

Religious Reformations of Odisha: Jainism, Buddhism, Mahima and Other Cults



Suchitra Das

Co-ordinator & Jain Chair,
Deptt of Culture Studies,
Utkal University of Culture,
Bhubaneswar

Abstract

Society is defined as the collection of individuals who lived with a shared goal, sense of values tempered by the feeling of love, mutuality and sacrifice. Religious institutions come into being to address the needs or promote the well-being of the collective body i.e. society. 'Protestantism' is symbolic in its connotation as it stands for any reform within a religious fold. It comes in the form of opposition or protest against a decadent religious order. It is born out of certain exigencies which make it necessary to perch a religion of its irreligious or non-religious components. It goes without saying that Buddhism and Jainism as a religious movement has tremendous impact on the socio-cultural and religious life of the Indians in general and Odisha in particular. The socio-religious life of the people of Odisha is significantly influenced under the sway and sweep of Jainism and Buddhism.

Keywords: Protestantism, Socio-Religious Life, Reform, Values, Transition, Buddha and Mahavir, Mahima.

Introduction

Today in the 21st century the globe is overtaken by crisis. The crisis is not due to dearth of economic resources but is essentially crisis in human psyche. It is essentially a crisis of values. The Science and Technology have empowered man. They are rich in mechanisms but silent about the purposes to walk the path. It is necessary to have a sense of goal. It is the goal which imparts the sense of direction. Hence it is necessary that scientific and technological developments have to go hand-in-hand with cultivation of values because it is the values that bring in the sense of right and wrong, desirable and undesirable. This is true not only of human progress but also of the society. Society is not mere togetherness of individuals. Society is defined as the collection of individuals who lived with a shared goal, sense of values tempered by the feeling of love, mutuality and sacrifice.

Ironically, social or religious institutions come into being to address the needs or promote the well-being of the collective body i.e. society. But with the passage of time they tend to degenerate and proved to be the cause of discord and degeneration. Society passes through period of transition (*yugasamdhi*) when the time honored norms and institutions proved to be self-defeating. Such critical junctures witness the advent of renaissance men in form of masters who show the beacon light to help the humanity find the way out of darkness. The term 'Protestantism' is symbolic in its connotation as it stands for any reform within a religious fold. It comes in the form of opposition or protest against a decadent religious order. It is born out of certain exigencies which make it necessary to perch a religion of its irreligious or non-religious components.

A close look into the history of Human Civilization reveals recurrent periods of rise and fall. This is true not only of civilizations but also of great religions which had their heydays and doomsdays i.e., days of growth and expansion followed by times of degeneration and decadence. Needless to say that it is the masters adepts or enlightened ones who founded religions in order to help people to move on the path of truth (Satya) and righteousness (Dharma). In nut-shell every religion aims at bringing about transformation in the individual and social psyche by advocating the message of love, mutuality, tolerance and sacrifice. These are the cardinal values which all religions of the world share and seek to propagate. But the religions greatly differ from one another in respect of the beliefs, myths, rites, rituals do's and don'ts. The latter constitute the outer aspect of religion whereas the values constitute the essence. But in course of time the outer aspects are mistaken to be the essence. As a result, the followers of a religion consider themselves to be different from others, this

makes room for religious fundamentalism. The sacred beliefs degenerate into dogmas. The practices or formalities which are supposed to liberate the people grow oppressive and sow seeds of mutual hatred and intolerance. A time comes when the conscientious followers raise voice of revolt against prevailing practices and urge the co-followers to follow the essence to remember. They are the reformers and revolutionaries who spearhead the movement by protest. They are initially misunderstood by the contemporaries as heretics. But in the long run, people by and large perceive the distinction between the universal essences. Such notes of revolt within the fold of Catholic Church which was directed against the supremacy of Pope is known as the protestant movement. But Protestantism as a symbolic meaning stands for any of within the fold which came into being in order to purify or purge a religion of its irreligious or non-religious components.

Jainism & Buddhism are no doubt reformation movements initiated by their founders in order to reform Hinduism. They were not alien forces which questioned the Hindu orthodoxy but were verily forces of revolt which arose within Hinduism against the degenerate practices and beliefs which were responsible for exploitation of mass by the minority in dividend society on the caste. The minority arrogated themselves as the privileged group in respect of religious practices and spiritual attainment.

Buddha and Mahavir were contemporaries. They came in a time when there was social decadence around the globe awaiting a period of revival Confucius in China, Zoraster in Persia, Buddha and Mahavir in India were the pioneers in global renaissance. It is noteworthy that the Indian renaissance in 5th century B.C. is a part of global renaissance when there was awakening in different parts of the globe even though the countries and continents were isolated and distanced from each other without there being any means of communication or mutual interaction. This goes to corroborate the thesis of collective mind. As the individual mind is subject to change either for the better or for the worst the social psyche is also subject to the process of refinement or degeneration. When these process of degeneration reaches an extreme point masters and seers appear in the scene and give new ideas and show the light to people engulfed in darkness of dogmas, superstitions and practices that are detrimental to collective wellbeing.

It goes without saying that Buddhism and Jainism as a religious movement has tremendous impact on the socio-cultural and religious life of the Indians in general and Odisha in particular. One finds a clear shift from speculative thinking to ethical living. The mission of Mahavir and Buddha was not to present grand philosophical systems as offered in orthodox schools. Rather their mission was to build up a strong ethical base on which the human society can make real progress. Though they differ in respect of the details underlined the need to build up love, compassion and service. There was a clear protest against the Vedic rituals, animal sacrifice brahminical supremacy and casteistic exploitation. As a result the superiority of Brahmins and kshyatriya suffered a great set back. The revolt against the formalities of

Vedic rituals are also sounded in Upanishads. In Prasna Upanishads the dogs are found to recite hymns and engaged in priestly activities.

... Now those, verily, who worship, thinking 'sacrifice and pious acts are our work', they Win only the human world. They certainly Return again.....

But it took concrete form in the philosophy of Buddhism and Jainism. Buddha's silence about metaphysical questions was the clear indication of that he was against metaphysics as he cleared the ethical regeneration of society.

Jainism, on the other have struck a note against metaphysical absolutistic in form of Anekantavada and Syadvada which point to relative knowledge of nature of all human beings with the explicit suggestion that one has to appreciate each others view point which in empirical sphere means co-existence.

Buddhism also makes a fundamental departure from the classical Indian tradition in formulation of the notion of self. The 'No Soul Theory' (Anatmavada) seeks to repudiate the idea of a permanent self (Atman) which is beyond change. Since everything change is universal of everything exists for a moment the idea of a immortal should be misnomer. The so-called self is nothing but aggregation of five components (Skandhas) namely, Rupa, rasa, vedana, sanjna. While denying static notion of Self they offer a dynamic interpretation of self. Though there is no soul there is rebirth. Rebirth is interpreted in terms of continuity of lives. The thesis of Supernatural Agency which forms the core of the Vedic metaphysics doesn't find a place either in Buddhism or in Jainism. The Jainas glorify Jinahood as the highest state of attainment whereas Buddhists interpret *nirvana* as the cessation of the series. The notion of heaven and hell are conspicuous by their absence. Liberation can be attained here and now by self-effort. Buddha remarks O! brethren, chalk out your own liberation. Bondage is trade to the ignorance of the individual. Therefore, liberation can be attained by personal effort neither by divine grace nor through priestly mediation. Buddha's silence in response to ten metaphysical questions, simply means that theoretical speculation about reality is irrelevant to following a moral life. What is important is not 'knowing' but 'being'. The Jainas underline the need of following a life of love, compassion and absolute non-violence in thought, word and action. Buddhism, on the other hand, shows the midway between extremes of self-indulgence and self-denial by showing the middle path which is considered as a sure means for attainment of *nirvana*. In the then times the four-fold distinction in the social hierarchy degenerated into heredity, as a result the Brahmins occupied the highest rung in the social hierarchy. Brahmins were privileged to preside in the Vedic rituals and have the monopoly to interpret scriptures. This led to increasing alienation of the non-Brahmins from the mainstream. The elitist mindset of the Brahmins led to caste rigidity and exploitation of the lower strata by the Brahmins, Buddhism and Jainism were explicit revolt against the Brahminical supremacy and stressed that every man is potentially equal with every other no social status quo was

admitted. As every individual has the inherent potency to attain the highest state the anti-absolute and egalitarian spirit of the two-protestant religions pleaded in favour of peaceful co-existence and social brotherhood. Though the concept of universal fraternity (*Vasudheiva Kutumbakam*) was theoretically envisioned in the Vedas there were efforts to give it a shape in form of concrete societal facts and realities. The revolt against the Vedic orthodoxy became from pronounced as the authority of Vedas was called into question. The words and deeds of the masters remained as ethical paradigm for the people to follow.

Veda was considered to be infallible as it was thought to be impersonal (Apuresaya) containing to the divine revelations. Any attempt to question the authority of Vedas was deemed as heretical. The words and deeds of Tirthankaras and Buddha came to be codified as canonical scriptures of respective traditions. What is secured popularity of the protestant religion is that the teachings were available in the language of the people i.e. prakruta whereas the Vedic literature was in Sanskrit to which the common man could not have reasonable access. This also gave a jolt to the supremacy of the priests who were privileged to interpret the scriptures, organize and preside over the rituals. In Buddhism and Jainism attainment of Godhood was considered as birthright and there was no room for priestly mediation for attainment. People irrespective of caste, colour and creed has access to participate in the religious order. So the religion became more secular and sacred. It is worth nothing that Buddhism and Jainism inaugurated the Sramana tradition. The practice of animal sacrifice and the associated rituals patronized by the Kshatriyas received a set back in form of the movement led by the Sramans. In philosophy and practice of the Sramana provided a clear antithesis to the autonomy of the Vedas as they relegating the speculative theory and scriptural knowledge to the background. A closer view and analysis of idea espoused by the protestant faiths amply revealed that they were not revolts from without but genuine attempts to read Hinduism of its non-religious elements.

Needless to say that every system of thought and institutions has its heyday and days of decadence as well. That explains why there have been reformation movements when a particular system, a particular faith or institutions tend to degenerate. Buddhism, Jainism had their genesis to reform the decadent socio-religious systems and sought to infuse values in the socio-religious thinking and patterns of living. Interestingly, Odisha has been a meeting ground of the protestant religious movements spearheaded by the Buddhists, Jains. It is not difficult to see how the socio-religious life of the people of Odisha is significantly influenced under the sway and sweep of Jainism and Buddhism. The idea and ideology of poet philosopher Bhima Bhoi went a long way in contributing to change in thinking and living of the people of Odisha. With Buddhist and vedantic cross currents at the background Mahima Dharma, the socio-religious movement spearheaded by Bhima Bhoi was essentially directed against social discrimination, religious dogma and was a clarion call

to people to imbibe the unity of God-hood and brotherhood of man.

References

1. Banarjee, P, Early History of Jainism, Indo Asian Culture, New Delhi, January,1970
2. Banarjee, R.D, History of Orissa Vol. I (1970), Calcutta.
3. Banarjee, Satya Ranjan, Jainism in Different States of India, Jain Bhawan, P-25, Kalakar Street, Calcutta-7, 2001.
4. Chanchreek, K.L, Jain Mahesh, Jainism Rishavadeva to Mahavir, Shree Publishers & Distributor, 2003.
5. Chanchreek, K.L, Jain Mahesh, Jain Religion History & Tradition Shree Publishers & Distributor.
6. Chatterjee, Asim Kumar, A Comprehensive History of Jainism (Upto 1000 A.D) published by Firm K & M Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta-12
7. Das Suchitra & Dash Pratima, Jainism in Twin-City Paschima
8. Deo, S. B, History of Jain Monachism, Bhattacharya, N.N, Ed: Jainism and Prakrit in Ancient and Medieval India, New Delhi 1994
9. Devendra Muni, Jain Religion and Philosophy, Udaipur , Sri Tarak Guru Jain Granthalaya, 1985
10. Forbes Geraldine -The new Cambridge History of India, Women in Modern India : Cambridge University Press, 1998, Reprint 1999
11. Jacobi, Hermann Metaphysics & Ethics of Jains
12. Meheta M.L, Jain Culture, Varanasi, 1969
13. Mohapatra, K. N, Sri Kharavela (Oriya), Bhubaneswar, 1961.
14. Mohapatra, R.P, Jain Monuments of Orissa
15. Patnaik S.K., Buddhist Heritage of Odisha, Mayur
16. Panigrahi, K.C, History of Orissa r
17. Sahu, L.N, Jainism in Orissa
18. Sahu N.K., Buddhism In Orissa, Utkal University, 1958,
19. Sangave Vilas Adinath, Facets of Jainology
20. Sharma C. D, A Critical Survey of Indian Philosophy, Motilal Banarasi Das, New Delhi, 1994
21. Sogani K.C, Epitome of Jainism, Sholapur, 1967
22. Stevenson. S, The Heart of Jainism, New Delhi,1970
23. Tatia, N, Studies in Jain Philosophy