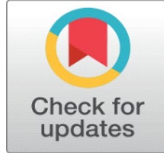


A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE LORE OF LORD BUDDHA IN AŚVAGHOŚA'S

Dr. Pitas Das ¹✉

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Sanskrit, Dewanhat Mahavidyalaya, West Bengal, India



Corresponding Author

Dr. Pitas Das, pitasads5@gmail.com

DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.1627](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i1.2024.1627)

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Copyright: © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



ABSTRACT

A Buddhist monk of the first or second century C.E., Aśvaghoṣa comprised a Buddha-Carita poem consisting of fourteen cantos. He maybe belonged to Ayodhya, a place in North Central India. His work Buddha-Carita or 'Life of Buddha' takes the readers from the birth of Siddhartha to his development. Aśvaghoṣa's main aim was not to amuse but to teach to present the Buddha's teaching as the climax of the Brahmanical tradition. His Buddha-Carita is a response to Brahmanical challenges where we can notice two major points. First, he presents the Buddha's doctrine the dharma discovered through his development as the consummation of the Brahmanical religion, a preparation for the appearance of Buddha. Brahmanism is the expectation of Buddha and Buddhism is the satisfaction of Brahmanism. So, it is incorrect to see both as contradictory or opposing theories. The present paper is an attempt to focus on how Aśvaghoṣa presents the context and significance of the lore of Lord Buddha.

Keywords: Buddhism, Hinduism, Lore, Siddhartha, Life of Buddha, Brahman, Māra

1. INTRODUCTION

Being a Brahmin converted to Buddhism, Aśvaghoṣa was a wise Buddhist monk who was enlightened both with the Brahmanical texts, Mythology, Philosophy and ritual, and Buddhist theology and history. Besides this Aśvaghoṣa was an eminent poet. In his creation Buddha Carita, he successfully culminates Buddhist theology and his poetic genius to create an epic that successfully reveals the fact that Buddhism is the finest from Brahmanical theory. That it releases human beings from the shackles of the drudgery of human life to achieve salvation. In his poem the Buddha Carita, he focuses on the concept of awakening preaching and death. It is hinted in his writings that Aśvaghoṣa belonged in the first century CE in the reign of the Kuṣāṇas. This is evident in the relationship of his works with the other text of the same period. Aśvaghoṣa possibly is prior to the famous Sanskrit poet Kālidāsa who is believed to belong to the fourth century CE. So, it is clear that Aśvaghoṣa was quite familiar with Manu's Mānava Dharmaśāstra, the literature from the 2nd

century CE in his Saundarānanda he compares the age of Buddha to the age of Manu he identifies the Buddha with the sun and Manu to be the son of the sun, Buddha as the self-existent entity and Manu's Mānava Dharmaśāstra as a sun of the same existent entity. In fact, the code of law is believed to have been created by Svayambhū. So, Buddha is the original author of the treatise on dharma which surpasses the code of law of Manu it is an inferior and degenerated version of the dharma of Buddha. The counsellor of Buddha's father says a man has three debts in he released through his offspring. The theology of debt is for the first time used to defend his concept of Rāma. This is similar to Aśvaghoṣa's two verses of Manu. It is also to be noted that the name coined the term Mokṣa which was later used by Aśvaghoṣa. Mokṣa refers to the liberation from the cycle of rebirth. The above discussion establishes that Manu belongs to the 2nd century. The Manuscripts of Ayodhyā suggest that Aśvaghoṣa was born in the same place. The evidence of the life of Buddha suggests that Ram incarnated as Buddha and Buddha's departure from his place is similar to Rāma's vanabāsa. He also finds suggestions of similarity in Daśaratha and Śuddhodana's lamentation when both of their sons leave home. Since Buddhism was becoming more and more popular among societies the Brahmanical epics were the silent answer to the Buddhist challenge and the life of Buddha is the outcome of the same. There were two sections of Brahmins; the second is the Asitā which referred to 'Great Seer'. The learned Brahmins declared Siddhārtha as an Asita which places him in the sphere of Brahmanical traditions. The present research paper is limited to the thirteen chapters composed by Aśvaghoṣa.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The objective of the present study is to see Buddha's birth as the incarnation of the Hindu God Rāma according to Aśvaghoṣa. Hinduism believes in the theory of salvation, meaning freedom from the cycle of rebirth which actually refers to Buddha's Mokṣa, Freedom from the cycle of rebirth. To understand the transition from Hinduism to Buddhism, Buddhism appears to be the finest form of Hinduism.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present research work is based on various primary and secondary sources. The primary source includes Aśvaghoṣa Buddha Carita, The History of Sanskrit Literature, Manuśaṃhitā, and Life of Buddha by Aśvaghoṣa. The necessary data are accumulated from different secondary sources such as – Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata, the Religious History of Kuṣāṇas, and The Literature of Kālidāsa, etc.

4. THE LORE OF LORD BUDDHA IN BUDDHA CARITA

The Buddha Carita by Aśvaghoṣa is the finest specimen of the Life and Lore of Gautam Buddha. It is evident, from the title of the epic, that the central theme of Buddha Carita is the biography of Lord Buddha. This epic consists of seventeen cantos. This is an account of the Life of Lord Buddha from his birth to his Nirvāṇa.

The story started when a holy spirit descended to the womb of Māyā the wife of king Śuddhodana as soon as she felt she desired to spend her time in the fascinating garden of Lumbinī. She sought permission to meditate and travel there. King Śuddhodana happily let her be in the garden with her attendants on the eighth-day fourth month Bodhisattva took birthⁱ. He was surrounded by an aura of light. As a blessed child "he was born fully conscious without any confusion"ⁱⁱ. In this book, the concept of avatāra or saviour takes birth to destroy the evil forces in the world.

It is evident in the Buddha Carita that Bodhisattva was born to save the world from suffering only the celestial king Māra was full of sorrow and did not rejoiceⁱⁱⁱ. There is a reference to wise Brāhmaṇa who said to the king in distress the following line –

“The parents want a son when a baby is born. O king, you should feel great joy now, as [you would at the celebration upon] a full month [after birth]!

You now have a wonderful son. His light will most certainly make your clan famous. Be assured and pleased, and do not feel uncertain anymore!

Good luck will be concentrated in your house and country. From now on you will be increasingly prosperous. The excellent son born to you will certainly be the world’s salvation.

Yes, this superior person is gold-coloured and very bright. With such excellent signs, he most certainly will attain perfect awakening. Or he will bring happiness in the world, certain to be a wheel-turning king.

All around he will be a ruler of the great earth, a brave and righteous ruler. He will rule the four worlds, governing over all kings, just as the light of the sun is superior to any kind of light in the world.

If he dwells in the forests in the mountains and seeks deliverance with all his heart, he will accomplish true wisdom and shine everywhere in the world.^{iv}”

It is to be noted that being a Brāhmaṇa the wise men foretell that Siddhārtha would save the world from miseries and sufferings. This is a clear suggestion of the concept of avatāra found in Mahābhārata. The wise Brāhmaṇa also gave an abundance of references to Hindu Ṛṣis like Bhṛgu, Aṅgiras, Bṛhaspati, Śukra, Vaśiṣṭha and Parāśara. When the king expressed his doubt by saying “if it is as you say why would wonderful signs not be associated with a former king but be manifested in my progeny?”^v He also gives reference to Janaka the king found in the Rāmāyaṇa to have “obtained the path of meditation without any teacher”^{vi}. There is also a reference to the Brahmins offering incantations when Siddhārtha was born. The new-born Siddhārtha was also compared with the king God Kārttikeya the six-faced son of Lord Śiva^{vii}. When the new prince was born the people of Kapilābastu rejoiced with happiness in the same way when the Hindu mythical king Viśravaṇa had Nalakūvara and also in chapter II Buddha-Carita Buddha is compared to Āditya the son of Manu. When Siddhārtha entered the garden a multitude of women well comes him and tried to please him with all measures. But Siddhārtha was indifferent to them. Then Udayana come to the place and said that desire “Desire is first and foremost. Even the gods cannot forget about it! Even Lord Śakra (Puraṇḍara) had an illicit affair with the wife fourteen of the seer Gautama.”^{viii}. This is also a reference from Hinduism. Again, Udayana referred to the name of Bṛhaspati, the son of Candramās, Parāśara, and Kapiñjalada all such Hindu Mythical characters who according to him, were reclined by women. In reply, Siddhārtha said that although he accepts that these elements bring happiness to man, he will not go for them as they do not exist permanently. When Siddhārtha returned to his place after increasing his thoughts about Nirvāṇa, there is a description of his appearance where he is said to have resembled a son of Lord Śakra or the God of Indra. After entering the place and having a conversation with his father about despising five desires he was well come with a multitude of ladies and with Gandharva music there is a reference to the son of Vedic Ṛṣi Viśravaṇa. Hinduism aims at achieving Mokṣa, i.e. - to free oneself from the attachment of desire this dominant philosophy of Hinduism is also very prominent in Lord Buddha’s philosophy. Siddhārtha says that the five desires are the root of sorrow and “one should feel sorrow for those who

are attached to desire!"^{ix}. Buddha said this in connection with the question of why are should keep their son. But in Hinduism death is always exalted whereas Buddha sees death enemy^x. While having a discussion with his wife Yaśodharā he said to Yaśodharā that if she abandons him, she would be like Sumantra who abandoned Rāma this is a reference from the epic the Rāmāyaṇa. She also accepts that a Muni or Hindu saint has fine qualities. The Reference to Trāyastriṃśa is also present in the epic. Trāyastriṃśa is the concept of heaven both in Hindu and Buddhist cosmology^{xi}. In the same chapter, Siddhārtha thinks that Kaṣāya Garment, a dyed pure robe, is the exquisite ornamentation of a Seer which is acutely robes found in Sanskrit as Civāra meaning sacred robes without regard to colour.

Siddhārtha entered the place of the seers. The Brahmins were surprised to see an appearance. They exclaimed in wonder "if he was the eighth Vasu God which is a Hindu God. Even the Brahmins compared him with the son of the sun or of the moon. The Vedic people worshipped the Sun and the Moon to be the divine being. It is very important to note that Bodhisattva sought advice from the Brahmins about which true path he should practice. He asked the Brahmins "I have just now arrived here I do not yet know which way to practice. Consequently, I beseech you to please give me your explanation!"^{xii}. But after heaving the suggestion Siddhārtha was not convinced by their explanations he felt that their asceticism leads them to the cycle of rebirth. "The suffering will be plentiful but the happy little"^{xiii}. According to Siddhārtha, it is better to develop knowledge than to practice exertion and if one rejects both, he is unconditional forever. The Brahmins were pleased with his explanations and invited him to stay. One Brahmin commented that Bodhisattva's knowledge is high so he can free himself cycle of rebirth. In chapter eight when Siddhārtha did not return to the place the whole city of Kapilābastu submerged in grief just like when Rāma in the famous epic Rāmāyaṇa left for his exile while Ayodhyā become extremely unhappy. Śuddhodana grief for the detachment from his son Siddhārtha has been compared with Daśaratha's mental state and the sorrow of Yaśodharā despair has similarity with that of Sītā. Again, we find the shadow of Hanumāna on the horse and the image of Bharata the brother of Rama in Chāndaka, the character of Siddhārtha, Śuddhodana and his son Siddhārtha are compared with the Hindu God Indra and his son Jayanta^{xiv}. The preceptor and his chief minister and the national preceptor set out to meet Siddhārtha. They were compared with Bāma Devatā "Who went to a mountain forest to see prince Rama; like Śukra and Aṅgīrasa." When they reached the palace of Buddha, they were compared with lord Śakra comforting Śukra and Agnisvara and with Punarvasu waiting upon the moon"^{xv}.

Buddha said that one specific force of nature draws destruction to another. But when they make harmony, they turn to complete beings. In this statement of Buddha, there is a shadow of Vedic culture that worshipped the natural forces as a divine being. In chapter eleven Buddha referred to the Kauravas, the Vṛṣis and Hāvās, the Mekhalās and the Dandakās to convey that desire just like knives. He also gave the example of Sunda and Upasunda, the asura brothers who destroyed each other for their desire. Another reference to Kapilā and his disciples was found in the speech of Buddha when he exerted Kapilā by saying that he has become Prajāpati by obtaining deliverance. In another statement, Buddha accepted that all the Brahmins around the world have successfully explained to the world the sacred of being free from "birth, old age and death". He also accepted that after the end of life, a truly free person takes birth in the Brahma. King Māra tries to change the mind of Bodhisattva with his arrow and his three jade daughters who were the most celestial beauties but nothing could change the complacent mind of Buddha. A similar incident is

found in Mahābhārata where Ūrvaśī, the apsara sent by Indra failed to seduce Arjuna. In Buddha Carita, this is described as Māra-vijaya.

5. CONCLUSION

Through this study, we come to the conclusion that Aśvaghōṣa's Buddha Carita is a complete biography of lord Buddha from his birth to his enlightenment where it is evident that Buddhism is the consummation of Brahmanical religion; A culmination of Brahmanism and Buddhism. We come to this conclusion by citing several examples from the text having incidental similarities between Hindu Mythology, Epics like The Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata and other Vedic references. Firstly, both religions emphasise the concept of Karma which means action or activity that implies its subsequent results. Secondly, Buddhism gives emphasis on winning over the cycle of rebirth which is Nirvāṇa in Buddhism and Mokṣa in Hinduism. Thirdly, both belief in reincarnation. Fourthly, both religion believes that suffering is caused by excessive attachment to desire

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

- Aśvaghōṣa. Life of the Buddha. Trans. Olivele, Patrick. New York : New York University Press and the JJC Foundation, 2008, p. xvii.
- Aśvaghōṣa. BUDDHACARITA IN PRAISE OF BUDDHA'S ACTS (Taishō Volume 4, Number 192). Translated from the Chinese by Willemen, Charles. United States of America : Nu-mata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2009, pp. 3-91.
- Aśvaghōṣa's. Buddha-Carita or Life of Buddha Venerable. Trans. Cowell, E. B. Google Book, pp. 9-160.
- Chaudhury, Surya Narayan (ed. & Trans.). Aśvaghōṣa. Bud-dha-Carita Vol.1. Delhi : Ram Manohar Lal, 1955, pp. 1-128.
- Cowell, Edward B (ed.). The Sanskrit Text of Buddha-Carita by Aśvaghōṣa. Google Book, pp. 12-137.
- Aśvaghōṣa. Buddha-Carita Vol.1. Trans. Tagore, Rabindranath. Kolkata : Visva Bharati Press, 1944, pp. 1-108.
- Chattopadhyay, Jayashri (ed.). Mahākavināśvaśvaghōṣeṇa Praṇitaṃ Buddhacaritaṃ (Canto I & III). Kolkata : Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 2018, pp. 1-66 ; 1-99.
- Chaudhury, Surya Narayan (ed. & Trans.). Buddha Charita by Ashvaghosha. Delhi : Siddharth Books, 2012, pp. 1-29.
- Johnston, E. H. (ed.). Buddhacarita or Acts of the Buddha by Aśvaghōṣa's. Delhi : Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1995, pp. 1-55.
- Nagar, Shanti Lal (ed.). Buddha Carita of Aśvaghōṣa (Sanskrit Text, English Translation, Index of Verses & Photo-graphs of Archaeological Evidence). Delhi : Parimal Publications, 2011, pp. 1-115.

Notes:

- ⁱ Buddha-Carita, I/8.
ⁱⁱ Buddha-Carita, I/10-22.
ⁱⁱⁱ बोधाय जातोऽस्मि जगद्धितार्थमन्या तथोत्पत्तिरियं ममेति ।
चतुर्दिशं सिंहगतिर्विलोक्य वाणीं च भव्यार्थकरीमुवाच ॥ Buddha-Carita, I/34.
^{iv} Buddha-Carita, I/40-45.
^v Buddha-Carita, I/49.
^{vi} Buddha-Carita, I/59.
^{vii} Maheśvara is Śiva. He had a six-faced son, Kārttikeya, the god of war, also known as Skanda.
^{viii} कामं परमिति ज्ञात्वा देवोऽपि हि पुरन्दरः ।
गौतमस्य मुनेः पत्नीमहल्यां चकमे पुरा ॥ Buddha-Carita, IV/72.
^{ix} तदेवमभिनिष्क्रान्तं न मां शोचितुमर्हसि ।
भूत्वापि हि चिरं श्लेषः कालेन न भविष्यति ॥ Buddha-Carita, VI/16.
^x Ibid., VI/20.
^{xi} Ibid., VI/34-55.
^{xii} ततो द्विजातिः स तपोविहारः शाक्यर्षभायर्षभविक्रमाय ।
क्रमेण तस्मै कथयाञ्चकार तपोविशेषं तपसः फलं च ॥ Buddha-Carita, VII/13.
^{xiii} Ibid., VII/21.
^{xiv} शुद्धौजसः शुद्धविशालकीर्तिरिक्ष्वाकुवंशप्रभवस्य राज्ञः ।
इमं जनं वेत्तु भवानधीरं श्रुतग्रहे मन्त्रपरिग्रहे च ॥
तस्येन्द्रकल्पस्य जयन्तकल्पः पुत्रो जरामृत्युभयं तितीर्षुः ।
इहाभ्युपेतः किल तस्य हेतोरावामुपेतौ भगवान्वैतु ॥ Buddha-Carita, IX/4-5.
^{xv} कृताभ्यनुज्ञावभितस्ततस्तौ निषीदतुः शाक्यकुलध्वजस्य ।
विरेजतुस्तस्य च सन्निकर्षं पुनर्वसू योगगताविवेन्दोः ॥
तं वृक्षमूलस्थमभिज्वलन्तं पुरोहितो राजसुतं बभाषे ।
यथोपविष्टं दिवि पारिजाते वृहस्पतिः शक्रसुतं जयन्तम् ॥ Buddha-Carita, IX/11-12.