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Buddhist Avadāna-Śataka Literature and Tagore's Poems: Literaturistic Study

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Abstract

A poet is usually inspired by nature as Wordsworth and Shelly have been. In the case of Rabindranath Tagore, nature undoubtedly played an important role in his life. In addition some iconic personality likes Bhagavan Buddha, Kabir, Sanatan Goswami etc., had occupied a wide seat in his poetic inspiration.

Rabindranath tried to depict Buddha as a human being who achieved the Bodhi above the human cognatery mental status. Rabindranath Tagore and Gautama the Buddha are the two great persons who are the cultural icons of India. Though Buddhist philosophy is generally believed to be anti-Vedic, but in Tagore's observation, the teachings of Buddha and the Upanisads speak of the same. This he tried to justify with the notion of Brahma Vihāra and from that standpoint he tried to look at the doctrines of Four Noble Truths and Nirvāṇa in a new way.

In Tagore's poems like Śrēṣṭhābhikṣā, Mūlyaprāpti, Pūjārinī, etc; drama like Malini, Raja, Naṭirapūjā, Acalāyatana etc; dance drama like Śyāmā, Chaṇḍalikā and also his novel Śēṣēra-Kabitā, he has expressed his reverence to this great personality. Rabindranath's poems on Buddha mainly depend on the Avadānas stories. Therefore here in my Article I have tried to give emphasis on those poems which are related to Buddhist Avadāna-Śataka Literature.

Key Words: Rabindranath Tagore, Bhagavan Buddha, Four Noble Truths, Brahma-Vihāras, Śrēṣṭhābhikṣā, Mūlyaprāpti, Pūjārinī.

Introduction: A poet is usually inspired by nature as Wordsworth¹ and Shelly² have been. In the case of Rabindranath Tagore, nature undoubtedly played an important role in his life. In addition some iconic personality likes Bhagavan Buddha, Kabir³, Sanatan Goswami⁴ etc., had occupied a wide seat in his poetic inspiration.

Rabindranath tried to depict Buddha as a human being who achieved the Bodhi above the human cognate mental status. Rabindranath Tagore and Gautama the Buddha are the two great persons who are the cultural icons of India. Though Buddhist philosophy is generally believed to be anti-Vedic, but in Tagore's observation, the teachings of Buddha and the Upanisads speak of the same. This he tried to justify with the notion of Brahma Vihāra⁵ (Wyl. tshangs pa'i gnas) and from that standpoint he tried to look at the doctrines of Four Noble Truths (Wyl. 'phags pa'i bden pa bzhi) and Nirvāṇa (Wyl. myang 'das) in a new way.

The gap between these two thinkers is more than 2500 years. But still, their messages have been the same. Buddha's Doctrine is based on compassion (Wyl. snying rje), friendliness, love (Wyl. brtse ba) and non-violence (Wyl. rnam par mi 'tshe ba), and save the world from diestrum and the *Bodhisattva* (Wyl. byang chub sems dpa') ideal is service above self. In this respect Rabindranath Tagore was born in 19th century A.D. in Bengal and he also believed that, we all are the children of Supreme One and so there should be no scope for violence or hatred in this world.

Apparently looked from the philosophical point of view, it seems as if Tagore and Buddha belonged to two opposite poles, one believed in an eternal spirit and the other in the momentariness of everything. Tagore's writing mainly based on the Upanisadic thoughts,

¹ Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882 C.E.) was an American poet and educator whose works include "Paul Rever's Ride, The songs of Hiawatha and Evangeline". He was also the first American to translate Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy, and was one of the five Fireside Poets.

² Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822 C.E.) was one of the major English Romantic Poets, and is regarded by some as among the finest lyric, as well as most influential, poets in the English language.

³ Kabir was an Indian mystic poet and saint in 15th century A.D., whose writings influenced Hinduism's Bhakti movement and his verses are found in Sikhism's scripture Adi Granth. His early life was in a Muslim family, but he was strongly influenced by his teacher, the Hindu bhakti leader Ramananda.

⁴ Sanatana Goswami (1488-1558 C.E.) was a principal disciple of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Sanatana wrote a number of important works in the bhakti tradition of Gaudiya Vaishnavism and was the senior most of the influential six Goswamis of Vrindavana.

⁵ The *Brahma Vihāras* are also known as the Four Divine Emotions or The Four Divine Abodes. Those are maitrī (Loving-kindness), karuṇā (Compassion), muditā (Joy with others), upekṣā (Equanimity)

whereas Tathāgata Buddha's doctrines polemic against the popular orthodox beliefs. But Tagore, as a believer in the idea of humanity and a worshipper of the religion of man, had strong admirations for Buddha and his doctrines. Tagore is also inspired by Buddha's teaching.

According to Dhammapada⁶-

“Sabbapāpass akaraṇaṃ-
kusalass upasampadā
Sacittapariyodapanam-
etaṃ buddhāna sāraṇaṃ.”⁷

Not to do any evil work, always cultivate good, to purify one's mind; this is the teaching of the Buddhas.

In Tagore's poems like *Śrēṣṭhābhikṣā*, *Mūlyaprāpti*, *Pūjārini*, etc; drama like *Malini*, *Raja*, *Naṭirapūjā*, *Acalāyatana* etc; dance drama like *Śyāmā*, *Chaṇḍalikā* and also his novel *Śēṣera-Kabitā*, he has expressed his reverence to this great personality. Rabindranath's poems on Buddha mainly depend on the *Avadānas* stories. Therefore here in my Article I have tried to give emphasis on those poems which are related to Buddhist *Avadāna-Śataka* Literature.

Avadāna Literature: *Avadāna* is the “utterances of realizations. Parable is one of the twelve scriptural categories that explain a topic with illustrations and examples for easy comprehension”⁸.

The literature of the Buddhist *Avadānas* (Wyl. rtogs pa brjod pa) is vast and varied. It often compared with the Hindu Purāna. The *Avadānas* were mainly composed in prose, metered, or mixed verse. Some have no attributed to author, while others like *Jātakamāla*, the *Avadāna-Śataka*, and the *Avadāna-Kalpalatā* are attributed to a specific author. *Avadānas* can also be found in various languages including Pāli, Chinese, and Tibetan. Some *Avadānas* (Pāli. Apadāna) are the part of *Khuddaka Nikāya* of *Sūtrā Pitaka* (Wyl. mdo sde'i sde snod)⁹ of Buddhist canons. Others remain *Avadānas* considered post-canonical (or non canonical) literature.

⁶ The *Dhammapada* is a collection of sayings of the Bhagavan Buddha in verse form and one of the most widely read and best known Buddhist scriptures. The original version of the *Dhammapada* is in the *Khuddaka Nikaya* of *Sūtra Piṭaka*, which is one of the *Piṭaka* of *Tripitaka*.

⁷ Thera, Narada: *The Dhammapada*. p. 165

⁸ Rigzin, Tsepak: *Tibetan English dictionary of Buddhist terminology*. p. 110

⁹ There are three *Pitakas* in Buddhism, known as *Tripitaka*. Those are: *Vinaya Pitaka*, *Sūtrā Pitaka* and *Abhidharma Pitaka*. These are also known as Buddhist Canonical literature.

An *Avadāna* is simply a Buddhist narrative story involving of the past which is linked to a story of the present or future. The story shows the effects of karma and inspires the Buddhist practitioner to lead a proper life. This goal is closely related to that of the *Jātaka*, and there is much crossover between the two kinds. Many scholars have drawn the general distinction between the two in that the “Hero” of the *Jātaka* story is generally the Buddha or Bodhisattva (a previous life of such a figure), while the hero of the *Avadāna* can be any Buddhist saint or figure.

Some *Avadānas*:

1. *Avadāna-Śataka*
2. *Avadāna-Kalpalatā*
3. *Bhadrakalpa Avadāna*
4. *Bodhisattva Avadāna*
5. *Kaṭhiṇa Avadāna*
6. *Mahāvastu Avadāna*
7. *Ratnamālā Avadāna*
8. *Sumāgadhā Avadāna*

Tagore's poems on the resources of Buddhist *Avadāna Śataka* literature

1. *Śrēṣṭhabhikṣā*
2. *Mūlyaprāpti*
3. *Pūjārini*

Śrēṣṭhabhikṣā: In the poem *Śrēṣṭhabhikṣā* Tagore expressed the greatness of offering (Wyl. mchod pa). If charity is successfully done then one can get the blessing of Bhagavan Buddha. Depending of that kind of thinking the story *Vastrābadāna* was included in the *Avadāna Śataka*. The story of the poem *Vastrābadāna* is the instance of great offering.

According to the story *Vastrābadāna*, *Anāthapiṇḍada* (Wyl. mgon med zas sbyin)¹⁰ obtained permission from the king to collect alms and for the benefit of the whole population of the city. The *Anāthapiṇḍada* was receiving metallic vessels, bracelets and other ornaments as alms from his neighbours. A poor woman also gave her only remains cloth, which she threw over from behind a hedge. The beggar knew instantly what the matter was, and bestowed on her rich presents. She went to the Lord and received the knowledge of truth from him.

In the poem Rabindranath did not change the first part of the story from the Buddhist literature, where the Buddhist devotee *Anāthapiṇḍada* collected alms from door to door for Buddha. Hearing this all the citizen of the town came and gave as much as donation they can afford for Buddha. Like a rich merchant can and wanted to give lots of jewels, someone wanted to give his necklace, someone wanted to give his gem. But it was not successfully

¹⁰ *Anāthapiṇḍada* was the chief lay disciple of Tathāgata Buddha. He was extremely wealthy and a patron of the Buddha.

fulfilled to take the right offering for Tathagata Buddha. So Anāthapiṇḍada was not happy at all. He entered into a garden where he found a poor lady. She wanted to give him the only remained cloth to Buddha which was her last provision.

“Araṇya - āṛālē rahi kōnōmatē
Ēkamātra bāsa nila gātra hatē,
Bāhuṭi bārāyē phēli dila pathē
Bhūtalē.”¹¹

In the Buddhist literature there are so many examples on charity. The Jātaka story expressed charity, which is one of the *Pāramitās* (Wyl. pha rol tu phyin pa) of the ten *Pāramitās*.

The *Dānapāramitā* (perfection of generosity) (Wyl. sbyin pa'i pha rol tu phyin pa) is the first stage of perfection. Generosity constitutes the ability to give whatever can be given who are in need. The philosopher-poet Ācārya Śāntideva (Wyl. slob dpon zhi ba lha) wrote about the perfection of generosity in his work, the *Bodhicaryāvatāra* (Wyl. byang chub sems dpa'i spyod pa la 'jug pa): “In the beginning the Blessed One directs only the giving of vegetables and so forth; yet eventually he fashions a person who would sacrifice even his own flesh”¹²

Here in this story the poor lady wanted to offer her most precious thing to Buddha when the disciple of Buddha, Anāthapiṇḍada came to their town. But she had had only the cloth which she wore. She wanted to offer that one to him, knowing that it was the last dress to prevent her shame. So Anāthapiṇḍada thought that when someone offers her last and final thing to Bhagavan Buddha no matter it was not only precious but also it was the best thing to offer to Buddha.

Anāthapiṇḍada collected alms as much as he could, but he did not satisfy with the alms which he obtained. Lastly he reached in that place where the poor lady offered her last belonging and hid herself behind the bush. In Buddhist literature, the grace of perfection of generosity. A wealthy person can offer things out of their hues wealth. But the poor lady had had her only thing she offered it to Buddha. So this is the best alms which she offered to Buddha, out of devotion. So Anāthapiṇḍada take it and went away to gave it to the Buddha.

“Calilā sannyāsī tyajiyā nagar
Chinna cīrakhāni lajē śirōpara
Saṃpitē bud'dhēra caraṇanakhara –
Ālōkē.”¹³

So Rabindranath beautifully expressed the Buddha's teaching in Śrēṣṭhabhikṣā where a poor lady also got the blessing of gods, because she offered her only last thing to Buddha.

¹¹ Thākura, Rabīndranātha: *Śrēṣṭhabhikṣā, Rabīndra Racanābalī* (Caturtha Khaṇḍa). p. 19

¹² Śāntideva: *A guide to the bodhisattva way of life* (Bodhicaryāvatāra), Translated by Vesna Wallace and Alan Wallace. p. 78

¹³ Thākura, Rabīndranātha: *Śrēṣṭhabhikṣā, Rabīndra Racanābalī* (Caturtha Khaṇḍa). p. 19

In this poem Rabindranath described Tathāgata Buddha as ‘Prasanna Praśānta’ (favorable pacific) ‘Nirañjana Ānandamūrti’, Tagore also described Buddha’s love and compassion for the all sentient beings. Everybody wants to see his ‘nirañjana ānandamūrti’.

On that Tagore said: “I had once gone on a visit to Buddha Gaya (Present known as Bodhgaya), and it had thrilled me to think that he who had hallowed the earth by touching of his feet had once come to that very place in the flesh. Why, I had thought with a pang, had I not been born in his day, that I might have received his holy influence directly with my entire mind and body!”¹⁷

Tagore wrote this poem Mūlyaprāpti, inspired by Buddha’s concept of *mudita* (Rejoice in joy of others).

Pūjārini: The poem Pūjārini was written on the basis of the story from *Avadāna-Śataka*. This poem was one of the most excellent poems of the all *Kathā Kāvya*s. The story shows those thing which need for Buddhist worship, way of homage, full devotion in Buddha, devotion is more precious than life, contradiction between Buddhist verses non Buddhist etc. Looking at this thing, devotion and faith also arise in Tagore’s mind, to Buddhism.

According to the story from *Avadāna-Śataka*, Rājā Bimbisāra (Wyl. gzugs can snying po), receiving the knowledge of truth (Wyl. bden pa shes pa) from Gautama the Buddha, had built a big Stūpa (Wyl. mchod rten) over the Buddha’s nails and hairs in his palace. His maids cleansed the place every day. But when his son Ajātasātru (Wyl. ma skyes dgra) ascended the throne, he prohibited the females to sweep the Stūpa if anybody did not, he or she must be punished. Śrīmatī, a female maid did not care for her life, washed it neatly and lighted it with a row of lamps. The king, in great rage, ordered her execution. After her death, she as a Devaputrī, appeared before the Buddha in the Bamboo Grove, and, ‘clearing the mountain of human misery by her devotion,’ obtained all that is desirable.

Here in the poem Tagore changed many parts of the story. According to the story, Bimbisara who was a devout Buddhist, he built up a Stūpa with the relics of Buddha. Where in the evening all the brides and daughters of King’s house to offer flowers and light lamps.

“Sandhyābēlāyā śucibāsa pari
Rājabadhū rājabālā
Āsitēna phula sājāyē ḍālāyā,
Stūpapadamūlē sōnāra thālāyā
Āpanāra hātē ditēna jbalāyē
Kanakapradīpamālā.”¹⁸

After Bimbisara, Ajatasātru came in power. He was very much anti-Buddha. He declared that people should pay homage only towards the Vedas, Brāhmin and King. And as per his

¹⁶ Tagore, Rabindranath: *English Writings of Tagore* (vol-I). p.147

¹⁷ Dash, Narendra Humar: *Indo-Tibetan Culture* (Buddhadeva). p.15

¹⁸ Thākura, Rabīndranātha: *Pūjārini, Rabīndra Racanābalī* (Caturtha Khaṇḍa). p. 29

order nobody should pay homage to Buddha and if one did then he/she should be killed by his soldiers.

But the maid (Śrīmatī) of the royal family considered that her devotion to Buddha was more alive than the order of the king. So in the autumn evening she came out with the golden tray with lamps and fresh white blossoms for the purpose of offering to Buddha. Nobody, even Princess Śuklā too did come with her because they afraid for their lives. Even the county people also did not want to go with her. But she did not stop. She went there and lighting the series of lamps on the *Stūpa*¹⁹ and paid respect to Buddha.

Then the royal soldiers went there and asked her that who she was. The foolish lady was not afraid of death. Śrīmatī replied in sweet voice that she was the disciple of Bhagavan Buddha.

In the next moment, obeying order of the king, the royal soldiers killed her. Her blood covered the white marble *Stūpa* and the last lamp gradually extinguished to its ray.

“Sēdina śubhra pāṣāṇaphalakē
Paṛila raktalikhā.
Sēdina śārada sbaccha niśīthē
Prāsādakānanē nīrabē nibhṛtē
Stūpapadamūlē nibila cakitē
Śēṣa āratira śikhā!”²⁰

So she was not afraid of death voluntarily on account of her practice of indifference (*upekṣā*) (Wyl. btang snyoms). It shows that a devoted disciple of Tathāgata Buddha can sacrifice his/her life for the cause of his/her master.

According to the *Dharmamapada* if we constantly honour, respect and make worship to Buddha our four things will increase. They are: life (length of days), beauty (Wyl. mdzes po), happiness (Wyl. bde ba) and strength (Wyl. stobs).

“*Abhivādanasīlissa-
niccam vaddhāpacāyino
Cattāro dhammā vaḍḍhanti-
āya vaṇṇo sukham balaṃ.*”²¹

Here in this poem Rabindranath also expressed the supreme sacrifice (Wyl. mchod pa) of them towards Buddha, which was make a great influence in Poet's mind to write this kind of poem.

¹⁹ *Stūpa*, Buddhist commemorative monument usually housing sacred relics associated with the Buddha or other saintly persons. The hemispherical form of the *stūpa* appears to have derived from pre-Buddhist burial mounds in India.

²⁰ Thākura, Rabīndranātha: *Pūjārinī, Rabīndra Racanābalī* (Caturtha Khaṇḍa). p. 29

²¹ Thera, Narada: *The Dhammapada*. p.102

Conclusion: Apart from many writing of Tagore's, these three poems express Tagore's devotion towards Buddha and his ultimate teaching, Here in these three poems the Poor lady, Sudas (the gardener) and Śrīmatī (the female maid) all are great followers of Buddha and his ultimate teaching. So they all spend their whole life depend on this ultimate teaching, that not attach with the worldly wealth. Though you have possessed many you did not feel proud for that because at the time of death you could not take a single one. Your virtuous work only goes with you.

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