

BUDDHIST LITERATURE IN TAMIL, PĀLI AND CHINESE FROM TAMILNADU

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Abstract

Buddhism had flourished in Tamilnadu with Royal Patronage for long. This is clearly reflected in the cultural contributions which are in the form of Art, Architecture and Literature. This paper is an attempt to bring to light the Buddhist Monks, Scholars and Poets of High order who have been the pillars of this religion especially in Tamilnadu and their contribution to Buddhism in Tamil, Pali and other foreign languages.

Buddhist monks appointed by King Aśoka were primarily responsible for spread of Buddhism through out India, and Tamilnadu was no exception to it. According to the Aśokan edicts – II and XIII, a South Indian mission was employed specially by king Aśoka to propogate Theravāda. Thus Buddhism was instilled in the land of the Tamils as early as the 3rd C. B. C. This religion flourished in glory for about a few decades and survived till about 16th C.A.D.

Buddhist literature in Tamil :

Ḫam Bodhiyār belonging to the Sangam age (1st or 2nd C.A.D.) who is said to be the author of verse 72, *Narriṇai* is the earliest known author to write on Buddhism in Tamil Language.

Sittalai Sāttanār was an evolved Buddhist and a mature poet of great order. He is the author of one of the five Tamil epic poems, namely the *Maṇimekalai*, the other four epics being *Silappadikāram*, *Cīvācācintāmaṇi*, *Valāyāpati* and *Kuṇḍalakesi*. He followed the Saṅgam poetic tradidion and innovatively knit the Buddhist legends and beliefs in the indigenous story of Maṇimekalai, the heroine, who became a Buddhist nun.

Aravaṇa Aḍigal referred to in the *Maṇimekalai* is a great monk-poet of the Saṅgam age who is said to be responsible for the conversion of Maṇimekalai, the heroine, who was daughter of Kannagi and Kovalan of the first great epic *Cilappadikāram*. Historical facts about Aravaṇa Aḍigal, point out that he was the head of a Vihara in Kāveripattanam and had to abandon the town when it was engulfed by sea; he went to the Chera capital, Vañji and later shifted to Kanchi where he attained Nirvāṇa.

A poet, Nādagutta, of the 4th C.A.D wrote the *Kuṇḍalakesi* another one of the five famous Tamil kāvyas mentioned above. Kuṇḍalakesi was a Bhikṣuṇi and desciple of Nādagutta. It is believed that she is the one mentioned as the Vaiśya girl, the heroine of the Kāvya.

Buddhamitra of 11th C.A.D was a prince of Ponparri village in Arantangi taluk of the Tanjore district. He composed the Tamil grammatical work *Vīracolīyam* at the request of his patron Vīrarājendra Cola. This is the first work in the series of Tamil grammatical theories which attempts to compare the grammar of Sanskrit and Tamil.

Peruntevanār was the student of Buddhamitra who wrote a commentary on the *Vīracolīyam*.

Ācārya Diñṅāga belonging to a brahmin family at Simmavatharam village near Kanchipuram became the desciple of Vasubandhu and learnt all the Mahāyāna doctrines from him. His disciple Dharmapāla and his disciple Śīlabhadra were both hailing from Kānchi who spread Buddhism far and wide. Since all three of them have authored Buddhist texts in Sanskrit language they are not discussed here.

Pāli works from Tamilnadu :

Several buddhist scholars travelled from Tamilnadu to other parts of the country and also to Ceylone and China propogating Buddhism. A poet monk of the 5th C.A.D. Thera Buddhadatta of the Chola country composed a few works – *Buddhavamsattagatha*, *Abhidammāvatāra*, *Uttarvinichaya*, *Jinālaṅkāra*, *Madhuraṭṭhavilāsini* and *Rūpāvatāravibhāga*. He was patronised by king Kalabhara Acyutavikkanta. He also was the head of monasteries successively at Kaveripattanam, Uragapuram, Bhutamangalam and Kanchi. From the *Abhidammāvatāra* it is evident that Kanchipuram and Kāveripūmpattanam were important Buddhist centres of that time:

*kāveripattane rame nānārāmopasobhite karite
kanhadasena dassaniya manorame*

Another description about Bhūtamaṅgalavihāra of Buddhadatta is as follows :

*kāverījalasampāta pavipūtamahītale
iddhe sabbaṅgasampanne maṅgale bhūtamaṅgale
pavarākāra pākāra parikhāparivārite
vihāre veṇḥudāsassa dassanīya manorame.*

Buddhaghoṣa also belonging to the same period (5th C.A.D) is said lived in Kanchi for some time as mentioned by himself in his *Aṭṭhakathā* on *Aṅguttaraikāya*:

*ayacito sumatinā therena bhadanta jotipālena
kāñcīpurādisu mayā pubbe saddhimvasahlena.*

The commentary *Manoharapūraṇī* on *Aṅguttara Nikāya* was also an outcome at the request from Badanta Thera Jotipāla of Kanchi.

Buddhaghoṣa has immensely contributed to Buddhist literature. He has written commentaries on the *Tripīṭaka*. At the request of his friend Buddhmitta he also wrote the commentary *Prapañcasūdanī* on *Majjhimanikāya* is known from his own words - *ayacito sumatina therena bhadanta buddhamittena*.

Samantappasādīkā is a voluminous commentary on the five books of the Vinaya piṭṭaka. Commentaries like *Kaṅkahāvātāraṇī* on *Pātimokkha*, and *Sumaṅgalavilāsīnī* on *Dīghanikāya* are important works to the Buddhist monks and priests. The commentary *Aṭṭasālīnī* on *Dhammasaṅgīnī* deals with definition of the *Dhammas*. A philosophical treatise *Nānodaya* was also authored by him. Many other commentarial works are available in his name. A very important contribution by Buddhaghoṣa is *Viśuddhimagga* – “the encyclopaedia of Buddhism”.

Buddhappiya Thera was variously called as Buddhappiya Dīpaṅkara or Coliya Dīpaṅkara. Buddhappiya is the title of honour accorded to him. He was also called Dīpaṅkara for he was a renowned resident Superior Thera of two Buddhist Monasteries who caused the religion to shine forth like a lamp in the Damiḍa country. He is the author of the two works – *Pajjamadhu* and *Rūpasiddhi*. *Pajjamadhu* is a Pāli poem in 104 verses describing the beauty of Buddha’s personality, his teachings and the Saṅgha. *Rūpasiddhi* is a work on Pāli grammar based on Kaccāyana’s works. The date of Buddhappiya is not certain for some scholars opine that he belonged to the 11th C.A.D while others assign him to 13th C.A.D.

Anuruddha of 12th C.A.D of the Pāṇḍya country was the head of the vihāra - Mūlasomavihāra, at Kanchipuram. He has authored many

works of which a few are – *Anuruddhaśataka*, *Abhidammatthasangha*, the *Paramārthaviniccaya* and *Nāmarūpaparicceda*; all these became very popular in Ceylone.

Kassapa the last commentator on the *Piṭaka* lived in the 12th C.A.D at Kanchi. He has authored *Anuruddhaśataka* and *Nāmarūpapariccheda*.

Spread of Buddhism to Ceylone and China :

Saṅghamitra, a tamil Buddhist monk of 4th C.A.D of the Cola country is said to have travelled to Ceylone who converted its king to Mahāyāna from Hinayāna sect. Unfortunately Saṅghamitra fell in the trap of the plot hatched by one of the king's wives who belonged to the Hinayana sect.

The famous Zen Buddhism was founded by the Tamil Prince of Kanchi - Bodhi Dharma of early 6th C.A.D. This *dhyāna mārga* founded by the king spread far and wide came to be called as 'Chan' by the Chinese and 'Zen' by the Japanese. Bodhi Dharma went to China by 520 A.D and converted the Emperor Wu-Ti to Buddhism. The emperor also became a monk and made Bodhi Dharma the head of all monks in China. He lived in a monastery near the present Kiu-Kian on the Yang-Tze. The Chinese called Bodhi Dharma - 'Tamo' and respected him as one of the twenty eight apostles. They also erected temples in his honour.

Vajrabodhi of 7th C.A.D who belonged to the Pāṇḍya country was an ardent follower of the Vajrayāna school of Buddhism. He was a contemporary of king Narasimhavarma of the Pallava dynasty. He travelled to Nalanda, Kapilavastu , Ceylone and China. The prime text of the Buddhists, namely the *Prajñāparamita* was carried to China by him. He also translated many Buddhist works into Chinese.

Bodhiruci of 7th or 8th C.A.D was a brāhmaṇa of South India who took to Buddhism and went to China during the early days of the reign of T'ang dynasty and settled there . He is said to have translated many Sanskrit works and is considered as the greatest translator of Buddhist texts. He is believed to have lived for 156 years when he died in 727 A.D.

Dharmakīrti of 13th C.A.D is another popular Buddhist monk who went to Ceylone from the Pāṇḍya country and propogated Buddhism there. He organised an International conference of Buddhists under the patronage of Parākrama Bāhu II. He is ascribed with the two works *Dathavamsa* and *Culavamsa*.

From the above birds eye view of the contribution of Buddhist Monks and poets, it can be understood without doubt that Buddhism not only flourished in Tamilnadu under these great teachers of this land but also spread to various countries especially to China and Ceylone.

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