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DEVELOPMENT OF BUDDHISM IN KANCHIPURAM

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Abstract:

Kanchipuram was the home of the various religious movements of India. In south India Buddhism and Jainism reached their zenith here, Saivism and Vaishnavism had their beginnings at Kanchi. There are relics of every religious movement, which reached South India, Buddhist stupas and statues, Jaina shrines, Saivite and Vaishnavite temples. The various cultural streams met here-Aryan and Dravidian, Vedic and non-Vedic, Hindu, Buddhist and Jain. This paper portrays on development of Buddhism in Kanchipuram, the Buddhist scholars who lived in Kanchipuram viz Boddhidharma, Buddadatta, Buddhagosa, Vajra bodhi, sidha Nagarjuna, Amodha Buddhatiya and various Bhuddist sculptures.

KEY WORDS:

Development of Buddhism, Religious, Buddhist Literature.

INTRODUCTION

Buddhism was one of the religions which set itself against Vedic sacrifices. Mahavira, Buddha and Makkali Gosala, who established Jainism, Buddhism and Ajivikism respectively, in India, were contemporaries and were known as the founders of non-Vedic religions. They gave importance to asceticism (shramanas) and advocated a life of retirement in the forest, spending most of their time in philosophical speculation. Buddha preached Ahimsa and kindness to all living beings and tried to eradicate all claims to superiority on the grounds of birth.

Buddha had to struggle hard and try various methods of penances to attain enlightenment. After attaining enlightenment, he had two disciples who were merchants called Tapura and Bhallika¹. The next convert was the son of a very rich merchant called Yasa, to whom Buddha taught the merit of gifts (danakatham), the practice of precepts (silakatham), the means of attaining heavenly existence (saggakatham) and the evils of enjoying earthly pleasures (kamanama dinavam samkilesam). Yasa converted 54 friends of his who became Buddhist monks. Following this, 1000 Jatilas², who were originally Brahmana hermits, were converted by Buddha at Uruvela. When king Bimbisara offered him a garden outside Rajagriha, the number of followers increased and, eventually, Buddha was able to establish a religious order called Sangha which even today is worshipped by practising Buddhists in their Trisharana³.

Although in the beginning, Buddha resisted the intake of women in the sangha, he later admitted women from all walks of life. In the initial stage the monks had little connection with lay society. But later, with the support and respect given by kings and nobles, they received alms and other necessities for their monastic life. In return, they taught lay men lessons in dhamma. After the nirvana of the Buddha, King Ashoka, who embraced Buddhism, organised a missionary movement and saw that Buddhism was widespread, both inside and outside India. Buddha's middle path, i.e., neither severe austerities nor a life of luxury, gained popularity among the people. Here it is worthwhile to understand When did Buddhism,

gained so much popularity in North India, come to the south? History does not provide any definite date on which Buddhism was brought to the south of India. But there are references to show that Buddhism was known in South India during the time of the Tamil works, Maduraikkanchi⁴ Silappadikaram⁵ and Manimekalai⁶. From one of the Ashokan edicts the one on a rock at the foot of Mount Girnar near Junagadh one comes to know that King Ashoka had established medical centres in the Chola and Pandya territories, in Satyaputra and Kerala. In another rock edict of Ashoka (258 B.C.) found near the city of Bhishawar, it is said that Ashoka had won his victory of dhamma in the south, in the Chola, Pandya and Tamaraparani areas.

In particularly south of India, from historic times, Kanchipuram enjoyed the position of one of the most sacred places of pilgrimage in the country. All the main religions, mainly Buddhism, Jainism, Shaivism and Vaishnavism, flourished here and enjoyed royal patronage at one time or another.

One could consider the Talaing records as the earliest Buddhist reference to Kanchipuram. These records, which date back to the 4th century B.C., are written in characters, which are almost identical with the Dravidian Vengi alphabet of the same period⁷. Buddhist connections with Kanchipuram are known to us today from literature, archaeological evidences and references made by foreign travellers.

BUDDHIST LITERATURE

In addition to archaeological sources a number of Pali texts mention Kanchi as one of the Buddhist centres in the south. The Tamil Buddhist epic, Manimekalai, written by Eattanan often mentions Kanru (Kacci), a place where Buddhism was nurtured by Buddhist missionaries. Manimekalai, the daughter of Madhavi and Kovalan, renounces the world on the death of Kovalan, who was killed by the Pandya king on a fictitious complaint made by a goldsmith. After the death of Kovalan, Madhavi also renounces the world and embraces Buddhism. Manimekalai, after travelling to several countries and listening to various other systems of philosophy, comes to Kanchi to listen to the sermon of Aravana Adigal, a Buddhist monk⁸. The meeting of Aravana Adigal and Manimekalai had been already predicted by an idol on a pillar called Kantirpavai⁹. Manimekalai had also been told by the same idol about her meeting with her grandfather, Machattuvan, the father of Kovalan, who took to Buddhism after the death of his son Kovalan, and the meeting with her mother Madhavi¹⁰. The 28th Chapter of the text Kacci managar pukka kathai (entering the City of Kacci), narrates how Manimekalai visited Aravana Adigal in Kanchi and listened to Buddhist religious doctrines.

Kanchipuram, before her visit, was dry and was facing a severe famine. Manimekalai, coming from Vanji, was travelling through the air and landed in the heart of the city. She first went to the Buddhist temple built by Ilarikilli, the brother of Thotukalarkilli. When the king of the city was informed of her visit, he came and paid his respects to her. He also told her how he was informed of her visit to his country by a deity. He further told her about the wish of the deity, that he build a pond and a grove². She visited this grove and found that it resembled Manipallavam to which she had been first taken by Goddess Manimekalai and where she realised the details of her previous birth. Manimekalai made the king build a putta pitikai on which the two feet of the Buddha are laid, and also two temples for the Goddess Manimekalai and Thipathilakai. She made the king pay his respects and perform festivals. She, with the help of Amudhasurabhi, a bowl which is always filled with food and never becomes empty, fed the people of the country who were dying of starvation due to the famine ravaging the place. She was visited in her dhannashala by Aravana Adigal, the Buddhist monk, her mother Madhavi and her companion. Aravana Adigal preached the Buddhist doctrine to Manimekalai, as well as other systems of philosophy existing in his time. After listening to his discourses, she became an ascetic to get out of the cycle of birth and death.

Here it is highly useful to know that is Aravana Adigal, the teacher of Manimekalai, a historical figure or a mythological character? Some scholars identify him with Dharmapala (6th century A.D) i as the name Aravana Adigal appears to be a Tamil translation of Dharmapala. M. Raghava Iyengar connects the place Arappanancheri in Kanchipuram with Aravana Adigal. He suggests that Arappanancheri has come from Aravanancheri¹¹ where Aravana Adigal would have lived in Kanchi. Arappanancheri is situated near the temple street of Kamakshi Amman kovil in Kanchipuram. In the absence of other evidences to corroborate the above name, one cannot come to a definite conclusion. But the information one gets from Manimekalai points to the fact that there were Buddhist activities in Kanchipuram.

Though with the available evidence one is not able to come to a definite conclusion about the identification of Aravana Adigal with Dharmapala, it is known that a Buddhist scholar by the name Dharmapala seemed to have lived in Kanchipuram. Dharmapala, who was a son of a high official in Kanchi, fled to a Buddhist monastery near Kanchi and was ordained by Bhavaviveka. He eventually went to the University of Nalanda and became the chief there. His works on the etymology, logic and metaphysics of Buddhism were well received. He was also known as the Dharmapala Phusa i.e, Dharmapala Bodhisattva,

among scholars.

In the epic Manimekalai, the character Manimekalai is named after the deity of the same name who was supposed to have saved one of her forefathers¹² during a voyage when his ship was wrecked at sea. This account occurs also in the Silappadikaram¹³. The deity Manimekalai is said to roam the seas for the purpose of protecting seafarers, being thus ordained by Indra. The references to this deity are also found in the Sanghajataka¹⁴, and the Mahajana Jataka.¹⁵ Sylvan Levi¹⁶, who has made a study of these legends, is of the opinion that the legend of the goddess Manimekalai may have originated around the cities of Puhar and Kanchi. (There exists a temple dedicated to the goddess Annapurna in Kanchipuram even now). These legends might have been incorporated at a later date into the Jataka stories which were mentioned above.

Buddhist Scholar of Kanchipuram

DIGNAGA

Here it is interesting to note the Buddhist Scholars of Kanchipuram Dignaga. Apart from Dharmapala, there existed another great scholar by name Acharya Dignaga Dinnaga who hailed from Simhavakra, (probably Singaperujnalkoil of Kanchipuram). Mylai Chinni Venkatachami Nattar identifies Simhavakra as Chiyamarikalam in Chengalpattu district. Dignaga, who had his education under Vasubandhu (420 - 500 A.D.), was a great scholar in Buddhist philosophy and logic. He is considered to be "the father of the medieval Nyaya or a link between the Buddhist and orthodox Nyaya systems of India"¹⁷. He is connected to Bhavaviveka by Hiuen Tsang in his travelogue¹⁸. His works, the Pramanasamuchchaya, the Nyayapraveshha, the Hetuchakra - damaru, the Pramana-shastranyaya and the Alambanapariksha are very popular among learned Buddhists of India and abroad, mainly in China and Japan. There exists a close resemblance between the Nyayapraveshha of Dignaga and the Buddhist logic expounded in the Charnayakkanakkar Tantiraiketta Kathai of Manimekalai¹⁹. He belonged earlier to the Vatriputriya sect of Hinayanism and later embraced the Mahayana school, due to the differences he had with his teacher. He wrote many treatises on logic and many of them were translated into Tibetan or Chinese. He travelled from Kanchi to many other places in India like Orissa (Odivisa), Maharashtra (Maharashtra) and Nalanda. In Nalanda he outwitted a logician called Sudurjaya, and the learned scholars of Nalanda conferred the title Tarka Pungava on him.

BODDHIDHARMA

Apart from Dharmapala and Dignaga, there seems to have been another renowned Buddhist scholar from Kanchi by the name Boddhidharma who lived in the 6th century A.D. There are different opinions about the origin and life of Boddhidharma. Beal observes that Boddhidharma, a man of the Turkhara country, of great bodily size and strength, came to China and became a priest. He wandered through the nine provinces as a religious mendicant. On his visit again to India to adore the sacred vestiges, I-tsing met him at Nalanda) When he was about 50 years old, he died in North India²⁰.

Contrary to what Beal says, Yamakami Sogen is of the opinion that Boddhidharma was the third son of a king of Kanchi. Meenakshi also confirms this opinion with the accounts of Suzuki and Charles Elliot,²¹ that there is no doubt Boddhidharma was a South Indian and a prince of the Pallava family". Shu Hikosaka in his work Buddhism in Tamilnadu, says that Boddhidharma's doctrine is the philosophy of Sunyata of Mahayana Buddhism. He also adds that "if we accept the tradition according to which Aryadeva, a direct successor of Nagarjuna, lived near Kanchi in his last years, we could reasonably infer that Boddhidharma's basic doctrine of Madhyamika philosophy was cultivated at Kanchi²².

Buddhadatta and Buddhaghosha

Buddhadatta and Buddhaghosha, who were supposed to have lived during the 5th century A.D., mention Kanchi in their works. Buddhadatta, who was patronised by Achyuta Vikranta, a Kalabhra king, has composed Vinayavinichchaya, Buddhavamsattagatha, Anagata vamsha and a commentary on Buddhavamsha Abhidammavata.

Buddhaghosha, who belonged to Magadha, in the colophon to his work Manorathapurani, a commentary on the Anguttara Nikaya, mentions Kanchi as a centre of Pali'. Buddhist scholars like K.R.Srinivasan²³ identify Buddhaghosha as a native of Kanchi, from the reference found in the colophon discovered in Visuddhimagga. In this colophon, there is a reference to Morandakjietaka as his native place. C.R.Srinivasan tries to identify Morandakhetaka as Moranam near Kanchi in North Arcot district. .

Vajrabodhi

Vajrabodhi, (A.D.'661-730), the son of the preceptor of the king of Kanchi and a contemporary of Pallava Narasimhavarman II, was a native of Kanchi and travelled to China. He is said to have translated many Buddhist works into Chinese.

SIDDHA NAGARJUNA

Siddha Nagarjuna, (7th century A.D.), who was considered to be one of the eightyfour siddhas, was born at Kahora, a part of Kanchi, according to Tibetan tradition. He has written sadhanas and tantras and also propagated siddhis (occult sciences), which formed the syllabi of Tantric Buddhism. It is said that he attained this state of excellence by the grace of the goddess Tara of kanchi. It is also worth considering here the opinion of T.A.Gopinatha Rao who says that Kamakshi was originally the goddess Taradevi of the Buddhist pantheon²⁴.

AMRUDHA, BUDDHATIYA

Amrudha (12th century A.D) of the Pandya country, is known to have headed the mulasomavihara of Kanchi. There are also references to another Buddhist scholar named Buddhatiya of Sadvihara of Kanchi who composed bhogavali (laudatory poems) on the Javanese king, Hayam Wuruk. This, and the seated figure of Buddha (11th century) in padmasana found in Kanchi, which bear close resemblance to Javanese types, point to the interaction between Kanchi and Java.

Among the kings, the early Pallavas of Kanchi supported Buddhism and some of the kings also used the name 'Buddha' along with their proper names. Buddhavarman and Buddhyanikara are examples of this trait²⁵. Besides it is ighly useful to know the following remarks made by the Chinese traveller, Yuan Chwang, helps us to a certain extent to know about the Buddhist activities in and around Kanchipuram. "The region had a rich fertile soil; it abounded in fruits and flowers and yielded precious substances. The people were courageous, thoroughly trustworthy and public spirited, and they esteemed great learning in their written and spoken languages. They differed from Mid-India. There were more than 100 Buddhist monasteries with above 10,000 brethren, all of the Sthavira school. The Deva temples were 80, and the majority belonged to the Digambaras. This country had been frequently visited by the Buddha, and King Ashoka had erected topes at the various spots where the Buddha had preached and admitted members into his order. The capital [Kanchipura of the Ta-Io-pi-tu or Dravida country] was the birth place of Dharmapala Risa. He was a professor of Nalanda.

Not far from the south of the capita! was a large monastery which was the rendezvous of the most eminent men of the country. It had an Ashoka tope above 100 feet high, where the Buddha had once defeated the Tirthankaras by preaching and had received many into his communion. Near it were traces of a sitting place and exercise - walk of the four past Buddhas".

The above reference of Yuan Chwang is, as Gopinatha Rao says²⁶, to a great extent in agreement with the descriptions found in Manimekalai. Even in the 14th century A.D, Kanchipuram seemed to have had Buddhist activities. An inscription found in Korea mentions an Indian monk called Dhyanaabhadra, who had visited Kanchipuram and listened to a discourse on the Avatamsaka sutra in the 14th century A.D²⁷.

In addition to the above mentioned sources the sculptural evidence also suplimented the existence of Buddhism in Kanchipuram is further corroborated by the five images of Buddha found in and around Kamakshidevi temple of Kanchipuram. There is one image of Buddha found right in the firstprakara of the Kamakshi temple. This is 7 feet in height and has a pedestal which is 10 inches in height. Both hands are broken today. The folds of the flowing robes are exquisitely worked out. T.A. Gopinatha Rao, who has studied Buddha vestiges, poses the question, 'Why is a Buddha image in the Kamakshi temple?' After examining the situation, he has come to the conclusion that this temple would have been originally a temple of Taradevi and later converted to a Hindu temple²⁸.

There are also two other Buddha images in the Kamakshi temple, one without a head in the second prakara of the temple and the other in the garden of the Kamakshi temple. Both hands of the first image lie on its lap in the yoga mudra pose. The second image is seated in a yoga attitude with the hands in tho yoga mudra pose (plate 21). Gopinatha Rao is of the opinion that there should be two more large images buried in the garden.

Apart from the above mentioned three images, there are also two others in the Karukkil-amarnta-amman temple which is situated on the way to Vishnu Kanchipuram. The hand of one of the images is in the bhu-sparsha-mudra (plate22). Both the hands of the other image are in the yoga mudra pose.

There are also Buddha images in the Ekambreshvara temple in Kanchipuram. C.Meenakshi, who had made a study of all the available Buddhist vestiges in Kanchi, is of the opinion that there should have been more than one Buddhist vihara in Kanchipuram²⁹. From the reference found in Nagarakritagama and other evidences, she has tried to identify the shadviharas (six monastries) in Kanchi. She has also explained, with evidence, that Buddhists were living in Kanchi upto the 14th century A.D³⁰.

Though Buddhism was popular in Kanchipuram, it could not gain a firm hold like Jainisrn. Jainas and Hindus were always against Buddhists and they] took all steps to drive them away from Kanchipuram.

The great Hindu Vedanta philosopher, Shankaracharya, after vehement religious debates, drove many Buddhists away. Likewise, the Jaina monk, Akalavika, also had religious disputes with Buddhists in front of the king, Hemasital of Kanchi, and eventually drove them away.

The Mattavilasa Prahasana³¹, a Sanskrit drama written by the Pallava king, Mahendra Vikrama (580 - 630 A.D), depicts the downfall of Buddhism through the character of a Buddhist monk. The mockery made by the Kapalini and his wench of the Buddhist monk depicts the feeble hold of Buddhists on society, though they were rich.

The decline of Buddhism in Kanchipuram in particular and in Tamilnadu in general could be due to many reasons. Insufficient royal patronage, Jaina and Brahmanical persecution, Muslim invasion³², internal corruption among the monks, many divisions and sectarianism, and insufficient support from the common man could be the main reasons³³.

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