

The Philosophy of Mahāyāna in Odishan Tradition

Dr. Seema Rani Rath

Assistant Professor(Guest), Department of Sanskrit, Rajendra University, Prajna Vihar, Balangir

Abstract- This paper explores the philosophical landscape of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism within the cultural and historical context of Odisha. Odisha, a significant centre of Buddhist learning, witnessed the flourishing of *Mahāyāna* thought through its prominent monastic institutions, including Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, and Lalitgiri. The study delves into the influence of key *Mahāyāna* philosophical doctrines such as *śūnyatā* (emptiness) and *Vijñapti-mātratā* (consciousness-only), as propounded by thinkers like Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu. Furthermore, the paper examines how the Bodhisattva ideal and the concept of compassionate service influenced religious practice, art, and literature in the region. The archaeological remains and inscriptions in Odisha provide significant evidence of the deep-rooted *Mahāyāna* tradition. By investigating the philosophical contributions and cultural reflections of *Mahāyāna* in Odisha, this paper aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of its role in shaping the region's religious identity and philosophical discourse.

Index Terms- Mahāyāna, śūnyatā, yogācāra, nirvāṇa, Odisha, Philosophical discourse.

I. INTRODUCTION

Odisha has a rich heritage of Buddhist culture and philosophy, with *Mahāyāna* Buddhism playing a pivotal role in its spiritual landscape. By the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE, *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, characterized by its emphasis on compassion, altruism, and wisdom, gained prominence in the region¹. The spread of *Mahāyāna* philosophy in Odisha was facilitated by the establishment of monastic institutions that attracted scholars from across the Indian subcontinent.²

This paper focuses on the philosophical dimensions of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism in Odisha, exploring the teachings of the *Mādhyamika* and *Yogācāra* schools and their impact on regional art, culture, and religious practices. Through the analysis of archaeological evidence, inscriptions, and historical texts, it seeks to highlight the contribution of Odisha to the evolution of *Mahāyāna* thought.

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Buddhism in Odisha traces its origins to the Mauryan period under Emperor Ashoka, who played a significant role in its propagation. However, it was during the early centuries of the Common Era that *Mahāyāna* Buddhism gained a stronghold³. Odisha's strategic location on trade routes facilitated the exchange of philosophical ideas and religious practices. The renowned Buddhist sites of Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, and Lalitgiri served as major centres of learning, fostering the growth of *Mahāyāna* scholarship.

The patronage of rulers, particularly during the Bhaumakara and Somavamsi dynasties, further contributed to the flourishing of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. Monasteries became hubs of intellectual discourse, where philosophical texts were composed and studied. The transmission of *Mahāyāna* doctrines from Odisha to Southeast Asia also underscores the region's prominence in the Buddhist world.

The historical background of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism in Odisha is deeply intertwined with the region's cultural and religious evolution. Odisha, formerly known as Kalinga, played a significant role in the spread of Buddhism in India⁴. The transformation of the region into a major center of Buddhist learning and practice can be traced back to the time of Emperor Ashoka. After the devastating Kalinga War in 261 BCE, Ashoka renounced violence and embraced Buddhism, promoting its teachings across his empire⁵. His support for Buddhism led to the establishment of numerous monasteries and stupas, laying the foundation for the growth of various Buddhist traditions, including *Mahāyāna*.

While early Buddhism in Odisha was predominantly associated with *Theravāda* and *Sarvāstivāda* schools, by the 2nd to 3rd centuries CE, *Mahāyāna* thought began to gain prominence. The rise of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, with its emphasis on the Bodhisattva Ideal and philosophical doctrines like *śūnyatā* (emptiness) and *Vijñapti-*

mātratā (consciousness-only), resonated deeply with the spiritual and intellectual climate of Odisha. The region's monasteries evolved into vibrant centers of philosophical debate and practice, attracting scholars and pilgrims from across the Indian subcontinent and beyond.

During the Gupta period (4th to 6th centuries CE), Odisha experienced further growth in Buddhist scholarship⁶. The establishment of prominent monastic complexes such as Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, and Lalitgiri marked the region's emergence as a major hub of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism⁷. These monasteries, known collectively as the Diamond Triangle, were not only places of worship but also centers of advanced learning, comparable to the famed Nālandā University in Bihar⁸. Inscriptions, seals, and archaeological findings suggest that monks in these institutions engaged in the study of *Mahāyāna* texts and actively participated in doctrinal discussions.

The influence of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism in Odisha was further strengthened by the patronage of successive dynasties. The Bhaumakaras and Somavamsis (8th to 11th centuries CE) provided generous support for the construction of Buddhist monuments and the preservation of scriptures⁹. The rulers' dedication to *Mahāyāna* ideals is reflected in the architectural grandeur of the region's monasteries, with intricately carved sculptures of Bodhisattvas, Buddhas, and other deities¹⁰. These artistic representations, along with the presence of numerous votive stupas and inscriptions, attest to the widespread influence of *Mahāyāna* philosophy in Odisha¹¹.

Furthermore, Odisha's geographical location along ancient trade routes facilitated cultural exchanges with Southeast Asia. Ports like Tamralipi served as gateways for Buddhist missionaries traveling to regions such as Sri Lanka, Java, and China¹². The transmission of *Mahāyāna* texts and practices from Odisha to these regions played a significant role in the global spread of Buddhism. Additionally, foreign scholars and pilgrims, including Xuanzang and Faxian, visited Odisha, documenting their experiences and contributing to the region's historical legacy.

By the medieval period, *Mahāyāna* Buddhism in Odisha had undergone further development, incorporating Tantric elements through the rise of *Vajrayāna* Buddhism¹³. The monasteries of Ratnagiri and Udayagiri became prominent centers of esoteric Buddhist practices,

with elaborate rituals and the worship of deities like *Tārā* and *Avalokiteśvara*. This synthesis of *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna* traditions reflected the dynamic nature of Odisha's Buddhist heritage.

Despite the gradual decline of Buddhism in India after the 12th century, the legacy of *Mahāyāna* thought in Odisha remains evident. The ruins of its grand monasteries, the surviving sculptures, and the inscriptions serve as lasting reminders of the region's significant contribution to the development and propagation of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism¹⁴. Today, ongoing archaeological excavations and scholarly research continue to uncover valuable insights into Odisha's historical and philosophical engagement with *Mahāyāna* Buddhism.

III. PHILOSOPHICAL DIMENSIONS

1. The Doctrine of *Śūnyatā*

The concept of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) is one of the central tenets of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism, particularly as articulated by the philosopher Nāgārjuna in his seminal work, the *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā* (Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way). Nāgārjuna's philosophy is based on the doctrine of *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination), which posits that all phenomena arise in dependence upon other phenomena. As a result, nothing possesses *svabhāva* (intrinsic existence) or independent identity. This lack of inherent existence is what is referred to as *śūnyatā*¹⁵.

Nāgārjuna's Middle Way philosophy rejects the extremes of eternalism (the belief in an unchanging, independent essence) and nihilism (the belief that nothing exists at all)¹⁶. Instead, it emphasizes that while phenomena are devoid of intrinsic existence, they do exist conventionally through interdependent relationships. *Śūnyatā*, therefore, is not a denial of existence but a recognition of the true nature of reality — a dynamic, interdependent web of causes and conditions.

In the context of Odisha, the doctrine of *śūnyatā* gained significant importance in monastic centres such as Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, and Lalitgiri, where *Mādhyamika* philosophy was studied and debated¹⁷. The inscriptions and sculptures from these sites often depict scenes from *Mahāyāna* texts, suggesting the dissemination of Nāgārjuna's thought. Philosophers and scholars engaged in rigorous discussions on the nature of emptiness,

further developing the interpretative traditions of *Mādhyamika*¹⁸.

Moreover, *śūnyatā* was not merely a subject of philosophical discourse but also a foundational concept in spiritual practice. Understanding emptiness was considered essential for achieving liberation from suffering. Meditative practices in the Odishan *Mahāyāna* tradition often involved contemplating the emptiness of self and phenomena, fostering wisdom (*prajñā*) and compassion (*karuṇā*). This synthesis of philosophical insight and meditative practice reflected the holistic nature of *Mahāyāna* Buddhism in Odisha.

2. Vijñapti-mātratā and the Yogācāra Influence

The *Yogācāra* school, founded by Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, introduced the doctrine of *Vijñapti-mātratā* (consciousness-only), asserting that external objects are mere projections of the mind. This idealist perspective gained traction in Odisha, contributing to the region's philosophical diversity¹⁹. Monks and scholars engaged in rigorous dialectics to explore the nature of perception and reality, leaving behind inscriptions and manuscripts that reflect their intellectual pursuits.

3. The Bodhisattva Ideal

The Bodhisattva Ideal is a central concept in *Mahāyāna* Buddhism that emphasizes the path of selfless compassion and wisdom. Unlike the *Theravāda* goal of arhatship, where the primary aim is individual liberation (*nirvāṇa*), *Mahāyāna* practitioners strive to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings²⁰. This path is embodied in the figure of the Bodhisattva, one who vows to remain in the cycle of *samsāra* (birth, death, and rebirth) until all beings are liberated. A Bodhisattva is characterized by the practice of the Six *Pāramitās* or Perfections, which include:

1. *Dāna Pāramitā* (Generosity) — Practicing selfless giving without expectation of reward.
2. *Śīla Pāramitā* (Ethics) — Maintaining moral discipline and conduct.
3. *Kṣānti Pāramitā* (Patience) — Cultivating tolerance and forbearance.
4. *Vīrya Pāramitā* (Effort) — Diligence and perseverance in virtuous activities.
5. *Dhyāna Pāramitā* (Meditation) — Developing concentration and mindfulness.

6. *Prajñā Pāramitā* (Wisdom) — Attaining insight into the nature of *śūnyatā* (emptiness).

The Bodhisattva Ideal in Odisha

In the context of Odisha, the Bodhisattva Ideal played a vital role in shaping religious practices, philosophical discourse, and artistic expression. The influence of prominent *Mahāyāna* texts like the Lotus Sūtra and the Avataṃsaka Sūtra is evident in the inscriptions and artworks of the region. The widespread depiction of Bodhisattvas in the Buddhist monasteries of Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, and Lalitgiri reflects the deep reverence for this ideal²¹.

Among the most prominent Bodhisattvas venerated in Odisha were:

- *Avalokiteśvara*: The Bodhisattva of Compassion, often portrayed with multiple arms, symbolizing his boundless ability to assist beings in distress²².
- *Mañjuśrī*: The Bodhisattva of Wisdom, who represents the enlightened intellect necessary for the realization of *śūnyatā*²³.
- *Tārā*: A compassionate female Bodhisattva, often regarded as a savior who protects beings from danger and suffering²⁴.

These Bodhisattvas were not merely objects of devotion but also served as philosophical exemplars²⁵. Devotees and scholars in Odisha studied their qualities to cultivate compassion and wisdom within themselves. The recitation of Bodhisattva vows was a common practice, reinforcing the commitment to altruistic service.

Cultural Impact and Legacy

Mahāyāna Buddhism's influence in Odisha extended beyond philosophy, leaving a lasting imprint on art, architecture, and literature. The intricately carved stupas, monasteries, and votive sculptures at Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, and Lalitgiri depict scenes from *Mahāyāna* texts and express the spiritual aspirations of the devotees²⁶. The visual representation of key *Mahāyāna* concepts, such as the compassionate gaze of *Avalokiteśvara*, serves as a testimony to the philosophical and artistic synthesis of the tradition.

Additionally, the presence of Buddhist manuscripts and inscriptions in Pāli, Sanskrit, and Prakrit provides evidence of a vibrant scholarly environment²⁷. These texts continue to serve as valuable sources for understanding the transmission of *Mahāyāna* ideas across the Indian subcontinent.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Bodhisattva Ideal in Odisha exemplifies the profound philosophical and spiritual commitment that characterized *Mahāyāna* Buddhism in the region. Unlike the pursuit of individual liberation, the Bodhisattva's path emphasized the welfare of all sentient beings. Through the practice of the Six Pāramitās and the cultivation of compassion and wisdom, practitioners dedicated their lives to the collective goal of universal liberation. This altruistic vision of enlightenment enriched the religious landscape of Odisha, influencing not only monastic communities but also the broader society.

The flourishing of the Bodhisattva Ideal in Odisha is evident in the region's rich artistic heritage. The numerous depictions of Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, and Tārā in the monasteries of Ratnagiri, Udayagiri, and Lalitgiri reveal the reverence for these compassionate figures. These sculptures and inscriptions served as constant reminders of the Bodhisattva's commitment to selfless service, inspiring both monastics and lay practitioners. The artistic representations also demonstrated the integration of philosophy with devotional practice, reflecting the spiritual aspirations of the people.

Moreover, the philosophical depth of the Bodhisattva Ideal encouraged intellectual discourse in Odisha's monastic centers. Scholars engaged in rigorous debates on the concepts of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) and *upāya* (skillful means), contributing to the development of *Mahāyāna* thought. The commitment to compassionate action, grounded in a profound understanding of emptiness, fostered a holistic spiritual practice that balanced wisdom and empathy.

The enduring legacy of the Bodhisattva Ideal in Odisha extended beyond its Buddhist communities. Its emphasis on selflessness, ethical conduct, and the pursuit of collective well-being influenced other religious traditions and cultural practices in the region. The ideals of compassion and service continue to resonate, offering valuable ethical guidance for contemporary society.

In conclusion, the Bodhisattva Ideal in the Odishan tradition stands as a testament to the region's spiritual and intellectual contributions to *Mahāyāna* Buddhism. It exemplifies a philosophy that transcends personal liberation, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all beings and the responsibility to alleviate suffering. By preserving

and studying this legacy, scholars and practitioners can continue to draw inspiration from the timeless wisdom of the Bodhisattva path, fostering compassion and understanding in the modern world.

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