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Buddhism in Kashmir: From the lens of Chinese travelers

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Abstract

The modern day Himalayan union territory of Jammu & Kashmir has long been acted as a gateway to not only India but to the whole central Asia. It is due to this fact this place have enjoyed the privilege to enrich itself with multi-cultural tenets of almost every central Asian country. The historical sources suggests that that Buddhism paved its way into China in the first century of common-era and Buddhism was by then an established faith of Kashmir. The Chinese thrust of getting acquainted with the detail doctrinal aspects of the Buddhism made them travel towards their western neighbor and hence a new form of inter-cultural journey begun.

The records of Fa-hien, Hiuen-tsang and I-tsing are well known to the students and scholars and have served one of the primary sources for the study of history of India. This paper will attempt to analyze the Buddhism and Buddhist practices of Kashmir region through the lens of Chinese travelers. Apart from above mentioned big names few other monks from china also travelled to the Kashmir region such as Fa-yong, Che-mong and Ou-Kong and a reference will also be made from their records.

Keywords: Chinese travelers, Buddhism, Kashmir

Introduction

Jammu and Kashmir has distinct geographical regions, Jammu region lies across the Shivalik hills extended from Basholi and Kathua in the east and Pir-Panjal mountain ranges in the North. Kashmir valley is an oval shaped stretched of land between inner Himalaya drain of one of the most scenic Jhelum river. The Buddhist ruins and remains witnessed that Buddhism was pre-dominated religion of Jammu & Kashmir from 3rd BC to 12th C.E. It is after the conclusion of 3rd Buddhist council at Patliputra modern day Patna in Bihar the king Ashoka send Buddhist Missionaries to the different parts of the world to propagate the Dhamma preached by the Buddha. In due course of propagation a monk named Majjhantika was sent to Kashmir and hence paved its way into the valley region ^[1]. Buddhism enjoyed royal patronage from king Ashoka to king Kanishka. The king Kanishka hosted the 4th Buddhist council in Kashmir and afterwards constructed the stupa to commemorate the occasion. The tradition suggests that Asoka begun a pan India project to build 84,000 stupa and chaitya's including Kashmir. The contribution of Kashmir in the development of Buddhism has long been acknowledged my many histories of native and neighboring land like China and Tibet. Some important monuments are Harwan Buddhist monastery, Parihaspur Mahavihara, Parihaspur stupa, Uskur, Malangpur, Pandrethan, Surasa vihar etc. are the relic site of Buddhism presently in ruins.

The history of Buddhism in Kashmir was discussed in both native chronicles like Nilamatpurna and Rajatarangni and foreign accounts like Si-yu-ki. Greek sources are where Kashmir was first mentioned, followed by Chinese accounts. On their approach to the hallowed Indian Plains, Buddhist pilgrims from China in the past stopped in Kashmir and made it their resting place. Since, the paper priority is to underline the narratives provided by the records of Chinese missionary travelers a brief account of each of them about Buddhism in Kashmir is presented below.

Fahien

When Fa hien traveled to India in 399 A.D., he noted that Buddhism was thriving there and that Indian literature had spread widely over central Asia, despite the fact that he did not

personally see the valley proper. He traveled to China with a Kashmiri accomplice by the name of Buddhajiva ^[2].

Che-mong

Another Chinese monk, Che-mong, left Cha' ang-an on his journey in the year 404 AD. Up until they reached the Pamir's, where Che Mong managed to cross with only six of his comrades, they journeyed through central Asia with fourteen other monks and a Kashmiri monk serving as their guide. While traversing the passes, the Kashmiri guide also died. Che-Mong and his companions stayed in Kashmir for a long period ^[3].

Fa-yong

More time was spent studying Sanskrit and Buddhist lore in Kashmir by Fa yong and his colleagues. Both Che mong and Fa yong visited Kashmir at different times and stayed there until 420 C.E. fa-yong traveled through turfan, kucha kashghar, the Pamir Mountains, the Gilgit valley, and finally reached Kashmir with 20 monks. This demonstrates that, although Buddhism did not leave any records, it was a tremendous center of learning and was in full bloom during those few years ^[4].

Hiuen tsang

Hiuen Tsang universally respected Chinese Traveler and great master of the Law who visited Kashmir during his voyage to India, and resided here as honored guest for 2 years from (631 to A 633)C.E.

Hiuen Tsang was born in 6th April 602 AD in Chen-le as a teenage boy he was keen to read religious books and studying the ideas with his father, like is elder brother he became the student of Buddhist studies at Ching-tu monastery. Hiuen Tsang was ordained as a Sramanera (Novice monk) at the age of 13 but, due to the political and social unrest triggered by the fall of the Sui dynasty he went to the Chengdu in Sichuan where he was ordained as a Bhikshu (full monk). At the age of 20 he travelled throughout the China in search of sacred books of Buddhism. In course of this noble search he came to Chang'an than under the peaceful rule of Taizong of Tang where Hiuen Tsang developed the desire to visit India inspired from the visit of Fai hien's visit and satisfy his quest for the major Buddhist texts which further had paved the way for sincere consolidation of Buddhism.

At the age of 27 he began his seventeen years long journey to India and as a result what we get today is Si-yu-ki. He had mentioned number of places including Kashmir as Kia-shi-mi-lo in his record.

Hiuen Tsang entered the valley from the west in September 631 C.E. and lived there for 2 years. He mentions of a stone gate where he met by the younger brothers of the king's mother, after paying his devotion at the sacred monuments he went for a night monastery of Hu-sc-tri or Hushkash opposite to Baramulla. Hiuen Tsang visited Kashmir during the region of Durlabhavardhan and warm reception was given to him ^[5].

According to Hiuen Tsang Kashmir is surrounded by lofty mountains which is a correct description of valley itself but when he goes on to say that its circuit is 7 thousand li or 1166 miles, he must refer to extended kingdom of Kashmir not to the valley only, which is only 3 hundred miles in circuit, but extend of the political boundary from Indus on the North in the South and Indus in the North and Ravi on

the East. The capital of the country on the west sides is bordered by great rivers. The soil is fit for producing cereals, land is full of fruit and flowers, fragrant turmeric the fo-chu and medicinal plants. The climate is cold and stern and there is much snow but little wind. The people wear leather doublets and clothes of white linen. They are light and frivolous and of weak pusillanimous disposition the people are handsome in appearance but are very cunning ^[6]. They love learning and are well instructed and consist of both heretics and believers. He mentions of about 100 Sangharamas and 5000 priests. There are 4 stupas built by Ashoka each of these are about contain a pint measure of relics of Tathagata Buddha. The most important fact mentioned by Hiuen tsang in his records was, once a dragon lake in old times and the lord Buddha told Ananada that after three hundred years of his Mahaparinirvana an arhat named Majjhantika will found a kingdom in this land and will civilize (Pacific) the people and by his effort spread the law of Buddha.

In the fifteenth year after the Mahaparinirvana, the disciple of Ananda (Majjhantika) the arhat having obtained the six spiritual facilities and been gifted with the Vimokshas heard of the prediction of Buddha his heart was overjoyed and repaired to this country. He was sitting tranquilly in a wood on the top of the high mountain crag, and exhibited great spiritual change, the dragon beholding it was filled with deep faith and requested to know what he desired, and the arhat said I request you give a spot in the middle of the lake just biggest for my knees. On this the dragon withdraw water so far and gave the spot, then by his spiritual power the Arhat increase the size of his body, whilst the dragon king kept back water with all might. So the lake became dry and water exhausted. On this Naga taking his flight asked for places. The Arhat then said "to the north west of this is a pool about 100 li in circuit in the little lake you and your prosperity may continue to dwell. The Naga said the lake and land being mutually transferred let me allow to make my religion offerings to you, Majjhantika said not long hence I shall entre on the nirvana without remnants (Anupadhiseha) although I should allow your request how can I do it, the Naga then pressed his request in this way "May five hundred arhats then ever receive my offering till the end of the law, after which I allowed to return to this country to dwell in it as a lake Majjhantika granted his requested. Then the arhat having this land by exercise of his great spiritual power founded 500 Sangharamas.

Hiuen tsang further mentioned that king Kanishka became interested in the Buddhist scriptures and asked for a monk to guide him the teachings of the Dharma but he left unsatisfied and then consulted the venerable Parsva about the true doctrine ^[7]. It was on his advice that he decided to convene fourth Buddhist council in which various sect were represented. He was an anxious to put an end to the dissensions in the faith or church. The king built a monastery for accommodation of 500 monks who were called upon to write commentaries on pitakas. The commentary on the sutta pitaka was composed in 100000 Slokas and the vinaya vibhasa a commentary on vinaya pitaka also consist 100000 Slokas and also the Abhidhamma vibhasa which composed in council also to the same number. Hiuen tsang mentions of the Jusk vihara where he stayed for the night after his entry into the valley at Baramulla. He also speaks about Jayendra Vihara founded by maternal uncle of Parvasena-2 where he stayed for the

couple of years and received teachings on various shastras [8] Huien tsang records proves beyond doubt that Kashmir even during his visit was the center of Buddhist learning and there were several distinguished Buddhist scholars in the valley who not only commanded mastery over the vibhasa and upadesha shastra but, also continue composing texts of important subjects with unabated and unflagged zeal and enthusiasm.

Ou-Kong

The next Chinese traveler who visited Kashmir was Ou – Kong. He reached Kashmir in 759 C.E. From Gandhara using the same route opted by Hiuen tsang. He stayed here for four years. Ou Kong visited Kashmir during the reign of king Lalitaditya of Karakota dynasty. There was a friendly relation between China and Kashmir during this period which facilitated of Buddhist missionaries between the two countries. The king of Kashmir sent religious teacher from royal family to China and this greatly inspired Ou Kong to visit Kashmir. Here the king gave him a warm welcome and was admitted into Husakpur monastery and put under three teachers Upadhaya Kamacharya and Acaraya who taught him the vinaya text in seven sections [9]. The Husakpur monastery which according to his Chinese records is Mung ti was identified by Sten konow is located in the village Uskar (Huskapura). It is during this time there are more than three hundred Viharas in Kashmir and considerable stupas and images which according to Ou-Kong built by King Asoka. Besides Mung ti vihara Ou Kong mentions the seven Buddhist establishments in the valley Nago-mi-to-pwan (Amitabhavana), Ngo namli (Anandabhavan), ki teche (Krtiyasrama-vihara jo-jo, k'o-toon. Among them the famous Vihara was Amritabhavan vihar identified by Stein, the Vihara was flourished during the time of Ou Kong visit who mentioned that it as a Ngo-mi-too-po-wan (Transcribed as Amitabhvan) presently identified in suburb of Srinagar the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir [10]. He also supported the fact that Sarvastivada was dominating Buddhist sect in Kashmir at that time. He further mentions that ruler of Karakota dynasty who ruled during the eight century were the staunch follower of Shaivism and Vaishnavism faith but also kept a friendly and favorable attitude towards the Buddhist faith. It can also easily be assessed by the fact that the king of the Karakota Dynasty Lalitaditya founded one Rajavihara with the large quadrangle and large Chaitya are in Parishapur modern day Paraspur and also built an another Vihara with stupa at Huskapur near Baramulla.

Ou-Kong, the famous Chinese Pilgrim who visited Kashmir in the middle of eighth century A.D. mentions of the three most important trade routes of the country. These great routes traversed the high mountains which surround the valley of Kashmir and formed the main lines of communication between the valley and the outside world from the ancient times. The first route leads over the Zoji La pass to Ladakh and thence to Tibet through Demchok. The second route leads through upper Kishenganga valley and from there to Skardu to join the Gilgit route across Khunjab pass to Central Asia and Chinese Turkistan. The third route follows the river Jhelum along the Baramulla gorge towards the west. This is the easiest route as it does not involve crossing of any high mountain passes [11].

Ou-Kong has given very interesting description of Kashmir where he stayed for few years where studied Sanskrit.

He again went back to Gandhara and stayed at Jou lo li monastery where he found that large number of monastery built by the relatives of the kings who said to have been the descendant of king Kanishka. He visited the stupa which was built by king Kanishka which contains the relics of Gautama Buddha. Further he start his journey to different places associated with Gautama Buddha such as Kapilavastu, Bodhgaya and Sarnath.

Conclusion

Chinese travelers have often documented their experiences in Kashmir through their travelogues. Their writings provides us unique perspective on the regions culture, landscape and the people. Despite the fact that their time periods were different so as their rich content the common theme was the detail description of Buddhism and the natural beauty of Himalayas. The most renowned Chinese monk Hiuen Tsang provided most detail information among them. He visited Kashmir, and his writings serve as a prism through which we can observe the historical background of Buddhist Kashmir and its interactions with neighboring regions. Although his observations are reliable source, they only cover a particular historical period and point of view. They continue to be researched by academics who are interested in the history, culture, and religious practices of the area because they provide a priceless window into the past. He also went to a number of Buddhist temples, making notes about the surroundings, the facilities, and the artifacts and relics kept there. His views shed light on Kashmir's status of Buddhism at the time.

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