EXPLICATING THE DEIFICATION OF THE BUDDHA INCARNATE FROM VISHNU'S PANTHEON

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Abstract-From a mythological perspective, the central idea of avatars was conceived to be one of the most significant aspects of Vaishnavism during the Gupta period in ancient India. It signified the fact that varying modes of worship could be brought under the general domain of Vaishnavism, and this notion had begun to associate itself with the identification of the incarnations of Vishnu who would come to the material world with the specific purpose of destroying evil and maintaining dharma. Here, the supposed conception of the Buddha as one of the incarnations of Vishnu, the ascetic prince on his way to renounce the world and bring forth ideal peace, is compared to that of the Vishnu avatars of Rama and Krishna in terms of their respective situational deaths. Whereas Rama assumes the role of the Supreme Godhead in the end and Krishna's death is mired between divine benediction and enforcement of divine will, the Buddha is portrayed to be a supramundane being who is fully aware of the events that would lead to his demise. Thus, the Buddha is presented as a foil to the overarching idea of the divine will as he doesn't fit with the Vaishnavite paradigms of fate and destiny, which would supplement the mythic hierarchy of the incarnate and reincarnate; wherein in the case of the Buddha, it is a deliberated propagation that draws out a distanced equivalent amongst the incarnations of Vishnu and the Buddha, who would rather enter Nirvana than achieve Godhead.

Index Terms: avatars, Buddha, incarnate, Krishna, Rama.

1. INTRODUCTION

“Yadayada hi dharmasyaglanirbhavatibharata
Abhythanamadharmasyatatadmanamsriyamaham
Paritranyasadhunangvinashay cha dushkritam
Dharmasangsthapanarthaysambhabamiyugeyuge”

(Prabhupada 274)

“Whenever Dharma, or the situation of law and order, is endangered on this world, I shall incarnate onto this world to re-establish Dharma, law and order, and to save the good from Yuga to Yuga”.

Dating back to the period of 200-400 AD preceding the Gupta period in ancient India, an attempt was made to conceptualize a concrete theological system pertaining to every form and avatara of Vishnu. What is interesting is that during this period these manifestations of Vishnu are not yet termed as avatara, but pradurbhava. The first text that actually deals with this manifestation are presented in books I and VII of the Ramayana. From a mythological perspective, the central idea of avatars was conceived to be one of the most significant aspects of Vaishnavism during this period. It signified the fact that varying modes of worship could be brought under the general domain of Vaishnavism, and this notion had begun to associate itself with the identification of the incarnations of Vishnu who would come to the material world with the specific purpose of destroying evil and maintaining dharma. Towards the end of 4th century BCE, therein developed a generalized approach to frame a listing of ten manifestations (pradurbhava) of Vishnu. As such, during the classical period of the Gupta reign the formation of Vaishnavism as a coherently conclusive theological system was framed (Entwistle and Bakker 33). Furthermore, the concept of avatara was slightly different from the Buddhist and Jain portrayals of the bodhisattvas and Tirthankaras, wherein the gods were capable of assuming multiple forms. Within the framework of the Gupta period, the Buddha was made into one of the Vishnu avatars. The gradual assimilation of the Buddha's doctrines within the framework of Vaishnavism as recorded in the Puranas, had led to the eventual subversion of the institutionalized form of Buddhism. In between the workings of the Vishnu and the Saiva rationales, the figure of Buddha had finally lost his cultic veneration. (Sarao 107) Here, the Buddha figure would be portrayed as a foil in between the relation between an incarnate and a reincarnate, wherein it can be shown that his assumption of an avatara does not cater to the earlier Vishnu avatars in terms of the ordaining of fate and divine will. In this essay, I intend to show in reference to Bhagavad Gita As it is and The Decline of Buddhism, the conception of the Buddha amongst several Puranas, ranging from a principal avatara to that of a grand seducer, wherein Buddha as the amsa of Vishnu, lies in utter ambiguity in between the paradigms of the incarnate and the reincarnate. Furthermore, a comparative analysis between the deaths of the earlier two Vishnu avatars and Buddha seems to indicate the latter being a foil to the

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overarching sense of divine will and the mythic hierarchy between the incarnate and the reincarnate, such that it draws out the equivalent amongst the two.

2. RESEARCH ELABORATION

The conception of the Buddha “as the eternal who had no beginning or end and in fact, assumed the form of one who was beyond any description” (Sarao 132), ties into the perception of Vishnu. Therein lay the formation of the concept of trikaya in accordance to the Mahayana tradition, meaning the three bodies of the Buddha-dharmakaya, nirmanakaya and sambhogakaya. This sort of deification of the Buddha within the framework of Brahmanical Hinduism is indicated in one of the slokas of Dharmadasa, a foremost commentator of Candragiri grammar during the Gupta period. He attempts to equate the Buddha figure amongst the ranks of Siva in his sloka, “RudraVisvesvara is the titular deity of our family, while Lord Buddha, the conqueror of evil, is the ornament of our family.” (Sarao 136).

The Garuda Purana projects the Buddha Avatar as one of the incarnations of Vishnu, the ascetic prince who would eventually renounce the throne and lead the masses toward an ideal world of peace. Being born as the crown prince, Siddhartha at Kapilavastu, he was disillusioned with the recurring deaths of all living creatures. Having come to the realization that there were no concrete answers to that, he sought the Absolute Truth by adopting a hermit’s life and attaining Enlightenment, and eventually founded the Buddhist religion.

One of the prominent Vaishnava poets of the 13th century, Jayadeva, had included the Buddha amongst the ten principal avatars of Vishnu in the Dasavatara stotra section of the Gita Govinda, as is indicated in “O Keshava! O Lord of the universe! O Lord Hari, who have assumed the form of Buddha! All glories to You! O Buddha of compassionate heart, you decry the slaughtering of poor animals performed according to the rules of Vedic sacrifice”.

One primary misconception held by the general populace is that the Buddha was looked upon with disdain by the Brahmanical society. Even if that were true, it would lead to the fact that the Buddha figure would never have been accepted as one of the avatars of Vishnu. Here, the Garuda Purana specifically entails the Buddha incarnate as quite distinct from the other avatars, since the advent of this particular avatara is not to delude the Asuras to their doom, within the larger context of being the savior of the world. While the Varaha Purana does refer to the Buddha merely as a God of beauty, the other Puranas such as the Vishnu, Vayu and Matsya portray the Buddha as the grand seducer. In light of Buddhism’s scant perception of Brahmanical Hinduism through their negative portrayals of the Hindu deities, as indicated in Indra being the parasol bearer and Vishnu relegated to being a Mara in Buddhist Literature (Sarao 242).

3. FINDINGS

The Buddha figure’s representation as the Cosmic Man, refers to the fact that within the reinvigorated Brahmanical Hindu tradition dominated by the primordial Bhakti cults of Vishnu and Shiva, the king is depicted as an avatar of Vishnu through the consecration ceremony of abhisheka. Now, being transformed into a partial avatara or a descent of Vishnu through the abhisheka, the king-elect is now being made in the likeness of the Cosmic Sovereign. Similarly, this can be carried over to the relation between an avatara and a cosmic being, where the Buddha is sculpted into an avatara of Vishnu in the same way. (Sarao 186) By 8th century BCE, the four Puranas had entailed the Buddha as the ninth amongst the ten avatars of Vishnu. (Sarao 187) Following is a Gita sloka that explores the distinction between the incarnate and the reincarnate, as we attempt to situate the Buddha figure amidst these paradigms.

“vasansijiraniyathavihayavananigrihnatinaroaparani
tathasariranivihayajiranyanyanisanayanidchi”

Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2, Verse 22 (Prabhupada 229)

The aforementioned verse alludes to the process of reincarnation in the Hinduism tradition. Just as we replace our soiled and dirty clothes with clean ones in times of need, the atman takes up residence at periodic intervals throughout a series of physical bodies. And since the clothes themselves don’t represent the permanent nature of the atman, it is only the reincarnate’s atman that moves from one earthly vessel to another. It should be noted that this is not the case with the incarnate, since its transitioning state back to Godhead following death is recorded as something quite distinctive from the former. An incarnation requires the advent of a divine being in a physical form, through the natural process such that He can undergo the same experiences as the reincarnate. It is not necessitated that the physical form of the incarnation need to be of a human form; rather it can be mythical, semi-human or even an animal form. The incarnation may exist for a brief period of time or a complete life time. Being posited as a divine interference in the recurrent affairs of the material world, the incarnation is bestowed with an omniscient awareness of the realm. Along with a number of associated divinities that incarnate beside Him, the advent is mandated due to the unrestrained nature of the reincarnate’s actions endowed with free will. This eventually causes

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a state of imbalance amongst the multiple worlds, thereby implying the need of divine manifestation to restore order and morality.

(Jayaram V. <hinduwebsite.com>)

Furthermore, a comparative analysis of two preceding avatars of Vishnu and the Buddha himself, suggests a slight discrepancy in their respective situational deaths. Here, towards the end of Ramayana, Rama's ascension to Vaikunth is indicated by the following passage,

Following his reign over a thousand years, within which Sita was taken away by Bhumi, Rama's private meeting with Kala in the guise of an old saint indicated that the objectives of his advent had come to fruition and he was supposed to take up his celestial abode back in Vaikunth. Lakshmana's interruption of the meeting at the behest of Durvasa Muni, had implied the violation of the cardinal condition that he wasn't supposed to let anyone in under any circumstances. Having realized that he was caught in between Durvasa Muni's curse and Kala's condition that the person intruding upon them would be brought to death, he comes to the conclusion that his time in the material world had come to an end. Abiding by the instructions of Kala, he approaches the river Sarayu and assumes the form of Ananta Sesha. Following his death, a grieving Rama had come to the realization it was time to leave for Vaikunth. Followed by his ardent devotees, he walks deep into the river Sarayu and leaves the material realm.

(Rajendran<hindublog.com.>)

This indicates the avatars of Rama assuming the role of the Supreme Godhead, as he realizes that his time has come to an end. It portrays a divine omniscience imbibed in him, as he encounters celestial embodiments that would finally lead to his demise.

In the aftermath of the Kurukshetra battle in the epic Mahabharata, the events that lead to Krishna's demise are stated as thus, Kurukshetra lay silent as the wails of Gandhari cradling the lifeless body of Duryodhana filled the lamenting airs of the battlefield. Blinded with rage, she had cursed Krishna,

"You, the young king of Dwarka. You, who I worshipped every day, as Vishnu himself and You, who I know to be an avatar of the supreme Godhead. Aren't You ashamed of your doings? Shouldn't You have averted this war with your divine will and power? Is this what you do to your own creation?"

The employment of the elements of divine benediction and the enforcement of divine will is clearly implied in the above passage, as Krishna had set the wheels of fate into motion.

"Do you smile after all this? What a nerve you have. Listen to this, oh mocking God. If my years of Vishnu Bhakti have been true, and if my Pati Bhakti since my marriage has been unshaken and strong, then may You die in 36 years from today." (Saagar)

The ordaining of fate itself had called upon the poisoned arrow of a hunter who had mistaken Krishna's heel for a deer and had shot through it. Gandhari's curse had taken effect in accordance to Krishna's promise, and thus, the eighth avatars had ascended back to Vaikunth. Here, we can notice the ensuing of a benediction-curse fulfillment that mandates his return to his celestial abode of Vaikunth.

However, this is not the case with the circumstances surrounding Buddha's death, as is reflected in the following passage from the MahaparinibbanaSutta,

Upon the Buddha's journey to Vajji during his rainy season retreat, his last meal consisted of Sukaramaddava served by Cunda Kammaraputta. Here, Sukaramaddava may suggest pig's flesh, or a plant trodden by pigs, or mushrooms trodden upon by the pigs. Since he had reached the state of Mahaparinirvana, he was detached from his earthly existence. And noticing that something was wrong with the meal, he nevertheless consumed it by himself, and asked the rest of it to be buried. As he succumbed to its effects, he had elevated himself from the primal cessation of perception and sensation, thus, passing into Nirvana. (Halsall)

This situates the Buddha as some kind of a supramundane being, as he is quite aware of the events that would lead to his departure from the material world. Even though in other versions, where the Buddha is approached by Mara on his deathbed, he doesn't immediately ascribe to the ordainment of the pervading destiny, as he does not accept the invitation right at the moment. It is only when his disciple, Ananda fails to perceive his request for the latter to remain, that he passes on. Therefore, Buddha enters the realm of nothingness as he is situated in between the likes of a reincarnate being and that of a deific Vishnu avatars.

CONCLUSION

Two primary features of the Vishnu avatars, the former entailing the avatars as a materialization of Vishnu's being, allowing him to approach the human prayers as a personal lord. Secondly, Vishnu's ability to take a number of forms signifies a reification process for the Vishnu avatars in turn. This indicates some kind of socio-historical assimilation into the BrahmanicalVaishnava tradition. Thus, the avatars had become an instrument through which it was made possible to assimilate, subordinate and legitimize the other deities in such a way that the Buddha had assumed the role of an appendage to Vishnu's mythic hierarchy. (Sarao 188) Therein, as we delve further into this contextual relation, we come to terms with the supposed deific nature of the Buddha who stands out as a foil to the encompassing divine will subjected upon the material realm. It can be observed that the Buddha figure doesn't fit

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within the Vaishnavite paradigms of fate and destiny, as he enters Nirvana following death, rather than the celestial abode of the Supreme Godhead. This in turn, implies a supposed hierarchical relationship between the incarnate and the reincarnate in light of the other avatars, wherein the latter becomes a tool for the former's deliverance from the face of the physical world. In the case of the Buddha, it is not a consequent relation between the two, but rather a deliberated propagation that would draw out the equivalent amongst the two.

APPENDIX

- Yuga- Epoch or Era
- Avatara- Manifestation of a deity
- Pradurbhava- Appearances
- Bodhisattva- an individual who has generated bodhicitta
- Tirthankara- Omniscient teaching God who preaches dharma
- Saiva- one of the primary branches of Hinduism
- Trikaya- Mahayana Buddhist doctrine of the three bodies of Buddha
- Stotra- Ode
- Mara- Seducer
- Amsa- Partial descent
- Aatman- Soul
- Vaikunth- Celestial home of Vishnu
- Bhumi- Mother Earth.
- Kala- Embodiment of Time.
- AnantaSesha- King of all nagas
- Vishnu Bhakti- Devotional worship unto Vishnu
- Pati Bhakti- Devotional worship unto one's husband
- Nirvana- final goal of Buddhism
- Mahaparinirvana- state of complete Nirvana
- Mara- God of Death

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