

BUDDHIST CULTURE IN PHANIGIRI REGION: A HISTORICAL STUDY**Dr.P.RAMESH**

Assistant Professor, Department of History, University College of Arts and Social Sciences,
Osmania University, Hyderabad, Telangana.

Abstract

This paper an attempt is made to discuss the expansion and importance of the Buddhist Culture of Hyderabad Deccan in general, particularly, in Phanigiri region of Nalgonda District in Telangana State. The great revival of interest in Buddhism in recent times is due in no small measure to the magnificent patronage best-owed by H.E.H. Nizam's Government, for the preservation of the Buddhist monuments, sculptures and painting at Ajanta, Ellora and other places like Phanigiri in the State. Gauthama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism was a historical personality who lived between 563 and 483 B.C. It is not certain, whether Buddha travelled in the Deccan. There is, however, no doubt, that from about the beginning of the 3rd Century B.C. Buddhism received the patronage of the Deccan rulers and for about six hundred years, flourished side by side with Jainism and Hinduism.

Key Words: Ashoka, Buddhism, Deccan, factors, foreign, Hinduism, inscriptions, Jainism

Introduction

Buddhism had spread in the Deccan by the time of the Ashoka. Ashokan inscriptions have been discovered of 'Maski' in the Raichur district and at Gavimath and Phalkigundu, two hills near Kopbal 21 miles from Hampi-Vizianagar. They prove beyond doubt the extension of Ashoka's dominations in the Deccan. Maski is identified with Suvarnagiri or Gold Mount, the headquarters of Ashoka's viceroy in the Deccan.¹

By the 6th Century A.D. both Hinduism and Buddhism observed foreign elements and the Bhagawatha Purana bears evidence to the synthesis of cultures and the recognition given to the different radical factors in the country in a verse, which bears comparison to the famous edicts of Ashoka.

"I bow to the almighty lord by adoring whose devotees low class people such as Kiratas, Hunas, Andhras, Pulindas, Pulkasas, Abhiras, Kamkas, Yavanas and Sakas as well as high class people who have fallen into sin become absolved".

The edicts of Ashoka, as well as the verses in Bhagavatha indicate a great revolution in thought, constituting an epoch in the development of freedom of mind. A modern parallel is provided by the recent proclamation of the Maharajah of Travancore throwing open the public temples to all Hindus by birth or by conversion. The Vakataka Kings, who held sway in the Deccan, for nearly two hundred years after the fall of the Andhra from their imperial position continued to Patronize Buddhism in the Deccan and the caves of Ajanta, contain inscriptions of grants made by the Vakataka kings or their ministers.²

Early Buddhist Monuments in the Deccan:

The sacred relics of Buddha were deposited in caskets and over them were erected “Stupas or Tombs”. Later on, when caves were hewn out of rocks, chaityas or halls were constructed, with a Stupa or Dagoba containing the relics of Buddha. If we compare the Chaitya to a Hindu temple, the Dagoba corresponds to the ‘Garbha Griha’, which contains the image of God or Goddess in a Hindu temple. Relic workshop was not peculiar to the Buddhists. The medieval movement of Hindu Vaishnavism, especially in the Deccan, emphasized the importance of preserving the memory of their saints, by the construction of tombs or Brindavans. The important shrine contains the bodily remains of the departed Saint but bones or ashes may be carried to different places and shrines constructed, wherever the influence of the Saint has spread. The tomb of Jayateertha, a fourteenth Century Vaishnava Saint of Malkhed, the tombs of the Vyasaraaya and others at Anegondi are some of the most conspicuous. The skills also worship the relics of this Gurus. The tomb at Nanded attracts, Sikhs from all parts of India. Small miniature relic caskets in metal containing the ashes gathered from those of the original tombs are kept in daily worship, by the followers of the respective Saints. Such this type of constructions was constructed in the Phanigiri village. These are the forms of Saint-worship widely prevalent in the Deccan.

The greatest legacy of the Andhra Kings to the culture of India and event to the culture of the world is all that is represented by the words Ajanta – Ellora. And one of the most famous Buddhist Stupas was constructed at Amaravathi or Dhanyakataka, near the frontier of the Hyderabad State, towards (Bezawada) Vijayawada. Some of the Specimens of Amaravathi Sculpture, representing the life story of Buddha are to be found deposited in the Hyderabad Museum. The greatest Buddhist philosopher of the Second Century A.D. Nagarjuna, resided at Nagarjunakonda, in the immediate neighborhood of Amaravathi. The sculptures of the Nagarjunakonda representing the life story of the Buddha.

Ajantha-Ellora were important centers of Buddhist influence in the Deccan for nearly a thousand years, from the 2nd Century B.C. to the 10th Century A.D. Ellora is situated north-west of the Hyderabad State and is 13 miles from Aurangabad. Ajanta is 55 miles from Aurangabad, there are 29 cave temples. They are hewn out of solid living rocks, in a semi-circular scrap, 250 feet high, extending for about 600 years. From a distance, they appear like a succession of Pillared Verandahs. The spot chosen at Ajanta is the most appropriate for study and meditation. Along with this many of Chaityas (Temples), and Viharas (lecture halls) or Aramas, and paintings are located at above mentioned centuries.³

The study of Phanigiri – as Buddhist Culture:

The South-East region of Telangana, particularly the Nalgonda district, occupies a pivotal position on the Archaeological map of Telangana. It attracted the ancient man right from the pre-historic times, as it was endowed with hill ranges, isolated hills and traversed by rivers and rivulets. The hill ranges run through the Nalgonda-Devarakonda region extend up to the Khammam district in the north-eastern direction. The Nallapahad hill range bifurcates the above hill range after reaching the Dindi River and Pedda vagu. The area is drained by the rivers Krishna, Musi, Aleru, Dindi, Halia, Kangal and Pedderu. The region abounds in many

pre-proto and early historic sites. A good number of Paleolithic, Microlithic, and Neolithic tool-kits were reported from the banks of the river Krishna of Yeleswram. Several Megalithic burial sites were also identified at places such as YeleswaramTipparthi, Nakirekal, Nalgonda, Raigir, Nagaram, Janakipuram, Jaikonda, Valigonda, Miryalaguda, Huzurnagar, Phanigiri, Thirumalagiri, Bayyaram, Vemulapalli, Arvapalli, Basireddipalli, Chennapur, Etooru, Vardhamanukota, Gajula banda, and Arlagaddagudem.

Phanigiri and its Environmental conditions:

The Phanigiri village (17° – $25'$ E 79° – $29'$ N) lies on left bank of the rivulet Pedderu, a tributary of the river Musi. The Buddhist site is located on hill-top about 150 feet high and is about 35 kms from Suryapet and 110 kms from Hyderabad via Bhongir and Thirumalagiri. It is just 6 kms from Thirumalagiri, the Mandal headquarters in Nalgonda district. At present, the rivulet Pedderu flows 4 kms away from the habitation in North-South direction.

Etymologically, the village Phanigiri seems to have derived its name from the shape of hillock located on the northern side of the village, which looks like a snake hood. In Sanskrit, Phani means snake, Giri means hillock not only served as the main water source for the inhabitants but also the rivulet Pedderu. It is one of the important Buddhist monasteries strategically, located on the hilltop, on ancient trade route connecting the west and the east coast of the Deccan.⁴

To support and sustain the monastic establishment at Phanigiri for a longer duration a cluster of early historic sites up in close proximity i.e., Vardhamankota, Gajulabda, Thirumalagiri, Arlagaddagudem and Yeleswaram.

Vardhamaukota, an early historic Buddhist site located 8 kms from on the left bank of the rivulet Pedderu, on Phanigiri-Suryapet road. It appears that the present village itself lies on high ancient mound encompassed by a brick fortification wall which locally known as “Kotadibba”. Earlier, an Idol of standing Buddha and inscribed slab with 1st Century A.D. Brahmi characters, coins and broken sculptures panels were reported from the site.

Gajualabanda, situated on the left bank of the river Pedderu near Etooru village, is 3 kms away from Phanigiri on North-West. Here, unearthed a monastery comprised of a Mahastupa, Vihara, Votive Stupas platform and early historic materials.

Thirumalgiri, another Buddhist, site lies just 6 kms from Phanigiri on Suryapet – Jangaon road. It appears that the present habitation is cropped up over ancient mound-broken limestone sculptured panels namely, a ‘Circular lotus medallion’, a decorated Pedestal with a Central Socket, a balustrade with lotus medallion were recovered earlier from the site. Even today also brick alignments, can be seen at certain places in the village. Similar Buddhist remains are also reported from Naagaram and Singaaram villages in that region.

Phanigiri sites:

The sites are to be excavated order to know its relation to the monastic establishment located on the hilltop. On the hilltop are Cairn heaps located on North-Western of the habitation

adjacent to the tank. These probably are the burials of the residential monks of the monastic order also noticed at Thotlakonda and Pavuralakonda in Visakhapatnam district and Chandavaram in Prakasham district all Buddhist sites. The ancient habitation on hilltop covered an area of 10 acres in extent.⁵

The Buddhist site at Phanigiri was selected for preliminary excavation in the year of 1941 by Sri Khaja Mahammad Ahmed, the then Director, and inviting Hon'ble Kusru Jung Bahadur member in charge of the Archaeology department to visit the site and inaugurate the operations and continued up to 1944. After a lapse of nearly six decades, the department had started its work for four field seasons i.e., 2002-02, 2002-03, 2004-05 and 2006-07 brought to light a Mahastupa, Apsidal Chaityagrihas, Votive stupas, Viharas, Pillared Congregation halls, platforms with staircases at various levels, sculptural panels with Brahmi label inscriptions of the Satavahana and Ikshvaka times, apart from the early historic culture Milieu datable to the period between the 1st Century B.C. to 6th Century A.D. The observation on the Mahastupa, Votive Stupas, apsidal Chaitayagrihas, sixteen pillared congregational hall, Stone pillared congregation hall, brick shrine and reflectory are located at a higher contour, on the South and Western side of the site, whereas the Viharas, pillared congregation hall and platform with staircases are located at lower level on the eastern and Northern side of monastery.

Structures:

The brick structures laid bare at Phanigiri include a Mahastupa, votive stupas, both in brick and stone, six viharas, apsidal Chaityagrihas, Stone Pillard halls, Platforms and a square Shrine built in the different phases.

Mahastupa :

The Mahastupa is the biggest structure located elegantly on an elevated area on the Southernmost part of the monastic complex. It is built on wheel shaped plan and comprised of drum, ayaka platforms and dome. The drum has four ayaka platforms on four Cardinal directions, with five upright ayakasthambas, probably represent the five great events in the life time of Buddha i.e., Birth, Renunciation, Enlightenment, first Sermon and Mahaparinirvana.

Votive Stupas:

Abutting the brick platform of the Mahastupa on the Southern side is another platform built in random rubble masonry using mud as mortar and plastered extremely with lime. Altogether seven votive stupas were unearthed on the east and South-east corners of the Mahastupa at two different levels.

Apsidal Chaityagrihas:

The apsidal chaityagirhas were known as the monastic complex, located by the side of the sixteen pillared mandapa on South-West side of the complex is neatly paved with lime concrete floor and nicely finished, surface. The staircases are decorated with stone balustrades having mythical animal figures on one end and sockets to provide wooden or stone railing. The balustrades are depicted with the events from the life of the Buddha.⁶

Viharas :

So, far, six viharas exposed along with the above structures and located on the north and eastern sides of the Mahastupa. Each Viharas is in rectangular plan with common verandah in front with the entrances decorated with Purnaghata motifs molded in brick. Each cell has a sill followed by semi-circular stone step (Chandrasila). Pathways were laid to reach the Mahastupa from each Vihara of the monastic complex.

Sixteen Pillared Congregation Hall:

It known as Shilamandapa was a few yards away from the apisidalchaityagriha on the eastern side was exposed sixteen stone pillared congregation hall with entrance facing south. The external wall of the hall is well plastered. At present only pillar stumps are seen. In course excavation at the entrance of hall several fragments of sculptural pieces were unearthed. Among them are, the Descent of the white Elephant from Tushita Heaven, carrying the tuft of Siddharta to heaven, beautiful lotus medallions, ahead of Boddhisatva, and dampati figures.

Refectory:

To the South-east of the Mahastupa and on the Western of Votive stupa a construction has the occurrence of huge quantities of ash mixed with potsherds of dishes and conical bowls on the earthen and northern side of the structure obviously indicate that it might have served as a kitchen complex.⁷

Material culture:

Above excavations at Phanigiri yielded a good number of antiquities such as sculptural panels, pottery, terracotta tiles, stucco figurines, coins, epigraphs, beads, bangles and iron artifacts. Accordingly, to clines accounts, the monasteries were famous centers of learning and teachings of religious and secular concepts for people. They were not just convents. They functioned as cultural centers gathering into themselves the rich and varied intellectual life of the period.⁸ In this context the Phanigiri monastery was deserve special mention, since its contribution is that of regional importance not only from the religious aspect, but also from the art, architecture, sculptural and cultural spheres. And very famous temple Sri Seetha Rama Chandra Swamy is located in the middle part of Phanigiri hill.⁹ This village is known as the symbol of religious harmony center. Present in this village one Buddhist museum also maintaining by the Archeological department.

Chronology:

Basing on the phase wise constructions of religious and secular structures, size of bricks, used in the constructions, material evidences such as pottery epigraphs, coins, sculptures and other cultural materials, the monastic establishment at Phanigiri initially commenced with Hinayana school of tradition (1st B.C. – 1st C.A.D.) and was continued with the Mahayana school of tradition up to the 3rd and 4th centuries A.D.¹⁰

References:

- 1) Proceedings of the Deccan History Conference, First Hyderabad Session – 1945, p.101.
- 2) Ibid, p.103.

- 3) Kakatiya Journal of Historical Studies, Vol.VI No.1, May, 2011, p.46.
- 4) Phanigiri-A Buddhist site in Andhra Pradesh, Archaeological Series NO.76, 2008, p.2.
- 5) Ibid., p.5
- 6) Ibid., p.8.
- 7) Ibid., p.28.
- 8) Proceedings of the Andhra Pradesh History Congress, Narsapur, 1999, p.38.
- 9) Souvenir of South Indian History Congress, 35 Annual Session, February, 2015, p.57.
- 10) Phanigiri – A Buddhist site in A.P., p.40.

Bibliography:

1. B.S.L. – Hanumantha Rao – Socio-Cultural History of Ancient and Medieval Andhra, Hyderabad, 1995.
2. A.K. Narain – Studies in History of Buddhism, Delhi, 1980.
3. V.V. Krishna Sastry – Annual Report of the Department of Archaeology and Museums, Govt. of A.P., Hyderabad, 1988.
4. Y. Gopal Reddy – A comprehensive History of Andhra, Hyderabad, 1994.
5. V.V. Krishna Sastry – Proto and Early historic cultures of Andhra Pradesh, Hyderabad, 1983.
6. Kartikeya Sarma – Buddhist sites in Andhra, Itihas, Vol.IV, No.2, Published, A.P.S.A. & R.I. Tarnaka, Hyderabad.
7. Khwaja Muhammad Ahmed, PhanigiriBouddharamaalu (Telugu), Hyderabad, 1950.