

BUDDHIST CULTURE IN ANCIENT KASHMIR

DR MUSHTAQ AHMAD ITOO

Introduction

Kashmir is an ancient land mentioned in the Greek classics of Ptolemy, Dionysius and Herodotus. The Greeks referred to Kashmir as Kaspapyros and describe it as one of the cities of Gandhara Mahajanapada. Huien-Tsang described it as Kia-Shi-Mi-Lo. The Tibetans refer to Kashmir as Khachul but the valley is known to its inhabitants as Kashir¹. Kashmir has a unique position among the nations surrounding or encircling it, as it is geographically encased in mountain barriers and could have been thought to have existed and flourished in isolation like an island.

In the past, from the 3rd Century B.C to about the 12th Century A.D, Kashmir was inhabited by Buddhists and ruled by illustrious Buddhist Kings, most notably Ashoka and Kanishka of Mauryan and Kushan dynasty respectively. It was a place adorned with exquisite Buddhist art, sculpture and architecture of high aesthetic and spiritual appeal. The history of Buddhism in Kashmir has not been much different than its history in the rest of the country. It is believed that Kapil the propounder of 'Sankhya Darshana' and the famous Buddhist philosopher and thinker Nagarjuna were Nagas. After the induction of Aryans these aborigines of Kashmir accepted the Vedic religion and thereafter the Buddhism. The introduction of Buddhism to Kashmir according to the Ceylonese Chronicle is attributed to a monk namely **Majjhantika**, a disciple of **Ananda** who was the constant companion and contemporary of Mahatma Buddha². According to Dr. Sunil Chandra Ray, Buddhism seems to have obtained a footing in Kashmir as early as the 3rd Century B.C. Kashmiris readily accepted the four Noble Truths and the Eight Fold path of Buddhism. Significantly enough Nagas, an intellectual class though belonging to lower strata of the society, were the first to accept the new faith followed by progressive Kshatriyas and enlightened

¹ Bamzai, P.N.K., "Culture and Political History of Kashmir" vol. i, MD Publications, New Delhi, 1994, p 04

² Mahavamsa (Tr. W.Geigar, 1950), p. 03

Brahmins. Traditions present in the Buddhist texts testify to the prevalence of Buddhism in Kashmir from the third century B.C to the 12th Century A.D. The importance of Kashmir in the history of Buddhism can be viewed from the fact that even the Buddhism in **Tibet** had its origin from Kashmir. Historically speaking, **Ashoka** had a hand in the introduction of Buddhism to Kashmir when he brought 5000 Buddhist monks and settled them in Kashmir to popularize the Hinayana Buddhism in Kashmir and its adjacent territories. During his reign the city of Srinagar in Kashmir was found at the present site of Pandrethan, which soon developed to be a fabulous city characterized by uniquely Buddhist cultural landscape consisting of magnificent shrines, monasteries, leading Buddhist learning centres and other varied Buddhist monuments. He built many Buddhist statues throughout the valley of Kashmir, some of which were still standing at the time of the great Chinese traveler Hieun-Tsang in the 7th century A.D. he gifted the beautiful valley of Kashmir to the Buddhist Sangha considering it as an ideal place for the propagation of Buddhism. However his son **Jaluka** was an anti Buddhist and is said to have revived the Shiva cult in Kashmir³. After the fall of Mauryan dynasty Kashmir came under the occupation of **Indo-Greeks**, whose one of the great kings **Menander** propagated the cult of Buddhism in Kashmir. It is said that there took place a discussion at a place not far from Kashmir on Buddhism between King Milind or Menander of Indo-Greeks and a monk- Nagasen, following which Menander embraced Buddhism and became an Arhat. The discussion between a monk and a King was later on given a book shape in the form of Milindapanha. The book informs us that Menander built the Milindavihara and joined the Sangha as a monk and finally attained Arhathood. The Milindapanha was written in Kashmir but later on was translated into Pali. It was during the rule of Indo-Greeks that took place the development of Gandhara or the Graeco-Buddhist art, depicting scenes from the life of Buddha⁴.

Kushans:-

The Kushans came to power in India in the beginning of the Christian era. Having conquered the whole of northern India including Gandhara, Kashgar, Yaqand and Khutan, they brought Kashmir too under their sway. As per Chinese Buddhist writings the great Kushan ruler- **Kanishka** was drawn closer to Buddhism when he came in contact with **Ashvaghosha**, the most renowned Buddhist scholar at Pataliputra. Ashvaghosha was a philosopher, intellectual, poet, musician, dramatist and author. He has written the famous epic 'Buddha Charita' in Sanskrit, which is the complete life story of Buddha. The King was so impressed with the teachings of Ashvaghosha, that he invited him to Peshawar. It was in his capital city of Peshawar that the great King embraced Buddhism and thus reestablished Buddhism in Kashmir. Though he became a Buddhist but was quite tolerant towards other faiths. This is well reflected in the images of his coins produced during his reign which show the

³ Bamzai, P.N.K., Op.cit, 01, p. 31

⁴ Bamzai, P.N.K, Op.cit, 01, p. 81

figures of various Hindu, Persian and Greek deities. His Empire extended outside the frontiers of India and included the whole of Trans-Pamir region, such as Kashgar, Yarkhand, Khoton, Bactria and the territories between the Hindukush in Central Asia, Kabul and the Himalayan region. He is said to have built a large number of Chaityas and Monasteries in Kashmir. The importance of Kashmir in the history of Buddhism can be viewed from the fact that the **4th Buddhist council** took place in Kashmir during the reign of Kanishka in the 1st Century A.D. The council was chaired by **Vasumitra** and its vice chairman was Ashvaghosha. The purpose of the Council was to settle the strife between the contending Buddhist sects and to collect, collate and finalize the fundamental Buddhist principles. The Council also gave birth to the new school of Buddhism known as Mahayana Buddhism. The religious policy of Kanishka stated that Bodhisattva would work for the salvation of all beings. Hence during the reign of Kanishka, people didn't need to undergo hardship and penance in order to attain salvation. Kanishka replaced the worship of Buddhist symbols like Buddha's footprints, Dharmachakra, stupa or Bodhi tree by initiating the worship of Buddha and Bodhisattva. The meeting place of the said council was Kundalvana, a monastery near Shalimar. The council was attended by around five hundred Buddhist monks and arhats who came from all parts of India and made an exhaustive examination of all authoritative Buddhist literature. The entire proceedings of the conference were inscribed on copper plates in Sanskrit, enclosed in stone boxes and deposited in a Vihar. According to the Buddhist sources King Kanishka donated entire Kashmir to Sangha after the Council was over. During the reign of Kanishka, Kashmir became a high school of Mahayana Buddhism and attracted scholars and pilgrims from distant lands who studied the Buddhist texts at the feet of the learned pandits of the Valley. Nagarjuna, the monk credited with bringing Buddhism to Ladakh, resided at the monastery built near Harwan. He was born in the land of Vidarbha (Berar) as the son of a wealthy Brahman. His parents sent him on a journey to other places till he arrived at Nalanda and here he became a monk, and devoted himself to Buddhist studies⁵. After attaining the age of maturity, he lived in the court of Kanishka and founded the Madhyamika school of Buddhism. The glorious role that Kashmir played in the development of Mahayana Buddhism and its propagation in the distant Central Asia and China is still preserved in Buddhist texts and translations in Ceylon, Tibet and China. The number of Buddhist scholars who went to China from Kashmir was larger than that of those who went from other parts of India. Dr .P. C Bagchi, a noted indologist and scholar of excellence, writes in his famous work 'India and China': Kashmir takes the leading part in the transmission of Buddhist thought and traditions directly to Tibet and China. Though Vedic religion existed side by side, Buddhism was most popular in the valley during the Kushan period. It was the centre of most powerful Buddhist sect of Northern India known as 'Sarvastivada'. A few of the most important Kashmiri missionaries were Kumarjiva, Yasa, Vima Laksha,

⁵ Sufi, G.M.D, "Kasheer" Capital Publishing House, Vol. i, New Delhi, 1996, p. 42

Buddhiviyasa etc. To such an extent was politics dominated by religion that **Kalhana** in his **Rajtarangini** says the Bodhisattva Nagarjuna was virtually the 'sole supreme ruler of the land'⁶. After the fall of Kushan dynasty, Buddhism received a temporary setback in Kashmir valley. The first organized crusade against Buddhism in Kashmir was made by Raja Nara. He harassed and terrorized Buddhists to such an extent that famous Buddhist scholar Nagarjuna had to run away from Kashmir to South India. Later in the 5th Century A.D it was nearly wiped off the valley by the Hun ruler Mihirkulla. He harassed the Buddhists of Kashmir and devastated large number of Buddhist Viharas, Chaityas and Mathas. However the successor of Mihirkulla seems to have atoned for his predecessor's sins by restoring the Chaityas and Mathas throughout the valley of Kashmir.

Till the advent of Karkota dynasty, the Gonanda dynasty gave Kashmir only two notable rulers viz. Meghavan and Pravarsena. The former was a pious and a strong ruler with Buddhist learning's. He stopped the killing of animals and birds throughout his kingdom and was well influenced by the Buddhist doctrine of Ahimsa. His wife Amritaprabha erected a Vihara for Buddhist pilgrims from foreign lands⁷. During the reign of Pravarsena, his uncle Jayendra built the famous Jayendravihara and under Yudhisthira ii, the son of Pravarsena, several Viharas and Chaityas were erected by the King and his courtiers. Galuna, the minister of King Vikramaditya constructed the Vihara in Srinagar and named it after his wife Ratnavali⁸. With the foundation of **Karkota** dynasty in Kashmir in the 7th Century A.D Buddhism again received a patronage from its rulers. The two Kings of the dynasty namely Durlabahavardhana (600-636 A.D) and Lalitaditya-Muktaida (724- 761 A.D) provided conducive atmosphere for the propagation of Buddhism in Kashmir. It was during the reign of Durlabahavardhana that the famous Chinese pilgrim **Huien-Tsang** visited Kashmir in the year 629 A.D and copied here large number of Buddhist manuscripts and studied here the Sutras, Shastras and other Buddhist scriptures at the feet of learned men. The King provided him twenty clerks who copied the religious scriptures for him. From his accounts it becomes quite clear that the king was well inclined towards Buddhism and established large number of mathas and viharas in the Kashmir region. He mentions 100 monasteries in Kashmir in 631 A.D while as his successor Ou-Kong who came a century later found 300 monasteries in the Kashmir valley, which clearly shows that Buddhism was still in ascendancy. During the reign of Lalitaditya-Muktaida, Buddhism received official protection. He served both Hindus as well as Buddhists in Kashmir. He liberally patronized many Buddhist scholars and Viharas where learning flourished. Archaeological excavations at Parihaspora have brought to light Buddhist structures, a stupa, a monastery and a Chaitya. Among the sculptures discovered at Parihaspora, there

⁶ Bazaz, P.N., "The History of Struggle for Freedom in Kashmir" Gulshan Publishers, Residency Road, Srinagar, 2003, p. 08

⁷ Bazaz, P.N, Op.cit, 07, p. 199

⁸ The Last Buddhist of Kashmir (Sanskrit Studies vol. ii)

are two images of Bodhisattva and one of Buddha⁹. All these archaeological excavations prove the popularity of Buddhism in Kashmir and the patronage which it received at the hands of Karkota rulers. After the fall of Karkota dynasty Buddhism because of the loss of State patronage and its inherent weaknesses started decaying in Kashmir. During the reign of **Lohara** dynasty in Kashmir, there was a brief attempt to revive Buddhism in Kashmir but in vain. By the time of king Harshavardhana the Buddhist Sun in Kashmir had set. In the 12th Century, Buddhism received patronage from the ruler Jayasimha who became the king of Kashmir in the year 1128 A.D. He built many Buddhist Viharas and repaired several. His queens and courtiers are also recorded to have built Viharas and Chaityas. By the end of 13th Century, Buddhism disappeared from the Valley. Some of the followers perhaps adopted Islam and the rest found a welcome home in Ladakh, where it is still the predominant faith.

After going through the bird's eye view of the development and decay of Buddhism in Kashmir, one is supposed to conclude that amongst the main centres of Buddhist learning's, the region of Kashmir has an important place. Buddhism enjoyed the status of a predominant faith for a period of Ten centuries in Kashmir. However from the 8th century onwards it began to decline and after 13th century was completely ousted from the valley. According to Dr. Sunil Chandra Ray it was the growing Vaishnava and Shiva faith which overshadowed Buddhism in Kashmir¹⁰. However P.N.K Bamzai states that the loss of royal patronage to Buddhism led to its decline¹¹.

⁹ Dar, M. Ashraf, "Religions of Ancient Kashmir: A case study of Buddhism" an Unpublished Thesis in the Department of Ancient Indian History, Culture and Archeology, Vikram University, Ujjain, 2012, p. 66

¹⁰ Dr. Ray, S.C, "Early History and Culture of Kashmir" 2nd edition, 1970, p. 165

¹¹ Bamzai, P.N.K, Op.cit, 01, p. 72