

THE GROWTH AND DECLINE OF BUDDHISM IN TAMIL NADU: THROUGH THE AGES**K. Sasikumar**

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Abstract: Tamil Nadu, located in southern India, has a rich religious history. Buddhism, though not as predominant as Hinduism, played a significant role in shaping the region's spiritual and cultural development. This article traces the growth and decline of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu from its introduction around the 3rd century BCE to its eventual decline by the 12th century CE. The early spread of Buddhism is attributed to the missionary activities of Emperor Ashoka and the patronage from various rulers and local chieftains, notably the Pallava and Chola dynasties. Archaeological evidence and literary contributions highlight the flourishing of Buddhism, particularly in centers like Kanchipuram and Nagapattinam. However, the rise of the Bhakti movement, the resurgence of Hinduism, and the shifting political environment led to the gradual decline of Buddhism in the region. Despite its decline, Buddhism's influence persisted through cultural and intellectual exchanges. The article also examines the modern revival efforts, particularly those initiated by Pandit Ayothi Doss and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, which sought to reconnect with Tamil Nadu's Buddhist heritage. This historical survey into the religious, cultural, and political forces that have shaped the evolution of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu.

Keywords: Buddhism, Tamil Nadu, Ashoka, Pallava, Chola, Bhakti movement, revival.

INTRODUCTION

Tamil Nadu, situated in the southern part of India, boasts a rich cultural tapestry woven over millennia, with Hinduism traditionally dominating its religious landscape. However, the region's history also bears the imprint of Buddhism, which, though not as predominant as Hinduism, exerted significant influence during various periods. The growth and decline of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu provide a fascinating glimpse into the region's socio-political and religious evolution, revealing intricate patterns of interaction between faiths and their adherents.

Buddhism first arrived in Tamil Nadu around the 3rd century BCE, during the reign of Emperor Ashoka of the Maurya Dynasty. Ashoka's missionary efforts to propagate Buddhism across the Indian subcontinent reached Tamil Nadu, leaving an indelible mark on its spiritual landscape. The early growth of Buddhism in the region saw the establishment of monastic centers, stupas, and viharas, supported by archaeological evidence from sites like Kanchipuram, Nagapattinam, and Puhar.¹ These discoveries underscore Buddhism's firm establishment and significant following in Tamil Nadu during antiquity. The archaeological excavations in Tamil Nadu provide compelling evidence of Buddhism's presence

and influence. Sites such as Kanchipuram, known historically as a major Buddhist center, reveal remnants of stupas and monastic complexes. Inscriptions and sculptures found at these sites not only attest to the material culture of Buddhism but also highlight the patronage it received from local rulers and chieftains. This archaeological wealth enhances our understanding of how Buddhism flourished alongside other religious traditions in Tamil Nadu.²

Throughout its history in Tamil Nadu, Buddhism received patronage from various rulers, most notably during the reigns of the Pallava and Chola dynasties. These dynasties not only supported the construction of Buddhist monuments but also encouraged scholarly pursuits that enriched Tamil literature with Buddhist teachings.³ The poet-saint Manimekalai, for instance, contributed significantly to Tamil literature with her Buddhist-themed work, demonstrating the cultural and literary impact of Buddhism during its heyday. Despite periods of royal patronage and cultural integration, Buddhism in Tamil Nadu faced challenges from competing religious movements, notably Jainism and the ascendant Bhakti movement within Hinduism. The Bhakti saints, advocating intense devotion to Hindu deities, marginalized Buddhism by appealing to the emotional and spiritual needs of the masses. This shift in religious preference, coupled with philosophical critiques from Hindu scholars, posed formidable challenges to Buddhism's sustained influence in the region.⁴

The decline of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu did not mark its complete disappearance. Revival efforts in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, inspired by figures like Pandit Ayothi Doss and supported by international Buddhist movements, sought to rekindle interest in Tamil Buddhism.⁵ These efforts, though modest in scale compared to Buddhism's historical prominence, highlighted the enduring appeal of Buddhist principles and the cultural continuity they offered to Tamil society.

The research aims to investigate the historical trajectory of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu, focusing on its initial establishment under Ashoka, its flourishing during the Pallava and Chola periods, and the factors contributing to its decline. The examination of archaeological evidence, historical texts, and cultural interactions, the study seeks to elucidate Buddhism's impact on Tamil Nadu's religious landscape and its enduring legacy.

The study employs historical approach, integrating historical analysis of archaeological findings and textual sources with thematic exploration of socio-political factors. Archaeological sites in Tamil Nadu, such as Kanchipuram and Nagapattinam, will be examined for artifacts and inscriptions related to Buddhism. Historical texts and scholarly literature on Tamil Nadu's religious history will provide contextual insights into the socio-cultural dynamics influencing Buddhism's growth and decline in the region.

Early Growth of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu

Buddhism is believed to have been introduced to Tamil Nadu around the 3rd century BCE, during the reign of Emperor Ashoka of the Maurya Dynasty. Ashoka's propagation of Buddhism through missionary activities played a crucial role in its spread across the Indian subcontinent, including Tamil Nadu. The early growth of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu is marked by the establishment of monastic centers, stupas, and viharas.⁶

Archaeological discoveries provide substantial evidence of the early presence of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu. Notable sites include Kanchipuram, Nagapattinam, and Puhar, where inscriptions, sculptures, and remnants of Buddhist architecture have been found. These findings suggest that Buddhism was well-established and had a significant following.⁷

Buddhism in Tamil Nadu received patronage from various rulers and local chieftains. The Pallava and Chola dynasties, in particular, played a crucial role in promoting Buddhism. The literary contributions of Buddhist scholars, such as the poet-saint Manimekalai, further enriched Tamil literature and spread Buddhist

teachings.⁸ Patronage, defined as the support, encouragement, privilege, or financial aid that an organization or individual bestows upon another, is a multi-dimensional, codified network of exchanges involving the production, performance, transmission, reinterpretation, and preservation of art and literature. The giving and receiving of donations may occur between individuals, groups, or institutions, often involving specialized communities of craftsmen, royal officials, or members of royal families. According to Suchandra Ghosh, patronage is an asymmetrical relationship between a patron and a client, where the patron possesses honor and superiority that enables them to provide patronage. This concept extends beyond royalty to include the merchant class, common people, and householders who also contributed to the development of Buddhism.⁹

Literary and archaeological sources provide valuable insights into royal patronage in the establishment and growth of religious institutions. Terms such as Dana, Dakshina, and Gift frequently appear in inscriptions, illustrating the importance of patronage in ancient times. For instance, King Asoka's inscriptions emphasize the significance of religious patronage for every individual. Romila Thaper's monographs on Dana demonstrate that patronage as a form of exchange was a crucial socio-economic function in ancient times. L.C. Cunnison views the institution of patronage or Dana as an exchange and redistribution of wealth and services, while J. Gonda discusses the various terms used in the context of gift-giving in the Rig-Veda, assessing the role of gift-making in sustaining social relationships.¹⁰

The numerous Buddhist structures such as stupas, viharas, and chaityas built during the study period reflect the patronage of rulers who sought to legitimize their positions and earn religious merit (punniyam) through gift-giving. The early Buddhist period in India is replete with instances of single railing pillars, cross-bars, and paving slabs for stupas, individual cells in monasteries, and sculptures in Buddhist shrines being donated for religious merit. Donations at Buddhist sites on the east coast of India by monks, nuns, men, and women indicate the faith placed in the sangha. The Brahmi script, popularized by Emperor Asoka through his dhamma vijaya, is found in almost all places in India, attesting to the widespread influence of Buddhism.¹¹

Buddhism entered Tamil Nadu around 300 B.C.E. through missionaries sent by Asoka from the north and by the Ceylonese king Tissa from the south. The Ceylon chronicle Mahavamsa records that the third Buddhist council, held at Pataliputra with Asoka's patronage, resulted in many monks being sent to various places. Among them, Asoka sent his son Mahendra, who preached the teachings of Gautama Buddha to King Devanampiya Tissa. The king and the people were profoundly impressed and accepted Buddhism. However, Buddhism never attained the prominence in Tamil regions that Jainism did.¹² Jainism exerted considerable influence, gaining popularity among merchant communities, farmers, and peasant families. This preference for Jainism over Buddhism among the ruling classes led to conflicts at the royal courts of Kanchipuram and Madurai.

Despite the conflicts, Buddhism saw periods of significant patronage and popularity. Apart from royal patrons, householders, particularly women, played an important role in supporting Buddhism. Women in Pali literature are depicted as giving daily alms of cooked food to bhikkhus and making rich donations of jewelry and other articles to the Buddhist sangha. The early periods of trade in the Ganga valley, which developed into bigger orbits in pre-Mauryan times and reached its zenith under the Mauryas, facilitated the spread of Buddhism. Inscriptions found at places like Maski and Yerragudi point to regulated trade routes along the east and west coasts during the Mauryan period.¹³

Tamil Nadu presents a contrasting account of Buddhism, which emerged as a less significant phenomenon compared to northern religious sects like Brahmanism, Jainism, and Ajivikism.¹⁴ The Kalabhra interregnum, from the 4th to 6th centuries C.E., marked a period of ascendancy for Buddhism in Tamil Nadu. Notable Buddhist scholars and saints like Nagaguttanar, Buddhadatta, Dinnaga, Dhammapala, and Bodhidharma flourished during this time. The association of Buddhaghosha, a great Pali scholar, further confirms the prominence of Buddhism during this period.¹⁵

The Sangam age in early Tamilagam ended around the 4th century C.E. with the rise of the Kalabhras, who ruled Tamil country until the 6th century C.E. The Pallavas occupied the Tondaimandalam region from the mid-6th century onwards, and religious and cultural elements gradually penetrated Tamil regions. While there is no direct evidence of Mauryan dominance over Tamil land, it is suggested that areas like Tondainadu were under Asokan rule, with Kanchipuram becoming a major Buddhist center with stupas and viharas. Chinese traveler Hiuen-Tsang, who visited Kanchipuram in the 7th century C.E., referred to stupas attributed to Asoka in Kanchipuram, the Chola country, and Malakuta.¹⁶

The Kalabhras, though considered "evil rulers" in some accounts, significantly boosted Tamil literature and were supporters of Buddhism and Jainism. The only Kalabhra king known by name, Accuta Vikranta, is praised in Tamil literature for his Buddhist affiliations. The Kalabhra reign, lasting nearly 300 years, saw Buddhism thrive in and around Kanchi (ancient Tondaimandalam). The Buddhist idea of dana (gift) is emphasized in post-Sangam literature like Manimekalai, which depicts the propagation of Buddhism as an ideological force uniting the laity and monastic orders.¹⁷

Silappatikaram and Manimekalai, the two great Tamil epics, reflect the patronage of Buddhism and Jainism. The authors of these epics, Ilango Adikal and Sattanar, present a non-sectarian attitude, emphasizing the integration of religious ideologies. The crises mentioned in these epics, such as the destruction of Pukar due to a curse or evacuation, point to significant events affecting Buddhism and trade.¹⁸

Despite the early prominence, Buddhism in Tamil Nadu faced challenges from the ascendant Bhakti movement, which began in the 7th century C.E. The Bhakti saints' fervent devotion to Hindu deities marginalized Buddhism, leading to its decline. The Pallava and Chola dynasties, while initially supporting Buddhism, gradually shifted their patronage to Hinduism.¹⁹ In Kanchipuram, all four major Indian religious schools—Buddhism, Jainism, Saivism, and Vaishnavism—experienced periods of ascendancy and royal patronage. Jainism, Saivism, and Vaishnavism continue to be practiced, while Buddhism saw a decline by the 7th century C.E. The Chola ruler Ilankilli, brother of Killivalavan, built a stupa, vihara, and chaitya and provided amenities to Manimekalai, a Buddhist nun, at Pukar. Chinese traveler Fa-hien's accounts of Buddhism in Krishna, Guntur, and Nellore districts, though not specifically mentioning Kanchipuram, suggest its prevalence.²⁰

Nagapattinam, another significant Buddhist center, saw the construction of a Buddhist vihara in 720 C.E. during Narasimhavarman II's reign for Chinese mariners. This monastery, known as the Chinese monastery, was visited by Marco Polo in 1292 C.E. and continued to be a prominent Buddhist center until the 17th century. The patronage of Buddhism by various royal houses, despite its eventual decline, played a crucial role in its growth and sustenance in Tamil Nadu. Buddhism survived in the hinterland and coastal regions of Tamil Nadu beyond the 3rd century C.E., exerting some influence

until the 12th century C.E. However, the lack of extensive patronage from the Pallava, Chola, or Pandiya royal families and the rise of Hindu Bhakti movements led to the gradual decline of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu.²¹ The historical evidence suggests that Buddhism, though once thriving, could not maintain its prominence in the face of competing religious ideologies and changing socio-political dynamics.

Peak of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu

During its peak, Buddhism in Tamil Nadu saw the establishment of numerous monastic centers and universities. The town of Kanchipuram emerged as a major center of Buddhist learning, attracting scholars from various parts of India and beyond. These centers became hubs of intellectual and spiritual activity.²² Buddhism's influence is evident in the region's art and architecture. Rock-cut caves, stupas, and sculptures from this period reflect Buddhist themes and iconography. The Buddhist art of Tamil Nadu is characterized by its unique blend of indigenous styles and Buddhist motifs. Several prominent Buddhist figures emerged from Tamil Nadu, contributing to the spread and development of Buddhism. Bodhidharma, a legendary Buddhist monk from Kanchipuram, is credited with spreading Chan (Zen) Buddhism to China. His legacy continues to be revered in both Tamil Nadu and East Asia.²³

Buddhism in Tamil Nadu has a rich and complex history, marked by its emergence during the Sangam age, its flourishing golden period from AD 400 to 700, and its subsequent decline with the rise of the Bhakti and Vedanta movements in the 6th century. The Bhakti Movement, emphasizing personal devotion to Hindu gods, and Adi Sankara's Vedanta Movement, which consolidated Hindu philosophical thought, played pivotal roles in the diminishing influence of Buddhism and Jainism in Tamil Nadu. The suppression of Buddhist literature, with the notable exception of the epic "Manimekalai," led to the integration of Buddhist principles into Hinduism, effectively erasing distinct Buddhist practices from the region.²⁴

Prominent scholars such as Mylai S. Venkatasami, Dr. Vasudeva Rao, Dr. S. N. Kandasamy, and Dr. Shu Hikosaka have extensively researched the history and literature of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu. Dr. Shu Hikosaka, in particular, has emphasized the need to study the lasting impact of Buddhism on Tamil culture and literature following its decline. Despite the significant historical presence of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu, there has been a lack of comprehensive studies tracing the history and efforts towards the revival of Tamil Buddhism in the modern era.²⁵

The revival of Buddhism in India can be traced back approximately a hundred years, beginning with Mahaviraswami, a veteran of the Indian Mutiny, who received higher ordination in Burma and settled in Kusunagara. The organized movement for Buddhist revival began in 1891 with the founding of the Maha Bodhi Society by Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933). Dharmapala's efforts brought attention to the neglected ancient Buddhist sites in India and he gained international recognition through his maiden speech at the Parliament of Religion in Chicago in 1893.²⁶

A landmark event in the modern revival of Buddhism in India was Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism at Nagpur on October 14, 1956, along with half a million of his followers. This event marked a significant turning point, making Buddhism once again a prominent and living hope for millions in India. In Tamil Nadu, Pandit Ayothi Doss's Buddhist Revival Movement predates Dr. Ambedkar's Neo-Buddhist Movement in Maharashtra. Ayothi Doss's contributions to the revival of Tamil Buddhism, including the publication of Tamil books and periodicals, warrant detailed research and investigation.²⁷

The revival of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu began towards the end of the nineteenth century, particularly with the efforts of Pandit K. Ayothi Doss and the support of prominent figures like Col. Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907) and Madame H. P. Blavatsky of the Theosophical Society. Col. Olcott and Blavatsky, influenced by their study of Buddhism in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), played crucial roles in the early revival efforts. Col. Olcott's compilation of Buddhist teachings into a Buddhist catechism and his organization of Buddhist schools in Ceylon were instrumental in rekindling the Buddhist spirit.²⁸

Pandit K. Ayothi Doss, inspired by Col. Olcott and Madame Blavatsky, played a central role in reviving Buddhism in Tamil Nadu. Doss founded the South India Sakya Buddhist Association in 1898, which later became the South India Buddhist Association. He argued that Buddhism was the ancestral religion of the Tamils, particularly the depressed classes, and supported his thesis with historical documentation and interpretations of Tamil literature. He asserted that the famous Tamil classic "Thirukkural" was a Buddhist work authored by an untouchable.²⁹

Pandit Ayothi Doss's contributions to Tamil Buddhism included the establishment of the "Gowthama Printing Press" and the publication of books and pamphlets on Buddhism. His weekly publication "Ootru Paise Tamizhan," later renamed "Tamizhan," carried essays in puristic Tamil and informed readers about Buddhist teachings, social issues, and the political landscape. His magnum opus, "Buddharathu Adhivedam," explained Buddhism to new converts and showcased his scholarship in Tamil and Pali works.³⁰

The revival movement faced opposition from various quarters, including theists who disrupted Buddhist meetings and debates. However, over time, influential figures like Thiru. V. Kalyanasundaranar (Thiru. Vi. Ka.) were swayed by the scientific expositions of Buddhists and the writings of Col. Olcott, Jinarajadasa, and Bhikku Dharmapala. Thiru. Vi. Ka. eventually became an advocate for Buddhism and its place in Tamil literature.³¹

Prof. P. Lakshmi Narasu, an associate of Pandit Ayothi Doss, was another significant figure in the Tamil Buddhist revival. Prof. Narasu, a leading Buddhist scholar, conducted classes on Buddhist tenets for new converts, organized Buddhist conferences, and spread Buddhism among the untouchables. His book "Essence of Buddhism," published in 1907 with a preface by Anagarika Dharmapala, is regarded as one of the best works on Buddhism.

The Buddhist revival movement in Tamil Nadu extended beyond Madras, reaching places like Kolar Gold Fields (K.G.F.), Bangalore, and North Arcot District. In K.G.F., the South India Sakya Buddhist Association, founded by M. Y. Murugesar, became a center of Buddhist scholarship and activities. The association organized lectures, established libraries, and celebrated Buddhist festivals. It also played a crucial role in promoting social reform, including reformed marriage procedures and inter-caste marriages.³²

The Bangalore Buddhist Association, established by Pandit Ayothi Doss in 1907, constructed a Buddha Vihar and ran a Buddhist school. The Hubli Buddhist Association, founded in 1928, and various branches in North Arcot District further contributed to the spread of Buddhism in the region. Abroad, Tamil Buddhist associations were established in places like Sri Lanka, Rangoon (Myanmar), and South Africa, demonstrating the global reach of the Tamil Buddhist revival movement.³³

The printing and publishing of Buddhist literature were essential components of the revival movement. Works by Pandit Ayothi Doss, such as "Buddharathu Adhivedam" and "Buddhist Doctrines-

Questions and Answers," were republished by the Siddhartha Book Depot in K.G.F. Other prominent figures, like A. P. Periaswamy Pulavar and Pandithamani G. Appaduraiar, also contributed to the literary efforts, writing books and articles that expounded Buddhist teachings and interpreted Tamil classics from a Buddhist perspective.³⁴

The decline of the early 20th-century revival movement can be attributed to several factors, including internal conflicts, involvement in political movements, lack of funds, and insufficient support from the Indian Maha Bodhi Society. Despite these challenges, the efforts of dedicated individuals like I. Ulaganathan, who continues to coordinate Buddhist activities in Kolar Gold Fields, ensure that the legacy of Tamil Buddhism endures.³⁵

This historical survey of Tamil Buddhism, from its origins to its revival in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, highlights the significant contributions of individuals and organizations in preserving and promoting Buddhist teachings. The efforts of Pandit K. Ayothi Doss, Prof. P. Lakshmi Narasu, and others laid the foundation for the Neo-Buddhist movement in Tamil Nadu, influencing contemporary Buddhist practices and social reform initiatives. The revival of Tamil Buddhism not only enriched the cultural and religious landscape of Tamil Nadu but also contributed to the broader narrative of Buddhist resurgence in India.

Decline of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu

The decline of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu can be attributed to multiple factors, including the resurgence of Hinduism, the rise of Bhakti movements, and political changes. The patronage that once supported Buddhism began to shift towards Hinduism, leading to a gradual decline in Buddhist institutions. The revival of Hinduism under the influence of Adi Shankaracharya, who propagated Advaita Vedanta, significantly impacted Buddhism.³⁶ The growth of Saivism and Vaishnavism, coupled with the Bhakti movements led by saints like Appar and Sambandar, further marginalized Buddhism in Tamil Nadu. Over time, many Buddhist practices and beliefs were assimilated into Hindu traditions. Buddhist deities and symbols were often integrated into Hindu temples and rituals, leading to a blending of religious identities. This assimilation contributed to the diminishing distinctiveness of Buddhism in the region.³⁷

The narrative of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu reflects the religious, political, and cultural dynamics that shaped the subcontinent's history. Buddhism, once a thriving and influential religion in the region, faced a gradual decline over the centuries. This decline can be attributed to a confluence of factors, including the lack of sustained royal patronage, the resurgence of Hinduism, the philosophical challenges posed by other religious doctrines, and the socio-political transformations within Tamil society.³⁸

Lack of Sustained Royal Patronage: One of the primary reasons for the decline of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu was its inability to secure continuous royal patronage. In the Indian subcontinent, royal support played a crucial role in the flourishing of religions. Kings and chieftains who embraced and promoted a particular faith provided it with the necessary resources and legitimacy to thrive. Buddhism, which had initially enjoyed the support of several rulers, gradually lost this backing as new dynasties emerged with different religious inclinations. The rulers who sought to revive the ancient glory of Hinduism actively promoted Hindu faith, often at the expense of Buddhism. This shift in royal patronage significantly weakened Buddhism's influence and presence in the region.³⁹

Resurgence of Hinduism: The resurgence of Hinduism in Tamil Nadu further contributed to the decline of Buddhism. The common people, influenced by their rulers and the prevailing socio-cultural milieu, began to embrace Hinduism with renewed vigor. Hinduism's rich tapestry of deities, rituals, and devotional practices

offered a spiritual and emotional fulfillment that Buddhism, with its more rational and philosophical approach, could not provide to the same extent.⁴⁰ The concept of a Supreme, Powerful, Benevolent, and Merciful God resonated deeply with the devotional instincts of the masses, drawing them away from Buddhism. Additionally, the anatmavada or no-soul theory of Buddhism, which denied the existence of a permanent self or soul, was difficult for many to comprehend. This theory, which was central to Buddhist philosophy, created confusion and disinterest among those who could not grasp its nuances.⁴¹

Philosophical and Theological Challenges: Buddhism also faced significant philosophical and theological challenges from Hindu scholars. The notions of re-birth and karma, fundamental to both Buddhism and Hinduism, were interpreted differently within these traditions. Hinduism's ability to provide a coherent explanation of these concepts, along with the ideas of bondage and liberation, appealed to the intellectual and spiritual needs of the people. Several Hindu scholars and philosophers, including the proponents of Advaita Vedanta, offered logical refutations to Buddhist doctrines, demonstrating their perceived shortcomings. These scholarly debates and critiques eroded the intellectual foundation of Buddhism, making it increasingly difficult for the religion to maintain its foothold in Tamil Nadu.⁴²

Influence of the Bhakti Movement: The rise of the Bhakti movement in Tamil Nadu was another critical factor in the decline of Buddhism. The Bhakti movement, characterized by intense devotional worship and the exaltation of personal gods, gained immense popularity from the 6th century onwards. Saiva and Vaishnava saints and mystics, through their devotional hymns and spiritual teachings, inspired a deep and emotional connection to Hindu deities. This movement was in stark contrast to the more detached and rational approach of Buddhism.⁴³ The emotional appeal of the Bhakti movement overshadowed the philosophical inclinations of Buddhism, leading to a shift in the religious landscape. Prominent figures like Manikkavachakar and Thirugnana Sambandhar played pivotal roles in promoting Saivism and challenging the presence of Buddhism. Their activities, along with the looting of Buddhist viharas by figures like Thirumankai Alvar, further marginalized Buddhism in the region.⁴⁴

Political and Cultural Transformations: Political and cultural transformations in Tamil Nadu also played a significant role in the decline of Buddhism. The emergence of the imperial Cholas, who were staunch supporters of Saivism, marked a turning point in the region's religious history. The Cholas' allegiance to Saivism and their efforts to promote it through temple-building activities and patronage of Saiva saints contributed to the marginalization of Buddhism. Additionally, the rise of the agrarian class, which supported the Saiva faith, further diminished the influence of Buddhism, which had previously been supported by merchants and traders.⁴⁵

As the socio-political conditions became increasingly unfavorable, many Buddhist monks left Tamil Nadu and sought refuge in neighboring countries. They found a more receptive environment in regions like Sri Lanka and East Asia, where they continued to develop and enrich the art, culture, and architecture of these areas.⁴⁶ This migration marked the end of an era for Buddhism in Tamil Nadu, as the religion that once held significant sway in the region became a distant memory.

CONCLUSION

The trajectory of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu, from its introduction in the 3rd century BCE to its decline by the 12th century, underscores the intricate interplay of religious, cultural, and political dynamics. Despite initial patronage from rulers like the Pallavas and Cholas and the establishment of significant monastic centers, Buddhism faced challenges from the resurgence of Hinduism and the Bhakti movement. The assimilation of Buddhist practices into Hinduism further blurred religious boundaries. Although periods of revival emerged in the late 19th and 20th centuries, driven by figures like Pandit Ayothi Doss and supported by international Buddhist movements, the impact was limited. The study of Buddhism's rise and fall in Tamil Nadu offers critical insights into the broader patterns of religious evolution in India, illustrating how socio-political shifts and philosophical debates can profoundly influence the fortunes of a religious tradition.

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