

Impact of Buddhist monastery-based education in the removal of poverty: A comparative study of Sri Lanka and Bangladesh

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Introduction

In general, religious education particularly in South Asia is often given with extremist connotation. The multifaceted religious education systems are often dictatorial over the 'definition' of what is lawful and because of that tendency; conflict of interests in this region is still obvious and alarmingly growing¹. Though the non-theistic education such as of Buddhist is claimed to be humanistic comparing with theistic education, we sometime cannot but equate them in same category². It's because Buddhism of the present age often fails to focus on but often ends with opposing³ practically the social demands e.g.

1. M.Niaz and Nazmul Chaudhury, 2006::2

2. David R.Loy, 2001:55

3. ee the monks' reaction towards the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement. The Buddhist Revival of Sri Lanka, p.243

gender discrimination, empirical analysis of poverty, population, family problem and so on although a handy favorable discussion is found in the original teachings..However,modern researches also show that the more it was related with applied education the more it was successful and beneficial⁴. It seems that authorities understand its ineffectiveness or outdated nature as they invite people to suggest bringing about revival.

In all levels of Buddhist Education we read about ethics of economic life oftencited and discussed in intellectual and traditional writings⁵but lack of practical implication to the materialistic development paves the way to severe criticism⁶.Though it is argued that this emphasis on ethical economic life may lay a background for the education related with the human development, we may ask specially keeping the MDGs in mind some questions such as-how far it is helping to contend a monastic student (spiritual) with a secular (materialistic) student and How religious administrations address these issues when an integrated effort is required. The success of modern monastic education lies totally in the positivity of those answers.Culturally both Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have a negative mindset on the ordaining for education which seems to be considered as extra-quality in the Thai culture⁷. But monks in these countries determine to break down that tradition through their own efforts and find ways to establish them in the job market.

Though there are numerous publications on Buddhistreligious education,I had no chance of getting into any of the sources which discuss about its attitude towards economy except a brief article by Sanit Sumhiram and others (2012).Though this education system needs a comprehensive study, I have confined myself to a section of Buddhist monastic educationswhich is a counterpart of modern secular educations. It tries to focus on theformal monasticeducation

4. Tambiah,1976:200

5. See- future roles of Sangha articulated by Venerable Seck Kwang Phing(p.65-66);Bhikkhuni Soun (p.77-79)

6. 'a life of dolce far niente' by S.Samarasinghe; cf.Therigatha 272 which reads- a lazy bunch, making their living off what others give and greedy tidbits '.

7. Sanit Smhiram and others,2012:902

which has market values or which has recognized value and which is believed to have social implication.

Background

Sri Lanka has one of the most attractive education systems which offers free education up to undergraduate level. Buddhist Formal Education System in Sri Lanka however, consisted mainly of Sunday school operated by almost all monasteries and three-tier Pirivena Education, such as Mulika, Maha- and Vidyayathana. There are altogether 734 Pirivenas with 35,019 and 29,589 students from clergy and laity⁸. According to the Pirivena Education Act No.64 1979, traditional Pirivenas aim to teach Buddhist Philosophy, History, Buddhist Culture, Sinhala, Pali and Sanskrit. However, religious education in Sri Lanka has been done on the procedures set by the state for the students to get government provided certificate and to pursue higher education in the governmental universities.

The religious and ethnic dimension of the Bangladeshi Buddhist demands a background of their lives as they have their own socio-economical backgrounds. The low-land Bengali communities cover roughly less than half of the total Buddhist communities in Bangladesh. There is no statistical data particularly for the lowland Bangladeshi Buddhists, but among the total population approximately 1.06% is Buddhists. Sometime it is not creditable account on the total Buddhist population of Bangladesh. However, in most cases, MDGs indicators are similar with rural Muslim Bangladeshis.

Indigenous people, comparatively the oldest among the Buddhists in Bangladesh, occupy more than half of total Buddhist population depicted in the national statistic. Among the ethnic minorities Buddhism and Christianity occupy 54% and 26% respectively, while remaining is by others⁹ of the whole tribal community living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), 88.7% are Buddhists while tribes of Coastal area, Rakhaine, an offspring of Burmese tribes and separated from CHT who consist of nearly 6% of total tribes are Buddhists.

8. Sri Lanka Educational Information, 2012:66

9. S.R.Nath, 2009:21

Though, oppression of minorities is a ongoing process of modern communal nationalism, Buddhist Ethnic minorities face a broader setback in regard to their economy, education, culture etc. under the Islamic regime from 1948 onwards when they lost their traditional lands. Approximately, 18000 families were displaced of whom 70% were Chakmas, a Buddhist tribe, and 40% of total CHT pappy field was destroyed by that dam¹⁰. It has been major factor of severe poverty in the CHT with the traditional ways of land grabbing of minorities¹¹. It is still ongoing process which led Muslim population up to 50% of totality there which was merely 5% in 1860¹². As UNDP Bangladesh sponsored project reveals, 65.1% of the indigenous families live under absolute poverty line¹³ and more than 19% Indigenous students are out of school (see. Ibid, 2009:117). Other indicators of attainment of MDGs remain also below the acceptable line.

Both Banglee Buddhists and Indigenous people do not have their own religious system of education. They follow, mostly the secular education staying in the house or staying in the religion-based informal institutions, where they get their basic needs freely and religious education informally.

Religious Education and Some issues

Both Bangladeshi and Sri Lankan monastic students are motivated by the hope of better economical or educational environment. According to several Pirivena Adhipati-s of Sri Lanka , novices from the nearest villages are not often welcomed to the Pirivenas. In Bangladesh the tendency to move for education is from CHT to lowland Chittagong. Though, most of the students' family in CHT have acres of cultivation land, they are compelled to send their children to the lower Bengali Buddhist area for the lack of educational

10. S.Parveen and I.M.Faisal, 2002:197

11. S.Parveen and I.M.Faisal, 2002:200 informs that migration of Muslims which mostly is govt. sponsored caused a historical conflict which made many people refugees in India.

12. Ibid, 2002:200

13. Abul Barkat and others, 2009:113

institutions or facilities. Population problem might be another reason for sending the students to the free Buddhist Asrams. The following points will enlighten us on the true position of the modern monastery based educations in these two countries.

Internal Migration and School choice

The Statistical data shows that Sinhalese students in the less privileged areas are supposed to move towards the religious schools. It is quite probable in from an comparative discussion on Sri Lankan education information 2012. There we can see that among the 7398 clergies studying in 149 Piriveanas of western province are very rarely from those districts. In the Vavuniya, one of the most LTTE dominated areas, for instance, 19 Government schools in which at least 9 are functioning has an average of 296 students¹⁴. But the only Vidyayathana Pirivena that is found in that area has 327 students and most of them are laity. The main reason behind the gaining power of pirivena is in this area equality of the standard of the education of the both secular and religious school. In this area Science based A/L is omitted which is not followed by pirivenas traditionally. Commerce level is not also so popular as only 9 students are registered for it (p.27). The Pirivena enrollment is higher because it has very little margin of difference with Govt. Sinhala schools.

In Contrary to the above data, the involvement of the laity in the much more developed western province is comparatively less. In the Colombo area as shown in the Govt. Statistic¹⁵, the involvement of the laity is lowest (avg. 26.18 in 149) among others (except eastern province). It is because, the alternative options in this area is available. And this region belongs to one of the richest part of the country.

As indicated earlier, eastern province shows less involvement of lay people (avg. 9.68 in 22 pirivenas). The low average of laity is most probably for the total withdrawing of Vidyayathana Pirivenas which attracts laity. Similar instance can be applied in the case of Matale, Nuwara Eliya, Pottalam where absence of Vidyayathana Pirivena

14. Sri Lanka Educational Information, 2012:19, 29

15. 2012:66

leads to less lay involvement. But in contrast, Kurunagala(Avg. 47.32 in 85 Pirivenas)of North western province, Ratnapur(56.80 in 44) aand Kegalle(Avg. 49.73 in 41 Pirivenas) of Sabaragama province, Kalutara(Avg. 82.77 in 47 pirivenas) of western province show highest average in the lay-enrollment. Though in this limited survey it is not possible to determine precisely, we can assume that area popular for Agriculture has high percentage of lay-enrollment in Pirivenas.

The less privileged- the more chance of inclusion to Sasana

This issue is very much true in concept. While inclusion to the Sasana is taken into consideration, economical position of the person and traditional beliefs are thought to be main factors working behind it. According to **Sharmini Serasinghe**¹⁶, in the Sinhalese Tradition the production of clergy especially who belongs to child age is truly influenced by Poverty and 'Malefic Horoscopes'. Mahendra De Silva¹⁷, **while commenting upon the articles of SharminiSerasinghe** obviously did not go against these two major factors working behind the ordination process. S.Serasinghe states- 'many, amongst the average Buddhists believe, that a son born, under the 'wrong stars (malefic horoscope)', must be 'donated' to the temple. This, they believe, in all their ignorance, will ward off the ill-effects on the rest of the family, of such a horoscope, of an 'unlucky' child'. In contrast to this, poverty is much clearer and less explanation is needed. Accordingly, when these poor parents find it hard to make ends meet, the only option, available to them, is the temple. But totally disagree with her when she uses the term 'mostly *against their wishes*' on the basis that *wishes* of the people is totally to be explained under the economical theory of 'demand-supply'. From the economical perspective, a demand is just when its option of fulfillment is open. Similarly, its bias to call monastic education is 'against the wishes' for

16. See-S.Samarasinghe(2014), 'Child Ordination -Through A Mother's Eyes!' in Colombo Telegraph, <<https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/child-ordination-through-a-mothers-eyes/>>

17. Mahendra De Silva(2014), 'Child Ordination- A different Perspective'in Colombo Telegraph, <<https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/child-ordination-a-different-perspective/>>

the available option that those people have.

However, (1) poverty is not necessarily main reason for religious school choice. Besides the poverty, two major reasons found in the Bangladeshi religious institutions are (2) lack of educational facilities, and (3) being orphan. All the 33 novices of 12-23 years who belong to two monastic institutes¹⁸ belong to following categories:

- Either father or mother died: 36.37%
- Both died: 2.04%,
- Family members: (a) 2-3=12.12%, (b) 4-5=57.57%, (c) 6-7-30.31,
- Fathers Educational qualifications: (a) illiterate-12.12%, (b) primary-36.37%, (b) junior secondary: 39.40%, (c) secondary-9.09%, (d) higher secondary-3.03%,
- Head's Occupation: (a) farmers-48.49%, (a) labour-21.21%, (b) own business-21.21%, (c) others-9.09%
- Income (TK.): (a) 1000-18.18%, (b) 1500- 33.34%; (c) 2000- 18.18%, (d) 2500-12.12%, (e) 3000-12.12, (f) 3500-6.06%, (g) 4000-6.06%
- Housing far away from school: 12.12%

This data is a collection of students from lowland and highland Buddhist. Though, many of the students opined about their primary reason enrollment to religious institutions, it could not be true except one student whose family stands comparatively well judged position to carry on secular education. It seems that in most of the indicators of MDGs, they remain well behind of acceptability.

Conflict of demands

In the first point we have clarified the reasons behind the motivation of choosing monastic schools. The reality of the life¹⁹ gradually appears and students realize what are to be done. My present observation shows that out of 54 monks who did finish B.A in 2013 under Pali and

18. One belongs to Kadalpur, Chittagong and another belongs to Himbutana, Sri Lanka

19. Most of the students go to Buddhist monastic schools in their infancy.

Buddhist Department, University of Kelaniya, only 7 persons remain in the monastic life. Solely for this, most of the students from the Sri Lankan Buddhist Monastic Schools follow subsidiary courses. Most of ten students for example, who are pursuing 4th year (in 2014) Pali Special Degree in University of Kelaniya are following some external courses such as Human Resource Management, Social Problem, Computing, and so on. This shows the urgency of following courses that have value in market.

In the Bangladeshi Monastic Education, authority also permits to get registration in Arts and sometime commerce. Out of the three institutions which are situated in Raosan, and Ukhiya of Chittagong district no one permits Science education. The laymen studying there have this facility. It is quite unsatisfactory considering the social need of those people.

Similar frame of mind is obvious in the Sri Lankan Pirivena education where only medium of Arts is followed for Mulika (= O/L) and extensive religious study is followed in Pracina and Prarambha. However, monks are free to follow self funded A/L in any medium.

Prospect of faster social mobility and development

The relationship between poverty and religion is one of the heated debated issues in the social science arena. For the study of this, Weber and Marx are often referred. However, the challenges that Protestantism faced against Catholic was similar to what Buddhism faced in the Brahmanic society. Traditional catholic theory favoring 'a withdrawal from the realistic world' was reformed under the realistic propagation of 'no work- no food' hypothesis²⁰. Brahmanism, though living in society physically, was totally isolated from that ideologically while other heretics though tried to address the misery of the society were comparatively isolated from the social facts by posing 'pre-determinism', no-energy theory, and total materialism. All of those philosophies are discussed in the Samannaphala

20. Basten, C. and Betz, F., 2011:11

sutta²¹ and more or less their implications here are also obvious²². Materialistic approaches that Indian materialists put forward are ruthlessly criticized in the very first Sutta, Dhammacakkappattana²³. It's because the thirst of wealth²⁴ never has its boundary .

In this regard Buddhist materialism shares quite similar ideology with Protestantism. C.Basten and F.Betz²⁵ carries on explaining that 'in practice, Ascetic Protestantism encouraged the accumulation of the wealth, which it regarded as a sign of God's blessing. It severely restricted consumption especially of luxuries'. Examples of first growing nations, India and China relevant to this and their achievement in MDGs can be cited. According to UN development agendas, economic development of a country necessarily does not show the real distribution of the standard of life²⁶. Specially when poverty is concerned various inter-related social changes are required.

However, when the challenge of primary education that MDGs demand, Sri Lankan Monastic Education undoubtedly very quick and responsive. Because, when Primary education is concerned, Monastic Education of Sri Lanka provide the standard found in other South Asian Countries. But demand of people especially in Sri Lanka who are in the good track of attaining MDG regarding education increased. Modern Buddhist reformer found this issue with less endeavors. Anagarika Dharmapala sees how traditional religions followed by the South Asians are quite toothless in development. Gombrich from Dhammapala's *Return to Righteousness*, ed.A.Guruge (Colombo: Government Press 1965), p.717, quotes- 'Europe is progressive.... Her people are following the dictates of Modern science. Sanitation, aesthetic

21. Digha Nikaya, vol. I, 1975:47-86

22. Even I think we need not to discuss Buddhist economic theory as it is well discussed and not relevant in this limited work.

23. Samyutta Nikaya, Vol.V, 1975:420

24. Malalasekera, G.P., 1937:988, quotes from Tanha Sutta, Anguttara Nikaya (PTS), II.10

25. 2011:11

26. See The United Nations Development Agenda: Development for all 2007:5-6

arts, electricity etc. are what made European and American people great²⁷. Dharmapala(1864-1933), along with O.H.S.Olcott being sole observers of uprising of Christian modernism in the flourishing period of colonialism started secularized Buddhist Education.

Both these two countries show that MDGs has its own limitations. Even though it is positive, the aim of hundred percent primary education enrolment has very little to do with the development or eradication of poverty. In that sense, though Bangladeshi Buddhists are getting enrolled in primary schools, which is often free the dropping rate is very high after primary education. It's because secondary education in Bangladesh put the people much more under pressure. Study ²⁸shows that in the CHT the primary enrollment is about 82% and only 16 percent students pursue secondary while the discontinuation in the midway of primary is about 65%, the discontinuation after the primary is about 19%. Among the notable reasons behind the dropping out before primary one is finance (71.4%) and another is Distance(10.5%).Unsurprisingly, in case of dropping before approaching to secondary the financial problems more than two third majority(84.6%)²⁹. Monastic education of Bangladesh addresses these two problems as all are aiming to free residential education.

There is no doubt that the modern linguistic moderation that we have has been evolved over time. The basic economic needs are considered to be base of human development. Buddha identified poverty as the basic need of social and political development³⁰. No development is considered to be possible if those needs are not fulfilled. Similarly there need a stable pre-requisites to bring about mental and physical development in the human society. 6th century B.C. is believed to have reached such stability³¹.According to Buddhist explanation of Wheel rolling king found in Cakkavattisihanada

27. 1988:13-14

28. Barkat,A., and Others, 2009:130

29. See,Abul Barkat and others, 2009:117-120

30. See Cakkavatti-Sihanada Sutta, Digha Nikaya , III.60

31. Swaris, N.,1999:50-55

sutta we read a perfect kingship arises when there are Economic, Intellectual and social and so on. Buddha's human capitals (e.g. Dhammasenapati Sariputta) to roll over his Dhammacakka are also considered to appear in that developed economic period. Now question can be raised-without developing the human capitals how far it will be successful to establish a Buddhist rightful society which always endeavor to attain spiritual development?

Administrative Limitation and challenges

Someone interested in 'welfare religion' may think about how trends in the Buddhism were bearing the social agendas or different dimensions of social development. Teachers of South Asian religions had also similar influence in determining the educational philosophy. Sometime traditions of religion may harm the way that we are aiming to. The backward communities whose misfortune is often approved by religious teaching should be the sole target of UDGs. The Musharas of India and the Sri Lankan low caste people may have similar fate though their degrees are different from country to country. On the other hand, in the modern Communal Nationalism religious teachings harm sometime political stability, human rights and so on. Buddhist Education has to deal with those problems also. It should be done with fulfilling the pre-requisites of human development which some Buddhist reformers already mentioned e.g. Dharmapala=Sanitation, electricity, aesthetic arts etc; Ariyaratne= sanitation, road development, house development, providing help to reach agricultural or other technologies etc³². It will certainly help those people who are in the circle of woe of poverty and whose culture of poverty 'left scars on their personality and behavior'³³. If not so, it will be defined as hindrance to development of institutions required for economic growth³⁴ In Asoka's word, if not so they are harming their own religion.

Monks' skills from the early days were up to date as they could have recruited to the other government services easily and held

32. Buddhist Revival, p.243-248; Gombrich, 1988:13-14

33. Dwarko Sundrani, 1998:35

34. Pavol Minarik, 2011:1

highest position in secular education. In the monarchical society it was most probably the only source of pursuing secular and religious education³⁵. However, from the 17th century onwards, with the dawn of European imperialism, Buddhist monopoly of education in the Sri Lanka and Burma faced the challenge of adaptation. Not only that they seem to lose its authority to focus on the social activities under the restriction imposed in the colonial period³⁶. The Buddhists of countries like Bangladesh are facing similar fate.

Though, the Buddhist education in these two countries has full or partial government support the success of that kind of education lays in individual effort. The lack of satisfactory performance of Bangladeshi monastic schools can be ascribed primarily to lack of proper organizational management of education.³⁷ It seems that in Sri Lanka also, proper address to the need of lower level of people and the economical challenges that modern Buddhist people facing are not encouraging.

Conclusion

In the above discussion, we have seen Monastery based education is mostly limited to a certain group of people who has very limited access to the modern facilities. But in the ancient period it was representing people from every economical stratum³⁸. Buddhist leaders of these two countries need to address this problem. By a proper country wide plan, religions also can strengthen their claim in the world development.

35. Rahula, W., 1955:287

36. Bond, George D, 1992:287

37. See Sraddhalankhar mahasthvir, 2006:V for frustration of individuals in this regard

38. Swaris, N., 1999:312

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