

The Evolution of Buddhist Thought

The History of Buddhism in India

In Relation to the Social & Philosophical Fabric of India

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Abstract: This paper explores the evolution of Buddhist thought in relation to the social and philosophical contexts of India. Buddhist philosophy evolved for around 1500 years in India with developments in logic, epistemology, phenomenology, cognitive theories, etc. Some of these works are master pieces of structured philosophy. An evaluation of the history of Buddhist thought and its exchanges with other schools also reveals an overall picture of the evolution of Indian thought. India did not assume a monolithic religious, social and philosophical identity and showed great tolerance, openness and acceptance to revolutionary and revisionist ideas. This openness of Indian social fabric in those days has greatly helped not only the evolution of Buddhist thought, but various other streams of thought and lead to an all rounded development during that era. The golden era of Buddhism in India also happened to be the golden era of Indian civilization, science and technology as a whole.

Introduction

This paper reviews the period from the Buddha's time till the 8th century CE. In the first part, the philosophical and social context of India during the Buddha's time is presented based on the conversations recorded in the Pali Suttas. After, briefly sketching the key discoveries of the Buddha, the contributing circumstances for further evolution of Buddhist thought is reviewed. Then, the paper looks into the phase of evolution of the six schools of the orthodox Indian philosophy and juxtaposes the evolution of Buddhist thought in that background. The next major phase is the evolution of Madhyamaka philosophy in the 2nd century CE. The period from the Gupta empire through the Harsha empire and Pala empire marks the golden era of Indian philosophical arguments and the development of some of the finest philosophical thoughts. The next part focusses on that. Before concluding, the paper does a brief review of the influence of Buddhism in India's social fabric.

As the focus is on comparative philosophy, the Buddhist paths and the methods of transformation of mind are not discussed in this paper in detail. This paper also does not cover Vajrayana Buddhism. A complete history of the Buddhist schools, such as various councils, various monastic systems of practice, etc., are out of scope of this paper as the focus is on the evolution of philosophical thought within Buddhism.

The philosophical and social context of India during Buddha's time

The accounts of various conversations captured in the Suttas (Sutta in Pali) of Buddhism provide clear pointers to the philosophical and social context of that time. A monolithic religious order had not formed in India by then. This is evident from the widespread support that new schools of thoughts such as Buddhism, Jainism and Ājīvika received from both kings and lay people.

For example, according to *sāmaññaphala-sutta* (Dīghanikāya 2), king Ajātaśatru of Magadha met the proponents of various philosophical schools, to explore and study their thought. Likewise, *kālāma-sutta* (Aṅguttaranikāya 3.65) shows how even lay people in a village were concerned about how to figure out whose view was correct and which path to follow. They didn't seem to be concerned about preserving a religious identity. Instead, they were concerned about how to evaluate the correctness of various views and paths.

The Vedic religion was followed at that time only by the Brahmins. Many kings also performed sacrificial rituals as in the Vedas based on the advice of the Brahmins in their court. Even among the Brahmin followers of the Vedas, there were ascetics who searched for the truth and a path to liberation. In that process some of them also came to the Buddha.

Pārāyanavagga (Suttanipāta 55-70) narrates the questions from the Brahmin Bavari's disciples to the Buddha. *Tevijja-sutta* (Dīghanikāya 13) narrates the questions that a group of Brahmins brought to the Buddha regarding which Vedic path to follow, etc. This implies that not all Brahmins at that time took the Veda as the final word.

Rational philosophers at the time of the Buddha

Sāmaññaphala-sutta (Dīghanikāya 2) gives an account of many explorers who chose to walk away from the orthodoxy to follow a path of enquiry and experimentation. Amongst these explorers were many agnostics and atheists. There were philosophical speculators and empiricists. As Sutras indicate, these atheist masters were held highly in the kingdoms of Magadha, Kosala, etc.

Of these philosophers, Sanjaya Bolatiputta held an agnostic view that metaphysical questions are not resolvable and only divert us from happiness into endless debates and suffering. Ajita Kesakambali held a materialistic view and explained that mind is nothing more than an epiphenomena coming from material interactions, just like how mixing of various ingredients gives liquor its intoxicative power. He may be identified as a precursor for the school of thought which came to be known later as Carvākā or Lokāyata.

Then, there were Pakhuda Kaccayana¹ and Purana Kassapa² who held that soul (*jīva*) is separate from inanimate matter. Pakhuda speculated a view of eternalism where soul, pain and pleasure are separate eternal entities that come together along with material particles in the formation of a person. He argued that when a sword cuts through a person, nothing is annihilated as only the elements separate and the sword goes through in between. Purana accepted varying experiences of pain and pleasure for the soul, but felt that varying experiences of pain and pleasure are without any cause³, happening completely at random. Since both Pakhuda and Purana claims about the presence of a soul, they believed in continuity beyond this life, but they did not find any causal relations between various births and did not see any reason to plan for future life. The liberation that Sanjaya, Ajita, Pakhuda and Purana envisaged were probably from the tight-grip of social customs and ethical judgements.

Then, there was Makkhali Gosala, the master of *ājīvika* school of naked ascetics. Though this school had a significant presence in India till at least the 2nd century CE, their own scriptures are lost now. Makkhali held a view of fatalism (*niyati*), that a soul travels through many lives, gradually progressing through one life after the other and eventually attains liberation from suffering, just like how a ball of thread naturally and gradually unwinds over time. Nothing can be done by the person to affect its course.⁴ According to him, experiences of pain and pleasure have natural inanimate (*ajīvika*) causes similar to how plants sprout up, die and come up again.

The next level of refinement came with Nigantha Nathaputta⁵ of the Nirgrantha school that later came to be known as the Jain school. He postulated that human suffering and pain comes from the direct ripening of the fruit of actions that one did in many lives in the past. However, this school viewed Karma as a type of material particle that attach to the otherwise pure and omniscient soul. According to them, the way to liberation is to prevent newer accumulation of karma through the practice of restraint and then to clear away the karma that is already accumulated. They believed that the way to clear away the accumulated karma is through the practices of austerities and penance. This completes the popular schools of philosophical exploration that preceded the Buddha as listed in *sāmaññaphala-sutta*.

¹ Also known as Kakkuda Kartyāyana

² Also known as Purana Kasyapa

³ i.e., according to Purana, soul experienced pain and pleasure, but not due to any cause that the soul creates. So, there is nothing that needs to be done to avoid future pain or increase future pleasure. All that one can do is to enjoy the present pleasure.

⁴ According to the Jain sources Makkhali Gosala explored together with Mahavira before parting their ways. As their own scriptures are extinct now, the main sources into their philosophical position are the Buddhist and Jain scriptures that show them as fatalists. Since, they thrived as a school for centuries, in all likelihood, they would have also believed in some way of smoothening the journey and reducing the suffering while undertaking the fatalistic journey through fixed lives. According to the discussions in Manimekhalai, Ājīvikas are treated as similar to Nirgranthas (Jains).

⁵ Also known as Nirgrantha Nāthaputra, identified as Mahavira. Pali word Nigantha, and Sanskrit word Nirgrantha refers to the Jain school as it was known at that time.

Other experimenters at the time of the Buddha

There were also others who after abandoning worldly life and dwelling in forests, experimented with consciousness. They were probably not as well-known as the above listed philosophers. Some among those who find specific mention in the Buddhist scriptures are Alara Kalama (Arāḍa Kālāma in Sanskrit) and Uddaka Ramaputta (Udraka Rāmaputra in Sanskrit), the two teachers with whom Siddhartha experimented before finding his own way to Buddhahood, as described in *āriyapariyesana-sutta* (Majjhimanikāya 26). To them, the way to end suffering was to disengage and isolate from the turbulent realm of sensory perceptions and mental wandering and discover deep absorptions of peace and stillness. They may be identified as belonging to the predecessors of the Samkhya approach in their intent, though they did not engage in Samkhya style ontological speculations. However, the names of schools such as Samkhya and Yoga do not appear in the Pali Suttas.

Brahmanical schools at the time of the Buddha

In addition to these, various theistic schools were also present during the Buddha's time. Particularly there were two types of Brahminical schools frequently mentioned in the Buddhist sutras - (i) the Vedic school of rituals to please various gods for prosperity and glory, and (ii) the proto-Upanishadik⁶ quest for attaining either the realm of Brahma God or the absolute as Brahman, through chastity, restraint, and meditation.

The dominant among them was the Vedic school with its gods such as Indra, Varuna, Agni, Soma, Mitra, etc. They engaged in sacrificial rituals to please these gods. According to the Buddha as detailed in *brahmaṇadhammika-sutta* (Suttanipāta 19), Brahmins were originally ascetics who lived away from society in search of ways to reach the realm of Brahma God or the absolute as Brahman. The Buddha says that they were people of self-restraint who abandoned objects of five senses and strived in their quest. They valued virtue, rectitude, mildness, penance, tenderness, compassion and patience. The Buddha says that they gradually got attracted to the wealth and glory of the kings, and thus changed their focus to hymns and rituals involving the sacrifice of many cows, horses (*aśvamedha*) and even humans (*puruṣamedha*) and exhorted kings to perform them. On many occasions, when Brahmins approached him, the Buddha advised them to abandon sacrificial rituals involving living beings, and to either turn into ascetics or perform rites without killing animals. Many of them took his advice to heart. The Buddha also advised King Prasenjit of Kosala not to perform such sacrificial rituals.

The proto-Upanishadik Brahmin ascetics stayed in self-restraint and engaged in pursuits of prayers and meditation to reach the realm of the Brahma God or the absolute as Brahman. They were theistic explorers. The name Upanishad is not mentioned in the Buddhist Sutras. However, as per *tevijja-sutta* (Dīghanikāya 13), some Brahmins came to Buddha and discussed their internal disputes regarding their path to liberation. From this, it can be inferred that some of the ideas of Aranyakas and Upanishads were at least in its formative phase during the Buddha's time. Further, the Buddha points out the faults of views such as 'infinite self' in *brahmajāla-sutta* (Dīghanikāya 1), 'cosmos is the self' in *alagaddupama-sutta* (Majjhimanikāya 22), etc. These can be taken as his refutation of the ideas of early Upanishads. In *mūlapariyaya-sutta*⁷ (Majjhimanikāya 1), the Buddha explained how identifications such as 'I am Brahman (*brahman me'ti*)', 'I am boundless consciousness (*viññāṇañcāyatanam me'ti*)', 'I am the One (*ekatva*)', 'I am the multiplicity (*nānātvā*)', 'I am all (*sarvaṃ*)', etc., and even 'I am Nirvana' are wrong views. These views result from not comprehending meditative experiences correctly and thus identifying oneself with that experience.

As we can see from this discussion, the ground was fertile for philosophical speculations and experimentation in India at the time of the Buddha. There was no monolithic religion. Even the most powerful school of the day, the orthodox Vedic school, encouraged doubts in philosophy. The famed Nasadiya Sukta of Rgveda asks and wonders who can know whence the world has arisen, because gods also came after the formation of the world.

As we have seen, the Buddha was able to even question the Vedic rituals of sacrifice of life without facing wrath from any segment and he was also able to influence change within the orthodoxy. This unique openness and willingness of India for new ideas at that time is definitely a contributing factor for the rise of the Buddha.

⁶ proto-Upanishadik because the Upanishads were still being developed and were not known by that name.

⁷ *Mūlapariyaya-sutta* discusses how with respect to any phenomenal experience, one at first perceives it as it comes, but soon drifts further to conceptualizing 'things about it', 'things in it', 'things coming out from it', and finally conceptualizing 'it as oneself'. The Buddha explains this as an error resulting from taking a knowable as the root and then giving into proliferation of concepts around it.

The Key Discoveries of the Buddha

The Buddha's aim was not to philosophize but to find a practical solution to attain Nirvana as the freedom from suffering. His teachings are that of practically leading disciples in the path to liberation. He did not accept speculative philosophy as a way to understand the nature of our existence and the causes of suffering. Instead, he relied on direct investigation and logical inference based on observations.

The Buddha rejected various pursuits of his time, such as (i) denying causality and indulging in sense pleasures (*akriyāvāda*), (ii) holding on to the view of predetermined effects of past karma and then engaging in self-torture (*pūrvekatāhetuvāda*), (iii) speculating a God to be the cause, and trying to please a metaphysical God (*īśvara-nirmānavāda*), and (iv) withdrawing into deep absorptions of mind (*arūpa-dhyāna*). He adopted a middle-way of neither clinging to sense pleasure nor engaging in self-torture. His method is to cultivate insight into the nature of phenomenal experiences with a clear and stable awareness, and thus dispel the root cause of suffering. He said in *dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* (Saṃyuttanikāya 56.11) that the truth of suffering is to be comprehended, the cause of suffering is to be abandoned, the cessation of suffering is to be experienced, and the path to cessation is to be cultivated. These are the four noble truths (*catur-ārya-satya*), the heart of the Buddhist path. It needs to be noted that the Buddha does not speculate about ontological categories, but just observes phenomena as it is without giving into speculations.

He discovered that all phenomenal experiences that are contaminated by clinging and craving are in the nature of suffering (*duḥkha*). All phenomena are compounded through causes and conditions and are thus impermanent (*anityā*). There is no Self to be seen anywhere (*anātma*) because what one experiences as oneself is only a stream of transient experiences of forms (*rūpa*), feelings (*vedanā*), designations (*saṃjñā*), mental formations (*saṃskāra*) and cognitions (*vijñāna*).

Suffering of Samsara is caused by craving and clinging, which in turn arises due to the ignorance (*avidyā*) of mistaking impermanent as permanent, and not-Self as Self. When ignorance, craving and clinging are eliminated, the causation that sustains the delusion of Samsara is reversed, and *Nirvāna* is realized. Nirvana as the uncompounded (*asaṃskāra*) nature cannot be attained by clinging to it as another concept and craving for it. Thus speculations about Nirvana as a true Self, transcendental, etc., are only additional hindrances to the path. Instead, the Buddha advocated to work with one's immediate experiences. Nirvana is attained through the Noble Eight-fold Path (*ārya-aṣṭāṅga-mārga*). This path also avoids the extremes of worldliness and withdrawal because one engages in right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right samadhi. In each of these limbs, the word 'right' means, avoiding extremes and choosing the right middle.

As one looks into various philosophical systems, Buddhists and non-Buddhists arrive at similar conclusions on many aspects and differ on some. Even within Buddhism, there are many philosophical schools with varying views. However, the above four points of *anityā*, *anātma*, *duḥkha*, and *nirvāna* are common to all schools of Buddhism and distinguish Buddhist schools from other schools of thought. Non-Buddhist philosophical systems typically take at least one entity to be permanent, and formulate one or another concept of a metaphysical Self.

India after the Buddha

India continued to maintain an open culture with no particular monolithic religious identity even after the time of the Buddha. This provided a fertile ground for the growth of Buddhism with its emphasis on rationality and direct investigation. During this period India also saw the rise of many well-systematized schools of philosophy - both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. The period from the Buddha's time till around 8th-9th century CE was also the golden era of India in terms of its development in logic, medicine, academics, astronomy, mathematics, etc.

The Maurya period (4th to 2nd century BCE) is an example of how India stayed clear from a monolithic religious identity. While Emperor Asoka followed Buddhism, he also supported other schools of thought. Asoka's Pillar Edict at Delhi-Topra (Hultzsch, E. 1925, pp 132-137), round the pillar, throws light about the schools of thought that existed at his time. Asoka's edicts use the word Dhamma⁸ to refer to Buddhism. In this edict he mentions that he appointed special ministers not only to engage with Sangha⁹, but also to engage with all groups of ascetics and householders. Here, he

⁸ As Asoka's edicts use the word Dhamma (Pali equivalent of Dharma) for Buddhism and Brahmana for the Vedic religion, it is evident that Dharma by default meant Buddhism at that period, and the use of Dharma for Brahminical religions started at a later period.

⁹ referring to the community of Buddhist monastics

particularly mentions the names of three other sects - Brāhmaṇa, Ājīvika and Nirgrantha - and then uses the phrase 'many other sects'. It implies that the present-day religious identity of India had not yet taken shape. Brahmins in general practiced the Vedic religion of sacrificial rituals, and some of them who became ascetics practiced the Upanishad-style meditations and self-restraints. That was not yet widespread among the masses. There were many other theistic and non-theistic meditations and methods of rational inquiry that the rest of India engaged in. And, as the Buddhist records reveal, many Brahmins too joined the rest of India in following those schools. That kind of an open inquiry without clear religious identity prevailed at the Maurya time.

Indo-Greek Kingdom (2nd century BCE to 1st century CE) and the Kushan empire (the 1st to 4th century CE) brought a confluence of the intellectual cultures of India and Greece. One of the earliest thorough logical work of debate is *milinda-pañha* (trans. 2001), which documents the debates between the Buddhist monk Nagasena and the King Menander I Soter (2nd century BCE). The earliest Buddhist sculptures are also said to be from Gandhara during the Kushan empire, inspired by the Greek influence.

Contributing conditions for the evolution of Buddhist thought after the Buddha

The evolution of Buddhist thought had many reasons. The salient among them are:

- a) Buddha himself promoted rational inquiry and critical evaluation. Thus, the Buddhist scholars continued to study both the ultimate nature and conventional characteristics of phenomena through observations and reasoning. This led to the development in various fields of knowledge such as (i) the Madhyamaka system of philosophical deconstruction, (ii) Pramāṇa system of logic, epistemology, and the related theory of cognition and (iii) Yogacara system of the theory of consciousness.
- b) Though the Buddha used logic and reasoning during his discourses, his emphasis was not in building a philosophical system, but to individually benefit the audience in front of him through directly going to the point that is most pertinent to that group of disciples. The Buddha's message varied depending upon the habitual dispositions of the disciples. So, after the time of the Buddha, scholars began categorizing his discourses and forming philosophical systems to study his words thoroughly. This was important for developing a scholarly understanding of the teachings of the Buddha as well as for preserving and practicing the intended meaning instead of merely following the words.
- c) The Greeks arrived in India in the latter half of the first millennium BCE. They also brought with them their tradition of formal debates using logic and reasoning. They challenged the philosophers of India for debates (*Milinda-pañha*, 2001/trans)¹⁰. This would have created a very positive environment to develop sophisticated theories of logic and methods of debate.
- d) Many formal schools of non-Buddhist philosophy arose in India that held one or more entities to be permanent and indivisible building blocks of the world and argued that one or other type of inherently existing metaphysical Self (*ātmā*) is the essence of the person. Some of them also held that there is an inherently existing God as a creator, controller or coordinator. Though the Buddhist path works with direct observation instead of metaphysical speculations, the Buddhists also found inspiration in engaging in the philosophical process for two reasons - (i) comparison with other views and debating can be a good way to find the subtle faults that one is falling into in one's own view, and (ii) philosophical debates can be useful in showing the right path to those who are philosophically inclined.
- e) Over the time, Mahayana sutras of the Buddha came to light. These new sutras expounded the profound view of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and the vast qualities of Buddha-nature (*sugata-garbha*). Logic and reasoning were useful in validating the authenticity of these sutras as well as for understanding their meaning. Systems of philosophical tenets were developed to see how all these words of the Buddha fit together.

To explore the evolution of Buddhist thought in the overall context of the evolution of Indian thought, the next few sections of this paper review the Buddhist thoughts by juxtaposing it over the evolution of other Indian thoughts.

The Period of Evolution of the Six Orthodox Schools

¹⁰ The Greeks also developed a keen interest in Buddhism, leading to the famed Greco-Buddhist art.

Around this time, Panini compiled the grammar for Sanskrit, a refined language based on the earlier Vedic language. He is considered to have lived around 350 BCE (Basu, B.D., 1913, p i). While the Vedic language was permitted only for the higher castes, Panini's new Sanskrit was adopted widely by scholars of almost all schools, without any caste restrictions, as a common language for philosophical exchanges and debates. This gave a major boost to the philosophical traditions of India. Buddhism also adopted Sanskrit for its philosophical works.

The following period saw the systematic development of formal logic, epistemology and many detailed metaphysical theories, each with its own scriptures and enumerations of categories to understand the world and to figure out their specific paths to liberation. There were also many debates between schools, often organized by kings.

The foundations for the six Brahminical schools of philosophy, that later came to be known as the six orthodox schools (*āstika*) of Hinduism, were laid in the period between the 4th century BCE and the beginning of common era. Some of the explorers of these orthodox schools were non-theistic. Many of these schools such as Nyaya, Vaiśeshika, Samkhya and Yoga did not give importance to the Vedic rituals. However, all of them valued the exclamations on meditative experiences passed down within the Upanishads of Brahminical tradition. The philosophers of these orthodox schools strived to establish an ontological status to these experiences. This was in contrast to the Buddha's explanation of all kinds of ordinary and meditative experiences as various phenomenological states without a metaphysical meaning. They came up with different theories about a permanent metaphysical Self of person, and some of them also argued for the existence of an inherent Supreme Self as a God. Advaita Vedanta that came later is partly an exception, in that they aligned with the Buddhists in accepting the lack of a metaphysical Self of person. However, Advaita Vedanta argued for a monistic metaphysical Self. All of these schools were concerned with ontological speculations.

These orthodox schools started forming in the 4th century BCE. Their doctrines reached a final stage in the common era and gained popularity around the beginning of common era. From that time onwards, there are many references to such schools in the Buddhist scriptures. As noted earlier, the 1st century CE work of *buddha-carita* (trans. 2003) by Aśvagosa indicates that a proto-Samkhya-Yoga school was popular by the 1st century CE¹¹. Aśvagosa was an acclaimed scholar of Brahminical philosophy before adopting Buddhism. His depiction of Arāḍa's philosophy is considered to represent the view of proto-Samkhya school in the 1st century CE (Larson, 1979, p 75). Acharya Nagarjuna's (2nd century CE) *mūlamadhayamaka-kārika* (trans. 1991) pays much attention to deconstruct the ontologies of Samkhya, Nyaya and Vaiśeshika along with the ontologies of earlier Buddhist schools. His *viśvavārtanī* (trans. 1998) refutes the Nyaya epistemology and the Nyaya doctrine of attributing objective reality to logical constructs. This implies that Nyaya was an influential *pramāṇa* system by the 2nd century CE.

Sāmkhya School

Among the six orthodox schools, the earliest is said to be *Sāmkhya*. Its founder is said to be Kapila. The early Upanishads such as Chandogya illustrates meditative experiences that may be termed as Samkhya-style. These Upanishads describe meditations to isolate *puruṣa* as the pure conscious enjoyer of the world, as the subjective Self, away from the turbulence of the objective world. This period may be seen as common to both Samkhya and Yoga system as an early non-theistic Yoga system of attaining levels of meditative absorption - a practice that is more subjective in nature. In the later period, an ontological system of proto-Samkhya began to evolve that dealt with the enumeration of the objects of the world. It took its final shape as a non-theistic dualistic Samkhya philosophy in the form that is known today by 350CE in Iśvarakrishna's Samkhya-karika (Feuerstein, 2001, p 75). By then, Samkhya became a non-theistic path of knowledge. Its parallel system, the Yoga school became a theistic experiential path emphasizing the power of discipline and the grace of *Īśvara* (Larson, 1979, p 123).

According to the Samkhya dualism, *puruṣa* as the Self is not an object but a subjective enjoyer, whereas intellect (*buddhi*), ego (*aḥamkāra*), mind (*manas*), sense faculties, etc., are objects lacking consciousness. They are treated along with material elements and sensory objects as the objective evolutes of nature (*prakṛti*) separate from the subjective Self. The Samkhya philosophy does not leave any scope for a God, even as a supreme *puruṣa*, because *puruṣa* according to Samkhya is not an active principle, cannot initiate action, and only a passive enjoyer. However, theistic interpretations of Samkhya appeared in Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita.

¹¹ Though Uddaka and Alara, as per *Ariyapariyesana-sutta* did not speculate a detailed metaphysics but delved in a proto-Samkhya-Yoga style meditation, *buddha-cartia* depicts that they presented a detailed enumeration of the object of knowledge, similar to that of the later Samkhya.

One of the main Buddhist criticisms about Samkhya was about their assumption of Self as the permanent enjoyer. According to the Buddhists, to be an enjoyer of an object, the subject needs to change from the state of not enjoying that object to the state of enjoying it. Thus, *puruṣa*, if permanent and independent cannot be the enjoyer of the world.

Another line of debate that Samkhya had with other orthodox schools as well as with Buddhism is on their theory of primal causation. According to Samkhya, the non-conscious substratum of *prakṛti* primordially contains the effects that it evolves into. In other words, the effect is already contained in the cause. However, the Buddhists, particularly Madhyamikas refuted this because if the effect is contained in the cause, then whenever the cause is present, the effect should also be present, whereas what is seen in nature is that an effect is produced by the cause only when other conditions also come together. For example, a Mango seed does not imply that there is a Mango tree simultaneously present as its effect. The tree comes to existence only when the seed ceases to exist. Further, the quality of the Mango tree also depends upon the soil and availability of water and sunlight.

Yoga School

Yoga school of Patanjali came up in the 2nd century BCE with similar ontology and metaphysics as Samkhya, but with a theistic orientation. *Yoga-sūtras* initially composed by Patanjali reached its final form by 4th century AD (Larson, 1979, p 150). *Īśvara-praṇidhāna* (the aspiration towards *Īśvara*¹², the omnipotent God) is considered important in the practice of this school. Though Yoga took a theistic position, they also developed more details on the *prakṛti* part of naturalistic evolution by adding *citta* as an additional evolute of *prakṛti*. Similar to the Buddhist philosophies, *citta*'s causal changes were explained to be through *vāśana* (habits) and *bīja* (karmic propensities). According to the Buddhists, Yoga school also seeks for the permanent and static, and thus do not abandon the clinging to a metaphysical Self.

Mimamsa

The Mimāṃsa school (particularly, the purva-mimamsa) came up in the 3rd century BCE (Hiriyanna, 1995, p 130) as a philosophical justification of Vedic rituals, at a time when the Vedic rituals lost its importance with the advent of Buddhism, Jainism and the rationalistic and non-theistic schools of Brahmanism. Mimamsa school tried to use semi-atheistic lines of argument to justify Vedic rituals. They claimed that gods are merely in name and that the power attributed to gods are actually the power of the ritual procedure in itself.

The foundation for Vedanta schools

Brahma-sutras also came up during this period, giving a structured philosophical framework for the portion of the Vedas concerned with transcendental knowledge, which by then was known as Upanishads. Many Upanishads also came up during this period (Gunasekara, Victor, n.d.). This also paved way for the sixth orthodox school, Vedanta. From the 5th century CE onwards, over another 1000 years, various schools of Vedanta took shape.

Nyaya and Vaiśeshika

Nyaya and Vaiśeshika schools originated in the period that followed Panini. Akṣapāda Gautama's *nyāya-sūtra* (Basu, B.D., 1913/Ed.), just after the time of Panini, paved the way for Nyaya school. This work reached its final form only around the start of the common era (Matilal, 1977, pp 54-55). Kaṇāda Kashyapa's *vaiśeṣika-sūtra* (Basu, B.D., 1923/Ed.) paved way for Vaiśeshika school around the 2nd century BCE.

Akṣapāda held that ignorance is at the root of suffering, and the path to liberation is through acquisition of knowledge. For this purpose, *nyāya-sūtra*'s focus is on developing a formal system of logic and epistemology. It analyzes in detail what the characteristics of valid proofs and valid logical arguments are. This work paved the foundation for formal logic systems of India. Even the later development of the Buddhist formal logic and epistemology can be seen, to some extent, as a response to the development of the Nyaya system and the need the Buddhists felt in correcting some of the fundamental ontological assumptions in the Nyaya logic and epistemology. The early Nyaya school as in *nyāya-sūtra* was non-theistic as it rejects God as the efficient cause for a person's experiences. Further, early Nyaiyikas did not rely on the appeasement of God or gods as their path.

¹² *Īśvara* is often an epitome for Siva in the early writings as the Saivites considered Siva to be omnipotent. However, as Patanjali does not go into such specific characteristic of *Īśvara*, later Vaishnavitic schools also adopted Yoga and considered *Īśvara* to be Vishnu.

According to Kanada, founder of Vaiśeṣika, the supreme good (*dharmaviśeṣa*) is produced by the knowledge of reality (*tatvajñāna*) regarding six classes of objects, namely, substance (*dravya*), quality (*guṇa*), action (*karma*), universal (*sāmānya*), particular (*viśeṣa*) and inherence (*samavaya*). In this regard, *vaiśeṣika-sūtra* developed an elaborate ontology explaining these six classes of objects as the fundamental building blocks of the person and the world. *Vaiśeṣika-sūtra* holds that indivisible, dimensionless and permanent atoms of the five elements are the building blocks of the material world.

Later, Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika evolved together as a theistic system upholding Vedas, Upanishads and Supreme God and asserting a substantial Self that is not knowable through ordinary direct perception. The Self for them is a substance that is eternal and changeless. It is an object and not a subject. Though changeless, it initiates change in other constituents through its volition. Cognition (*jñāna*) is considered as other than Self because cognition is impermanent. In other words, they view the Self as the permanent substratum of an individual which supports changing particulars, qualities and actions. They also argued that recollection and rebirth are possible only because imprints of earlier cognitions are stored in a permanent Self.

The early period of Nyaya - Buddhist debates

The Buddhists refuted the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika arguments for a metaphysical Self because a changeless entity cannot be the initiator of change. Hence, volition cannot arise from a changeless Self. Further, since imprints themselves are impermanent and has to necessarily change over time, there is no need for a hypothesis of a permanent Self to store them. Recollection can happen due to the cause and effect connections of the stream of consciousness.

Many schools of *Sarvāstivāda* Buddhism, such as *Vaibhāṣika*, too developed their own atomic theory. They philosophized that phenomenological categories taught by the Buddha are also ontological categories. Vaibhashika's atomic theory regards the world to be made of indivisible and dimensionless particles of five elements and the mind to be a stream of the moments of consciousness. Vaibhashika's atomic theory had a minimalistic ontology in comparison to Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika. There is no Self of the person, but only the moments of consciousness and particles of matter making up the person.

This was in contrast to the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika theory that argued not only for a permanent Self of the person, but also the presence of a real 'whole' to every entity in addition to its parts. Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika argued that since the word 'cow' is used to denote all cows that have different particulars and occupying different space and time, there has to be a common 'cowness' (*gotva*), a universal (*sāmānya*) that is permanent and pervading and inhering in every particular cow. According to them, as there are infinite individual objects, it is possible to distinguish a cow from a horse and call it by the word 'cow' only because cows alone possess the universal 'cowness' (Basu, B.D., 1913/Ed. p 60). The Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika argued that this universal is a real object of knowledge. For the Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika, the cognition of whole is the detection of the real universal present in the particular object and not simply a conceptual idea that arises in mind upon receiving the particulars of the real object.

This debate was taken forward by *Sautrāntika* sub-school of *Sarvāstivāda* school of Buddhism and Madhyamaka philosophers of the Mahayana Buddhism in the later period. This paper comes back to those arguments in the following sections.

Period of Kushan and Satavahana Empires

From the Tamil epic of the Sangam period, Manimekhalai (trans. 1989) of the 2nd century CE, it is clear that many philosophical schools had a widespread presence even in the far South by that time. According to this epic, the schools such as Bauddha, Vedavadi, Mimamsa, Śaiva-vadi, Vaishnava-vadi, Brahma-vadi, Ajivika, Nirgrantha, Samkhya, Vaiseshika, Bhutavadi¹³, etc. were taught in Vanchi, a centre of learning in Chera Kingdom of the present-day Kerala. It also describes some of these including Buddhism to be popular in Kanchi, then in the Chola Kingdom. However, the temple worship of the modern Hinduism do not find mention in this 2nd century CE epic. Vedic rituals to Indra were popular, and there is also mention of many local deities.

The Satavahana kingdom of the Southern India (1st century BCE to 2nd century CE) also encouraged Buddhism. Ajanta caves were constructed in their patronage. Satavahana kingdom became the centre for the genesis of the Mahayana movement. At the same time, in the north-western direction on India, Kushan Empire (1st to 4th century CE) supported Buddhism. Many philosophical schools of Buddhism such as Mahasaṅghika, Vaibhashika and Sautrantika as well as

¹³ Bhutavadi is materialistic school, of which Lokayata is a sub-school

Mahayana engaged in intellectual development during this period. Many of the six orthodox schools also flourished in the Kushan Empire.

The rise of Mahayana movement

Between 2nd century BCE and 2nd century CE, many Mahayana sutras of the Buddha came to light. These sutras had its emphasis on attaining perfect Buddhahood and thus perfecting one's own abilities to be of benefit to all beings, just as how the Buddha did earlier. This was in contrast to the emphasis on individual-liberation in the earlier Buddhism. Bodhicitta, the altruistic mind that takes up responsibility to alleviate the suffering of all beings, and the wisdom of non-abiding in Samsara and Nirvana, are the foundations for the Mahayana practice. The depth of meaning in the Mahayana sutras was accessible to only a few at that time, and mostly it was read repeatedly so that an experiential insight dawns gradually.

In the 2nd century CE, Acharya Nagarjuna developed many logical treatises to make the view presented in those sutras more accessible. The development of Indian logic would have prepared the ground for such a treatise of logic to happen. His works of logic such as *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā*, *vigraha-vyāvartanī*, etc., and his other works such as *prajñā-pāramita-śāstra*, *dharmadhātu-stava*, etc., paved way to the rise of Mahayana movement. Most of the later philosophical works of Buddhism were contributions from Mahayana scholars. Nagarjuna's works also marked the beginning of the *Madhyamaka* school of Buddhist philosophy.

The rise of Madhyamaka School of Buddhism

Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā (trans. 1991) logically deconstructed all concepts and philosophies. Through this treatise, Nagarjuna proved that neither the smallest particles of matter nor the shortest moment of consciousness can have an independent existence as an indivisible or permanent entity. Every entity or phenomenon arises in dependence upon others and is empty in essence.

Madhyamikas tore apart the extreme realism of Nyaya-Vaiśeṣika system. According to Madhyamaka, the whole is dependent upon parts. The perception of the whole arises in dependence upon parts and relative to the observer. For example, what appears as a table to humans is a home to a cat. So, it is absurd to claim that 'tableness' and 'homeness' are real entities inherent to the object. They arise in relation to the perceiver observing the particulars.

Nagarjuna showed that at any level of perception, it can be seen that the object does not possess its own independent existence and thus is empty of inherent existence (*svabhāva-śūnya*), arising only as an acquired designation (*upādāya prajñapti*) upon whatever arises interdependently (*pratītya samudpāda*). By 'designation', Nagarjuna does not imply idealism. Designations are acquired, arising interdependently and are impermanent, and thus belong to the natural world than to the world of pure ideas. Further, Nagarjuna's approach is to see designations as merely designations and not to mix them with reality. Nagarjuna also extends this to show that even the moments of consciousness are empty and are acquired designations upon interdependent arisings.

Madhyamikas also refute the existence of permanent, indivisible and dimensionless particles of matter. If the particles are dimensionless without occupying extensions in space, they argue, how can they be arranged in space to produce coarse objects? And, if they have dimensions, they can be divided further as front and back, right and left, having their own unique interactions with space, and hence not the indivisible particle. Not only particles of matter and consciousness, Nagarjuna also showed that even space and time, cause and effect, and Samsara and Nirvana are empty of inherent existence. In effect, Nagarjuna showed how the 'real' and 'ideal' are all just extremes and are mere conceptual categories that we impute wrongly to the actual nature of reality. He established the theory of two truths¹⁴ - the ultimate truth and the conventional truth - emptiness and appearance.

Nagarjuna's philosophy may be called as the end of philosophy itself, as it deconstructs every possible view of philosophy - that existed and that can ever be conceived - by showing that nothing can hold as a dogma or truth applicable to all conditions. While generally it applies to all philosophies, specifically he deconstructs the then existing philosophies such as the view of momentarily existing fundamental particles and moments of consciousness that the earlier Buddhist schools¹⁵ propounded, and the non-Buddhist views of Nyaya, Vaiśeṣika, Samkhya, etc. Thus, Nagarjuna's logic showed the futility of all metaphysics and ontological treatises of all the orthodox schools as well as

¹⁴ two truths (*satyadvaya*) as *paramārtha satya* and *samvṛti satya*.

¹⁵ such as Vaibhashika and Sautrantika

the Buddhist schools. Madhyamaka shows how to perceive and understand phenomena and its groundlessness as it is, without drifting to extremes of conceptual proliferations.

His style was to lay bare the empty nature of all phenomenal arisings. After demolishing all possibilities of philosophical speculations and bases of clinging, Nagarjuna does not invoke another transcendental entity as the super substratum or entity. Instead, he directly draws attention to the immediacy of phenomenal appearances in their bare nature, as it is (*tathātā*), the very essence of the *prajñā-pāramita-sūtras*. Thus Nagarjuna freed Buddhist philosophies from their intermediate tendencies for ontological speculations, back to the freshness of the phenomenological approach of the Buddha, and further used that to bring light into the profound meaning of Mahayana sutras.

Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka deconstruction is to be compared with the post-modern deconstruction in the Western Philosophy. Nagarjuna's deconstruction occurred right in the 2nd century CE when philosophical speculations and schools of philosophy had just firmed up in India. However, the two truth theory of Nagarjuna avoids the nihilistic and depressive tendencies of the post-modern deconstructions. Varela, et al (1993, p. 253) state,

There is a profound discovery of groundlessness in our culture - in science, in the humanities, in society, and in the uncertainties of people's daily lives. ... Taking groundlessness as negative, as a loss, leads to a sense of alienation, despair, loss of heart, and nihilism. The cure that is generally espoused in our culture is to find a new grounding (or a return to older grounds). ... In Buddhism, we have a case study showing that when groundlessness is embraced and followed through to its ultimate conclusions, the outcome is an unconditional sense of intrinsic goodness that manifests itself in the world as spontaneous compassion.

According to Nagarjuna, even though all are mere designations lacking independent reality, since these are deluded experiences, as a sequence of causes and effects, there is a need of moral discipline and goal to life. Unless one realizes the ultimate truth in direct experience, there arise the conventional experiences of suffering depending upon conventional causes and conditions, and hence the need for following a path that eliminates the causes of suffering and then gradually developing the wisdom of the ultimate nature.

The Period from the Gupta Empire to Harsha's Empire

Modern Hinduism with its temples, idol-worship and non-Vedic deities such as the avatars of Lord Vishnu as well as Puranas attributed to Lord Siva and Lord Vishnu became popular during the Gupta period (320 CE to 550CE).

While Guptas were theists, they maintained the long-held secular tradition of India in promoting diverse schools of thoughts, arts and science. The most acclaimed Buddhist university of Nalanda, in its form known in the record of the Chinese travelers, was established during the Gupta period. Further, many of the early Buddhist sculptures recovered in North India dates to the Gupta period. When Faxian¹⁶ (Legge, James, 1886/trans), the Chinese monk traveller visited India in the 5th century CE, Buddhism was flourishing all around North India though it faced decline in the far-west such as Gandhara and so on.

The Samkhya philosophy as discussed earlier, reached its final stage in Samkhya-Karika in this period. Further, Nyaya-Vaiśhika system saw *nyāya-bhāṣya*, a commentary by Vātsyāyana to *nyāya-sūtra*. This treatise criticized the Buddhist theory of momentariness. Thus this period from the Guptas to Harsha also happened to be a period of involved debates between the Buddhists and the orthodox schools. The Buddhist scholar Vasubandhu (5th century CE) refuted the criticism of Vatsyayana in his treatises of logic such as *vāda-vidhī*, *vāda-vidhāna* and *vāda-hrdaya*. The famed Buddhist logician Dignaga (5th century CE) gave shape to the distinctive logic system of the Buddhists in his *pramāṇa-samuccaya*. Uddyotakāra (7th century CE) from the Nyaya side raised further criticism in his *nyāya-vārtika*. In response came the celebrated treatises of logic by the Buddhist scholar Dharmakīrti (7th century CE) such as *pramāṇa-vārtika*, *nyāya-bindu*, *hetu-bindu* and *vāda-nyāya*.

The evolution of the Buddhist theory of cognition

A major challenge the Buddhist logicians and epistemologists received during this period from the Naiyayikas was with respect to the theory of cognition. Though Nagarjuna showed the unviability of universals (*sāmānya*) proposed by the Nyaya school, the question kept coming back on how recognition of entities is possible without such real universals.

¹⁶ Also spelt as Fa-hien

So, this needed an answer using logic that deals with conventional phenomena (*vyavahāra*) instead of the Nagarjuna style of logic that deals with ultimate nature (*paramārtha*). Sautrantika system of realist Buddhist philosophy was used by the Buddhist logicians like Dignaga (5th century CE) and Dharmakirti (7th century CE) to answer these. This also helped them in establishing a natural transition from the mind-matter realism of Sautrantika, to the mental-realism of Yogacara and the emptiness of the Madhyamaka.

According to the Buddhist theory of momentariness, all coarse objects are made of momentarily changing particles of matter. In the absence of real universal, the question arises about how one perceives different cows at different time and space and recognizes all of them as cows. Dignaga resolved this issue through the theory of exclusion or *apohavāda*. Uddyotakāra from the Nyaya side raised further objections. Dharmakirti refuted those objections and expanded the *apohavāda* (Dunne, 2004, pp 145-198) doctrine to its fullness, in his *pramāṇa-vārtika*. Later Santarakṣita (8th century CE) elaborated on it in his *tattvasamgraha* from a Madhyamaka perspective. *Apohavāda* explains how cognition proceeds from the sense perception of momentary particulars of the real object to the construction of a generalized conceptual image in mental consciousness through the process of exclusion of other objects that do not produce the effect that one is looking for.

The *apohavāda* theory of cognition remains valuable even today in providing pointers towards a modern scientific theory of cognition, as all scientific evidences only point to particulars and not to universals as building blocks of the world. As modern science is still facing the problem of how to study the relation between the natural world of ever-changing particulars with the phenomenal experiences of permanent entities, abstract forms and intentions, the sophisticated theories of cognition that the Buddhist scholars of late 1st millennium CE produced can provide important clues.

The rise of Yogacara School of Buddhism

Yogacara school of Mahayana started with the works of Asanga and Vasubandhu in the 5th century CE. The Mahayana Sutras such as *lankāvātāra-sūtra*, *saṃdhinirmocan-sūtra*, *daśabhūmika-sūtra*, etc., gave the inspiration for the development of Yogacara philosophy. The intent of Yogacara philosophy was to understand the subtle phenomenological dynamics. It explored how the continuum of one's awareness transforms through the cleansing of obscurations to attain Buddhahood. In other words, Yogacara explores how the ultimate emptiness and sameness of Samsara and Nirvana become different phenomenological experiences of Samsara and Nirvana for sentient beings and Buddhas respectively. They developed the theory of three-natures (*trisvabhāva*) - imagined (*parikalpita*), dependent (*paratantra*) and perfect (*pariniṣpanna*) nature. The ordinary experience of perceiving objects as independent and substantial entities is the imagined nature, a deluded projection of mind. The way such projections arise as phenomenal experiences is the dependent nature. When the root cause of ignorance is eliminated, the perfect nature is experienced as the non-conceptual appearance of everything as it is. It is the freedom from the dependencies of the dependent nature.

Yogacara refuted mind-matter dualism of the early Buddhist schools, by explaining how a continuum of phenomenal arisings as cognitions (*viñāna*) is erroneously divided into a dualism of an outer object and an inner mind as a result of ignorance. The Yogacara approach is to first realize the apprehension of outer objects to be merely projections of mind, and then to realize the nature of that mind also to be empty.

Further developments in Madhyamaka school

Later scholars of the Madhyamaka tradition, developed the deconstruction process of the Madhyamaka in two streams of logic - called the *svāntarika-madhyamaka* (the school using syllogisms) and *prāsaṅgika-madhyamaka* (the school using consequential reasoning). The Svatantrika scholars such as Bhavaviveka (6th century CE) used independent syllogisms to establish a conventional position and then proving its ultimate emptiness. On the other hand, the Prasangika scholars such as Buddhapalita (5th-6th century CE) and Candrakirti (7th century CE) relied exclusively on reductio-ad-absurdum, that of not making any independent position on conventional existence, and only showing the absurd consequence of any philosophical position that others take. While Svatantrika logic provided a platform for understanding Madhyamaka deconstruction in stages, Prasangika logic provided a superior mode of reasoning where one does not have to hold philosophical positions even temporarily.

In the 8th century CE, Acharya Santarakṣita made a synthesis of Yogacara analysis and Madhyamaka analysis, which came to be known as Yogacara Madhyamaka. He explained it as a synthesis of 'the lineage of the profound' (Madhyamaka) and 'the lineage of the vast' (Yogacara). He explained the processes of phenomenology and epistemology with the sophisticated methods of Yogacara analysis of the rise and fall of the moments of consciousness. At the same time, by taking recourse to Madhyamaka analysis, he avoided the mistake of ontological reification of

matter and mind. Although there were many more scholars of Buddhism in India till at least the 11th Century CE, Santarakshita's Yogacara-Madhyamaka synthesis is considered as the last major milestone in the Buddhist philosophical development within India.

Nalanda at Harsha's period

During Emperor Harshavardhana's reign (7th century CE), Nalanda scholasticism of Mahayana Buddhism was in its peak glory. Emperor Harsha also encouraged many debates between scholars of various schools. According to the Chinese monk traveller, Xuanzang¹⁷ (trans. 1884) who visited India during this period, Buddhism was already declining in many parts of India while Nalanda was still thriving as a great centre of Mahayana. His main purpose of visit was to study Yogacara at Nalanda. There, Xuanzang composed *nikāya-samgraha-śāstra*, a treatise in Sanskrit with 3000 verses on the fundamental harmony of Yogacara and Madhyamaka (Cua, 2003/Ed., p 816). He also participated successfully in debates with other schools in Harsha's court. Xuanzang further travelled to the South and recorded that Buddhism flourished well in many parts of Southern India during that time.

The period of Pala Empire

During the 8th century CE, Pala empire in the eastern India also established more centers of learning in the line of Nalanda. Large Buddhist institutions such as Vikramsila and Odantapuri were established in this period. At this time, Buddhist scholarship and practice was excelling so well in that part of India that the emperor of Tibet, Trisong Detsen sent emissaries and invited Acharya Santarakshita, the then abbot of Nalanda, and Padmasambhava, one of the greatest mahasiddhas of the Buddhist lineage at that time, to establish scholastic and practice traditions of Buddhism in Tibet. It so happened that later as the major Buddhist universities in India faced destruction, similar style of major universities doing scholastic study of Buddhism mainly continued in Tibet.

Influence of Buddhist thought on India's social fabric

As the Buddhist practice and philosophy thrived in India for over 1500 years, its influence on India's social fabric pervades profusely. This section of the paper looks at some of the salient influences.

The Buddha's call to abandon sacrificial rituals involving sentient beings made a large impact on the social fabric of India. Many Brahmins themselves showed the willingness to accept these new ideals. This would have been one of the reasons for the evolution of the later part of Aranyakas and Upanishads that replaces sacrificial rituals of the Vedic Samhitas and Brahmanas with a new meaning in metaphorical terms. Further, as the society at large also lost interest in Vedic rituals, the Brahminical religion repositioned itself with its various Vedantic forms and devotional cults.

India's culture of tolerance, non-violence, compassion and secularism is also influenced by the presence of Buddhism as well as Jainism. Emperor Asoka himself, while being an ardent Buddhist and a champion of Buddhism, also supported various other streams of thoughts as is evident from his edicts. He exhorted people to turn to vegetarianism as far as possible, but without application of force. As in his edict at Girnar rock (Hultzsch, E. 1925, pp 1-2), he claimed that he himself was reducing the killing of animals for the consumption in his palace, and entreated others to follow that model. In the latter half of his rule, he also showed how a country could be ruled non-violently and by maintaining friendly and mutually beneficial relations with neighboring kingdoms. Further, he also established hospitals not only for humans but also for animals.

Further, the mainstream Buddhist practice in India also saw a turn towards Mahayana with its emphasis on great compassion where the sole motivation behind one's existence is to free all beings from their sufferings. In Mahayana, compassion is not merely an ethical principle, but fundamental to increasing one's sensitivity and cognitive abilities. The waves of this great compassion, where every being is considered as worthy as the Buddha in potential, had lasting influence on the social fabric of India. The Buddhist masters also advised kings and householders to care for all beings without discrimination, and not to harm even the minutest creatures.

Ayurveda also flourished during the golden age of Buddhism in India. Though the Ayurvedic system existed even before the Buddha, it was developed and systematized by many Buddhist masters. Today, one of the most important references on Ayurveda is Ashtanga-hridaya, a composition by Vagbhata, a Buddhist of the 6th century CE.

¹⁷ Also spelt as Hsüan-tsang

It is also a well-known fact that the Buddha's equanimous treatment to people of all castes, his acceptance of all into his Sangha without any differences, and his unequivocal criticism of caste structure and inequalities, have inspired many movements in the later times against the caste structure of India. Even the 20th century renaissance in various parts of India, against the caste structure, derived inspiration from the Buddha.

The golden era of the Buddhism also happens to be the golden era of Indian civilization, science and technology as a whole. The Indian research and science flourished during that period. This could be due to the culture of critical analysis and reason that the Buddhists as well as other thinkers promoted in society. In turn, the social structure that promoted such an open culture and exploration also contributed to the growth of Buddhism.

Conclusion

This paper reviewed the evolution of the Buddhist thought in relation to the prevailing socio-cultural and philosophical contexts of various periods in India. Particularly, this paper shows that India lacked a monolithic religious identity till at least the 8th century CE and that contributed to the growth of not only the Buddhist thought but also to an open culture of investigation, critical analysis and all-rounded development that was unparalleled in the world at that time. The challenges from other philosophical systems also inspired and thus contributed to the fineness of Buddhist philosophy. Unlike a religious system, Buddhist thoughts continued to develop because the Buddha encouraged critical analysis and openness. Many Buddhist scholars participated and contributed heavily to the overall intellectual development of India, particularly in the fields of logic, epistemology, theories of cognition, phenomenology, etc., and even in outer sciences such as Medicine.

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