

BUDDHISM IN LADAKH AND THE ROLE OF THE KASHMIRI BUDDHIST MONKS FOR THE PROPAGATION OF BUDDHISM IN CENTRAL ASIA AND CHINA THROUGH LADAKH

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism, the most well-known spiritual development of Ladakh, was one of the greatest binding and unifying force which transcended the barriers of regional diversity. Ladakh is bounded by some important nations of Central Asia and China. Silk trade between China and India began on a huge scale within the early centuries of the Christian era. This trade developed with the spread of Buddhism from India to Central Asia and China. This paper highlights the important role played by the Kashmiri Buddhist monk in the translation of Sacred scriptures of Buddhism from Sanskrit into Chinese. Buddhist scripture translation is essential to the propagation of Buddhism.

In the eight Centuries, Kashmir was once an important Buddhist Centre and one of the primary channels via which Buddhism has been transplanted to Central Asia and China. For the principle line of Communication from India to China ran at that time via the Kashmir valley, Baltistan, Leh, Nubra (a northern district of Ladakh) and across the Karakoram and Suget passes into Turkistan and thence to China. Ladakh had enjoyed close relationships with Central Asia from the ancient period. It is said that Buddhism was first introduced into Ladakh from Kashmir during the reign of Emperor Ashoka. The Buddhist missionaries under Ashoka (273-232 B.C) from Kashmir passed through Ladakh on their way to Central Asia. These Buddhist missionaries played an important role in spreading of Mahayana Buddhism. The Central Asia trade route was about 400 miles. It was known in the 7th and 8th centuries A.D. It was this route which was used when the fourth Buddhist council was held in Kashmir in the time of Kaniska. Besides, engraving decisions on copper plates; this council gave to the world, a progressive type of Buddhism, called the Mahayana. With their base in Kashmir, the Kashmirian Buddhist scholars introduced new doctrines in Central Asia, China and Korea. A cultural movement in the form of Mahayana Buddhism traveled to Central Asia and had a tremendous influence on its art, writing, dress and crafts. During the reign of Kushana rulers, many Kashmiri monks went to China for the propagation of the Buddhism doctrines, Famous among the monks who propagated Buddhism in China during the fourth and fifth centuries are Sangabhutti, Kumarajiva, Buddhayasa, Guatam Sangadeva, Punyatrata, Vikmalaksha and Guna Varman. Vikmalaksha and Buddabhadra went to Nankin to China to work with Kumarajiva. The existence of Kushana interest in Ladakh is proved by the Indian Kharosti manuscript by A. H. Francke at Khalse

KEYWORDS: *Buddhism, Monk, Mahayana, Sanskrit, Leh, Route, Trade, Manuscript, Kanishka*

INTRODUCTION

Ladakh known as “Roof of the World” is an area within the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, where people live at an elevation of 12000 to 16000 feet above the sea level. It borders Karakoram (Yarkand, Kasghar and Khotan) in the north, Himachal Pradesh in the south, Tibet in the east and Kashmir and Baltistan in the west. Ladakh has been known by many names-La-dwags, Maryul, Moonland, Great Tibet, Great Poliu, Kie-Cha and Western Tibet.

According to the popular belief, Buddhism was first introduced into Ladakh from Kashmir during the reign of Emperor Ashoka. The Buddhist missionaries under Ashoka (273-232 B.C) from Kashmir passed through Ladakh on their way to Central Asia. These Buddhist missionaries played an important role in spreading of Mahayana Buddhism. According to Fa-Hein, the Chinese pilgrim, Buddhism flourished in Ladakh in 400 A.D as solely the religion, it used to be similar to Indian Buddhism except, the truth that Ladakhi Buddhist used prayer wheel. According to him, the doctrine of Hinayana form or lesser vehicle of Buddhism prevailed in Ladakh. However, the Mahayana form or Greater vehicle of Buddhism was also introduced later on. The religion was further strengthened by the 9th century, when the most famous Kashmir monk Lotsava Rinchen Bzangpo (958-1055A.D) settled in Ladakh and built Kaniska Stupa at Sani in Zanskar, Sundan and Alchi Gumpa. He played the most important role during this period to spread Mahayana Buddhism in Ladakh. Rinchen Zangpo was one of the young scholar sent to Kashmir and other Buddhist centers in north India to study and absorb the tradition of Indian Buddhism. He was honored with the title of Lotsava (translator). He is still remembered as the great founder of the Stupa and monasteries both in Ladakh and the ancient kingdom of Guge.

Ladakh had enjoyed close relationships with Central Asia from the ancient period. The Central Asia trade route was about 400 miles. It was known in the 7th and 8th centuries A.D. It was this route which was used when the fourth Buddhist council was held in Kashmir in the time of Kanishka. Besides, engraving decisions on copper plates; this council gave to the world, a progressive type of Buddhism, called the Mahayana. Kanishka sent five hundred Buddhist missionaries for the propagation of the faith in Tibet and Ladakh. With their base in Kashmir, the Kashmirian Buddhist scholars introduced new doctrines in Central Asia, China and Korea. A cultural movement in the form of Mahayana Buddhism traveled to Central Asia and had a tremendous influence on its art, writing, dress and crafts.

The main cultural element in Ladakh of that period (9th and 10th centuries) must have come from Kashmir. Kashmiri Buddhism had penetrated deep beyond the Zojila as proven by the Sarada inscription at Dras and Chigtan which appear to go to a period c. 700-1200 A.D. The sculpture and the inscription at Dras are specifically important; but they have by no means been properly treated.

There is no authentic evidence indicating whilst exactly Buddhism entered China for the first time. It is believed that it must have been some time among the first half of the first century B.C whilst China managed to consolidate its power in the western regions and the middle of the first century A.D when the presence of Buddhism in China is already attested.

It is a well-known fact that Kashmir played a vital role and made an enormous contribution to the spread of Buddhism in Central Asia and China. Most of the Buddhist missionaries who preached Buddhist faith in Siankiang either hailed from Kashmir or were educated in Kashmir. Kashmiri scholar and missionaries continued to visit Central Asia and spread the message of Gautam Buddha there.

The influence spread as far north as Mongolia from the time of Kublai Khan, one of the grandsons of Chengiz Khan. Along with religions and philosophy, Buddhist culture and all that goes with its spread into Central Asia.

In the eight centuries, Kashmir was an important Buddhist Centre and one of the primary channels through which Buddhism has been transplanted to Central Asia and China. Chinese Buddhist monks were interested in obtaining copies of original Buddhist scriptures. Fahien, Huien Tsang, SungYun, and later I Tsing, all traveled and work in India. The Central Asian Trade route was also used by these Chinese Buddhist monks, Huien Tsang and Ou Kong when they came to Kashmir. Huien Tsang and Ou-Kong mention the arrival of 5,000 Buddhist monks in Kashmir under Ashoka. Ou-Kong who reached Kashmir 759 B.C. has left us an account of his visit. During the four years of history in Kashmir, he took a vow of a monk and studied Sanskrit. He mentions that there were three hundred Buddhist convents in Kashmir, which shows that in the 8th century, Buddhism was in flourishing condition than in the preceding century when the master of the law Huien Tsang had visited Kashmir.

In 629 Huien Tsang set out from China to India, "to look at the sacred remains of Buddha and seriously to study theology". The king of Kashmir gave him a royal reception, invited him to his palace and convened a conference to discuss some difficult points of Buddhist doctrine. Finally, he gave twenty men to copy the Buddhist scripture for Huien Tsang and order five men to wait upon him and obey his order and to furnish him, free of expense, with whatever things he required. Under the supervision of the chief priest, Huien Tsang learned *Kosa Sastra*, *Nyaya Anusara*, and *Hetovidya Sastra* daily in the routine manner. In Kashmir, he came to know about distinguishing learning, priest of high religious merit and conspicuous virtue, marked talent and of the power of clear exposition of doctrine. He stayed there for two years (May 631 to April 633) then he proceeded in a southwesterly direction. He was the predecessor to a stream of cultural and religious exchanged over the following centuries.

China and Central Asia have been linked through commerce from the dawn of civilization. Buddhism was introduced into China from Central Asia, which served as a transit route for Buddhism for several centuries. According to the Chinese, Buddhism was introduced in China in about 217 B.C. During the Han period most of these monks were Kashmiris who had settled in Kasghar, Khotan and Kuche. Further impetus was received by Buddhism after the 4th Buddhist Council of Kaniska when the Mahayana was given a formal shape. It was from China that Buddhism reached the countries of Korea, Mongolia and Japan. As a result of Kaniska's council, there burst forth an enthusiastic missionary spirit among Kashmiris who carried this religion to China across difficult passes and thus produced a great fermentation and controversy in Chinese thought.

During the reign of Kushana rulers, many Kashmiri monks went to China for the propagation of the Buddhism doctrines, Famous among the monks who propagated Buddhism in China during the fourth and fifth centuries are Sangabhutti, Kumarajiva, Buddhayasa, Guatam Sangadeva, Punyatrata, Vikmalaksha and Guna Varman. Vikmalaksha and Buddabhadra went to Nankin to China to work with Kumarajiva.

Sangabhuti, the first Kashmiri monk reached the capital of China in 381 A.D. and remained there till his death. He is said to have translated several works on Buddhism in the Chinese script. His translation of *Arya- Vasumita- Bodhi dattva- Sangiti Sastra* into Chinese script done in 384 A.D is still available. The other important work was his commentary on *Vinaya Pitaka* (disciplinary code) Sarvastivada School.

Kumarajiva (A.D 344-413), a Kuchean monk of mixed Indian ancestry was born in 340. He was the first master of Sautrantika School and was of great spiritual discernment and a brilliant reputation. Kumarajiva studied the Sarvastivada doctrine under the guidance of Bandudhatta in Kashmir. He is a noticeable figure and his careers illustrates several points of importance. First, his father came from India and he himself went as a youth to study in Kashmir and then returned to Kucha. Living in these remote corners of Central Asia he was recognized as an encyclopedia of India learning, including knowledge of the Vedas and Hereticalsastra. Secondly, after his return to Kucha, he was converted to the Mahayana. Thirdly, he went from Kucha to China, where he had a distinguished career as a translator. Some 300 translations of Buddhist texts into Chinese are attributed to him. Kumarajiva translated many Mahayana texts into Chinese including the *Saddamapundrika (the lotus sutra)* and *the Sukhavativyuha (the land of bliss)*. The translation of Kumarajiva is taken into consideration as one of the greatest and most popular translation. *Yuikyo-gyo, the sutras of last instruction*, translated by him in the early 5th century is regarded as one of the best among Chinese sutra translations.

Guatam Sanghadeva was another Kashmiri Buddhist monk who went to China about 384 A.D after remaining in north India for seven years. He met Sangabhuti, the first Kashmiri monk to have settled in China. He also undertook the work of translation and in all he translated eight works in Chinese in collaboration with Fahein.

Punyatrata and Dharmayases, the two monks of great repute had translated some Buddhist work on Chinese with the help of his compatriot and returned to China.

Vimlaksha, the teacher of Kumarajiva, from whom he learnt Vinaya at Kucha met him in China, while he was translating books in 406 A.D. After the death of Kumarajiva 413 A.D., Vimlaksha went to south China, where he translated two books.

The Buddhist monks not only increased intellectual communication and the spread of knowledge between India and China but also enlarged commercial transactions between the two civilizations. A large number of Buddhist pilgrim and preachers often function as agents for Buddhist text, icons, silk and relics to pay for their travel cost, to win patronage and to receive hospitality. The relics of the Buddha gained in commercial value when there was a market demand for them. Buddhist relics played a special role in the trade route, and the trade route played a special role in the development of Buddhism

However, Ladakh acted as a meeting point of the Indian, Central Asian and Chinese culture during the medieval period. The sources of the history of the Ladakh show that it remained one of the most important trade routes between Kashmir and Central Asia during the 16th and 17th centuries.

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