of Buddha find in different places of Assam
- To find out the contributions of Buddhism in the society and culture of Assam

**Methodology:** The methodology of the study is based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources like ancient remains, inscriptions are studied. The secondary sources like books, magazines etc. related to this topic are studied.

**Literature Review:**

Various literary works related to this topic are studied. There are different views between the scholars of ancient historians regarding this topic. We just try to find out the scope of related literature on this topic.

Barua, B.K. (2003) "The cultural History of Assam" is one of the most important book on Ancient Assam. Here the author discusses about the prevalent form of Buddhism and he states that there is no such evidence which can prove the prosperity of Buddhism in the region. In his book author mainly focuses the later form of Buddhism.

Barpujari, H.K.(2004),"The Comprehensive History of Assam",vol.I discuss about the political, cultural and economic history of ancient Assam. Here the author

discuss about Buddhism and its prosperity in the region. The author mention the various evidences relating to the religion and give a reference about the various iconographic representation of Buddhism found in Assam in that period.

Choudhury, P.C.(1959),”History of The Civilization of The People of Assam”, refers about Buddhism and he strongly believe that the religion prevailed in Kamarupa long before Yuan Tsang’s visit. He argues that the prevalence of the faith is also supported by the existing ruins of temples and icons of Buddha.

Gait, E. (2006),”A History of Assam” mainly discuss about the ancient polity and medieval history of Assam. Here the author silent about the religious institution of ancient period.

Dutta, S.(2006),”Buddhism in North East India” here the author discuss about Buddhism in depth. The author here tried to focus the popularity of Buddhism in the different states of North East India.

Sasanananda, S.(1986)”History of Buddhism in Assam” is an important book to know the ancient Buddhism in Assam. Here the author references various writings by other writers about Buddhism. But the author does not deal the recent discoveries of Assam relating to Buddhism.

### Practice Of Buddhism in Ancient Assam:

Towards the close of Upanishad period, the rise of Buddhism in Northern India was an important development on the religious field of the region. Kamarupa was not included in the Asokan Empire and any single edict of Asoka not has been discovered here. It is difficult to believe that Kamarupa or Pragjyotisha could remain free from this religion. It is opined by the scholars of ancient Assam that the people of the land worshipped *Devas* and did not believe Buddhism but, Buddhism was a prevalent form of the region . Taranatha’s History of Buddhism in India has been made reference regarding the prevalence of Buddhism in Kamarupa. Taranatha mentions that this cult was prevalent in the region even before the reign of Bhaskarvarman. Here Taranatha mention the name of a Sun worshipper ‘Siddhas’ who built a vihara called Mahachaitya. Taranatha refers the name of Buddhist teacher Dhitika , who was responsible for converting the people

of Ancient Assam to Buddhism. Arya Dhitika was flourished between Ajatsatru and Asoka and in this reference we can believe that Buddhism was a prevalent form as early as 3rd cen. B. C. Another personality named Asvabhava, who preaches the Mahayana Doctrine of Buddhism in Kamarupa was also mentioned in the history of Taranatha. But the later evidence does not speak the prevalence form of the cult. Because the time period of Asvabhava and the visit of Hieun Tsang was not a big difference. But we have not found any reference in this regards in the accounts of Hieun Tsang. Another evidence made in the Kalahan's Rajtarangini about the prevalence of Buddhism in Pre- Bhaskarvarman's period. The king of Kashmir Meghavahana married Amritaprabha, the daughter of one Varmana king, Balavarman. Amritaprabha, the princes of Kamarupa constructed a lofty Vihara named Amritabhavan, for the benefit of the Vikshus. One Stonpa, the spiritual guru of Balavarman, who hailed from Leh, also built a stupa called Leh Stonpa. This episode of Amritaprabha support the prevalence of Buddhist religion in 5<sup>th</sup> cen. A. D. because, Meghavahana of Kashmir flourished in that period. The king of Kamarupa Bhaskarvarman, was not a Buddhist. But he treated Buddhist sramanas with respect. He Chinese pilgrim Heuen Tsang stayed at the capital city of Kamarupa during the time of Bhaskarvarman. He states that the king establishes toleration among the various sects. Here seems complete harmony among the followers of the different religions. King Bhaskarvarman attended the Assembly at Kanauj and Maha-Moksa parishad at Prayag with Heuen Tsang. The Assembly at Kanauj was a Buddhist convocation, and was held to give utmost publicity and exhibit the refinement of the Doctrine of Mahayana Buddhism. Besides Buddha the image of Surya and Siva were also worshiped in this assembly. The active participation of the king in these ceremonies enlightened the spirit of toleration maintained by the king of Assam. After the proceeding of Prayag convocation, when Heuen tsang desired to leave for China, Bhaskarvarman himself proposing to built hundreds monasteries in his kingdom on the masters behalf (Hwui Li). The clear reference about the prevalence of Buddhism found mentions in the inscriptions of Indrapala and Dharmapala. Indrapala's first inscription mention a charter (sasana) connected with the name of Tathagata. In the inscription of Bhaskarvarman mention of the word Dharma

have led some scholar to believe that Buddhism did exist in Assam at an early period.

### Tantric form of Buddhism in Ancient Assam:

The later form of Buddhism called Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism, a mixture of monastic philosophy, magic and erotics, with a small admixture of Buddhist ideas. Vajrayana is an extention of Mahayana Buddhism since it differs in its practices, rather than it philosophy. There are different views as to where in the Indian sub-continent Vajrayana began. Some scholars believe that it originated in Bengal, others claiming it began in Uddiyana, some believe that it is in the Swat Valley in Pakistan, or in South India. Nalanda University in Northern India became a centre for the development of Vajrayana theory. India continue as a source of leading Vajrayana practice up until the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Buddhism had mostly died out in India by the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. because of the pressure from invading Islamic armies. By that time the vast majority of the practices were also available in Tibet, where they were preserved until recently.

Tantric Buddhism came into existence in the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D., there exist convincing evidences of the prevalence of the later form of Buddhism since that time. In the grant of Indrapala which we have mention above the word Tathagata , occurs in connection with the donated land. P.C. Choudhury finds a probable suggestion that 'near the land, donated by the king, existed a Buddhist Chaitya over some relics of Buddha, for which the endowment was formerly made. The Sadhanamala mentions four sacred spots of Vajrayanist, viz, Kamakhya, Srihatta, Purnagiri and Uddiyana. The identification of Uddiyana, according to the authority of Tibetan work Pag Sam Jon Zang it is the place where Tantric Buddhism first developed. But Uddiyana can't be identified with Kamarupa. Regarding Purnagiri B. Bhattacharya says that it must be somewhere near Kamakhya and Srihatta. According to Kalika Purana, when Lord Siva has ben wandering with the deadbody of Sati, her legs fall out Kamarupa, the breast Jalandhara, the shoulder and the neck upon the Purnagiri and then the head on the limit of Kamarupa. These whole regions belong to the East. The most interesting example of some sacred place being visited by the Buddhist and also the followers of Brahmanical cult is provided by the Hayagriva temple at Hajo. Even today this temple was visited by

the Buddhist from China, Bhutan, Tibet, Ladakh and they recognized it as the holy place of pilgrimage.

The monks who were responsible for the development of the cult were known as Siddhas. The Siddhas associated with Kamarupa in some way indicates the prevalence of Vajrayana in Ancient Assam. The prominent Siddhas were Saraha, Nagarjuna, Savaripa, Luipa, Padmavaira etc. are somehow connected with Assam. It is stated that the eighty four Buddhist Siddha Acharya were in some way associated with Kamarupa and indicates the prevalence of Vajrayana form in Kamarupa. It is evident that Nagarjuna introduced into original Buddhism in the first century A. D. and this form was later on known as Mahayana Buddhism. The Mahayana Buddhism associated a new phase and it developed during the early Gupta period. The form gradually developed into Tantrikism from the time of Pala dynasty. It ultimately spread into Kamarupa and established for itself a stronghold in Kamakhya. It is evident that under the influence of Rahulabhadra, king Ratnapala was converted to Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism. Sir Edward Gait's supposition that Tantrikism originated in Assam. He states that, the Kamarupa king, probably Brahmapala, adopted Tantrikism as their tenet and Kamakhya soon began a renowned centre of Tantric sacrifices, mysticism and sorcery. The most interesting example of the some sacred places being visited by the Buddhist and the followers of the Brahmanical cult is provided by the Hayagriva Madhava temple at Hajo. Even today the Buddhists from Bhutan, Tibet, Laddakh and south western China visit the Hayagriva Madhava temple at Hajo annually and recognize it as the holy place of pilgrimage. The Tantric form of Buddhism had emerged as popular religious belief in the first millennium A.D. in Assam. Hajo and Kamakhya was the prominent centre of Tantric Buddhism in the region. It is believed that Hajo is the cremation ground of Buddha, because there a Tibetan inscription bears a Buddhist mantra meaning "the gem of the lotus rests here". In fact Buddhist pilgrims from different regions visit the temple of Hajo considering as a Buddhist shrine. The Nagaon region also emerged as a popular seat of Tantric Buddhism.

## Architectural Remains of Buddhism in Assam:

There are many ancient shrine of Buddhism have been found in different regions of Assam. These all shrines prove the popularity of the religion in Ancient Assam. The shrine known as Medhghar situated at Chayagaon in the Kamarupa district an important centre of ancient Buddhism. We have found many shrine of Buddhism in Goalpara district in the later part of Pala period. The stones found from Goalpara and Dekdhoa the sign of dharmachakra inscribe. K. L. Barua has reffered about the two representation of Buddhism .Here Buddha seated in *Bhumisparsa Mudra*. Similar votive in terracotta have been found in Bengal, Burma and Bihar. The matel images of Buddha have been found from the Narakasura hoard. The figure recognized as *Dhyani* Buddha. The concept of *Bodhisatva Avalokiteswara* and the identification of the God have been cleared by the presence of Dhyani Buddha. Goddess Tara, who is held to be the supreme in the Buddhist python. The miniature metal images of the goddess have been found from the Narakasura Hill. All these images may be belongs to the 9th-10<sup>th</sup> century. Another image of *Mahapratisara* discovered in excavation at Guwahati and also seen at Bangladesh (Decca) of 11<sup>th</sup> cen. A.D. Another Goddess Chunda, as Buddhist deity have been found in Narakasura hoard. The important places of Buddhism in Ancient Assam are Hajo, Nilachal Hill, Singri, and Tezpur. P. C. Choudhury states that most probably some Hindu temples were constructed in the places of old Buddhist *math*.

## Impact of Buddhism in the society and culture of Assam :

The greatest contribution of Lord Buddha was the establishment of popular, easy, intelligible and simple religion. Buddhist thought and edicts influenced the people of Kamarupa. Revival of Neo- Assamese Vaishnavism is greatly indebted to the prevalent Buddhism in the land. The *Satra* which was an important element of Vaishnava institution and the fact is that the *Satras* was constructed exactly in the same pattern of the Buddhist shrine. It is likely that the tradition of *satras* was borrowed from prevailing Buddhism in Assam. In many Assamese folk literatures also we have found the influence of Buddhist ideas. The doctrine of Buddhism to do welfare in the society and the eight fold path of living. There are many folk

songs in Assamese literature and many of them influence by the philosophy of Buddhist ideas like *deh bisarar geet*, *dohas* etc. Direct or indirect influence of Buddhism thus infiltrated into Assamese society in various ways. It is quite clear that Buddhism came to ancient Assam and prevalent as an important cult in the region from very early time. There are many ancient shrines of Buddhism in Assam and also literary evidences and also the general point of view of Assamese people which was influenced by Buddhism. The reincarnation and Bhaktibad theory was borrowed from Buddhism and propagated in India as Vaishnavism. Kaviguru Ravindranath Tagore also stated “Shankar’s philosophy arose in conflict with or with the help of Buddhism”.

### Conclusion :

The cult of Buddhism was prevalent in Ancient Assam from very ancient times. The kings of Kamarupa were the follower of Brahmanical religion but they followed the conciliatory policy or the policy of toleration. The people of the region perform Vedic rituals and side by side perform devotional rites of Buddhism. The Tantric Buddhist traditions appear more likely in the region and the kings of Kamarupa received Tantric *diksa*. But it is evident that they also remained as the follower of Brahmanical faith. Recent archaeological findings has testified about the prevalence of Buddhism. The region comprising Suryapahar, Pancharatna in Goalpara, Bhaitbari near Tura in Garopahar were the important centre of trade route . This trade route gave the evidence of strong Buddhist influence from the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C. The recent excavation in the region of Tura have found a Buddhist Stupa which gave the weight about the point of prevalence of early Buddhism. The close connection of Assam and Kashmir through the Buddhist faith found in the recorded in the history of Kashmir. Taranatha’s History of Buddhism records that Buddhism continued to flourished in the eastern countries which included Kamarupa. There are various archaeological relics of Buddhism in Kamarupa which is sufficient to prove that Buddhism was a popular religion in the region and have a proper place in the history of ancient Assam.

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