

ROYAL PATRONAGE OF BUDDHISM IN ANCIENT INDIA

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Introduction

The Royal patronage is very much concerned with the success and propagation of Buddhism in ancient India and across the Indian boundaries. The liberal patronage of Kings, republican chiefs and wealthy and influential persons were valuable assets to the Buddha. As he was himself born as the son of a republican chief, he may able to connect intimately with the contemporary royal families. Secondly, despite the fact the he adopted a democratic organization for his Sangha, the Buddha did not criticize or reject the monarchical system of government; rather he advocated strong political power. It made it easier for him to enlist the patronage of Kings of his time. It is pertinent to be mentioned here that Buddhism was in tune with the changing economic patterns of the then society. The practicable doctrines of Buddhism influenced the large number of the leading Seth (or setṭi in Pāli) is of the period, who formed the spearhead of economic growth were among the main supporters of the Buddha. Prof. A. L. Basham rightly says that the greatest number of the patrons of Buddhism were members of the rising middle class' of merchants and craftsman of the better and more highly skilled out. We have sufficient archaeological evidence in the form of votive inscriptions' which indicates that the merchants or Seth is provided the funds for the construction of the great Stupas and Cave monasteries.

In this present paper the try is to throw light on the great Royal patrons of Buddhism in ancient India along with their contributions towards propagation and spread of Buddhism. Some names among others are King Bimbisāra of Haryak dynasty, King Pasenadi of Kosala, mauryan ruler Asoka the great, Indo-Greek King Menander (famous in Pali as Milinda), Kanishka of Kushaṇa dynasty, Gupta ruler Kumargupta and Buddhagupta, Harsha of Kanauj, a few Maukhari rulers can also be counted in this list. Pālā rulers viz. Gopāla, Dharmapāla, Devpāla and Rāmpāla etc. also among the above whose name is written in golden ink in the list of the ruler who have been done remarkable contribution in spread and development of Buddhism. These are the Kings whose patronization towards development of Buddhism will be discussed in brief. The royal patronage of Buddhism may be described by dividing into three historical phases:-

- I. Pre-Ashokan period
- II. Ashoka and Buddhism
- III. Post-Ashokan period

(i) Pre-Ashokan period:

Both Bimbisāra and Ajātaśatru of Haryak dynasty were great followers and patrons of Buddhism. King Bimbisāra who ruled in Magadha with its capital at Rājagaha, was the Buddha's first royal patron; ascending the throne at the age of fifteen, he reigned for fifty-two years.

When prince Siddhartha renounced the world and was seeking alms in the streets of Rājagriha as a humble ascetic, the King saw him from his palace and was highly impressed

by his majestic appearance and dignified deportment. Immediately he sent messengers to ascertain who he was. On learning that he was resting after his meal under the Pandavapabbata, the King, accompanied by his retinue, went up to the royal ascetic and inquired about his birthplace and ancestry. The ascetic Gotama replied:

“Just straight, O King upon the Himalaya, there is, in the district of Kosala of ancient families, a country endowed with wealth and energy. I am sprung from that family which clan belongs to the solar dynasty, by birth to the Sākya. I crave not for pleasures of the senses. Realizing the evil of sensual pleasures and seeing King Renunciation as safe, I proceeded to seek the highest, for in that my mind rejoices.”

Thereupon the King invited him to visit his Kingdom after his enlightenment. It is to be mentioned here that in the age of the Buddha, Buddhism gradually took shape as an organization and slowly but steadily extended its influence. According to tradition, Bimbisāra and Ajātaśatru became the followers of Buddhism. Ajātaśatru asked his advice about his struggle against the Licchavis. Sources have retained many stories about Bimbisāra's aid to Buddhist monk, and about the donation of Veluvana Park (in the vicinity of Rājagriha) to the Buddha and his adherents. It was under the auspices of Ajātasatru that the first Buddhist Council was held. But during the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. Buddhism could hardly be distinguished from other ascetic religions. It was evidently in the Maurya period that it emerged as a distinct current though even at the beginning of this period also, its activities were mainly confined to Magadha and Kosala. Small communities of monks had come into existence in the West also, as in the Second Council held at Vaiśālī about a hundred years after the demise of the Buddha, monks from distant places like Pāṭhaliya, Avanti, Kauśāmbi, Sankasya, and Kanauj participated. Mathura had also become an important centre of Buddhism in the early years of the Mauryan supremacy.

King Pasenadi of Kosala, the son of King Mahakosala, who reigned in the Kingdom of Kosala with its capital at Savatthi, was another royal patron of the Buddha. He was a contemporary of the Buddha, and owing to his proficiency in various arts, he had the good fortune to be made King by his father while he was alive.

His conversion must probably have taken place during the very early part of the Buddha's ministry. In the Samyutta Nikāya it is stated that once he approached the Buddha and questioning him about his perfect enlightenment referred to him as being young in years and young in ordination.

(ii) Ashoka and Buddhism:

Ashoka is rightly looked upon as the greatest royal patron of Buddhism. It is well known that the Third Buddhist Council held in his reign and noted its missionary activities. Indeed, it was through his efforts that Buddhism came to occupy some prominence in India and spread abroad. He was not a born Buddhist. In his thirteenth Rock Edict he says that at the end of eighth year of his reign, he invaded Kalinga (modern Orissa). In that invasion, many thousand men were killed, several thousand were taken captive and thousands died from the effects of the war. It filled his heart with remorse and probably due to the teachings of some able Buddhist monk at the right psychological moment, he became a Buddhist.¹

Asoka was the first ruler of ancient India who was conscious of the importance of Buddhism for the consolidation of the empire. It is interesting to compare the attitudes of Bimbisāra, Ajātaśatru and Asoka towards the Sangha. As pointed out by Bongard-levin, the Kings of Magadha who preceded Asoka kept in touch mostly with the Sangha i.e. with Buddhist monks, who lived in seclusion. In contrast to this, Asoka sought report with lay

Buddhists as well. It is not an accident that even the edicts of a purely Buddhist nature were addressed to all followers of that creed. His edicts appealed to them. They do not contain any exposition of the Buddhist religious doctrines while such notions of the edicts as “attainment of Heaven” of “earning happiness in this world and the next” were quite comprehensible to the laity. The tenets of Buddhist ethics were equally familiar to laymen. The similarity between the principles of the Dhamma of Asoka’s edicts and the rules of behaviour of house owner adhering to Buddhist teaching-Upāsaka-(as given in the Pāli canon) is obvious: both rested on ethical rather than philosophical ideas and were determined by the requirements of everyday life.

Asoka showed concern for the followers of Buddhism in his schism Edict also. Its Sārnāth version contains the order that one copy of it’s should be passed on to the laymen of the district who were to assemble every day of Upoṣatha to get acquainted with it. Thus in the age of Asoka the relations between the Sangha and society at large acquired a new character, transforming Buddhism from a purely monastic movement into a religion of great scope and influence.

(iii) Royal patronage of Buddhism in post-Ashokan period:

The royal patronage of Buddhism after Ashoka may be discussed with the King Indo-Greek King Menander. Menander (middle of the second century BCE), the Indo-Greek King, is famous as a great patron and supporter of Buddhism. The chief sources from which information about his interest in and love for Buddhism may be gathered are the Milinda Paññhopāli (Questions of King Menander) and his coins and inscriptions. Reference to him is also found in the AMMK, the Divyavadana, and The History of Buddhism by Taranath and Kshemendra’s Avadānakalpalatā. The Indo Chinese tradition associates him with a statue of the Buddha in the country Among the Classical writers Plutarch records episode which may be taken as a veiled allusion to his Buddhist learning’s.

Milindapanhopāli gives a vivid and detailed account of it’s in the form of the questions he put before Nāgasena. It is also recorded that he attained Arahathood. The Pāli texts represent the Greeks as King part even in missionary activities. The Greeks in India were also responsible for evolving the Indo-Greeks style of Buddhist art which flourished mostly in the Punjab and other parts of North Western India.

After the Greeks, the Śakas and the Kushāṇās became great champions of Buddhism. The Śaka- Kushāṇā inscriptions testify to its popularity during their supremacy. Kanishka’s reign was a landmark in the history of Buddhism. Tradition not only represents him as a great patron of the religion but also associates him with the fourth Buddhist Council and a galaxy of Buddhist masters who shaped Buddhism of that period (supra): It was in this period that Mahayana was evolved, the Indo-Greek school of Buddhist art touched its greatest height and Buddhist monks from India carried their religion to central Asia and China.

With the advent of the Gupta dynasty, Paurāṇika Hinduism acquired unprecedented popularity. The Gupta emperors were themselves Bhāgavatas, the adherents of Brahmanical faith. But they were sympathetic towards Buddhism also. We have a number of important inscriptions of the Gupta period recording gifts of private donors in the regions of Kausambi, Sānchi, BodhaGayā and Mathurā. Many seals, images, inscriptions and manuscripts found in archaeological excavations testify to the continued vigour of the Hinayana sects also-particularly of the Sarvāstivādins, the Sammitiyas and the Theravādins. The Chinese pilgrims, Fa-hsien, sung-Yun Chwang, etc. who came to India in this age, also throw light on the condition of the various sects of Buddhism. Moreover, Buddhist art relics from Mathura,

Sarnath, Nalanda, Ajanta, Bagha and Dhanyakataka prove the prosperity of Buddhism in the Gupta age.

Buddhism was patronized by the people and the ruling class during the period of, 55 to 650 AD. Thus, we have proper literary and archaeological evidence that. The Vardhanas are believed to have endeavoured to bring it back to its old glory. Harsha's own brother Rajyavardhana was a paramasaugata, according to the epigraphs of Harsha.² Some of the Maukhari rulers also patronized Buddhism. The several Maukhari seals recovered at Nalanda undoubtedly prove that they were patrons of this famous university. King Grahavarman was much more inclined towards Buddhism than his predecessors had been, and so was Harshavardhana, his brother-in-law. Rajyasri too, the queen of Grahavarman, in the misfortunes was attracted by Buddhism. Hiuen-tsang tells us that "Rajyasri was distinguished for her knowledge of sammatiya school of Buddhism.

Purnavarman, the Maukhari contemporary of Harsha, was to all appearances a thorough-going Buddhism, which explain his prompt action in the renewal of the Bodhi-tree destroyed by Sasanka. Nevertheless, though Yashovarman's reign synchronized with a marked the final ascendancy of the revived Brahmanism, the Kanauj emperor seems to have patronized Buddhism, at least the University of Nalanda, in the precincts of which an inscription of his reign was recovered recording that a son of Yashovarman's minister made some gifts to a temple of Buddha.³

From the middle of the 7th century A.D. or even earlier Buddhism shows symptoms of decay also. Nevertheless, some of the great centres of Buddhist studies like Nalanda and Valabhi kept the light burning vigorously. King Harsha of Kanauj, thought of himself a Shaiva, was quite liberal towards Buddhism and Buddhist.⁴ In the west the rulers of the Maitraka dynasty of Valabhi patronized Buddhism from the middle of the 6 century A.D. Numerous Buddhist relics discovered at Valabhi Prove the existence of Buddhism in that area up to the 10th century A.D.

The century that followed Harsha's rule saw a state of anarchy unfavourable to the growth of Buddhism, for it depended too much on the patronage of Kings who were now themselves in trouble. However, it still lingered in Kashmir, Swat valley, Valabhi and some other places in the North though its condition was far from prosperous. It experienced another great revival in eastern India under the patronage of the Pāla dynasty, the rulers of which were usually devout Buddhists⁵.

¹ Sutta Nipāta, 3,1, Pabbajjā sutta.

² Thapar, Ramila, Asoka and the decline of the Mauryas, p.137

³ Goyal, S. R., Harsha and Buddhism, Meerut, 1986

⁴ Beal, Samuel, life of Hiuen-tsang, P. 176

⁵ Hazra, Kanailal, Royal Patronage of Buddhism in Ancient India, New Delhi, 1984