

# **Twilight of Buddhism in India : The Decline and the Lasting Legacy of Vajrayana**

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## **Abstract :**

The decline of Buddhism in India, a profound historical event, was precipitated by an intricate interplay of internal decay, the resurgence of Hinduism, and Islamic incursions. This paper delves into the multifaceted causes that led to the waning of Buddhism, with a particular focus on Vajrayana Buddhism. The internal decay within Buddhist monastic communities, characterized by ethical lapses and political entanglements, significantly eroded the religion's foundation. Concurrently, the resurgence of Hinduism, driven by the Bhakti movements and royal patronage, overshadowed Buddhist institutions. Additionally, the Islamic incursions of the 8th to 12th centuries resulted in the destruction of key Buddhist monasteries and educational centers, further accelerating the decline. By examining primary sources and historiographical accounts, this study provides a comprehensive analysis of the historical dynamics that led to the decline of Buddhism in its place of origin.

**Keywords :** Interplay Resurgence Hinduism Monasteries, Dynamics.

## **Introduction :**

Buddhism, initiated by Siddhartha Gautama in the 5th century BCE, burgeoned into a seminal religious and cultural force within India. For epochs, it proliferated and disseminated across Asia, exerting profound influence upon a diverse array of cultures and societies. However, by the terminus of the first millennium CE, Buddhism had precipitously declined within India, the very crucible of its genesis. This treatise endeavours to scrutinize the multifarious factors precipitating the decline of Buddhism in India, with an erudite focus on the Vajrayana form of Buddhism, its idiosyncratic characteristics, historical trajectory, and its confluence with Hinduism, including its contemporary manifestations.

Buddhism's journey in India was marked by a series of remarkable achievements and extensive royal patronage. From the Mauryan Empire to the Pala dynasty, various rulers embraced and propagated Buddhist principles, leading to the construction of monumental stupas, monasteries, and educational institutions. Emperor Ashoka, one of the most illustrious patrons, played a pivotal role in the spread of Buddhism both within and beyond Indian borders. His reign witnessed the erection of stupas like the one at Sanchi, the establishment of the rock edicts, and the dispatch of missionaries to far-flung regions such as Sri Lanka and Central Asia.

Under Ashoka's aegis, Buddhism transitioned from a regional sect to a major world religion. The subsequent Kushan Empire further bolstered its prominence, with Kanishka the Great's support leading

to the flourishing of Mahayana Buddhism and the convening of the Fourth Buddhist Council. This period saw the creation of iconic Buddhist art and architecture, exemplified by the Gandhara and Mathura schools of art.

The Gupta Empire, often regarded as a golden age of Indian culture, continued to patronize Buddhism alongside Hinduism. This era produced significant Buddhist scholarship and the construction of universities like Nalanda, which became a renowned centre of learning attracting students from across Asia.

Despite these marvels, the decline of Buddhism in India was precipitated by various factors including internal doctrinal schisms, the resurgence of Hinduism and invasions by foreign powers. The rise of the Vajrayana form of Buddhism, with its esoteric practices and rituals, further complicated its relationship with mainstream Buddhist thought and Hinduism. This treatise will delve into these aspects, providing a nuanced understanding of the historical and cultural dynamics that led to the diminution of Buddhism in its birthplace.

## **Factors Contributing to the Decline of Buddhism in India Internal Decadence and Monastic Corruption in Buddhism**

The decline of Buddhism was significantly influenced by internal decadence and monastic corruption. As monasteries accumulated wealth and political power, the original ascetic and spiritual ideals of Buddhism were compromised. Monks and nuns, initially dedicated to simplicity and spiritual discipline, began indulging in luxury, leading to a decline in ethical standards and tarnishing the monastic image. Primary evidence, such as inscriptions and accounts from Xuanzang, reveals the luxurious lifestyles of some monks, while archaeological remains show a shift from austere to elaborate monastic structures. Historians like Richard Gombrich and Gregory Schopen highlight this ethical decline and material wealth. Additionally, monasteries' political entanglements, documented through Gupta period inscriptions and historical texts like the 'Mahavamsa,' further compromised their spiritual integrity, with scholars like T. W. Rhys Davids and Etienne Lamotte examining the impact of political alliances on monastic power. Economic exploitation, evidenced by land grants and grievances from the laity, created social resentment and alienation, as discussed by B. R. Ambedkar and Padmanabh S. Jaini. The loss of spiritual authority, noted in contemporary accounts by Fa-Hien and Xuanzang, weakened Buddhism's overall structure, with Heinz Bechert and Damien Keown exploring the implications of this decline. Finally, the degeneration of the monastic community led to a dilution of core religious practices, shifting the focus from meditation and enlightenment to material concerns. Steven Collins and John Strong analyse how this shift affected Buddhist rituals and practices, underscoring the profound impact of internal decay on the tradition.

### **Ascendancy of Hinduism :**

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The resurgence of Hinduism, driven by Bhakti movements and the codification of Hindu doctrines, significantly contributed to the decline of Buddhism in India. The Bhakti movements, starting in the 7th century CE, emphasized personal devotion and accessibility, contrasting with Buddhism's more scholarly focus. This shift is evident in the literature of Bhakti saints like Kabir and Mira Bai and supported by temple inscriptions documenting their widespread appeal. Historians John Stratton Hawley and David Lorenzen discuss this shift.

Hinduism's consolidation in texts like the Puranas, which codified beliefs and practices, further strengthened its position. Evidence from these texts and epigraphic records shows their influence. Wendy Doniger and Ludo Rocher highlight how these texts provided a unified religious framework that reinforced Hinduism's dominance.

Royal patronage significantly bolstered Hinduism, with rulers like those of the Gupta dynasty endowing Hindu temples and priests. This support is documented through inscriptions and archaeological sites such as the Elephanta Caves. Romila Thapar and Richard H. Davis explore how this patronage elevated Hindu institutions and contributed to Buddhism's decline.

Syncretism facilitated the assimilation of Buddhist adherents into Hinduism, with Buddhist deities and practices being incorporated into the Hindu pantheon. Evidence includes the integration of deities like Avalokiteshvara and literary texts reflecting this blending. Alex Wayman and Harold Coward examine how this syncretism affected religious boundaries.

Hinduism's deep cultural and social integration reinforced its dominance, with rituals and social norms embedded in daily life. Temple records and legal texts like the Manusmriti illustrate this integration. M. N. Srinivas and Sudhir Kakar analyse how Hindu practices and social structures contributed to its resilience compared to Buddhism.

## **Islamic Incursions :**

The Islamic incursions into India from the 8th to the 12th centuries had a catastrophic impact on Buddhism. These invasions, initiated by the Ghaznavids, Ghurids, and other Islamic dynasties, led to the systematic destruction of numerous Buddhist monasteries and universities, including Nalanda University, Vikramashila University, and Odantapuri. This destruction resulted in the loss of invaluable manuscripts and teachings.

Islamic forces specifically targeted Buddhist monasteries and universities, which were the backbone of Buddhist educational infrastructure. The annihilation of Nalanda University by Bakhtiyar Khilji in 1193 CE marked a critical point in the decline of the Buddhist educational system in India. Additionally, many Buddhist monks were killed, imprisoned, or forced to convert to Islam. Those who survived often fled to neighbouring regions such as Nepal, Tibet, and Southeast Asia, further weakening Buddhism's institutional structure.

The loss of educational and religious centres led to a significant decline in the production of Buddhist literature, the training of new monks, and the continuation of religious practices. In the aftermath, remaining Buddhist communities often integrated into the dominant cultural and religious

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milieu influenced by Islam and resurgent Hinduism, leading to the assimilation of Buddhists into other religious traditions.

Economic factors also played a significant role in Buddhism's decline. The shifting political landscape led to a reallocation of resources and patronage to Hindu institutions, causing financial enervation of Buddhist establishments. The decline in agricultural productivity, a primary revenue source for Buddhist monasteries, further exacerbated their economic plight. Hindu temples, more integrated into social life, attracted significant donations, making it challenging for Buddhist institutions to compete for limited resources.

## **Economic Factors :**

The decline of Buddhism in India was significantly influenced by a combination of destructive invasions, shifting political patronage, and economic challenges. Beginning in the 8th century, Islamic incursions, culminating in the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in the 12th century, led to the widespread destruction of Buddhist monasteries and universities, including Nalanda, Vikramashila, and Odantapuri. These invasions, spearheaded by the Ghaznavids, Ghurids, and other Islamic dynasties, not only obliterated educational centers but also decimated the Buddhist monastic community through persecution and displacement. Monks were often killed, imprisoned, or forced to flee to neighboring regions like Nepal, Tibet, and Southeast Asia, further weakening the institutional framework of Buddhism.

Financially, the sustenance of Buddhist institutions heavily depended on donations from the laity and royal patrons. However, as political dynamics evolved, particularly during the Gupta dynasty, there was a significant shift in royal patronage towards Hindu temples and Brahmanical institutions. This reallocation of resources resulted in a substantial decline in financial support for Buddhist monasteries. The economic difficulties were compounded by the decline in agrarian productivity due to climatic changes, soil depletion, and political instability, which reduced the income generated from agricultural lands owned by these monasteries. Additionally, Hindu temples, which were more integrated into the social and cultural fabric of society, attracted significant donations, further exacerbating the financial woes of Buddhist establishments.

Primary evidence from inscriptions, land grants, and historical accounts, as well as historiographical analyses by scholars like Romila Thapar and Richard H. Davis, illustrate the shift in patronage and the economic challenges faced by Buddhist institutions. The combination of destructive invasions, economic competition with Hindu institutions, and the decline of agrarian economy contributed to the gradual decline of Buddhism in India, making it increasingly difficult for the religion to recover and re-establish itself in the subcontinent.

## **Doctrinal Schisms and Sectarianism :**

The decline of Buddhism in India was significantly influenced by a combination of doctrinal schisms, sectarianism, economic challenges, and external pressures. The emergence of various sects,

including Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana, led to doctrinal discord and internecine rivalry within the Buddhist community. These divisions weakened the religion's cohesion and vitality, reducing its appeal and making it susceptible to competition from more unified religious traditions like Hinduism and Islam. The split between Theravada and Mahayana, marked by differences in teachings and practices, introduced confusion among potential followers and diminished Buddhism's coherence.

Economic factors further exacerbated the decline. The financial support for Buddhist monasteries dwindled as political patronage shifted towards Hindu institutions, particularly during periods like the Gupta dynasty. This reallocation of resources resulted in the financial weakening of Buddhist establishments, making it difficult for them to sustain their activities and infrastructure. Additionally, the decline in agricultural productivity, due to climatic changes and political instability, reduced the revenue generated from monastic lands, compounding the financial difficulties faced by Buddhist institutions.

The destructive invasions by Islamic rulers from the 8th to the 12th centuries, including the Ghaznavids and Ghurids, played a crucial role in the decline of Buddhism. Major Buddhist centers like Nalanda and Vikramashila were destroyed, leading to the loss of invaluable manuscripts and the displacement of the monastic community. These invasions not only resulted in physical destruction but also significantly weakened the institutional framework of Buddhism in India.

Primary evidence from inscriptions, council records, and travellers' accounts, along with historiographical analyses by scholars such as Romila Thapar, Richard Gombrich, and John S. Strong, highlight the combined impact of internal divisions and external pressures on the decline of Buddhism. The internal strife, economic challenges, and external invasions collectively contributed to the gradual erosion of Buddhism's presence in the Indian subcontinent.

## **The Emergence and Characteristics of Vajrayana Buddhism :**

Vajrayana Buddhism, or Tantric Buddhism, emerged in India around the 6th century CE, blending Mahayana Buddhism with indigenous tantric practices. Known as the 'Diamond Vehicle', Vajrayana emphasizes achieving enlightenment through esoteric rituals, symbols, and meditation. Its central tenet, 'Upaya' or skilful means, suggests that enlightenment can be accelerated by adeptly using these practices under the guidance of a guru. Practitioners engage in intricate rituals and meditative practices to transcend ordinary consciousness and attain a state of indestructibility and enlightenment. The Vajrayana pantheon features a variety of deities and bodhisattvas, depicted in mandalas that aid meditation. These deities symbolize different aspects of the enlightened mind and are visualized and venerated by practitioners. A distinctive aspect of Vajrayana is its emphasis on esoteric transmission through a lineage of gurus and disciples, with the guru embodying the Vajra mind and imparting secret teachings.

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Primary evidence for Vajrayana includes texts such as the Hevajra Tantra and Kalachakra Tantra, which detail its rituals and practices. Inscriptions from monasteries like Nalanda and Vikramashila provide historical context for its practice, while mandalas and thangkas from sites like Alchi and Tabo depict the Vajrayana pantheon. Historiographical insights from David Snellgrove's 'Indo-Tibetan Buddhism' explore the origins and development of Vajrayana, emphasizing its synthesis with local tantric traditions. Alex Wayman's 'The Buddhist Tantras' offers a detailed analysis of Vajrayana's esoteric practices and the concept of upaya, while Miranda Shaw's 'Buddhist Goddesses of India' examines the significance of female deities in Vajrayana rituals. Together, these sources highlight Vajrayana's unique position within Buddhism, characterized by its esoteric practices, rich pantheon, and the crucial role of the guru-disciple relationship.

## **Historical Trajectory and Decline :**

Vajrayana Buddhism initially thrived in India, particularly in Bengal, Bihar, and the Himalayan foothills, where influential tantric masters like Padmasambhava, Tilopa, and Naropa were instrumental in spreading and institutionalizing its practices. Monastic universities such as Nalanda and Vikramashila became prominent centers for Vajrayana scholarship, drawing students and practitioners from across Asia. However, Vajrayana Buddhism faced significant decline due to several factors: Islamic invasions destroyed monastic universities and persecuted monks, Hinduism's rise led to the assimilation of Vajrayana practices, and internal decadence further weakened the monastic community. Despite its fall in India, Vajrayana found refuge in the Himalayan region, where it was preserved and flourished in Tibet, Bhutan, and Nepal. The transmission of Vajrayana to Tibet, largely through Padmasambhava and his contemporaries, led to the establishment of a robust Tibetan Buddhism that evolved directly from Vajrayana traditions, with elaborate rituals and a rich pantheon.

Primary evidence includes texts like the Nyingma Gyubum and Kagyu Ngak'phang which document the transmission and practice of Vajrayana in the Himalayan region. Inscriptions and architectural remains from Nalanda and Vikramashila reveal the scale and influence of Vajrayana institutions before their destruction. Historiographical insights from scholars like David Snellgrove in 'Indo-Tibetan Buddhism' highlight the dissemination of Vajrayana to Tibet and its development there, while 'The History of Tibetan Buddhism' by Dan Martin provides a detailed account of Vajrayana's transmission and establishment in the Himalayan region. Additionally, the work of Ronald Davidson in 'Indian Esoteric Buddhism' examines the decline in India and the transformation of Vajrayana into Tibetan Buddhism. These sources collectively illustrate Vajrayana's historical journey from flourishing in India to becoming a prominent tradition in the Himalayan region.

## **Confluence of Vajrayana Buddhism with Hinduism :**

The syncretic assimilation of Vajrayana Buddhism into Hinduism profoundly influenced the religious and cultural milieu of medieval India. Vajrayana, with its distinctive esoteric rituals, deities, and symbols, gradually merged with Hindu practices, creating a rich tapestry of blended traditions.

Notable instances include the adaptation of Buddhist deities such as Avalokiteshvara and Tara into Hindu worship, where they were reinterpreted and integrated into the Hindu pantheon, acquiring attributes and roles consistent with Hindu gods and goddesses. This integration is visible in the iconography of medieval Hindu temples and sculptures, which often feature tantric motifs derived from Vajrayana, as well as in the Hindu Puranas that reflect the incorporation of Buddhist elements. The mutual influence extended to esoteric practices as well, with both Vajrayana and Hindu tantric traditions employing intricate rituals, mantras, and meditative techniques. Hindu tantric schools, particularly the Shakta and Shaiva traditions, absorbed and adapted Vajrayana practices, resulting in a syncretic esoteric tradition. This cross-influence is evidenced by texts such as the Kularnava Tantra and Rudra Yamala Tantra, which illustrate shared ritualistic elements. Scholars like Andre Padoux and David Gordon White have examined the convergence of these practices. Philosophically, the Vajrayana concept of the Vajra mind—representing indestructibility and enlightenment—parallels the Hindu idea of Atman, the eternal self. This intersection of metaphysical ideas led to a synthesis that transcended traditional sectarian boundaries. Comparative philosophical studies and works by scholars such as Miranda Shaw highlight these philosophical overlaps, revealing how the integration of Vajrayana and Hindu thought created a nuanced and evolving intellectual tradition. Overall, the assimilation of Vajrayana Buddhism into Hinduism underscores the dynamic interplay between these traditions, reflecting a complex and enduring interaction that shaped the religious landscape of medieval India.

## **Contemporary Existence of Vajrayana Buddhism :**

The contemporary existence of Vajrayana Buddhism is manifested in several distinct forms, each reflecting the tradition's adaptation and persistence in the modern world. Tibetan Buddhism stands as the most prominent expression of Vajrayana today. Characterized by its intricate pantheon, rituals, and monastic institutions, Tibetan Buddhism has maintained the core tenets of Vajrayana while expanding its influence globally. Through the efforts of the Tibetan diaspora and the establishment of Vajrayana centres worldwide, Tibetan Buddhism has garnered significant attention in the Western world. Key primary sources, such as 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead' and biographical texts about Tibetan Lamas, provide insights into the practice of Vajrayana in contemporary Tibetan Buddhism. Scholars like Donald S. Lopez Jr., in 'Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West', and Martin A. Mills, in 'Identity, Ritual and State in Tibetan Buddhism: The Foundations of Authority in Gelukpa Monasticism', explore the global spread and evolution of Tibetan Vajrayana.

In Nepal, Newar Buddhism represents another vital manifestation of Vajrayana. The Newar community of the Kathmandu Valley has preserved a distinctive Vajrayana tradition, which integrates complex rituals and a vibrant monastic community while blending with local Hindu practices. This syncretic nature of Newar Buddhism is documented in Newar ritual manuals and ethnographic studies that illustrate the preservation of Vajrayana within a Hindu context. Georgios T. Halkias's 'The Tibetan-Speaking Newar Community: Buddhism and Hinduism in Nepal' and Tseten Dorje's 'Newar

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Buddhism: The Syncretic Tradition' provide detailed accounts of Vajrayana practices among the Newars.

Globally, the dissemination and popularization of Vajrayana Buddhism have marked a significant trend in recent decades. Vajrayana centres and temples have proliferated across Europe, North America, and other regions, reflecting a resurgence of interest in Vajrayana practices. This global spread often involves adapting Vajrayana teachings to align with contemporary spiritual movements. Primary literary sources, such as global Buddhist publications and Western practice manuals, highlight the growth and adaptation of Vajrayana Buddhism outside Asia. Historiographical works by David Reynolds, in 'The Globalization of Buddhism,' and Alan Sponberg, in 'Buddhism in the West: An Overview,' examine the international expansion and transformation of Vajrayana Buddhism in a global context.

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