Hindu-Buddhist Dialogue through Early and Medieval Indian History

Pankaj Mohan
University of Sydney

In the World parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1892 Swami Vivekanand, arguably the most influential philosopher and ideologue of resurgent Hindu-centered cultural nationalism in modern India, made the following observation:

I am not a Hindu, as you have heard, and yet I am a Buddhist.
If China, Japan or Sri Lanka follow the teachings of the Great Master (Buddha), India worships him as God-incarnate on earth.

Swami Vivekanand further said, Shakyamuni came to preach nothing new. He also like Jesus, came to fulfil and not to destroy. Again I repeat, Shakyamuni came not to destroy, but he was the fulfillment, the development of the religion of Hindus.

Swami Vivekanand's views were immensely influential in the formation of knowledge of Buddhism in modern and contemporary
India. His works were avidly read by India's leading freedom-fighters, including Gokhale, Mahatma Gandhi and Tilak and extensively quoted by such secular political leaders of modern India as Rajendra Prasad, the first President and Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India. For BJP, the influential political party which ruled India and consolidated the foundation of Hindutva (Hindu fundamentalist ideology), the words and deeds of Swami Vivekanand continues to be the most important source of inspiration.

Indeed, Vivekanand's invention of Hinduism as a monolithic religion has to be understood as a counter-discourse to the Orientalist view and vision of India presented by imperialist historiography. Vivekanand's writings on Hinduism emphasised the essential core of Hinduism, while discrediting such aspects as caste-based discrimination, projected by the Western critics as symptomatic of the 'backwardness' of the religion, Assumptions of Western scholarship were internalised in neo-Hinduism which became the ideological foundation of freedom struggle, and subsequently this notion of Hinduism as a Unified religion was enshrined in the Indian constitution. In this context it is remarkable that explanation II of 25 (1) provides the following definition of Hindu: Hindu' shall be construed as including a reference to persons professing the Sikh, Jaina or Buddhist religion and the reference to Hindu religions institutions shall be construed accordingly.