

Dissemination of Buddhism from Kashmir to Central Asia

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ABSTRACT

Before third century .B.C. Buddhist, faith had already been prevalent in Kashmir but it did not get the royal patronage. Buddhist sources, however, are unanimous in attributing the introduction of Buddhism in Kashmir to Majjhantika, a monk of Varanasi and a disciple of Ananda. King Ashok the Mauryan ruler who patronized the Buddhism on world level deputed the monk Majjhantika to introduced Buddhism in Kashmir. He sent missionaries to different parts of India and outside India. Before Buddhism, in Kashmir Naga cult was prevalent and they resisted the efforts of majjhantika who was propagating Buddhism in Kashmir. Ultimately, Monk was succeeded to establish his foot on the soil of valley and he propagated Buddhism in Kashmir. He established many monasteries in Kashmir. From Kashmir Buddhism was spread to China and other countries. With the passage of time, Buddhism was continued up to 13th century A.D. and after the establishment of Muslim rule in Kashmir the Buddhism start to decline. At present, the populations of Buddhists are confined to Ladakh region only.

Key words: Majjhantika, Ashok, Buddhism, Alberuni, Vihara, Acharya.

INTRODUCTION

The origin of Buddhism in Kashmir is shrouded in obscurity. Buddhist sources, however, are unanimous in attributing the introduction of Buddhism in Kashmir to Majjhantika, a monk of Varanasi and a disciple of Ananda. According to Ceylonese chronicle –the Mahavamsa, Moggliputta Tissa ,the spiritual guide of King Asoka after the conclusion of 3rd Buddhist council , sent missionaries to different countries to propagate Buddhism .A Buddhist savant Majjhantika was deputed to Kashmir and Gandhara . The story of the introduction of Buddhism in Kashmir by Majjahantika is also told in several other Buddhist texts like the Tibetan Dutva, Asokavadan, Avadanakalpata and travel account left by Yuan –Chwang. It relates that how Majjhantika received hostile treatment of the hands of local Naga people and their chief and how he was finally able to win over to Buddhist faith in the entire Naga

population through his supernatural power. The history of the mission of Majjhantika received confirmation in the inscription (Bhilatopes) discovered by Cunningham in the tope no. 2 of Sanchi group. Yuan –Chawang says that in Kashmir Buddhism was introduced by Mijjhantika fifty years after the Nirvana of Buddha. According to the Buddhist text Divyavadana; several monks of Tamasavana in Kashmir were invited by Asoka to attend the 3rd Buddhist council at Patliputra. Kalhana also described the establishment of several Viharas in Kashmir during the reign of King Surendra, the predecessor of Asoka. This leads us to presume that Buddhist faith had already been introduced in Kashmir before the time of Majjhantika and Asoka. Because Kashmir had intimate relation with Magadha and other states in mid India from remote antiquities. It is only reasonable to assume that a number of Buddhist monks had found their way into Kashmir long before the arrival of Asoka and his missionaries and had succeeded in establishing Buddhist as one of living faith in the Valley. It seems that Buddhism, though introduced earlier, gained a firm footing in Kashmir only under the spiritual leadership of Majjhantika during 3rd century B.C.

Asoka (C. 273-236 B. C), whose sway extended to Kashmir as well as, is described by Kalhana as a King of Kashmir and follower of Jina, i.e. Buddha and credited by him with the establishment of several Stupa and Vihara in the Valley. Thus, he is credited with the building of a Chaitya of amazing height in the town of Vitastata. Yuan-Chwang also noticed four Stupas in the valley containing a portion of relics of the Buddha, which according to him, were set up by Asoka. The famous Tibetan historian Taranath speaks of King Asoka as having bestowed lavish gift on the several Buddhist Sangas of Kashmir.

1. ROLE OF BUDDHIST ACHARAYA

In the history of Buddhism, Kashmir has a pride of place. Ever since its introduction, Buddhism continued to flourish and enjoy popularity in the valley. The Viharas became great centres of Buddhist study and research and distinguished Buddhist Acharaya composed a large number of authentic Buddhist texts and expository commentaries. These flourishing centres of Buddhism not only attracted the attention of Buddhist scholars in the country but several Buddhist celebrities of other countries also flocked to the valley to gain firsthand knowledge of the Buddhist scriptures. The Buddhist Acharaya of Kashmir studied and taught not only in the valley but also disseminated and expounded the Buddhist faith and teachings in neighbouring countries in Central Asia, China, and Tibet. Kashmir played a vital role in the development of Buddhist literature and its propagation in various parts of Central Asia,

China, and Tibet. Numerous scholars and Buddhist monks were elected to work in these areas and spread the message of Buddha¹.

2. ROLE OF MAHAYANA SECT IN THE DISSEMINATION OF BUDDHISM

Mahayana Buddhism was gaining ground in India from the Kushana period. It was predominant form of Buddhism all over India till the 7th century A.D.² and contained a large section of literature in the form of numerous Mahayana Sutra and philosophical works in Sanskrit. It was with its exposition beyond the frontiers of India that this literature was translated into the language of those countries due to which spread. A comprehensive study of Buddhism in Central Asia involving its introduction, expansion and branching off into several sects with the finds of sources, materials, literary, epigraphic travel accounts as well as monumental remains of ancient Buddhist sites in this vast region proves that Buddhism spread in this region. Central Asia played an active role in its Savants in the translation of Buddhist sacred texts into Chinese. A large number of Chinese texts are available in both religious and secular from the principle centres of Central Asia. The series of documents ranging from 98 B.C. to 153 A.D. of intercourse between China and Central Asia.³ Monumental remains, Buddhist Savants in Chinese Buddhist literature point to the flourishing the state of Buddhism in this part of Central Asia, and Al Beruni⁴ too does not fail to record this fact. In his words, in former times, Khorasan, Persia, Iraq, Mosul, the country up to the frontier of Syria, was Buddhist, but the Zorasthustra went forth from Adharbayajan and preached Magism in Balk (Baktra).

The history of Buddhism in this part of Central Asia might be dated from the time of Indo-Bactrian. In this context, the Kandahar bilingual edict⁵, of Asoka is rightly considered the extension in this direction of Central Asia. The finds of other inscriptions in Afghanistan suggest that this part of central Asia had come under the control of Mauryan culture activities, it being a part of the empire of Asoka. It is proposed by Bagchi⁶ that Buddhism was introduced in Balkah in the time of Asoka, who introduces his dharma among the people of Gandhara -Kamboja and Yona. As Kamboja were a branch of Tukra people, while Yona were the Bactrian- Greeks. In this context, a legend recorded by Hieun Tsang refers to the first two lay disciples of Buddha, Trapusa and Bhallika as responsible for introducing Buddhism in that country .Originally these two were merchants of kingdom of Ballika.⁷ The progress of Buddhism to the North of Afghanistan is also borne out by Kharoshti inscription on a clay object recovered from Begram excavation in the first layer has placed between the

3rd and 2nd century B.C. recording a Buddhist name. ⁸ The foundation of the Greco-Bactrian state contributed the expansion of Buddhism in this region in the first two centuries preceding the Christian era. Both Demetrius and Menander were interested in Buddhism. ⁹ The former is supposed to attack India to punish the Brahman Sunga ruler for his anti Buddhist activities and persecution of Buddhist monk, while the later seems to have embraced the religion of the Thatagata after his discourse with the Buddhist philosopher Nagasena. The Milindapanhpo or Discourse with Menander is the theme of the great work. These both are in Pali and in Chinese translation. Its composition might have been of a later date probably after Meander's death. It is now generally accepted that Indo- Greek ruler was a devotee of the Thathagat, and certain symbols like stupa on the coins of Agethockks, as also the legends on the coin of Menander are in agreement with the theory of infiltration of Buddhism in the realm of the Indo-Greek or Bactrian rulers. ¹⁰

The political atmosphere was congenial for the Buddhist missionaries for the local followers in those areas to convey the message of the lord outside the boundaries of this kingdom. Further information regarding the association of Indo-Greek ruler as also the Yonas with Buddhism between 2nd and first century B.C. also available the sources. Two Kharosti inscription one from ancient country of Udan (Swat valley) and other from Banjaur (South-East of Jalalabad) recorded by a Greek officer named Meridaskh Theodorus who enshrined the relics of the lord Buddha, and the pious act of one Viyakemitra-an Apracharaja (Skt. Apartyagraja) respectively. ¹¹ The former was an officer rank and the latter was a vassal -both probably under Menander or under his successor. It is also proposed that Taranath connects the wheel on some coins of Menander with Buddhism. ¹² According to a tradition-cited, Meander's association with Buddhism is independent of Milindapanho. He refers to king Minara in the land of the Tukharas, who is identified with Menander by Lassen. ¹³ The first inflow of Buddhist culture to China was from Tokharestan. It was in the year 2 B.C. that the Chine ambassador Tsing- Kiang received Buddhist text as present to Chinese court. ¹⁴ The famous scholar Ghosaka, born in Tokharistan, played a prominent part at the 4th Buddhist council in Puruspura. He was the author of the contemporary on the Abhidharma -Vibhasa that was compiled there. These scholars also composed an original tradition on Abhidharma Abhicharmita, which is preserved in the Chinese translation of the 3rd century. Ghoska had returned to Turkestan and was associated with the Vaibhasika sect of Buddhism was widespread in Western Turkistan , and Vaibhasika doctrine are supposed to have brought it closer to the Mahayana school. Balkh was a great centre of Buddhist studies in later time.

Aryacandra, who first translated the Maitreya Smiti into the Tokharian language, was a Vaibhasika. It is said that the Chinese ambassadors in the country of the Yuc-Chis, met the first two missionaries to China in A. D. 68, Kasypa Matanga, and Dharmarksa.¹⁵ The spread of Buddhism in Central Asia was by the formation of the Kushana empire, which at its zenith seems to have overshadowed the Greco-Bactrian kingdom. The first ruler Kujula –Kadphises styles himself on his coin as steady in true law (Sacadhrama-Thitas=Satyadharmasthitasya) and the figure of Buddha is depicted on his coin. His successors appear to be Saivite, while Kanishka the great Kushana ruler was definitely a Buddhist. Buddha figures prominently on his coins with the legend CAKAMANO-BOYDO-BUDDHA SAKYAMUNI. Kaniska's name is associated with a vihara or monastery set up for the Sarvastivadin in an inscription dated in the year 1 from Shahji Ki Dheri near Peshawar.¹⁶

A Buddhist theologian Ghosaka, born in Tokharistan, who was one of the leading figures at Buddhist council, held in Kaniska's time at Puruspura. He belonged to the Vaibhasika School, a branch of the Sarvastivadin. The finds of potsherds from Kara-Tepe, with inscription in Brahmi point to the spread of the Sarvastivada school of Buddhism in the present Russian or Western Turkestan in the times of Kanishka.¹⁷ Among the early Buddhist missionaries to China (Lo-Yang) were two Parthian (An-Shibkao and An-Hsuan), three Yurch-Chih (Chih-Loc-Chia-Chueb-Lokasen, Chihnoo-and Chih-Liang), and two Sogdian (Kang-Menghsieng and Kang Seng – Hui). At the beginning of the 3rd century the Sogdian monks again figures as translated and this process continued throughout the 3rd century largely due to the efforts of those whose ancestors emigrated from western Turkestan. One such scholar was Chih –Chien.¹⁸ At the end of the 4th century one Dharamanandi from Tukaristan (Tu-Ho-Lo) came to China. He stayed there between 384 and 391 and translated fine works in this period including very important Hinayana-one.

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8. J. Harmata, op. cit. pp, 4-5
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10. The Pali text represents the Greeks as taking part in missionary activities. We are told that after with the conversion of Yuan (Greek) country to Buddhism, Moggiliputta Tissa went there and selected an elder Dharmasaksita for there and selected for missionary work. He was sent to Aparantaka where he made a large number of converts. The Greek were also represented by this elder Mahadharmaksita at the great stupa ceremony in Ceylon, initiated by Duttagamini in the middle of the 2nd century B.C.
11. Sten Konew. Corpus Inscription Indicars (II) I, These are discussed by K.A. Nil Kant Sastri, Comprehensive History of India, 1966. p. 219.
12. B .N. Puri, Buddhism in Central Asia, op. cit. p. 88
13. This tradition as recorded by Taranath, refers to king Milinda in the land of the Tukhara, and he is identified by Lassen with Menander.
14. The earliest documents are of 98 B.C.
15. Sten Konow; op. cit. p. 134.
16. Ibid.
17. Litvinsky. B. A., Outline History of Buddhism in Central Asia. Dushanbe, 1968. p. 10.
18. Chih- Chien, who had liberal and an upasaka of the country of Yuch-K, who came to China towards the end of the Eastern Har dynasty, which ended in 220 A. D. He was appointed as a professor by Sun-Knien, the first sovereign of the Wu-dynasty. He translated numerous works.