

NAGAPATTINAM – RENOWNED BUDDHIST CENTRE

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Abstract

Nagapattinam is one of major port cities in Tamil Nadu. It became a well-known city during the period of Pallavas and Medieval Colas. Many foreign travellers used to reach Tamil Nadu via Nagapattinam. Buddhism rose to prominence in Nagapattinam because many Chinese travellers visited this place for their business purposes. This paper will discuss the importance of Nagapattinam as a Buddhist centre.

Nagapattinam was considered to be a chief Buddhist centre from the time of the Pallavas, that is from 6th century AD. This was confirmed by a famous Chinese traveller I-Tsing in his observations.

The city served as an important Buddhist centre during the Pallava and Medieval Chola period. Although there were other port cities like Mahabalipuram and Vasava-samudram, the Chinese and Javanese travellers used only Nagapattinam to reach Tamil Nadu.

Many Chinese Buddhists came to Nagapattinam for trading and they needed a place to pray. As a result of this they constructed a Buddhist temple which later came to be called "China Pagoda". This temple was built during the reign of Pallava king Narasimha-Varma II after gaining his permission. During this period, again, Vajrabodhi (661-730 AD) a great Buddhist Acharya, went to China and presented the Buddhist text *Mahā Prajñā Pāramitā* to the Chinese king and also spread Vajrayāna Buddhism in China.

Marcopolo was travelling to China through Nagapattinam in 13th century AD. He found a *stūpa* in Nagapattinam, which provides us with the following account¹:

"It is surrounded with stones. There is *stūpa* of earth and brick many feet high. It bears the following Chinese inscriptions – The work was finished in the eighth moon,

of the third year-Hiun-tsung (1267)'. It is related that these characters have been engraved by some Chinese imitation of inscriptions on stone of these countries; up to the present time they have not been destroyed."

During 8th – 9th century Buddhism flourished in Nagapattinam. It was told by Guruparampara records of the Sri vaisnavas that the Buddhist idol was removed and a Vaishnavite temple was constructed for Lord Srī Raṅganâṭā of Srirangam by the devout Vaishnava saint Tirumaṅgai Alvar².

Tamil Kings strongly patronized the spread of Buddhism in Nāgapattīgam and the religion had the support of the king Rajaraja Chola I. This period was also considered to be the golden age of Buddhism. As depicted by Larger and Smaller Leiden copper plates, Rajaraja Chola I permitted the Sailendra king Maravijayatungavarman to build a Vihara and a Palli in the name of the latter's father Cudamanivarman of the Sailendra dynasty of Srivijaya (Sumatra, Java and Malaya) . Rajaraja I also gifted a heavy grant to this Cudamani Vihara and during the 21st year of his rule. He made the copper plate grant of the village Anaimangalam to the Vihara made by Rajaraja I.

The following is an extract from the Larger Leiden Copper plate tell about the grant given by Rajaraja I (lines 73-86):

- ७५ । राजराजो राजकेसरी ॥
 ७६ । वर्मा स्वसाम्राज्य वर्ष एक विंशतितमे निखिल धरणि तिलकायमाने क्ष ।
 ७७ । त्रियशिरवामणि वलनाङ्गनाम्नि महति जनपदनिवाहे पट्टनक्करर नाम्नि जनप ।
 ७८ । देऽनेकसुर सदन सत्रप्ररामाभिरामेविविध सौध राजमाने ना -
 ७९ । गी पट्टने निजमति विभव विजितसुरगुरुणा बुधजन कमलवनमरीचिमालि आ ।
 ८० । त्रिंजन कल्पपादपेन शैलेन्द्रवंशन श्रीविषयाधिपति -
 ८१ । ना कटाहाधिपत्यमातन्वता मकरध्वजेनाधिगता सकल राजविद्यस्य चूला -
 ८२ । मणिवर्मणः पुत्रेण श्रीमारविजयोत्तुंगवर्मणा स्वपितुर्नाम्ना निर्मापितं अध -
 ८३ । रिकृत कनकगिरी समुन्नति विभवं अतिरमणीयञ्चूलामणि वर्मणस्य विहारं अधिल
 ८४ । सते बुध्दय तस्मिन्नेव धनपदनिवाहे पट्टनक्करनाम्नि जनप -
 ८५ । दे करिणी परिक्रमण विस्पष्टसीमा चतुष्टयं आनैमंगलाभि -
 ८६ । धानं ग्राममदात् ॥

Translation :

“(73-86) He, this Rajakesarivarman Rājārāja , who had seen the other shore of the ocean of the collection of all sciences, whose foot-

stool was made yellow by the cluster of rays (emanating) from many a gem set on the borders of the beautiful gold diadems worn by the entire circle of kings, gave, in the twenty-first year of his universal sovereignty to the Buddha residing in the surpassingly beautiful Chulamanivarma-vihara, of (such) high loftiness (as had) belittled the Kanakagiri (i.e. Meru), which had been built-in the name of his father, by the glorious Maravijayottungavarman, who, by the greatness of his wisdom, had conquered the teacher of the gods, who was the sun to the lotus-forest (*viz.*) the learned men, who was the Kalpa-tree to supplicants, who was born in the Sailendra family, who was the lord of the Sri – Vishaya (country), who was conducting the rule of Kataha, who had the Makara crest, (and) who was the son of Chulamanivarman that had mastered all state craft-at Nagipattana, delightful (on account of) many a temple, rest-house, water-shed and pleasure garden and brilliant with arreys of various kinds of mansions, (situated) in the divisions called Pattana-kurra (included) in the big group of districts named Kshatriyasikhamani-valanadu, which was the forehead-mark of the whole earth, the village named Anaimangalam (which had its) four boundaries defined by the circumambulation of the female elephant and (which was situated) in the division called Pattana-kurra (included) in the same group of districts (as had been named above)''.

During the period to Kulotunga I, the ambassadors from kingdom of Kitaram came to Nagapattinam to appeal for the issue of grants in the form of copper plate inscription depicting the facilities and privileges to the Sri Sailendra Cutamanivarma Vihara³.

The Kalyani inscription⁴ provides evidence that Buddhism prevailed in Nagapattinam even after the Chola period. This 1467 AD inscription also depicts a tale of some Teravāda Buddhists travelling to Nagapattinam and worshipping in Padarikarama monastery.

Valentyn who visited Nagapattinam in 1725 AD also mentions China pagoda in his travelogue⁵. Sir Walter Eliot makes a mention about the "China Pagoda" before it was demolished by Jesuits in 1867 AD. Eliot describes this Pagoda as follows :

"Till within the last few years there was to be seen on the Coromandel coast, between one and two miles to the north of Nakapattinam, a tall weather-beaten tower, affording a useful landmark to vessels passing up and down the coast. It went by various names, as the Puduveligopuram, the old pagoda, Chinese pagoda..."⁶

Notes :

1. Cited by T.N. Ramachandran, *Bulletin of the Madras Museum, The Nagapattinam and other Buddhist Bronzes in the Madras Museum*, Madras, 1992, p.5.
2. *ibid.* p. 15.
3. Venkatasami, Mayilar cini, *Pauthamum Tamilum*, Saiva Siddhanta works Publishing Societym Tirunelveli, N.D.. P. 51.
4. *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. XXII., pp. 241 - 54, 276 - 278.
5. T.N. Ramachandran, *Bulleting of the Madras Museum*, p. 20.
6. *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. VII., pp. 224 - 227

Bibliography :

1. *Story of Buddhism with special Reference to South India*, by A. Aiyappan and P.R. Srinivasan, Government of Madras, Madras 1960.
2. *Buddhism in Tamil Nadu Collected papers*, Edited by R.S. Murthy and M.S. Nagarajan, Institute of Asian Studies, Chennai, 1998.