



## **MIXED PRACTICES OF RELIGION IN EARLY ANDHRA 300 BC TO 400 AD**

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### **Abstract**

The devotional Theism that led the Mahayanism to the Tantric system of Vajrayanism, led the theistic cults of Hinduism as well to that form of religion but not to such gruesome and obscene practices, as the former. It is interesting to note that the objects of Tantric worship in Hinduism were mostly the same divinities that came into it from Mahayana Buddhism. But, it has to be clearly borne in mind that the Devotionalism and its logical consequence, the Tantricism.

**Keywords:** Puranic Hinduism, Dharma Sunyata, Maha Sanghikas, Satavahana

### **Introduction**

The *Jataka* stories narrate a number of instances of Buddha having taken the forms of such noble animals in his several births in the past. These stories suggest the relation of Buddhism with several primitive popular cults of the time, friendly or otherwise, and accepting at the first instance and eventually absorbing them. It has to be borne in mind that these developments took place only after the Buddhist philosophy transformed into Buddhist religion, in its bid to make itself acceptable to and spread among the masses. Just like the Buddha integrated diverse schools of thought, the Buddhism as a religion absorbed a number of streams of popular cults and strengthened into a mighty river that flowed all over the country. It is necessary to note that even Brahmanical ritualism, like any other religious system and especially the Buddhism, turned into a popular religion, by absorbing those popular cults and progressed in its own way, produced its own mythology and systems of worship. The theistic developments and systems of worship, either they were Buddhist or Brahmanical, must have been the contributions of the popular cults that were coming down from primitive times rather than innovations by their respective intellectuals, the results of adopting and absorbing those popular cults

### **Objectives:**

1. To identify Buddhism in Early Andhra
2. To identify Hindu Influence on Buddhism
3. To identify Royal patronage to Buddhism
4. To identify different sects in Buddhism

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that history of Buddhism in Andhradesa and its contribution to the culture of the land and people has been one of the most important aspects of the history of the country in general, ever since the Buddhist stupa-sites at Amaravati, Bhattiprolu, Jaggayyapeta and others came to light, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The expansion of Buddhism into the country is generally considered as a socio-religious revolution against the decadent Vedic Brahmanism. Scholars used to argue that people were thoroughly dissatisfied with the latter, for its social order based on *varnasrama-dharma*, mistakenly identifying it with caste system, in which the Brahmans claimed superiority over other social sections. Besides, the Vedic religion, supposed to have, consisted only the sacrificial rituals, accompanied by animal slaughter, in whose



efficacy people were increasingly losing confidence. As against it, as the scholars hold, the Buddhism preached self-improvement by means of a simple moral code, without invoking for the benefices of any external godhead and its propitiation by means of rituals. They applaud the Buddhism as a “simple religion of self-improvement, which tried to pull down all artificial social distinctions”, by promising Nibbana (Nirvana in Sanskrit) or the Final Release, to all with no caste or class distinctions, commensurate with this admiration, they look at Brahmanism and the Brahman community with askance, that these had unlimited hatred towards Buddhism and fought determinedly till it was expelled from the country. Much of these points of view and conventional constructions are eccentric, being more than reality, besides being the results of confusion in the minds of scholars, whether their approach to Buddhism was as a philosophy, or a religion. As such, they often denigrate the Brahmanism and the Puranic Hinduism under the impression of critically analyzing them, by comparing their religious beliefs and practices with Buddhist philosophy, as if they had no philosophical basis.

Scholars usually consider that the Andhra's, who were essentially non-Aryans, not very much favorable to Vedic Brahmanism from a very early time and received the Doctrine as early as the lifetime of the Buddha himself. They rely on the account of a Brahman teacher Bavari, mentioned in *Suttanipata*, of the Pali canonical literature. The narration goes like, Bavari, who had his hermitage on the banks of the river Godavari, in the Asmaka country, came to know that Buddha propounded the way to Nirvana and sent his disciples to ascertain the truth in the news.

However, the thirteenth Rock Edict of Asoka testifies to the fact that the Andhras, within the Imperial realms, were followers of *dhamma* as a result of his missionary activity. The *Kathavatthu* of the Pali canon gives that the Andhakas, who were the same as Andhras, played leading role in the third Buddhist Council at Pataliputra, convened by Asoka. They played significant role in bringing about the Mahasanghika revolution in the Sangha and in evolving Mahayana doctrine.

A fragment of a pillar inscription, discovered at Amaravati in recent decades, is rightly supposed to belong to the Mauryan emperor and several other inscriptions in Mauryan Brahmi were recovered during the excavations at the stupa-site, together with the Northern Black Pottery and punch-marked coins of the time. These pieces of evidence well testify the Mauryan contact with the region, obviously because of its economic advancement and thus to have come into the political and economic network of the Mauryan imperialism. At the same time, they speak of the cultural contacts that Andhradesa maintained with regions on the Gangetic plains, where the Buddhism was rapidly spreading. It is thus clear that the Andhra's became well proficient in the Buddhist philosophy as early as the third century B.C., as they could play important role in the Third Buddhist Council and in the evolution of the Mahasanghika-Mahayana schism.

Eastern coastal strip of the Deccan had a number of popular settlements of various tribes such as the Sabaras, Pujindas, Nagas, Yakshas, etc. They were emerging economically wealthy and able to carry on overseas trade, while their chieftains were becoming politically powerful. Raja Kubheraka, known from the Bhattiprolu casket inscriptions was one such potentate. Even though, tangible evidence is not forthcoming, there need not by any doubt that renowned Buddhist sites of early Andhradesa, stood at flourishing urban centers of



commercial and industrial progress and thus, maintained contact with different parts of the Indian subcontinent as well as the outside world. As such, they could come in contact with the social and religious developments taking elsewhere, to receive them and transmit to other centers in their turn.

Several concepts and doctrines of philosophy and religious practices were undergoing metamorphosis during the time and thus criticism was not always external, but more often it was internal. Again, the philosophical debates were intellectual exercises, limited to scholarly circles in the societies, while religions and cults were always popular, less affected by them, if not least. People hardly take interest in such intellectual exercises, persisting in their customary forms of religion that could satisfy them, as they were always more serious about their own business, of pursuing their professions of the arts and crafts as well as commerce in their daily routine of life.

Scholars of conventional mindset in the past viewed the triumph of Brahmanism in the rise of Satavahanas in Deccan and in the spread of their hegemony eventually into Andhradesa. It was because the latter rose to power along with the Sungas in the North, on the ruins of the Mauryan empire and the scholars used to feel that such political struggles and revolts usually take place out of greed for power, would have taken place out of religious intolerance. The Sunga king Pusyamitra, who assassinated the last Mauryan king Brihadratha, was a Brahman and he is known to have performed two *Asvamedhas*; and so the unfortunate Mauryan king came to be considered as a Buddhist, from the example of his illustrious ancestor, Asoka. In the same spirit, the Satavahanas are believed to be Brahmans by their social status and thus characterized as opponents to Buddhism inasmuch as the Mauryan Empire that patronized it, under Asoka.

An inscription in one of the caves at Nasik states that it was excavated by a *sramana*, who was a *mahamatra* in the service of the king Kapha, of Satavahana *kula*<sup>14</sup> It makes clear that Buddhist *sramarias*, literally meaning monks, entered in the kingdom of the Satavahanas and the kings permitted them to execute the excavation of rock-cut *viharas* for the benefit of Buddhist monks. Even the Nasik inscription that extols the Brahmanical disposition of Gautamiputra Satakarni, reports that the queen-mother, Bala Sri, got it excavated in order to make it the gift for the benefit of Bhadrayanalya sect of Buddhist Sangha. Her royal-son, bowed before the command of the queen and got it excavated, out of his respect to his mother.

Vasishthiputra Siri Camtamula, his father and predecessor as well as the founder of Ikshvaku rule at Vijayapuri. The inscriptions refer to him as performer of *Asvamedha*, *Vajapeya*, *Agnisthoma* and several other Vedic sacrifices and a devotee of Virupaksa and Mahasena. The fact that the royal ladies respectfully remembered the king, who appears at first sight as an ardent follower of Brahmanism and thus a bitter hater of Buddhism according to the conventional parameters at the time the royal ladies were making gifts for the renovation of the *Mahacaitya*, Some historians in the past believed that the Ikshvaku kings were ardent Buddhists and even oppressors of Brahmanism. Thus, B.V. Krishnarao mistakenly identified an event, carved on a stone slab of the *Mahacaitya*, as the scene of Virapurisadatta trampling Sivalinga and thus insultingly rejecting Saivism". The fact that nowhere in the inscriptions, he was described as a Buddhist, militated his conclusions and further, the event depicted on the stone slab had been correctly identified as a scene from



Mandhata Jataka, of the king Mandhata visiting the world of serpents and defeating their king.

A recently discovered inscription at Rentala, in close proximity to Nagarjunakonda, records the gift made by a merchant, in the company of his whole family consisting of his wife, sons and daughters-in-law and grandchildren, to the Upendragiri-Vardhamana, obviously a Buddhist establishment.

Buddhist sangha came to be divided into eighteen schools, but broadly into Mahayana and Hinayana, with several sub-divisions within them. Without going deep into their doctrinal differences, it is sufficient to note that the Mahayana doctrines developed out of innovative thinking and convictions of some monks, who felt the "simple religion of self-improvement," of observing a moral code, was insufficient to convince people without some corresponding philosophical doctrine. They held that the knowledge that an *arhat* could obtain was not perfect and the aspiration to attain *nirvana* was nothing less than narrow-minded selfishness. An *arhat* was one whom the Hinayana schools considered as one who had conquered the worldly allurements (*asravas*) and thus attachment to worldly life; that he could avoid *karma* and *karmaphala* and thus attained *sambuddhi*, or the Supreme Knowledge and the state of *nirvana*.

They advocate, on the other hand, that the *arhat* had yet to realize the essencelessness of *dharma*, by removing the cover of knowledge, *nirvana*, which envelops the Supreme Truth and gives a false impression as if it were the true knowledge. The Supreme Truth is permanent and immutable and its essence is the Buddha himself, in whom no *dharma* (literally meaning quality) exists and thus the Highest Knowledge was realizing *Dharma-Sunyata*<sup>20</sup>. Thus they hold that attainment of the state of Buddha, personification of *sunyata*, beyond all *dharmas*, was the real state of *Nirvana*.

Thus, the inscriptions at Nagarjunakonda describe the Buddha as *Gandhahadi*, (*Gandha-Hasti*, in Sanskrit), meaning Scent-Elephant, *Mahagani-vasabha*, (*Mahagarii-visabha*) the Great Bull in the gana, implying that he was the greatest of the people of Sakya-gana. Literary traditions describe the Buddha usually as Sakya-simha, the Lion among the Sakyas. It is well-known that there were primitive cults of worshipping lion, elephant and bull, among others and figures of these sacred animals crown the Asoka pillars, representing the Buddha.

It needs no emphasis to say that these animals are held sacred in Hinduism as well, associated with Saivism as well as Vaishnavism, in different ways. Beginning with Indra of the Vedic mythology, whom the Buddhist mythology refers to as Sakka (a Prakrit form of the Sanskrit term, Sakra, which is a synonym to Indra), elephant, horse and cow (of course, the bull belongs to the same species as cow) were held as his possessions of wealth. The bull was held with special significance in the Indus culture as well and these animals command sanctity and importance in the Vedic culture. The same esteem for these animals is celebrated in the epic-puranic literature, in the famous episode of *sagar-manthan*, in which these animals are said to have emanated from the Ocean of Milk and came to be the possessions of Indra. Elephants are associated with goddess Lakshmi as the famous Rigvedic hymn; *Sri-sukta* describes her and continued in her sculptural representations in the form of Gajalakshmi.



The elephant worship in Deccan and south India, especially the coastal Andhradesa transformed in Hinduism as an important sect, called Ganapatya, centered on the worship of Ganapati as the principal deity. Originally a Fertility God, He is worshipped in the Puranic Hinduism under belief that He bestows all Knowledge. He is considered in fact as a bachelor-god, yet had two wives, called *Siddhi* and *Buddhi*, but the epic-puranic literature is relatively silent about these goddesses and His marriage with them does not take place in the annual celebrations as in the case of most of Hindu gods and goddesses. As such, it is tempting to suggest that these goddesses were conceptual personifications of attaining *Sambuddhi* being overcome by compassion (*Karuna*). It has been explained above that Buddha was considered as the chief in *gana*, or *ganas* and the significance of Ganapati in Hinduism is exactly the same, as he is the lord of *pramatha-ganas*, the army of Lord Siva. Lord Siva is again held as the fountain of all knowledge and the children in this part of the country are initiated into their schooling with the sacred formula, 'Om Namas-Sivaya Siddham Namah', meaning oblations to the Siddha, named Siva.

The conqueror of *jara-marana*, having been identified with Rudra-Siva. Thus, the highest knowledge that Lord Siva would bestow, as the Great Siddha, was the impermanence of the world and worldly life and he is prayed as Mrtyunjaya, the conqueror of death in other words the conquest of the fear of death.

Some scholars reading in the legend, some treachery of Brahmans to kill Acharya Nagarjuna in order to destroy Buddhism in Andhradesa, a logical historical deduction would be that common people understood the philosophical concept of conquest of *jara marana*, not as realizing or visualizing *Sunyata* in accordance with Madhyamika doctrine of the Acarya, but in terms familiar to them, as achieving immortality. The same concepts manifested in the concept of Siva as Mrtyunjaya and Kalantaka, both in the philosophical and religious planes. Another significant factor is that the inscriptions from Nagarjunakonda as well as those in subsequent time in early Andhradesa often praise the Buddha as the victor over the armies of Mara. He was the god of lust and vices in Buddhist concept, who tried to allure Siddhartha Gautama, by presenting his beautiful daughters holding pots of wine, for his enjoyment. It was to dissuade the Buddha from his spiritual quest for *Sambuddhi* and the latter could attain it after overcoming the allurements, in other words, after the subjugation of Mara and his forces. The Hindu counterpart of Mara was "Manmatha", literally meaning one who churns the mind of people, by creating passion and lust for enjoyment in life, of course, nowhere described as god of vices and malevolent disposition, but only the god presiding over love and amorous pleasure of men and women. Quite interestingly, he tried to disturb the penance of Siva and was burnt down to ashes by the latter, but subsequently Siva married Parvati and brought Manmatha back to life.

The famous Buddhist center, Sankaram, near Anakapalli in modern Visakhapatnam district, where the entire hill-top was chiseled into thousands of votive *stupas* and called at present as Bojjannakonda, deserves notice in this context. The name literally means the hill, which is the abode of the god, Bojjanna, which stands for Ganapati, the god with pot-belly, but undoubtedly the presiding god at the place must have been the Buddha, for the countless number of votive *stupas*, as well as the remains of some brick-built *caitya-grhas* on the top of the hill. Obviously, the Buddha became famous by the name Bojjanna, at the place, because of the syncretism between the concepts of gods, the Buddhist and Hindu that was taking place during the time, as explained above. Hence, the superficial





observation that the deified Buddha was adopted as one of the *avatar as* of Visnu in the Hindu Puranicpantheon<sup>26</sup> and a fantastic corollary to it that Brahmanism did the mischief by which they rendered Buddhism into an insignificant heterodoxy and thereby destroyed it are only examples illogical premises in modern historical research.

The Ikshvaku, the Vishnukundin inscriptions that are discovered in recent past, together with those of their political associates, the Sriprithvimula kings, throw light on the Buddhist culture of Andhradesa, in the period A.D. 350 to 600. The Tummalagudem (set-I) charter of the Vishnukundin king, Govindavarman, opens with invocation to the Buddha as the God (*Bhagavat*), Who laid down the path of *nirvana* (before the people in the world), readily adaptable and immediately fruitful, out of His enlightenment and compassion:

"Further, the record describes the donor-king in terms of Mahayana doctrines, thus speaking that the ideals and practices governed the spiritual pursuits of people of the time. Some scholars in the past were dismayed by the doctrinal developments of Mahayanism, as they had cut the ground under the feet of Buddhism, making it indistinct from Hinduism and eventually to lose its individuality.

The Tummalagudem (set-I) further describes the Buddha in true spirit of Mahayanism, as one Who obtained the highest intellect (*Mahabodhi-citta*) only to save human beings, immersed in the woes of *samsara*, consisting of the birth, old age, death as well as attachment, hatred, passion, etc. He was elevated to the status of Supreme God, *Bhagavat*, and described in the usual triple formula of the Buddhist tradition that he was strong by the ten strengthening powers; that He possessed excellent intelligence by mastering over the four intellectual excellences, (*vaisaradyas*); and that He was seen with thirty-two auspicious marks of *Mahapurusa* having embellished His body. He was said to have been laden with the heavy weight of merit and enlightenment, accumulated in countless axons, (obviously in innumerable lives in the past) only to render all the *sattvas* obtaining the way of crossing (obviously, *samsara* or the ocean of worldly life); the dispeller of woes of attachment, hatred, passion, birth and death and highly enlightened with all the knowable knowledge, unimpeded by the envelopes. Similarly, the Kallaceruvu grant of Harivarman<sup>37</sup> describes Him in a verse, as the sage (*muni*), victorious over the armies of Mara, that competed with highly swinging waves of the southern ocean, yet remains invincible and His victory continues to shower benefits on the world and His lofty and auspicious renowned shines like the pleasant rays emanated from Moon. This description reflects the faith and devotion in the Buddha as a sage, *muni*, but a divine sage as he is said to have been victorious over the forces of Mara, in addition. The investiture of divinity on His personality, characteristic of Mahayanism, seems to have been conditioned by the Hinayana concept of His appearance as *Manual Buddha*, in human form.

The Tummalagudem (set-I) charter registers the gift of two villages by the king, Govindavarman, in favor of Parama-Mahadevi built by his chief queen, in her own name. The record describes the king as well to have built a number of *viharas*, besides many other types of buildings of public utility and caused a large number of the earlier ones repaired to useful condition. The record states that the king made the gift for the enjoyment of the *Aryasangha* that belonged to the three *yanas*, of four directions of the earth<sup>41</sup>, in



other words, for the enjoyment of the Buddhist monks of various sects, who used to travel across the country, preaching their doctrines, who required shelter, provision of food and other requirements on their travel. Similarly, the Kallaceruvu and the three sets of Kondavidu copper plate grants of Prithvimula and his son, Harivarman, register gifts for the benefit of the *Aryasangha* of the four comers, as will be explained below. Notwithstanding the reference in the inscription under analysis, there is reason to believe that Buddhist monks in general gradually ceased to move across the country to preach the creed, from at least the beginning of Christian era. The Tummalagudem (set-I) charter refers to these developments as it states three-fold purpose of the grant, namely, providing the monks with all amenities of life, effecting repairs and renovations to the *vihara*, whenever necessary and finally and more importantly, that it was to provide the required materials for the worship of the Buddha in order to offer *dip a*, *dhupa*, *puspa* etc. These aspects of the grant make it clear that Buddhism was centered on the caitya-worship and thus the construction and renovations as well as making endowment to carry on the works were held as the means to earn merit. It has to be noted that temples for several gods and goddesses were constructed in medieval times with the same objects and the worship of the Buddha, mentioned in this record, is the same form of worshipping any Hindu god or goddess, even to this day, consisting of sixteen types of services.

However, some scholars suppose that *Vajraparvata*, where the cult was reportedly promulgated, was Sriparvata-Nagarjunakonda, as no 'parvata' or a hill, is seen at Dhanyakafaka-Amaravati, to identify with Vajraparvata. But the term *parvata* a synonym to '*saila*', seems to have stood for a *Mahacaitya*, instead of a hill by literal meaning; and it is well-known that Mahayana Buddhism in early Andhradesa, was known as "*Saila-vada*" as a synonym to "*Caityaka-vada*" for its reverence and worship of *caityas*, as representations of the Buddha and they were so large as to earn the nickname *sailas*, or hills. There developed eventually the sub-schools among the *Caityaka* or *Saila* School, as *Pubbasellya* and *Avarasellya*, meaning respectively the adherents to the eastern (*Purvasailiyas* in Sanskrit) and the western (*Aparasailiyas* in Sanskrit) *Mahacaityas*. The former was the one at Dhanyakafaka-Amaravati and later was that at Sriparvata-Nagarjunakonda. As such, there could be no improbability in taking Vajraparvata as the same as the *Mahacaitya* at Dhanyakafaka-Amaravati, where Bodhisattva Manjusri contributed to the beginning and evolution of the tenets of Vajrayana Buddhism. The Tummalagudem (set-I) charter further describes the monks in the Parama Mahadevi-vihara were devoted to learning by reading scriptures, observing vows and meditation, etc. in their spiritual progress to the Supreme State, as laid down by the Buddha, the Supremely Enlightened, by traveling on three *yanas*. They dedicated themselves to non-attachment (to the world), noble character, discipline and steadfastness in their conduct—acquired by means of studying, listening to, thinking, and visualizing, meditating and mental concentration. The donor-king, Govindavarman, was similarly described<sup>43</sup> as, one who obtained *Mahabodhicitta* and an uncommon vision, of things of this and otherworlds, by means of his studying the precepts of all the *sastras*, with meaning and digesting as well as meditating upon them. He was further said to have sacrificed his entire merit<sup>44</sup> and allowed all his lawfully earned wealth to be enjoyed by monks, twice-born, recluses, beggars, diseased, the mean and pitiable people. The description is clear that the king was an aspirant for the state of Buddha in terms of Mahayana doctrines that were prevailing by the time and supposed him to be a *Bodhisattva*. The arrangements made for the worship of Buddha in the *vihara* was ostensibly the *Anuttarapiljet* one of the important observances



to attain the state of a Bodhisattva and that he was an adept in *paramita* of charity (*dana*)<sup>47</sup>. Another significant point is the hope that the donor-king expressed that the gift would remove the causes of all misfortunes.

The Tummalagudem (set-II) charter, issued by Vikramendravarman, the great-grandson of Govindavarman, also describes the latter as to have built *Viharas* in countless number in all the provinces of *Dakshinapatha*, excelling the palaces of the lord of Heaven (in grandeur). The record registers his gift of the village, to the Paramabhatarika Mahavihara at Sakrapura, obviously a synonym of Indrapura, where Par is a Mahadevi had built a *Vihara*, to which Govindavarman gifted two villages, as mentioned above and thus the Paramabhatarika Mahavihara at Sakrapura is clearly the same as Parama Mahadevi-vihara at Indrapura. Recently a stone inscription has been discovered in the suburbs of Hyderabad city, which seems to shed further light on the personality of Govindavarman, as a builder of *Viharas*. Even though the inscription refers to him, as Govindaraja, instead of Govindavarman, and does not specify him as a Vishnukundin king, there need not be any doubt about his identity, as there was no other king of the name Govindavarman, in any other ruling line in ancient Andhradesa, except among the Vishnukundins.

In the Religio-Philosophical atmosphere of the country, presented after the above analysis, the prejudicial inferences and imaginations drawn in the past, on the basis of literary studies exclusively, and understanding them through their conventional paradigms of struggles and strives to have existed between different religious cultures have to be discarded. There could have been some sporadic instances of violence, by immature and emotional persons, as common at all times and in all societies, but utilizing them to draw far-reaching generalizations and depicting tarnished pictures of Religio-Philosophical cultures, cannot be sound historical research. But that does not necessarily imply that they were inimical to Buddhism, except by an eccentric interpretation of their inscriptions, reading that which was not mentioned. Puranic literature gives elaborate and clear picture of the Kali Age, but does not suggest that the Buddhism was one of the evils that manifested in it.

### Conclusion

The Brahmans, like the Buddhist monks, were always busy in twisting and turning the Religio-Philosophical cultures and producing innovative doctrines and practices, in accordance with the requirements of the people at large. As the Buddhist monks developed Mahayanism out of Hinayanism; and Vajrayanism out of Mahayanism, the Brahmans brought the Vedic gods out of the ritualistic pattern of propitiation and developed the system of worship, by means of nonviolent offerings. The devotional Theism that led the Mahayanism to the Tantric system of Vajrayanism, led the theistic cults of Hinduism as well to that form of religion but not to such gruesome and obscene practices, as the former. It is interesting to note that the objects of Tantric worship in Hinduism were mostly the same divinities that came into it from Mahayana Buddhism. But, it has to be clearly borne in mind that the devotionalism and its logical consequence, the Tantricism, were essentially popular in origin and contributions of popular religions to the Buddhism as well as Brahmanism. The latter had only refined the beliefs and practices with the touch of Vedic chanting and ritualism and thus remained somewhat less gruesome than in the Vajrayana Buddhism.





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