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Unveiling wisdom of the Sanskrit Buddhist Philosophers

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Abstract

The linguists classify the language of the Veda into the old Indo-Aryan family of languages covering 1500 B.C. to 1000 B.C. This language was in use by a select few, particularly belonging to the priestly class, for religious purposes. The term 'Sanskrit' refers to a language refined within the Paninian model of grammar, particularly after the fifth century B.C. This language, though technically not identical with the language of the Vedas, postdates the rise of Buddhism.

The original Buddhist teachings were compiled in Pali, a form of 'Prakrit'. Various types of Prakrit were the common language of much of the Indian subcontinent and evolved into most of the modern vernacular languages. Initially, Buddhists did not write in Sanskrit. After Panini, they turned to Sanskrit for the composition of fresh texts or translation of existing ones. The growth of Sanskrit writings in Buddhism was further encouraged from the early Christian era onward.

Buddhist philosophers such as Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, Dignāga, and Dharmakīrti concentrated their philosophical thoughts in Sanskrit. This paper explores their motivations for using Sanskrit instead of Pali.

Keywords: Sanskrit, Pali, Buddhist Philosophy, Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, Dignāga, Dharmakīrti

1. Introduction

The original Buddhist teachings were compiled in Pali, traditionally called *Magadhi Bhasa* by scholars such as Buddhaghosa. Pali was the language of the Magadhan region:

Sa Māgadhi mulā bhāsa
Narāyā ya ādikappika
Brāhmaṇa ca sutalapa
Sambuddhasca bhasare

Which means that "Māgadhi" which is also called the "mūla bhāsa" is the primeval language. It was spoken by common folks, scholars and by the Buddhas right from the primordial age. This view stands in sharp contrast with the popular Indian beliefs on the Sanskrit language.

Initially, the Buddhists did not write in the Sanskrit language. With the rise of Brāhmanism after the decline of the Mauryans and ascendancy of the Brahmin ruler, viz. Shungas and Kanvas the apparent change in the socio-political climate was to be reflected in the Buddhists religious literature too. After the Panini, the Buddhists also turn to Sanskrit either for the composition of the fresh text, or for the translation of the existing ones.

Furthermore, the Kushanas patronage to Buddhism and their vindication for the Sanskrit for all literary activities since the early Christian era, gave a fresh impetus to the growth of Sanskrit writings found in Buddhism.

All kind of the Buddhists teaching or practice if not in unison with the Mahāyāna, central philosophy was to be held as 'Inferior Means' or 'Hīna Yāna' 'to realize the ideals of Buddhism'. The volumes of the Mahayana literature flourished; and the language used for their composition was in Sanskrit.

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2. Buddhist Philosophers and Sanskrit Usage

2.1 Nāgārjuna (c. 2nd Century A.D.)

It has been noted that most Buddhist Philosophers, like Nāgārjuna, Vasubandhu, Diṇṇāga and Dharmakīrti concentrated their Philosophical Thoughts in the medium of Sanskrit Language. Here, we discuss only the writing of 4 Philosophers Nāgārjuna of Mādhyamika School, Vasubandhu, Diṇṇāga and Dharmakīrti of the Yogācāra School.

Nāgārjuna, probably belonging to the 2nd century A.D. (150-250 according to Nakamura), a Buddhist philosopher wrote Mādhyamika-kārika in Sanskrit language which laid the foundation of the Mādhyamika School. In Mādhyamika Kārikā Nāgārjuna has occasionally referred to certain technical terms of Ancient Logic, such as punarukta (repetition) in chapter II, Siddha-sādhana (demonstration of what has already been established) in chapter III and sādhyasama (petition principia) as well as parihāra (avoidance) in chapter IV.

There is also a criticism of Akṣapāda's doctrine of Pramāṇa (evidence).

A composition of logical treatise, Pramāṇa-vihetana of Pramāṇa-Vidhvamsana is attributed by Nāgārjuna, which literally signifies "the quelling of Pramāṇa." And which was in fact a review of the definition of the sixteen categories as given by Akṣapāda. The Sanskrit Original of this work is not avoidable.

The Upāya Kauśala-Hṛdaya-Śāstra, the essence of skill in the Accomplishment of Action, is stated to be a work on the Art of debate by Bodhisattva Nāgārjuna. Seeing that the Vaiśeṣika and other system were obscure in their terminology, Nāgārjuna, it is reported, undertook to write this book to give a clear exposition of the art of debate.

2.2 Vasubandhu (410-490 A.D.)

Vasubandhu was the author of a large number of very valuable works, some of which are available in Sanskrit and the rest in Chinese and Tibetan translation. He was a contemporary of Kumāra Gupta, Skanda Gupta, Pura Gupta and Baladitya (from 410 A.D. to about 490 A.D.) In the 7th century A.D. while Hwen-thsang was travelling in India, he saw three works on the art of debate attributed to Vasubandhu. The Sanskrit originals of these works as well as their Chinese versions are now lost.

1. VādaVidhi - the method of debate
2. Vāda-mārga - The course of debate
3. Vāda-Kauśala - the expedients of debate.

Beside these three works, there was a treatise on logic called 'Tarka-Śāstra' composed by Vasubandhu.

2.3 Dignāga (c. 450-500 A.D.)

Dignāga, the father of Medieval logic flourished possibly c.450-500 A.D. Satish ch. Vidyabhusan said in his book that the Pramāṇa-samuccaya is one of the grandest literary monuments of Dignāga. It is a Sanskrit work written in anustubh metre. It was supposed to be lost a few years back the whole text along with Jinendrabuddhis Bisālamālābati commentary has been discovered in a Monastery in china. Already the first volume has been published from Vienna. It was preserved in Tibetan Translation.

The Nyāya-Praveśa, or "Nyāya-Praveśa-Nāma Pramāṇa Prakaraṇa" is another excellent work on Logic by Dignāga. The Sanskrit original is lost. But a Tibetan translation exists.

The work Prajñā-Pāramitā-Pindārtha, the Aṣṭasāhasrikā-

Prajñā-Pāramitā is also attributed to Dignāga.

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Nyāya Praveśa opens thus:-- "Demonstration and refutation together with their fallacies are useful in arguing with others; and perception and inference together with their fallacies are useful for self-understanding: seeing these I compile this Śāstra."

2.4 Dharmakīrti (c. 7th Century A.D.)

Dharmakīrti is the author of numerous works on logic. I-tsing, who travelled over India during 671-695A.D. declares "Dharmakīrti made further improvement in logic" after Dignaga. He was a Buddhist Logician of the seventh century A.D. Nyāya-Bindu is excellent work on logic by Dharmakīrti. The Sanskrit original of this work was discovered among the palm-leaf manuscripts preserved in the Jaina temple of Santinatha, Camay, and has been published in the Bibliotheca Indica series of Calcutta by Professor Person. There exists a Tibetan translation of this work also. The Pramāṇa-Vārtika-Kārikā is one of his renowned work. There was a sun-commentary called Pramāṇa-Vārtika-Vṛtti on it by Dharmakīrti himself. Pramāṇa-viniscaya quoted by Madhavacarya (14th century A.D.) and others, is another work on logic by him. The Sanskrit original of this work appears to be lost, but there exists a Tibetan translation.

The Hetu-bindu-vivarāṇa, Tarka-nyāya or Vāda-nyāya are the another works on logic by Dharmakīrti. The Santanantara-siddhi or Tantrantara-siddhi is a philosophical treatise by Dharmakīrti.

The Sambandha-parikṣā is another philosophical treatise and the Sambandha-parikṣāvṛtti is a commentary by Dharmakīrti himself.

3. Reasons for Using Sanskrit

- Most of the Buddhist philosophers had grown up through the Brāhmanical atmosphere.
- Orthodox system of philosophy, specially Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika and Mīmāṃsā had written in Sanskrit language. Not only the Sanskrit language but also they had a special Philosophical terminology.
- If Buddhists philosopher did not learn Sanskrit or those philosophical terminology they could not refute the views of opponent on topic of common interest. So they adopted the same language, the enigmatic and algebrical style of the Brahmanical system i.e. Naiyāyikas & Vaiśeṣikas.
- They used this language to expound various Buddhist doctrines to familiar in elite society.
- Professor Tucci shows that categories accepted in the Nyāya system have become the basis on which the Buddhist masters also built up their edifice.
- Style and mode of argument in all of their works are the same with the Orthodox system of Nyāya. In each case the discussion is started just in the way of a formal debate, as if the opponent is present before the author.
- Arguments are syllogistic. The refutations are generally through the hetvabhasa fallacies. The views of the opponents are faithfully given at the outset in their own language. They are then analysed and flaws are detected one by one.

4. The Cullavagga Narrative

In the Cullavagga the question on the language of the composition of the “Buddha-Vacana” was once raised by two Brāhmins, Yamela and Kekuta. These monks approached the Buddha and sought his permission to compose the teaching in the sophisticated language Chandas (the language of the Vedas) because the people belonging to all castes, and clans were joining the order and each was trying to transmit the teachings in his own language. The Buddha disapproved the idea of any rendition of his teachings in his Chandas language and declared that anyone who indulges in an act to translate his teachings into Chandas shall be liable to the serious offence (apatti dukkata). He instead prescribed that “his teachings had to be learnt in one’s own language” (sakaya niruttiya).

Buddhaghosa the greatest Pali commentator, has carefully examined these utterances of the Buddha and concluded that the Buddha himself had spoken in the Magadhika language. But in the Book, Pali Prabesaka, Bidhusekhar Bhattacharya explained sakaya niruttiya as everyone should adopt the Buddha Vacana in his own language. So the argument goes on. But the fact is that it is in Sanskrit, Tibetan, Chinese and so on.

5. Conclusion

The shift from Pali to Sanskrit among Buddhist philosophers was influenced by socio-political changes, the need to engage with Brahmanical philosophical traditions, and the desire to communicate effectively within elite scholarly circles. Sanskrit’s terminological richness and structured debate methods made it the ideal medium for expounding Buddhist philosophy.

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