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SOCIO - POLITICAL DIMENSION IN THERAVADA BUDDHISM - A STUDY

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Abstract:-The socio-political dimension in Theravada Buddhism has a variable impact on social and political point of views in the Eastern World. It manifested in matters of governance was framed within a spirit of humanism. The Buddhist dimension based on principles, ethics such as the rule of law can make the relationship between the coexistence of religion and secular normative orders, the differentiations of religion and political spheres, to reduce social and political attentions and to solve challenging problems nowadays.

Keywords:Socio-political ,dimension ,religion and political spheres ,spirit of humanism.

INTRODUCTION:

A unique feature of Buddhism is that it is a doctrine of human being, by a human being, and for human beings. It has played an important role in shaping the spiritual, philosophical, and social modes of in the eastern world. Many social laws, cultures, and traditions in the east have been dominated by the Buddha's doctrine. Buddha is a vast source of inspiration in the arts and sciences in education.

A.K Warder rightly says, "a glance at few of the countless modern books dealing with 'Buddhism' will soon convince the inquirer that Buddhism is all thing to all men". Such conclusion is very valid.

Buddhism is concerned with human life and conduct. Man is regarded as the hub of truth and knowledge. Buddha's teaching is an all perfect wisdom, an insight into all things both outside and inside human life as they really are, everyone has an equal right to realize the truth of Buddha's words through his own perseverance and confidence.

While individual salvation is much emphasized, socio-political well-being is not neglected. T.W Rhys David contends that "the early Buddhist ideas of the Buddha were chiefly modified by two ideals dominating the minds of men in those days. The one ideal was chiefly political experiences; the other too philosophical speculations."

SOCIAL DIMENSION

Buddhism is a pragmatic teaching which starts from certain fundamental propositions about how we experience the world and how we act in it. It teaches that it is possible to transcend this sorrow-laden world of our experience and is concerned first and last with ways of achieving that transcendence. What finally leads to such transcendence is what we call Wisdom by or through which we can attain to Nirvāna.

Even though this is the nature of things in spiritual phase, in order to live in society and adjusts oneself to others as well as to establish harmony inside one's own being, immediate socialization becomes a vital necessity.

This work is particularly based upon the Theravāda Buddhist Texts, prevail in Theravāda Buddhist countries like Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand etc, drawing upon the social cultures and traditions to present the teachings of the Buddha in an attempt to relate them to our modern industrial society.

From the evidence of the Buddha's discourses, or Suttas in the Dīgha Nikāya, it is clear that early Buddhists were very much concerned with the creation of social conditions favorable to the individual cultivation of Buddhist values. An outstanding example of this, in later times, is the remarkable "welfare state" created by the King Emperor, Asoka (B.C. 274-236).

Dr. W. Rahula stated the situation -- perhaps at its strongest -- when he wrote that "Buddhism arose in India as a spiritual force against social injustices, against degrading superstitious rites, ceremonies and sacrifices; it denounced the

tyranny of the caste system and advocated the equality of all men; it emancipated woman and gave her complete spiritual freedom.”

The Buddhist scriptures do indicate the general direction of Buddhist social thinking, and to that extent they are suggestive for our own times. Nevertheless it would be pedantic, and in some cases absurd, to apply directly to modern industrial society social prescriptions detailed to meet the needs of social order which flourished over twenty-five centuries ago. The Buddhist householder of the Singālovada Sutta experienced a different way of life.

POLITICAL DIMENSION

According to Theravada Buddhist canonical texts, two systems of government existed in India during the Buddha's time. One was monarchical and the other was republican. The monarchical system was followed in the territories like Kosala, Magadha and Vatsa, while the territories like Vajji and Malla were considered republican federation.

The modern scholar on Buddhist history and Indian polity agrees without any controversy that the Buddha preferred the republican form of government to the monarchical form of government, even though a careful scrutiny of evidence found in the Pali canon would shed little light in favour of this conclusion.

The modern scholarship has adduced only single evidence from the Pali canon to establish the view that the Buddha regarded the republican form of government more favourably. That is the Mahāparinibbāna-sutta of the Dīgha-nikāya in which the fundamentals necessary to establish a Buddhist theory of politics is found.

In the sutta, the Buddha refers to a group of republican kings known by the name of Licchavi and explains the character of the political pattern followed by these kings by listing seven important rules which this group of kings follow without causing even the slightest violation to such rules in practice.

The Buddha considered these seven rules as very important because if a state follows these rules, progress would inevitably result and the government or the country based on the confidence of the people will never deteriorate. The rules fortify the unity and the confidence of the people. It is when these seven principles are grossly violated in the body of politics that the political machinery causes its own downfall, finally grinding to an inevitable halt. The Buddha drew a set of rules based on these seven principles followed by the Licchavi kings and laid them down as a basis for his community of monks.

Those seven principles are important because they constitute seven rules put into practice and not those confined only to theory. The republican kings, the Licchavis practised these rules in their everyday political dealings. Even when the modifications by way of five categories were adopted for the community of Buddhist monks, the emphasis was again laid on practice.

The sutta actually does not indicate any favour or prejudice of the Buddha towards the republican system of government. What it indicates is that Ajātasattu would not be successful in his ambition of conquering the Vijjian territory at the time envisaged in the story. Moreover, it indicates the Buddha's antipathy towards war. His praise of Vijjians should not necessarily be taken as a praise of the system of government that the Vijjians had.

In other words, the virtue of the people, but not the quality of the system, is spoken of in the above story. Nowhere in the Pali canon has the Buddha categorically praised the republics over the monarchies. Therefore the circumstantial evidence like the story in the Mahāparinibbāna-sutta is not sufficient to conclude that Buddhism favoured the republican system of government.

It should also be remembered here that the Buddha's remark about the Vijjian people does not embrace the people in the other republics of the day. It is illogical to consider that the virtues mentioned in the Mahāparinibbāna-sutta story were common to the people in the other republics too. This shows that the Mahāparinibbāna-sutta episode is an isolated instance which has only limited bearing. It speaks only of the people of one republic.

The Mahāparinibbāna-sutta gives the impression that Ajātasattu, the king of Magadha, could not overcome the Vijjians as long as they followed the seven conditions of welfare. Vassakāra, who brought the king's message to the Buddha, himself declares: “We may expect then the growth and not the decline of the Vijjians when they are possessed even if any one of these conditions of welfare; how much more so when they are possessed of all the seven. So, Gotama, the Vijjians cannot be overcome by the king of Magadha.

The Samyutta-nikāya however provides us with contradictory information. In it the Buddha declares: “Sleeping on couches of straw, Monks, such now is the way of Licchavis; strenuous are they and zealous in their service. Against them Ajātasattu, the king of Magadha, gets no access, gets no occasion. In the coming days, Monks, the Licchavis will become delicate, soft and tender in their hands and feet. On soft couches, on pillows of the first feathers of young birds they will sleep till the sunrise. Against them Ajātasattu, the king of Magadha, will get access, will get occasion.”

Here the Buddha is obviously critical of the Vijjians whose clan name was Licchavi. He knew the legacy not only of the Vijjians republic but also of the other republican states too. The implication of the above quoted the Samyutta-nikāya passage is that the Buddha was well aware of the facts that the republican system was outdated and that the monarchical system soon replace it all over Northern India.

If one instance is adequate to come to a conclusion, as the modern scholar has done by quoting the Mahāparinibbāna-sutta to establish the Buddha's republican attitude, the above reference in the Samyutta-nikāya stands with equal strength for the fact that the Buddha never commended or favoured the republican federations over monarchical states of his day.

CONCLUSION

There are some who believe that Buddhism is so lofty and sublime a system that it cannot be practiced by ordinary men and women in this commonplace world of ours. They also maintain that one has to retire from a day-to-day work and adopt the life of a monk in a monastery or to some quiet place to live the life an ascetic, if one desires to be a true Buddhist.

Some scholars have also represented Buddhism as a teaching emphasizing on personal salvation alone without any regard for social welfare. Thus Buddhism according to them has ignored service to the needy in any measure, hence is devoid of any social dimension whatsoever.

This is, as a matter of fact, just a sad misconception and a gross misinterpretation of facts, which goes against the Pali canon, as well as the living practices in Theravada Buddhist countries, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Laos and Cambodia. People run to such hasty and wrong conclusion as a result of their hearsay or casually readings something about Buddhism written by someone who has no proper understanding of the subject from all its aspects, gives only a partial and lopsided views of it. The Buddha's teaching is, indeed, meant not only for monks in monasteries, but also ordinary men and women living at home with their families.

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¹ A.K Warder, Indian Buddhism, Delhi Motilal banarsidass, 1980. P.1.

² T.W Rhys Davids, Indian Buddhism , Allahabad Jeet Malhotra Rachna Prakashan, 1972. P.128.

³ Rahula, W, History of Buddhism in Ceylon, Buddhist Cultural Centre, Sri Lanka, 1956, P. 78.

⁴ DN, III, P. 179.

⁵ Not only the Mahāpanibbānasutta, but also the Sattaka nipāta of the Anguttara-nikāya reports Ajātasattu's intention of invading the Vijjian territory and the lists of welfare conditions. See: Anguttara-nikāya, ed. R. Morris and E. Hardy, Pali Text Society, London, 1900, Vol. IV, P.16 ff. The composite nature of the Mahāpanibbānasutta is obvious fact. Therefore is legitimate to think that the relevant sections of the Mahāpanibbānasutta are nothing but extracts from the Anguttara-nikāya.

⁶ These are known as Satta aparihaniya dhamma in Pali. They are:

- a) to hold full and frequent public assemblies,
- b) to meet together in concord, rise in concord and carry out their undertakings in concord,
- c) to enact nothing not already established, abrogate nothing that has already being enacted, and act in accordance with the ancient institutions of the Vijjians as established in former days,
- d) to honour, revere and support the elders and hold it a point of duty to listen to their words,
- e) not to take away by force or abduct women or girls belonging to their clan and detain them,
- f) to honour, esteem, revere and support the shrines whether in towns or country, not to allow them to fall into disuse and
- g) to fully provide rightful protection, defence and support for the arahants (saints) among them, so that arahants from far away may enter the realm and therein live in peace. DN, II, P. 74.

⁷ Dīghanikāya, ed. T.W. Rhys Davids and J. E. Carpenter, Pali Text Society, London, 1911, Vol. II, P. 75-6.

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