

RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF RATNAGIRI, THE HILL OF JEWELS

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Abstract

Ratnagiri, the Hill of Jewels is one of the famous Buddhist establishments in India. It is situated in Bari block of modern Jajpur district in Odisha. This monastery like Nalanda, Takshashila and Vikramshila Mahavihara of ancient India disseminated spiritual knowledge of Buddhist philosophy and culture. This site is regarded as a segment of Diamond Triangle comprised of Ratnagiri, Udayagiri and Lalitgiri of Odisha. Manmohan Chakravarti discovered this site in 1906. Many scholars, historians, Buddhist philosophers and monks visited this site. In 1958 Prof. Devala Mitra started exploring this centre undertaking excavations in three successive phases (1958-1961). From the excavations it is clear that this site was a Mahayana Buddhist centre. Lama Taranath states that Buddhapaksha, the last Gupta king built this Mahavihara. Eminent Acharya Pito was a yoga teacher here. In 7th century Hiuen Tsang visited Odra (Wucha). He says that many Mahayana Buddhist centres were there in Odisha and majority people followed this religion. In 8th century Bhaumakara rulers of Odisha patronized Mahayana Buddhism. During their reign this Mahavihara flourished to its zenith. By 9th century Mahayana Buddhism being influenced by Hinduism converted to Tantric Buddhism; Bajrayana. Ratnagiri became the main centre of Bajrayana till 12th century. Due to rapid growth of Vaisnavism under the Ganga rulers of Odisha, Buddhism gradually declined. Suryavanshi king Pratapdeva tried to root out this faith from Odisha. As a result this religion lost its ground and the popularity of Ratnagiri faded.

Keywords: *Ratnagiri, Mahavihara, Buddhist Monument, Bari Block, Diamond Triangle, Mahasanghrama, Bajrayana, Tantric Buddhism*



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Introduction

Ratnagiri is a Buddhist establishment of Bari. It is one of the great monasteries of ancient India known as Ratnagiri Mahavihara. It is located on the top of the hillock, a part of the Asia range in Bari Block of modern Jajpur district. This Mahavihara was constructed in the later half of 5th Century or early 6th Century A.D. Gradually it attained phenomenal growth in religion, art and architecture. Its significance rose to the highest pinnacle of glory by 12th Century. This vihara like the famous Nalanda, Takshashila and Vikramshila Mahavihara disseminated Buddhist ideology, culture and philosophy not only all over India but in abroad as well. It became one of the magnificent Buddhist edifices with its marvelous art, architecture and sculpture. Scholars, Buddhist seekers, philosophers and entrants from all over the world poured in to this Mahasanghrama to receive knowledge from eminent

Buddhist monks and intellectuals. By the end of 13th Century A.D. this Buddhist monument suffered a sharp set back probably due to the rise of Brahmanical Saivism, Vaisnavism and Muslim incursions.

This unique Buddhist monument is regarded as a segment of the Diamond Triangle. Ratnagiri, Lalitgiri and Udayagiri, these ancient Buddhist sites are standing on a triangular piece of land coming within the geographical boundary of modern Cuttack and Jajpur districts.

Location

Its geographical location is 20°30' North Latitude and 86°20' East longitude. It is an isolated hillock of Asia range. This hillock is 25 m high and of khandolite formation. It rises abruptly in the midst of a wide expanse of an alluvial plain commanding beautiful view from a distance. This plain is surrounded by three rivers on three sides; the Brahmani, Kimiria and Birupa. It is in the midway between Brahmani and Birupa (3 kms and 2 kms away from the two rivers respectively) a streamlet called Kelua is flowing sluggishly at the foot of Ratnagiri. In olden time this streamlet might be of greater width and depth than that of present. It was certainly a way of communication through which all khandolite and chlorite stones carried to this place for the construction of this monument and fashioning of images.

Ratnagiri is 42 miles away from Cuttack city and 21 miles away from Jajpur town on its south by the Patamundai Canal embankment. The top of Ratnagiri hill offers a panoramic view of the surroundings. As it is an isolated place, full of natural scenic beauty and serenity, presumably Buddhists preferred this site for their penance and austerity.

Exploration

Ratnagiri was at first discovered by Manmohan Chakravartti, who was the sub-divisional officer of Jajpur in 1906. The year of his exploration is exactly not known but his report though brief presents an admirable notice of the mounds. This report was brought out in the Cuttack District Gazetteer.

Then the site was visited by scholars like R.P.Chanda, H.C.Chakaldar, N.K.Bose, N.K.Sahu, Debala Mitra and many others. Regarding the preservation of this historical site, H.C.Chakaldar emphasised that the Archeological Department must, therefore, take up the work of thoroughly exploring the hillock like Ratnagiri that forms one of the major sites of Buddhist Art in India. Archaeology Department must protect this major Buddhist site from ruination.

Religious Background of Ratnagiri

The monastic establishment of Ratnagiri was widely reputed as an important centre of Mahayana Buddhism. The Tibetan Traditions recorded in the Pag Sam Jon Jag inform that Bodhisri and Naropa practised yoga at Ratnagiri in Odisha. Nepalese sources inform that Padmaprabha had his enlightenment at Viraja. Many inscribed slabs have been found in the excavations at Ratnagiri, bear the Buddhist creed or Buddhist text like Pratityo Samutpada Sutra and Dharanis prove that Ratnagiri was a centre of Buddhism. The only record that shows the royal line, from Ratnagiri is a copper plate charter (p-23) of Somavamsi king Karnakeshari. This charter also fails to shed light on Buddhist establishment hereat Ratnagiri. Historians and research scholars find a faint memory of Buddhist establishment at Ratnagiri in a few later Tibetan works. As per Tibetan works Ratnagiri was an important religious and philosophical academy where students and scholars were eager to study and rectify themselves under the intellectual stalwart of Buddhism. Tibetan texts also enumerate that Ratnagiri contributed a lot for the evolution of Kalchakrayana, an offshoot of Vajrayana Buddhism.

Lama Taranath in his book, History of Buddhism in India states in chapter XXI, that towards the end of his life Buddhapaksha, Gupta king built a Vihara called Ratnagiri in the East, in the kingdom of Odivisa (Odisha), on the crest of a hill situated near the sea and in this vihara were kept three sets of Hinayana and Mahayana Sastras and there were eight groups of dharmas (religious groups) and five hundred monks. Moreover, Lama Taranath states that Achary Pito who had his training at Sambhala and had acquired the Siddhi of invisibility, was a renowned teacher of yoga at Ratnagiri, where Abadhuti, Bodhisri and Naropa were his chief disciples.

Nalinaksha Dutta feels that Gupta king Narasingha Gupta Baladitya (First half of six century A.D) was nicknamed as Buddhapaksha, as he was a staunch Buddhist and patronized Buddhism. There is no historical record to connect Narasimha Gupta with the establishment of Ratnagiri. The data derived from the excavation of Ratnagiri, however, go well with the period of Narasimha Gupta Baladitya. Ratnagiri was a Buddhist establishment of which branch of Buddhism was not definitely known. According to Taranath, Ratnagiri had three sets of Hinayana and Mahayana shastras. Hence there was the flourishing of both Hinayana and Mahayan Buddhism at Ratnagiri. Taranatha says that a vihara called Ratnagiri was built on the crest of mountain in the kingdom of Odivisa in the reign of Buddhapaksha.

Ratnagiri was constructed in the later half of fifth century A.D. or early half of six century A.D. Ratnagiri did not flourish much till seventh century because of unstable political situation in India after the fall of Gupta Empire. During Gupta rule Ratnagiri was situated in North Tosali within Odra vishaya. Odra Vishaya was occupied by Harshavardhan. After Harshavardhan, Utkal and Kangoda Mandala assumed their independence. Kangoda was ruled by the Sailodbhavas. Their kingdom extended up to the Mahanadi River. Chinese pilgrim Yuan Chwang (Hiuen Tsang) visited Kangoda Mandal in 639 A.D.

Hiuen Tsang; a Chinese pilgrim visited India during the reign of Harshavardhan. He stayed 15 years in India from 630 AD to 645 AD. His account on India is known as Si-yu-ki. In this account he has given a vivid picture of Buddhism in Odisha. He visited Odisha (Wu-cha) Odra in 638-639 A.D. He was a devout Mahayana Buddhist. He states that majority of the people of Odra were Mahayan Buddhists. There were as many as one hundred Buddhist monasteries and about ten thousand monks. There were two important Buddhist establishments in Odra. One of them contained a famous monastery called Po-si-po-ki-li. Po-si-po-ki-li is transcript as Puspagiri. The identification of this monastery is a matter of controversy. Some scholars like R.Chanda suggests in his memoirs of Archaeological Survey of India No.44 that Puspagiri should be identified with the Udaygiri, Lalitgiri and Ratnagiri of the Cuttack district (undivided). This identification is accepted by many later writers and local people of this area. They call it, at present, as Puspagiri. However Hiuen Tsang does not mention anything about sculptures and images of this monastery and mentions only about the stupas. In seventh century A.D probably the 2nd monastery was built. During this period building activities further accelerated. In eight century during Bhaumakara rule, getting royal patronage the building work got unprecedented growth.

The Baumakaras ruled for about two centuries. The first three rulers of Bhauma dynasty were Parama Upasaka Ksemakara Deva, Parama Tathagata Sivakara Deva and Parama Saugata Subhakara Deva. They all were Mahayana Buddhists. This is enumerated in the Neulpur Copper Plate Charter of Subhakara Deva I.

Subhakara Deva I the king of Bhauma dynasty was an ardent follower of Mahayana Buddhism. All the above mentioned Bauma kings not only actively practised Mahayana Buddhism but also propagated this faith. They constructed a number of monasteries which bear epigraphic evidences. The Dhenkanal plate of Tribhubana Mahadevi-I refers to her predecessors, including Unmata Simha (Shivakara-I) and Gayada Shantikara Deva-I as benevolent kings who exhausted treasure of their vast empire on religious work in order to

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enlighten their own country and others as well. They decorated the earth by constructing in an unbroken continuity various mathas and monasteries (viharas) and temples. In the Baudha plate of Tribhuban Mahadevi-II dated in the year 158 Bhauma Era Subhakaradeva is credited with the erection of many lofty stone viharas.

The Non-Buddhist kings of Bhaumakara dynasty donated land for the ceremonial worship of Buddhist images, maintenance of Buddhist establishments and repair of edifices. Two Talcher charters of the Parama Maheswara Shivakara Deva-III dated in the year 149 Bhauma Era record the grant of two villages for meeting the requirements of the temple of Buddha in Jayasrama Vihar. It is true that not a single record of the Bhauma Kar has yet been discovered at Ratnagiri. But it is equally true that Buddhism and the building enterprise received an unprecedented fillip during Bhaumakara period. The monastery-I was built when Mahayana Buddhism was at its full swing. A large number of images of this pantheon are found there at Ratnagiri. Gradually Mahayana Buddhism transformed into Vajrayana so that by 9th century or even earlier images of Vajrayana deities found at Ratnagiri.

According to the Pag Sam Jon Zang, Acharya Bitoba went (through magic) to Sambhala where he obtained the kalachakra-tantra, brought it to Ratnagiri and explained the doctrine to Abodhutipa, Bodhisri and Naropa. Ratnagiri was a centre of kalachakrayana in the late tenth and early eleventh century A.D. Naropa was an eminent tantrik sage. After Naropa, Jetary became the head of Vajrayana at Ratnagiri. Naropa is represented in some Tibetan Text as a teacher.

S.B.Dasgupta opines, Kalachakrayana is not a distinct school of Tantrik Buddhism but a particular name of the Vajrayana School. The Vajrayana found a strong footing at Ratnagiri. It is evident from the excavation which yielded religious edifices, numerous votive stupas with inscribed slabs and moulded terracotta plaques with Dharani. With a large number of monolithic stupas Ratnagiri commands a prized position among all Buddhist sites in India.

A copper plate charter of Karna Keshari Deva of Somavamsi dynasty is found at Ratnagiri. The record mentions that the king was ruling towards the end of 11th century and the beginning of 12th century A.D. This charter records the grant of a village in favour of Queen Karpurasri who hailed from Solamapura Mahavihara. Probably Karpurasri settled in Ratnagiri either as a lay devotee or a nun and the village was granted to her to meet her personal expenses.

After Karna Deva, the last king of Somavamsi dynasty, Odisha was ruled by the Ganga dynasty. Ratnagiri was not much affected by this political change. But after 13th Century A.D. building activity suffered a sharp decline till it came to a standstill. It lost its importance due to lack of royal patronage and victimization of the faith by muslim invaders.

During Gajapati rule in Odisha the Buddhism and its centres completely lost their ground. King Prataparudra Deva appears to have been antagonistic towards this religion. After the fall of Gajapati dynasty there was an effort to revive the dying faith during the reign of Mukunda Deva (1559-68). According Lama Taranath this king of Odisha established a temple for the inmates and a number of smaller centers for the Doctrine.

The Sambhal-lam-yig also records the construction of many Buddhist structures by Mukunda Deva in the country of Odisha. Initially he was a follower of Brahmanical religion but later on he is stated to have been influenced by his queen; a believer in Buddha. After Mukunda Deva, Odisha passed into the possession of Sulaiman Karani. Then Odisha became a part of Mughul empire. The restoration of the main stupa was probably undertaken during the reign of Mukunda Deva. Some repairing work was also done to the dilapidated monastery – I.

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