

Class schedule: Tuesday+Thursday 3-5 pm ????

Internal Assessment: 10+10+10

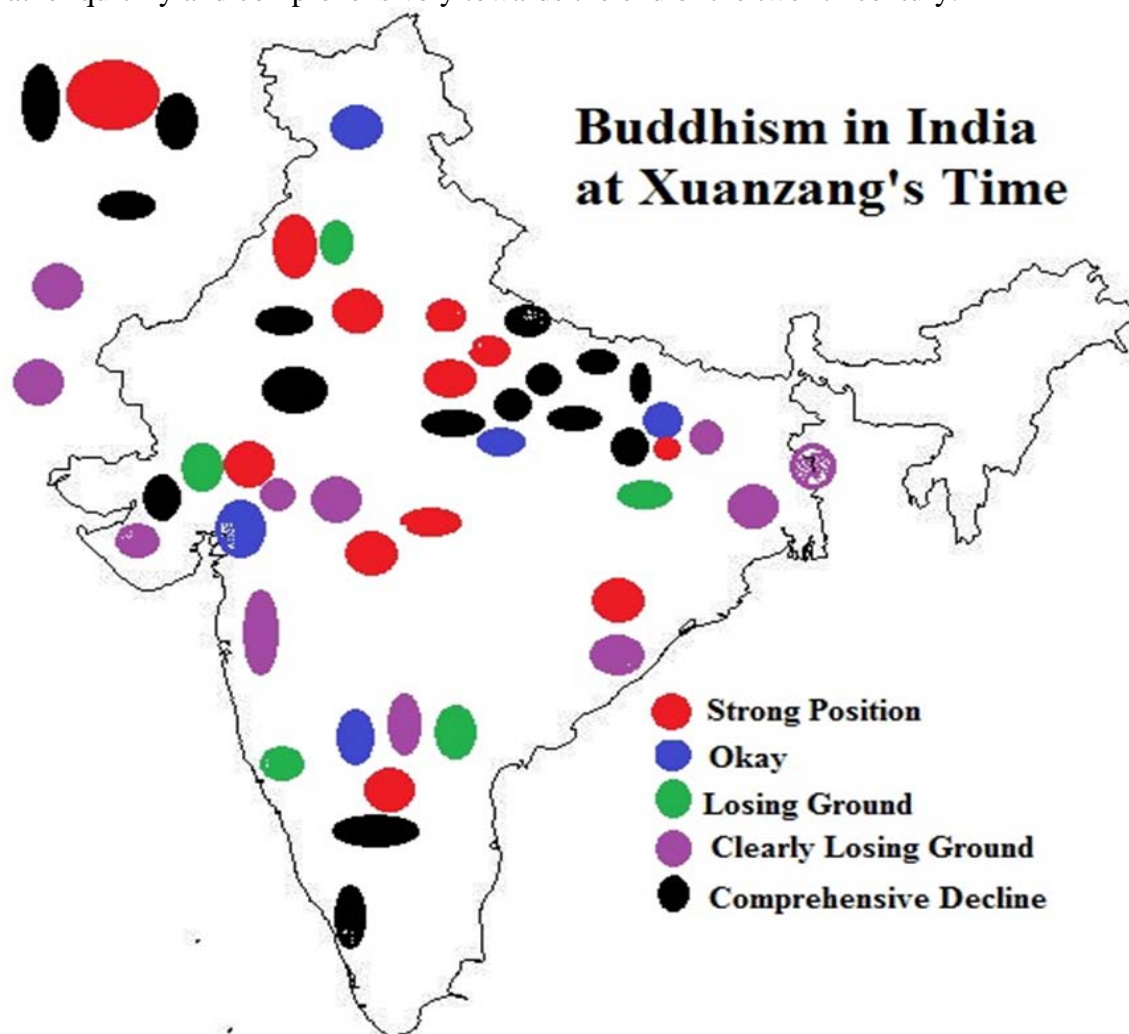
Final Evaluation: ??

Decline of Buddhism in India

Process of the decline of Buddhism was neither uniform in terms of time nor was it consistent in the manner of its decline.

No period can be delimited as marking the commencement of a *general* decline of Buddhism all over India. While one comes across Buddhism flourishing at one place, at the same time one can see it in decline at another place. For instance, when some well-endowed Buddhist monasteries existed under the Pālas in eastern India, Buddhism had already met its worst fate in Sind.

Wherever it survived, it seems to have fallen into a state of complete disarray and collapsed rather quickly and comprehensively towards the end of the twelfth century.



The first symptoms of crisis in monastic Buddhism appear to have made their appearance during the post-Kuṣāṇa period. Archaeological evidence from this period hints at the decay of some urban centres with Buddhist connections. One can also see some derelict monasteries in or near these decaying urban centres.

A region-wise look at the condition of Buddhism appears to indicate that the signs of decline had become quite pronounced when Faxian (399-414 CE) paid a visit to India.

By the time Xuanzang (629-645 CE) visited India, Buddhism had become somewhat of a spent force in most parts of India. In his memoirs he mentions at least **seventy-one** countries covered by the territory of pre-1947 British India. Buddhism had either comprehensively declined or was losing ground to Brāhmaṇical-Hinduism in **fifty-two** of these countries and was in a strong position only in **thirteen** countries. Interestingly, the countries where Buddhism had either declined comprehensively or was in a strong position, were **evenly spread out** in the whole of India.

Hye Ch'o (724-727 CE) and Oukong (751-790 CE) mention various places where Buddhism had become **completely extinct**. However, some vihāras at Odantapurī, Vikramaśilā, and Nālandā saw their **most glorious phase** during the medieval period when Buddhism had clearly declined in most of India.

Interesting things to note about Buddhism while considering decline:

Ritualistic part left to Brāhmaṇical-Hinduism: Monks and nuns were strictly banned by the Buddha from performing saṃskāras (life-cycle rites and rituals).

Close mercantile links: Buddhist missionaries invariably kept themselves confined to the trade routes and almost never strayed away from them.

Death-wish psyche.

Urban bias: over 90% the manpower in the saṃgha is urban and elitist.

Brāhmaṇical influence and control.

gāmadhamma, gāmadārako

No serious attempt made to have a mass-base

Issue of Identity: unlike Judeo-Christian tradition

Moral and Ethical Degeneracy in the Saṃgha

The saṃgha is said to have abounded with people who were perversely self-willed and unbearably quarrelsome.

The *Theragāthā* speaks of monks who were cheats, frauds, false witnesses, and unscrupulous.

The *Jātakas* acknowledge that many undesirable characters put on the robes of a monk because they found living easier inside the saṃgha than on the outside.

Monks in large numbers were pocketing individual or community wealth and engaging in several other indiscretions.

Faxian, Xuanzang, and Yijing: the Buddhist saṃgha owned movable and immovable property in substantial quantities including servants, cattle, land, granaries, and villages for the purpose of maintaining their residents.

Some of the prominent vihāras in early medieval period even began to issue their own seals and coins.

However, it is highly unlikely that moral laxity and unethical practices led to its decline. There is no well-documented evidence to prove that Buddhism was abandoned by its followers just because it had become a corrupt religion.

It would be difficult to explain as to how the ownership of land, servants, granaries, and precious metals by monasteries could have caused the decline of Buddhism even if the Buddha had advocated otherwise.

Besides, it would be manifestly wrong to say that corruption had assumed a universal character. Alongside the corrupt monks and nuns, we are reminded of the existence of others who lived exemplary lives. The saṃgha had never turned into an institution in disgrace.

Animosity of the Brāhmaṇas

Verardi: religious tolerance was alien to pre-British India and that Brāhmaṇas had destroyed not only monasteries but had also created special militias aimed at intimidating the Buddhist monks and the laity.

Attack on Aṅgulimāla by a frenzied mob,

Murders of Moggallāna and Āryadeva,

Anti-Buddhist crusades of Kumāriḷa Bhaṭṭa and Śaṃkarācārya,

An attempt by brāhmaṇas to burn the pavilion and kill Harṣavardhana when Xuanzang was to be honoured.

Description of the Buddha in some of the Purāṇas as a grand seducer

The view in the *Yajñavalkya* that a bhikkhu in yellow robes is an ill omen

There is no doubt that there were occasions when Buddhist monks were held in ridicule. But stray examples quoted in support of Brāhmaṇical enmity do not warrant that Brāhmaṇical-Hinduism had turned itself on Buddhism lock, stock, and barrel. The wrangles between the followers of the Buddha and the followers of various sects of Brāhmaṇical-Hinduism appear more like internal petty altercations within a religious system rather than frenzied communal riots.

The Buddha made respectful reference to brāhmaṇas who observed their vows. To the Brāhmaṇical-Hindu followers Buddhism was a mere sect within their religious system and, from their point of view, the bickering between the two must be seen as an internal affair.

The murder of Moggallāna was an individual act of crime.

The assault on Aṅgulimāla had no religious motive behind it.

Śaṃkarācārya may not have been exactly a friend of Buddhism; still no special animosity is betrayed against the Buddhists in the writings attributed to him.

Though some aspects of the philosophy of Buddhism, especially its atheism and their dress or shaven-heads, may have often been the subjects of bitter ridicule, it is not possible to find reliable evidence of any spirit of fanatical fury or hatred in the sources.

Indian history does not bear out the fact of a **continued and organized persecution** as the state policy of any ruling dynasty so as to exterminate an established religion.

Even from purely epigraphical evidence one can make out numerous instances of tolerance of Buddhism by Brāhmaṇical-Hindu rulers or of reverence to Brāhmaṇical-Hindu deities by Buddhists.

A glimpse into the Gupta period may be illuminating. Āmrakārdava, a Buddhist general of many victories in the service of Candragupta II, in his grant to the saṃgha at Śācī pronounces **the guilt of the slaughter of a cow or a brāhmaṇa on anyone who would disturb it**. This shows that the mental background of a Buddhist in the matter of taboos, inhibitions, and sins did not differ much from that of a Brāhmaṇical-Hindu.

Harṣavardhana, who is sometimes criticised for following a policy of discrimination in favour of Buddhism, pays homage to Śiva in his own book *Ratnāvalī*.

Had the Buddha been hated by the Brāhmaṇical-Hindu society, the same society would not have accepted him as an incarnation of Viṣṇu.

The *Garuḍa Purāṇa* invokes the Buddha as an incarnation of Viṣṇu for the protection of the world from sinners and not for deluding people to their ruin as in the *Viṣṇu*, *Agni*, and *Matsya Purāṇa*.

The *Varāha Purāṇa* also does not refer to the Buddha in any deprecating sense, but he is adored simply as the god of beauty.

It cannot be denied that some Purāṇas mention the Buddha as the grand seducer and the *Yajñavalkya* considers the sight of a monk with yellow robes as an execrable augury, but this kind of attitude was not always one-sided.

For instance, the Siddhas are expected to be served in heaven by Hari as their gatekeeper.

Each of the Brāhmaṇical-Hindu gods Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva is stigmatized as Māra or the seducer in Buddhist literature.

Persecution by Brāhmaṇical-Hindu Kings and Withdrawal of Royal Patronage

Xuanzang, Tāranātha, and Buddhist texts such as the *Vibhāṣā*, the *Divyāvadāna*, and the *Āryamañjuśrīmūlakalpa*: withdrawal of patronage and systematic policies of persecution by Brāhmaṇical kings such as Puṣyamitra Śuṅga (c.185 BCE: aśvamedha Yajna) and Śaśāṅka.

Puṣyamitra is reported to have burnt down numerous Buddhist monasteries and ordered the killing of a number of learned monks. His declaration to award anybody with one hundred *dīnāras* who would bring him the head of a śramaṇa is particularly cited by some scholars as an example of the degree of hatred with which he treated Buddhism. Sāgala (Sialkot): Indo-Greeks

Xuanzang on Śaśāṅka (seventh century CE): “Śaśāṅka-rājā having destroyed the religion of Buddha, the members of the priesthood were dispersed, and for many years driven away.”

The only thing that can be said with certainty is that he may have withdrawn royal patronage from the Buddhist institutions.

The testimony of the *Divyāvadāna* appears doubtful as it is chronologically far removed from the Śuṅgas and at that time *dīnāra* coins were not prevalent.

As a consequence of this shifting of patronage from Buddhism to Brāhmaṇical-Hinduism, the Buddhists seem to have become politically active against him and sided with his enemies. This might have incited him against them.

If Puṣyamitra Śuṅga were against the Buddhists, he would have dismissed his Buddhist ministers.

Well-known Buddhist monuments of Śācī and Bhārhut came into existence during the Śuṅga period.

K.P. Jayaswal: motivated by political considerations. The declaration of Puṣyamitra was made at Śākala, a place which was far removed from the centre of the Śuṅga regime and the capital city of his arch-enemies.

It may be reasonable to assume that Buddhism did not suffer any real setback during the Śuṅga reign even if one could see some neglect or selective persecution of Buddhists.

The Buddhist stories cannot really be given credence without any independent testimony such stories rest upon “the sole evidence of Buddhist writers, who cannot, by any means, be regarded as unbiased or unprejudiced, at least in any matter which either concerned Śāśāṅka or adversely affected Buddhism” (RC Majumdar).

Moreover, Xuanzang’s own observation that in Kāṇasuvāṇa, the capital city of Śāśāṅka, there were ten Buddhist monasteries with over 2,000 monks, contradicts the fact that he was a bigot and persecutor of Buddhism.

B.P. Sinha: Buddhists of some places, especially Magadha, who enjoyed considerable political clout, may have helped Harṣavardhana against him. Further, “the uprooting of the Bodhi Tree may have been an economic move against the Buddhist hierarchy of Magadha,” as the Bodhi Tree was by now attracting hugely lucrative presents from all over the Buddhist world. In any case, it cannot be denied that whatever might have been the motive and the measure of his persecution, its effect was not disastrous for Buddhism whether inside his kingdom or outside it. On the whole, tolerant pluralism of the populace and neutrality of the state towards different religions worked quite well during the ancient and medieval period of Indian history.

There being no concept of a ‘state religion’ in India, it would be difficult to assign any perceptible damage occurring to any religion as a consequence of the withdrawal of patronage by the rulers. Moreover, it does not appear that in any period of the history of ancient India, the saṃgha thrived anywhere merely on royal patronage or declined just because such patronage was withdrawn. Most of the Buddhist monasteries had not only humble origins but were also built in stages. They were mostly built by wealthy lay supporters.

Sectarianism and the Rise of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna

It is sometimes suggested that discipline began to relax with the rise of divergent schools. Vajrayāna is held responsible for qualitative decay.

However, internal bickering as well as sectarian divisions and rivalries do not appear to have caused any damage to Buddhism.

On the contrary, Buddhism being non-centralized, the emergence of numerous sects should actually be seen as an indication of both intellectual and spiritual vigour. Buddhist sectarianism was largely confined to *interpretation* of texts. All schools more or less accepted the validity of the basic Tipiṭaka, shared an almost identical code of conduct, and moved easily among each other’s communities.

It may also be pointed out here that the divisiveness associated with sectarianism was much more severe among the Jainas but did not lead to their decline.

Though it cannot be denied that Tantra was sometimes followed in a degenerate form in Buddhism, adoption of Tantric practices does not appear to have caused any damage for the simple fact that Tantra in its Brāhmaṇical-Hindu form has enjoyed great popularity and apparently has not contributed to the demise of Brāhmaṇical-Hinduism in any observable way.

Though the development of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna did not weaken Buddhism as such, damage appears to have been done at another level. Such a development appears to have **reduced the distance** that existed between Buddhism and Brāhmaṇical-Hinduism.

Devotionalistic elements in Buddhism completely transformed the original atheistic Buddhism into a powerful theological religion. The historical Buddha became fully metamorphosed into a saviour God, the eternal and immutable Lord of beings, unborn creator of the world, and the one who bestows good luck and fortune on all beings.

Attacks by Arabs and Turks

There is sufficient literary and archaeological evidence to show that some important Buddhist vihāras were attacked and destroyed by the *Turuṣkas* (Arab and Turkish invaders). The monasteries at Sāranātha, Somapura, Odantapurī, Vikramaśilā, and Nālandā suffered massive onslaughts at the hands of these marauders.

Dharmasvāmin: (witnessed some of the attacks) the libraries had perished, could not get a scrap of manuscript to copy.

Tabakat-i-Nāsiri: the 'brāhmaṇas with shaven heads' were slaughtered to a man, so that none survived to explain the contents of a large number of books that were found at the Odantapurī Mahāvihāra.

Fearing the terror, many of the surviving monks dispersed and fled with a few bundles of holy texts concealed under their robes and found security in the more hospitable countries such as Nepal, Tibet, and China. Of the remaining monks, some converted to Islam while others tried to manage with whatever remained. In many cases, monastic lands were confiscated and granted to Turkish occupants.

Though the attacks were neither organized nor systematic were accompanied, as a matter of routine, by some amount of slaughter and forced conversions.

In some cases, there is also evidence to show that these central Asian tribesmen being ignorant of edifices in their desert homelands, mistook the Buddhist vihāras for military strongholds.

Another reason for attacks by the plundering hordes was the enormous wealth accumulated by these monasteries.

R.M. Eaton: temples had been the natural sites for the contestation of kingly authority and Turkish invaders, while attempting to plant their own rule in early medieval India, they were basically following and continuing the established patterns already followed by both Muslim and non-Muslim rulers in India. More importantly, according to him, **acts of temple desecration typically occurred on the cutting edge of a moving military frontier**.

How do we explain decline in the south India?

How about the situation prior to 711?

By the time the Turkish invaders descended upon the plains of India, Buddhism had gone past its glory.

Though it cannot be denied that the Arab and Turkish attacks were quite ruthless in some ways, those attacks cannot be held as *raison le plus décisif* of the decline of Buddhism in India.

Thus, the impact of the Arab and Turkish onslaught on Buddhist institutions may have worked at the most only as a *coup-de-grâce* in some parts of India.

Role of Śūfism

Islam was not a champion of egalitarianism, or for that matter, of the cause of so-called suppressed people of India. Nor is it correct to say Buddhists were attracted towards Islam because they saw Islamic egalitarianism as being compatible with the Buddha's views on caste system and other forms of inequality.

Buddhism had become completely marginalized and insignificant in most parts of India when the Śūfis began their activities.

Trimingham: Islam was "a holy-man Islam" in India where the Śūfis acquired an aura of holiness. It was this aura of holiness which attracted Indians to the Śūfis, rather than formal Islam.

The *dargahs* and *khānaqāhs* played a seminal role in proselytization as their appeal went far beyond the divisive walls of caste and creed.

There is sufficient evidence to show that **Buddhists in Bengal regarded Muslims as their well-wishers** vis-à-vis Brāhmaṇical-Hindus .

I.H. Qureshi: "Such sentiments themselves constitute almost a halfway house towards the acceptance of Islam."

Revival of Brāhmaṇical-Hinduism and Rise of Bhakti Movement

From the time of king Aśoka onwards institutional Buddhism came to acquire the character of a pan-Indian and politically significant religion. Consequently, the Buddha and Buddhism came to enjoy a socio-political status that the Brāhmaṇical community simply could not ignore and its response was the formulation of a well-thought out two-pronged agenda:

1. to be purposely friendly and assimilative towards those ideas of Buddhist thought which had become socio-religiously commonsensical, and
2. to slowly and steadily, but systematically, subvert institutional Buddhism.

This can be seen in the shifting of the theories and political orientation of kingship from Buddhist to Vaiṣṇava and Śaiva rationales from the eighth century CE onwards.

R.B. Inden: before the eighth century, the Buddha was accorded the position of a universal deity and the ceremonies by which a king attained status were elaborate donative ceremonies entailing gifts to Buddhist monks and the setting up of a symbolic Buddha in a stūpa. This was so even for imperial dynasties that had strong associations with the Brāhmaṇical-Hindu gods Viṣṇu and Śiva. However, this pattern changed in the eighth century when one of the Brāhmaṇical-Hindu gods usurped the place of the Buddha as the supreme, imperial deity. The change was marked by the building of the first monumental Brāhmaṇical-Hindu temples and the elevation of either Viṣṇu or Śiva (or Sūrya, the Sun) to the status of supreme deity (*paramēśvara*, *maheśvara*), equivalent to the Cosmic Man by relegating the Buddha to a secondary position.

The avatāra device of Viṣṇu was an ingenious and convenient means used to assimilate and then to subordinate the figure of the Buddha and put him in his Brāhmaṇical place thereby undermining his historicity by making him an appendage of the Vaiṣṇava mythic hierarchy. Interestingly, when one looks into how and to what extent was the Buddha ritually included within the Brāhmaṇical-Hindu tradition, there is not much to find. **Cultic veneration of the Buddha within Brāhmaṇical-Hinduism is virtually missing.**

From about the sixth century onwards, as compared to Jains, the Buddhists failed "to respond meaningfully to the threat posed by the waves of *bhakti* that swept across India" (P.S. Jaini). The *Bhakti* cult achieved tremendous popularity through its association with Rāma and

Kṛṣṇa, weaning away some of the lay supporters and nearly all the patrons of the flatfooted Buddhists. In fact, with the depiction of the Buddha in the *Mahābhārata*, certain Purāṇas, and Jayadeva's *Gītāgovinda* as just another avatāra of Viṣṇu, Buddhism had already been brought within the reach of overarching Brāhmaṇical-Hinduism. The Buddhists were not perhaps conscious of the grave danger that this development posed because they did not make any attempt to either assimilate the popular Brāhmaṇical-Hindu deities into Buddhist mythology or to refute any notion of the Buddha as an avatāra.

However, the Jainas responded to these very pressures in a remarkably different manner and successfully repulsed the Brāhmaṇical-Hindu advances. They rebuffed the Brāhmaṇical insinuations that Rṣabha, their first Tīrthaṅkara, was an incarnation of Viṣṇu by questioning the very "divine" status of Viṣṇu himself, by taking resort to censuring the unethical deeds of the avatāras in particular. To top it all, they created full-length alternate versions of both the epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, depicting Rāma and Kṛṣṇa in them as worldly Jaina heroes subject to the retribution of Jaina ethical laws. Thus, the Rāma of the Jainas does not slaughter Rāvaṇa. This immoral job is assigned to his brother Lakṣmaṇa and Rāma is reborn in heaven for strictly adhering to the principle of *ahiṃsā*. However, the Jainas send Kṛṣṇa to hell as his misdeeds of violence and treachery were unforgivable as per Jaina ethics. In other words, the Jainas managed to outdo the Bhakti Movement by adopting its main cult-figures in a uniquely Jaina context as their own.

The manner in which the temple-centered Bhakti brought about the metamorphosis of Brāhmaṇical-Hinduism in the north was repeated even more vigorously and systematically in the South. The Bhakti inspired brāhmaṇa-peasant alliance appears to have succeeded in forming the basis of socio-political power to the complete disadvantage of Buddhism. Brāhmaṇical-Hinduism with its institutional base in the temple-centred agrarian settlements grew into a dynamic and progressive force whereas Buddhism still continued to be urban and elitist. The ideology of Bhakti acted as a unifying force by bringing together kings, brāhmaṇa priests, and the common masses to the disadvantage of the non-Vedic religions. Whereas Bhakti Movement had an agrarian-feudal bias, Buddhism had its supporters primarily among the mercantile community based in urban centres. Thus, it is not improbable that the rivalry between the non-Vedic creeds and the Bhakti Movement reflects, at least implicitly, the conflict for socio-political dominance between the landowning classes and the trading classes.

Samgha-Laitry Relationship, Decline of Urbanization, and Evolving Material Milieu

Buddhism in India appears to have never made an attempt to create a community of lay supporters who could exclusively be called followers of the Buddha and none other. They were no more than mere unattached well-wishers (or even fickle-minded).

As Buddhism originated and prospered in an urban milieu, with the onset of crisis in urbanization during the post-Kuṣāṇa period, the situation developed completely to the disadvantage of Buddhism. Loss of support due to the dispersal of merchants, traders, bankers, financiers, and artisans led to the dwindling in the numbers of Buddhist monasteries as well as those who aspired to adopt renunciation in the Buddhist samgha. In such a newly emerged situation, the samgha became concentrated in fewer and fewer monasteries. As time went by and as more and more urban settlements decayed, the number of Buddhist monasteries became reduced significantly.

Though some support may still have accrued here and there from the few surviving or newly emerged urban settlements to a small number of Buddhist monasteries, the number of traditional supporters of Buddhism became grievously small.

In order to survive in a situation of dwindling traditional support and the rising tide of rejuvenated Brāhmaṇical-Hinduism, the few surviving Buddhist monasteries began to tune

themselves to the emerging feudal situation by adopting new roles for themselves through the practice of self-supporting economies based on land grants. Further, the saṃgha liberalized learning and opened the doors of its monasteries to secular education so as to make it more effective in debates and disputations. Thus, from the fifth century onwards a number of monasteries began to grow out of their conventional character into fully-grown universities (*mahāvihāras*) of laicized academic learning and scholarship.

A major share of the land grants to these *mahāvihāras* came from their Brāhmaṇical-Hindu patrons who appear to have approached Buddhist deities as if they were Brāhmaṇical-Hindu. One consequence of such a development was that it greatly contributed towards making breaches in the wall that existed between Brāhmaṇical-Hinduism and Buddhism. However, the Brāhmaṇical-Hindu temples had a clear advantage over *mahāvihāras* in the management of landed estates due to their better knowledge of agriculture (especially rice cultivation) and seasons, and their ingenuity in constructing origin myths and enormous capacity for legitimation, and thus wider socio-political functions. This advantage was manifested in the shift of royal patronage from Buddhism to Brāhmaṇical-Hindu sects.

A Module/Blue-print for Decline

The following factors, most of which were inherent weaknesses of Indian Buddhism, appear to have collectively caused its decline:

1. Urban character, lack of mass-base, and anti-Buddhist brāhmaṇa-peasant alliance.
2. Inalienable affiliation with and dependence upon mercantile communities for material support.
3. Lack of interest in cultivating loyalty among the fickle-minded lay supporters.
4. Death-wish mentality.
5. Overwhelming presence of brāhmaṇical elements in the saṃgha and unwittingly playing second fiddle to Brāhmaṇical-Hinduism.