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HARDSHIPS AND DOWNFALL OF BUDDHISM IN INDIA

GIOVANNI VERARDI

Appendices by
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I had completed the first draft of this book before joining the Institute for Research in Humanities of Kyoto University for a semester. In Kyoto, I could avail myself of the critical comments and suggestions of colleagues and friends, to which the final version of this work owes much. I thank Minoru Inaba, who made my sojourn in Kyoto possible and assisted me in every way. He is one of the colleagues who read the whole text or parts of it, and in this respect, my sincerest thanks also go to Claudine Bautze-Picron, Toru Funayama and Giuliana Martini. I am also indebted to Christoph Cüppers and to Silvio Vita, Director of the Italian School of Eastern Asian Studies in Kyoto. Tiziana Lorenzetti provided me with photographs that allowed me to analyse monuments and icons and that are at the basis of some of the drawings accompanying the text. Daniela De Simone found reference material otherwise unavailable to me in Delhi. Thanks are also due to Jason Hawkes, Peter Skilling and Chiara Visconti. Special thanks go to Geraint Evans, who corrected my English to the extent that it was possible for him because of the paperoles I was continuously adding. Finally yet importantly, my heartfelt thanks go to D.N. Jha and Ramesh Jain of Manohar, who made the publication of this book possible, as well as to Manohar’s production team, whose very attentive proof-reading saved me from many mistakes.

Giovanni Verardi
Introduction

This book is not so much about Buddhism, as about Indian history, a general knowledge of which is taken for granted. It is a kind of advanced history of India aimed at discussing the mechanisms that started to set in motion the events that, with increasing force, characterised the Indian middle age until the thirteenth century, and at examining the often elusive or disregarded evidence that document the weakening and collapse of Buddhism. I do not share the inclusive paradigm that assumes that in ancient India, for all the recognised differences, there was – we speak here of the structured systems – a single development model, broadly shared by all the forces in the field. I see India as the only civilisation of the ancient world that generated two opposing models of social and economic relations that coexisted for a long time in conflict, whatever the attempts to reduce or mask the incompatibilities. Far from being a history with a low level of conflict, it was highly confrontational. Despite the widespread tendency to underestimate historical discontinuities and create inclusive paradigms, it is possible to deconstruct Indian history entering it through the visible fractures that mark its surface. These fractures are comparable to those encountered in volcanic soils, where fumaroles and sulphurous deposits make one understand that an explosive magma is lying beneath. In many cases, fissures have unexpectedly widened, allowing a vision that, if not unprecedented, is nevertheless noteworthy.

The issues raised in this book are numerous, but two emerge, I think, with particular clarity. The first is that whereas the idea of state and society the Buddhists had in mind was compatible with the extremely varied peoples inhabiting the subcontinent, the Brahmanical model implied their forced incorporation into the well-guarded perimeter of an agrarian society. It was not just a state society that, especially from the Gupta period onwards, started being established in vast portions of India but a varṇa state society, and this made the difference. Its establishment caused the arising of an extremely strong
opposition, generally underestimated by historians. The *varṇa* state was opposed not only by the natives who, against their will, saw themselves downgraded to the lower peasantry ranks, but also by the Buddhist brāhmaṇas who were in favour of a trading society less dependent on agricultural resources, and consequently less bound to the strict rules of *varṇa* and *jāti*. The second point is that the imposition of the rules of the *varṇa* state implied much violence. This appears most clearly in the non-brahmanised regions of central and north-eastern India where, from the eighth century onwards, the followers of the Vajrayāna decided to play the card of social revolt, but is already clear from the very beginning of the process: hence the central position that Gupta policy is given in this book. Intimidation and violence also caused a number of transformations in the religion of Dharma, where, rather early, a section of the *śramaṇa*-s started organising themselves according to a community model paralleling the Brahmanical priesthood and lifestyle.

The historical domain covered by this book is thus one where an antinomial model takes the shape of a religious system, Buddhism, which is bound, by ideology and violence, from within and without, to renegotiate continuously and dramatically its own antinomial position. In the course of the historical process, this resulted either in being suppressed or else in being cornered into subaltern positions. The antinomial stance of early Buddhist thought and early Buddhist communities condemned them to the impossibility of emerging out of their subaltern positioning throughout the whole of ancient and medieval history.

The large gaps that still exist in Indian history favour the persistence of a positivist approach. Positive data are in demand not just for filling these gaps, however, but because they have the unparalleled force of always being there, whatever the theoretical construct. The extraordinary force of philological research work, for example, derives from this. Nevertheless, data do change their position on the chessboard according to constructs, and while some of them come fully into focus, others end up in an indistinct periphery. My aim has been not so much to accumulate data, although a number of new facts are provided, but, rather, to reconsider them and rearrange them in the puzzle that the early historical and medieval history of India still is. Much though there is to explore within the inclusive historiographic model we have received, I think that new, decisive data are the product of new
perspectives, and not the other way round. I hope this book can serve this purpose.

The great progress of Buddhist studies worldwide, aimed at constituting the ‘literary corpus’ of Indian Buddhism (Cristina Scherrer-Schaub) and largely focused on the recovery of texts lost in India but preserved in other traditions, has led to a perceptible decline in interest towards Buddhism in modern Indian scholarship and society. Western and East Asian scholars working on the corpus often have – there are naturally many remarkable exceptions – an episodic, incomplete knowledge of Indian history, and, in addition, they do not interact with Indian scholars as happened in the past. For their part, scholars in India have pulled out of the venture, their interests, and those of their country, lying elsewhere. In a sense, India is reverting to a pre-nineteenth century situation, when Buddhism was forgotten when not remembered with hostility. Yet it was precisely the great Indian intellectuals of the past, especially Bengali intellectuals, who, at least with regard to the facts discussed in this book, had a clear perception of how things had gone, and who preserved the memory of events that, in some parts of the country, belonged to a not too distant past.

As regards the ‘data archive’ of Indian Buddhism, the situation is partly reversed, but to nobody’s advantage. Archaeology has long since become the exclusive concern of Indian scholars, and this has created an asymmetry that contributes to deepen the gap between the parties and risks undermining the validity of the new evidence, allocating it to the exclusive domain of nationalistic self-congratulation and tourist use. For all the criticism that today we reserve for the idea of Indian Buddhism created in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, its force lay in the close interrelationship which then existed between the literary corpus and the data archive. The restoration of the Pāli Canon and of a certain number of Mahāyāna texts remains closely related in everybody’s mind to the stūpas of Sanchi and the monasteries of Taxila. It was an extraordinarily powerful model, regardless of whether those associations were right or wrong. This unity is now broken. The data archive is broken in turn, because Indian scholars monopolise fieldwork but show little interest for the iconographic section. Here non-Indian scholars are again more active, although often disinclined to come face to face with the darker aspects of Indian history.
An important limitation to the understanding of both early and medieval Buddhism is the scarce attention paid by students of the religion of Dharma to the Brahmanical world – a traditional attitude that has now become more widespread because of the shifting north-and eastwards of philological studies. Yet we might provocatively argue that while it is possible to write a history of India that ignores Buddhism, the more limited task of writing a history of Indian Buddhism that ignores Brahmanical India seems hardly possible. Nevertheless, this is frequently done, and the result is a partial if not mistaken view of the matter that risks affecting also the work of the most self-confident, specialised fields of the research. Brahmanical sources, be they prescriptive texts, literary works or religious-mythical compilations like the Purāṇas, contain a surprising amount of information on Buddhism. Students of Brahmanical literature have taught us to read literary texts paying attention to the multiplicity of meanings and references particular to sandhyābhāsā, and recently the idea has come to the fore that iconographies respond to the same subtle, complex network of allusions and overtones. Nothing new under the sun, some will say, except that the teachings and methodology of the Warburg school have so far failed to establish themselves in Indian studies, where the barrier interposed by the constant resorting to a symbolism nurtured by the ideas of the 1930s seems unbreakable. Though it is not only a question of sandhyābhāsā, if the breach is now open by acknowledging the existence of instruments specific to India for understanding texts and images, we can only rejoice. The task is intimidating, because historians of religions should also contribute to this effort by offering us a more realistic view of the Brahmanical world.

The reference made above to the Warburg school suggests some considerations. Students of classical antiquities and of the Renaissance, whatever their specialisation may be, know that colleagues are up to in bordering sectors of their own field of research, and the wealth of such studies comes from a continuous dialogue between all the sectors, and many a scholar can competently address different sets of data. Some may say that in the case of ancient and medieval India data archives and literary corpora have too many empty boxes to allow us to proceed in this direction, desirable as it may be. I believe this is only partly true. When Aby Warburg began his investigations on the Italian Renaissance, things were not much different from at least some
periods of Indian history, given the strong discontinuity in the history of Italy that we can symbolically fix to the year 1527. The Catholic Reform had strongly reshaped, and in part deleted, the past, and it was now necessary to retrieve it using a methodology that broke the boundaries between disciplines. There are no cheap shortcuts here: for those who use the tools of the Warburg school, it would be unthinkable to make easy escapes into the region of ill-defined or consolatory symbolisms, either fuelled by texts or iconographies, and, above all, to adhere to any form of reassuring (and authoritarian) inclusiveness. Historical modelling goes together with extremely careful distinctions.

The idea of writing this book has its distant origin in the unexpected results of an excavation carried out in Kathmandu in the 1980s, which the reader will find briefly summarised in a section of Chapter IV. There was indisputable evidence of a Buddhist sanctuary dismantled and interfaced to make way for a Vishnuite temple, the operation being sanctioned by an inscription containing a damnatio memoriae of the Saugatas. My career as a student of things Indian had begun in the 1970s, when the long debate on the end of Indian Buddhism held in the past had gone out of fashion. My explanation of the facts proved correct but rudimentary, and as to the papers I wrote on this subject from different angles in the following years, they turned out to be mere attempts, only partly successful, to fill a gap in the knowledge. During the sabbatical year 1997-98, I spent a few months at the Ecole Française d’Extrême-Orient in Pondicherry and at the Asiatic Society in Kolkata, where I could go through much of what had been written on the matter in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In Kolkata, I met a young pandita with whom, for a few years, I exchanged an extensive correspondence regarding known and less known texts containing material relevant for the work I felt an increasingly urgent need to do. At the time, the idea of re-examining known textual sources and making new sources known – some in Bengali – seemed feasible. It became increasingly clear, however, that this would have meant preparing a set of preliminary works each implying a considerable effort. Moreover, for the book to be written, several other sources were needed, and they were written in a number of Indian languages, from Tamil to Kannada, let alone the Tibetan, Chinese and Islamic sources. All the relevant passages, it appeared, would have required, for one reason or another, a very careful re-examination. In the end,
the only viable solution has been for me to give the texts in the available translations. Regarding the Brahmanical texts, I have limited myself, when confronted with some passages glossed by learned insiders, to indicate to the reader how challenging their interpretation may happen to be. The subtle implications of these texts can hardly be understood without opening a dialogue with learned pandita-s.

Iconographies are often better dated than texts, and cannot be easily altered. Moreover, they are part of specific, recognisable contexts, to which they can be referred, at least to an extent, even when they have been moved away from their original place. Since patronage is necessary for iconographies to come into existence, they often provide us with precise references to the historical reality of a given place. Far from providing a mere illustration of a text, they often make explicit what in the texts is left out or only ambiguously alluded to. Here we are in the domain of iconology, which, as already said, is still struggling to make its way into Indian studies, where the mechanical juxtaposition of text and image continues to be proposed almost unchallenged. The recovery of meaning in the sense indicated by Erwin Panofsky still seems, with notable exceptions, a distant objective. For all the information gaps that characterise the contexts discussed in this book, I have tried to give a contextualised interpretation of images or suggest for them a credible scenario, deliberately ignoring the metaphysical and theological level. I have aimed neither too low (a mere description of little significance for my argument) nor too high (a discussion of overburdening priestly symbols, of equally little significance), and if some conclusions sound disturbing, this interpretive level provides us, I think, with the maximum historical information. The enormous weight of violence expressed by a large proportion of Brahmanical images and, later on, by the images of Vajrayāna Buddhism, cannot be ascribed, sic et simpliciter, to the world of symbols but require a more specific, historically motivated explanation. Limitations and constraints have affected this part of the work, too. With few exceptions, I have utilised material published in art history studies. During the writing of this book, I could visit only some major museums and a few sites, and it has been impossible for me to organise extensive and repeated surveys in central and north-eastern India, where I especially wanted to go. The iconographic output of Indian regions other than those mentioned in the book is ignored, and
inevitable though this is, it is not less regrettable. Finally, I regret that only a part of the drawings could be provided that in votis should have accompanied the text.

The third class of sources I have utilised are archaeological, but although this is my particular area of investigation, there is, regrettably, not much to say. Per se, the archaeological evidence is the only one definable as objective. The facts underlying both the setting in of the process of stratification and the production of artefacts are of course due to players comparable to those who produced texts and iconographies, but the slow formation of the archaeological deposit escapes the control of political players and ideologues. When diggings begin, a mound is really the objective whole of what has taken place. Unfortunately, even the best excavation is a compromise, because of its complexity and the technicalities involved. As regards the majority of the sites mentioned in this book, we face, in addition, inadequate excavations, where the loss of evidence has been enormous. The situation cannot be remedied because, unlike literary texts, which can be re-examined now and again, the archaeological text is difficult to reassess in that it is destroyed on reading. What we have is thus scattered evidence, partly handed over to us, if ever, by incomplete reports, and partly forgotten in inaccessible storehouses. Nevertheless, the reader will find information based on this kind of data throughout the book, and will also find a reassessment of the sites of Bodhgayā and Sarnath by Federica Barba in the Appendices.

The book is divided into six chapters. In the first, the issues I have raised are seen in perspective. Although the scholars of the past generations had access to a smaller amount of information and paid little attention to the social implications of the issues at stake, many of them had a more realistic vision of Indian past than the historians of the period of Independence and even modern historians. I fully distance myself from the current trend that sees a colonial construct in any position taken by nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars. Many of the ideas that nurtured foreign students were those of the learned babus they worked with, and by the end of the nineteenth century Indian scholars mastered the new methodologies very well, influencing the debate.

The second chapter explains why Buddhism belongs to a cultural horizon than is vaster than India, something that has marked its destiny,
in India, in the first place. For all the paramount contributions of Indian historians to the understanding of early Buddhism, it has not been fully realised how unprecedented was the attempt at building an antinomial society. The role of Aśoka as a Buddhist cakravartin must be clearly asserted, while the early attacks on the religion of Dharma ought to be seen within the framework of a deeply revised chronology provided by the archaeological evidence. This revision ends up with assigning to the Śuṅgas the role of pioneer supporters of a new Brahmanical orthodoxy based on the encounter of Vedic ritualists and new theistic movements, without compromising with the world of the śramaṇa-s. If we pay due attention to chronology, we also realise that the Guptas – we go now to the third chapter – have nothing to do with Buddhism, which succeeded in re-establishing itself in some regions only around the mid-fifth century to coincide with the loosening of the powerful political and administrative network created by a dynasty that was supported by the new orthodox powers. The Kali Age literature is an unequivocal sign of Brahmanical hostility towards the śramaṇa-s and the social sectors they represented. While the difficult times experienced by Buddhism in the middle Ganges valley in the early fifth century is documented by Faxian and other sources, in the new kingdoms of the Deccan this hostility turned into a cleansing policy. The idea of a large Buddhist oecumene, fuelled by new trading perspectives, came to the fore at the time of Harṣavardhana and of an expanding Tang China, but Xuanzang’s enthusiasm and involvement in the project did not prevent the great Chinese intellectual bearing witness to the ground lost by Buddhism in many Indian regions, starting from the North-West.

In the fourth chapter, after addressing a few methodological issues, I have discussed the poorly understood question of the doctrinal debates characteristic of the Indian scene. The stakes were the loss of political power and, therefore, of patronage, and the presence of militant, theistic groups transformed the debates into ordeals where the Buddhists were doomed to be the losers. All this should be seen as part of the slow but unrelenting occupation of the agricultural lands by the brāhmaṇas, who dislodged the former owners or put under cultivation the lands of the natives, clashing with non-agricultural peoples. Intimidation and violence became frequent. Militias were created which brought destruction to the Śramaṇic establishments and
social network, pushing for the construction of temples of the gods and the imposition of varnāśramadharma. In border regions like Orissa (the Pālas were ruling in the neighbouring territories), minority groups like the Kāpālikas were tolerated in that they took upon themselves the great sin of selectively getting rid of high-caste Buddhists.

The fifth chapter addresses at some length the question of the long, multi-faceted fight against the heretics as allegorised in Brahmanical texts and iconographies. A distinction is made between the battlefield, a ground where official war was waged, and the suppression of those who opposed not just the state but the varna state. The latter was a qualitatively different war. At the representational level, goddesses like Cāmuṇḍā and the yoginī-ś are shown to have been performing this task on the fault-line along the Vindhyas beyond which the Buddhist strongholds of Bihar and Bengal were located. As to the Buddhists, they probably started reacting to violence rather early, but developed a coherent system of defence at the theoretical and factual level with the Vajrayāna.

The last chapter opens with the attempt at providing a picture of the Indian scene at the eve of the Muslim invasion. A section of Buddhist śramaṇa-s was a priesthood composed of married monks, and the others were increasingly radicalised exponents of the Vajrayāna, either siddha-s or monks, pitted against the attempt at normalisation and integration into the varna state of the Buddhist strongholds of Magadha, Bengal and upper Orissa. When the Brahmanical powers understood that striking an agreement with the Muslims – that which had not happened in Sind – could better serve their interests than continually lost battles, they bargained for the establishment of tributary but strict varna states (the best example is Mithilā) against the final suppression of Buddhism.

The implosion of Magadha has thrown a long shade on northern India, conditioning its history to the present day, and awaits proper investigation. It would be high time for Indian historians, the only ones who are in a position to access and discuss the large amount of existing documentation, to abandon every form of reticence and give us the true story.

Kyoto, September 2010