

Archaeological Reflections and the Study of South Asian Buddhism

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As we are aware, there are two bodies of data available to study the history of Buddhism - literary material and archaeological and epigraphic material. Traditionally it is accepted that the large body of literary material is the most suitable for the studies of religious. From the mid-nineteenth century there has been a significant shift in the direction of Buddhist studies, because, on the one hand, literary works of Buddhist traditions came to be discovered one after another. On the other hand, archaeological and epigraphical sources were considered a powerful historical witness of Buddhist cultural history. Thus, while considering the significance of archaeological sources than the textual material for religious studies, most of them were attempted to make various arguments on the texts-bound studies of Buddhism. In this article, attention has been paid to this debatable issue regarding much more accurate sources material for the study of the nature of Buddhist religious culture. Here my attempt is made to explore new interpretations of the history of Buddhism readdressing some of early implications while reevaluating previous researches on the subject, dealing with architectural and inscriptional materials of the region.

Key words: History of Buddhism, Sources, Archaeology

I. INTRODUCTION

As we are aware, there are two bodies of data available to study the history of Buddhism - a large body of literary material and archaeological and epigraphic material. While translating Pāli and Sanskrit texts, European scholars namely Burnouf, Senart, Oldenberg, T.W. Rhys Davids, Windisch, George Turnour, Major Jonathan Forbes and Sir James Emerson Tennent laid the foundation for the systematic studies of Buddhism (Bhattacharyya, 1981: 1-18). From the mid-nineteenth century there has been a significant shift in the direction of Buddhist studies, because, on the one hand, literary works of Buddhist traditions came to be discovered one after another. On the other hand, archaeological and epigraphical sources were considered a powerful historical witness of Buddhist cultural history. Thus, while considering the significance of archaeological sources than the textual material for religious studies, most of them were attempted to make various arguments on the texts-bound studies of Buddhist culture. In this article, attention has been paid to this debatable issue regarding much more accurate sources material for the study of the nature of Buddhist religious culture. Here my main concern is to investigate the acceptability of archaeological material for the study of Buddhism.

Restrictions on the use of Textual Material

At least up to the mid-nineteenth century, most assumptions made regarding the history of Buddhism were based on literature. All the pioneering scholars of Buddhist studies attempted to bring out numerous issues on southern Asian Buddhist culture on textual oriented studies.

Burnouf is one of the pioneer scholars who researched Indian Buddhism based on textual material. Considering his historical studies of Buddhism, J.W. de Jong says,

Burnouf stressed that Indian Buddhism had to be studied based on Sanskrit texts from Nēpal and Pāli texts from Ceylon (Jong, 1975: 21).

W. Geiger also well aware of the fundamental importance of texts for the historical studies of Buddhism (Geiger: 1908). The pioneer scholars, but modern academics also emphasised the capability and importance of textual material to understand the reality of Buddhism. In 1975, J.W. de Jong suggested:

Undoubtedly, the literature (which produced three main divisions/vehicles of Buddhism) is the essential Buddhism source. Buddhist art, inscriptions and coins have supplied us with useful data, but generally, they cannot be fully understood without the texts' support. Consequently, the study of Buddhism needs, first of all, to be concentrated on the texts (Jong, 1975: 21).

However, from the mid-nineteenth century, there has been a significant shift in Buddhist studies' direction, with various issues made by scholars on Buddhism's text-bound studies.

The most essential, debatable consideration is the chronology of Buddhist literature. During the last few decades, various views have been expressed on the issue of chronology. According to the Sri Lankan historical tradition, it is generally accepted that the Pāli sources were the earliest historical material on Buddhism. This canonical text can be dated to the last quarter of the first century BCE. – Presumably, the date they were written at Alu-vihāra in Sri Lanka (Kalupahana, 1970: 165). Most of the modern scholarship attempts to question the actual context of the canon that was committed to writing in the first century BCE. As G.P. Malalasekera stated: how far the *Tripiṭaka* and its commentaries reduced to writing at Alu-vihāra resembled them as they have come down to us now, no one can say... (Malalasekera, 1928: 44).

Much more ancient manuscripts (of the first and second centuries CE) such as the *Gāndhāri Dhammapada* and the recently discovered Kharoṣṭhi fragments of *Suttanipāṭha* and other portions of the *Suttapi* *aka make it impossible to doubt that the Pāli canon is faithful to truly ancient originals in some order (Walters, 1997: 101). The *Gāndhāri Dhammapada* discovered near Khotan has been dated probably to the second century CE (Brough, 1962). The dating of the Bibliothèque Nationale fragments have been problematic. However, it has been suggested that they may be from the second and the third centuries CE (Gunawardana, 2001-2002: 222). A date probably in the first century CE., has been suggested for the British Library Scrolls and date probably in the second century CE, has been suggested for the Senior Scrolls that were found near Hadda in Afghanistan (Gunawardana, 2001-2002: 220). Thus, these fragments' dates move forwards to rethink the above assumption: Pāli sources were the earliest historical material of Buddhism.

The other important consideration is the purpose of the authors of Buddhist literary sources. Most of the modern scholars, clearly pointed out that the themes of these canonical texts were amplified for specific objective reasons. In 1981 A.K. Warder said:

... the authors of the canon were ready to turn everything to account in developing and popularising their ideas and presenting a comprehensive world view (Warder, 1981: 46-47).

Similar statements have been made by most scholars regarding this matter. For example, attention should be given to the statement by G. Panabokke regarding the Sri Lankan Chronicles. He has stated that the traditional Chronicles of Sri Lanka and all the themes therein were amplified for specific objective reasons. For example, these chronicles' main pupasare to emphasise the missionaries who first came and established Buddhism and the monastic order in Sri Lanka belonged to the Theravāda tradition (Panabokke, 1994: 69). Further, they were emphasised the Emperor Aśoka, under the advice of monk Moggaliputta Tissa, made a significant contribution to ending the unorthodox developments of Buddhists by giving his support to conduct the third Buddhist Council at Pā*aliputra in the third century BCE (*Dīpavaṃsa*, VIII: 12). The Chronicles clearly state that the Theravāda School gained supremacy over the other Buddhist sects in India and it spread all over the world as a result of this Council. According to the Chronicles' details, the other non-Theravāda doctrines were refuted, and pure Theravāda tradition was re-established (*Dīpavaṃsa*, VIII: 12). To give weight to their views, they added the Uposatha ceremony's story for the expulsion of unworthy monks and the complete rehearsal of the Dhamma and Vinaya at a council held in Pā*aliputra. Further, they traced the Vinaya teachers' lineage from Upāli to Moggaliputta Tissa and to give more prestige to Mahinda, placed him within this lineage as having studied directly under Moggaliputta Tissa and is linked with Pā*aliputra (Adikaram, 1946: 88). As R. Gombrich pointed

out, Moggaliputta Tissa is the chief Theravāda intellectual and, hence, regards his role as exaggerated in the Pāli literary sources (Gombrich, 1994: 13; Ray, 2001: 3).

In the same way, we can account for the missionary activities of Aśoka with the Buddhist monk Upagupta in the North Indian literary tradition as preserved in the Sanskrit *Avadāna* (Vogel, 1828-30: 22). *Aśoka Avadāna* recorded Aśoka's relationship with Upagupta, a monk who accompanied Aśoka on his pilgrimages to different sites that were associated with the life of Buddha—considering these descriptions someone can emphasise that not only the Theravāda sect but other sects as the Sarvāstivādin also associated Aśoka's name with leading contemporary figures of their respective sects in order to add importance to themselves (Collins, 1990: 89-126; Walters, 1997: 10-119). In the same way, Aśoka as an impartial ruler must have offered equal treatment to the Buddhists and non-Buddhists. It may be inferred that he would not support one sect against another. Subsequently, it is noteworthy that the Theravāda and Sarvāstivāda schools both claim particular association with Aśoka. Most probably, he would not have attempted to patronise any particular Buddhist school but was interested in the purity of the saṅgha and may have assisted in the unification of the saṅgha community (Thapar, 1994: 11-15; Gombrich, 1994: 1-10). Most probably, the traditional literary sources amplified selected themes for specific objective reasons according to their aspiration.

On the other hand it is impossible to suggest that these literary materials reflect the "real nature" of Buddhism. These materials reflect at least a part of what Buddhists—both lay people and monks—actually practiced and believed. At the initial stage, Buddhism offered a path to enlightenment through personal endeavour. However, it did not wholly reject pre-Buddhist, other cultic practices and ceremonial activities that served society's varied religious needs. Scholars such as R.A.L.H. Gunawardana (1979: 212) and many others attempted to observe the changing pattern of Buddhist culture with the religious development of the people, various rituals, beliefs, and practices were adopted into the original religion from time to time. So, initially, Buddhism accepted the new assimilations because the monks' community offered to serve society's varied religious needs. The statement made by R.A.L.H. Gunawardana clearly illustrates the nature of the changing pattern of Buddhist culture from time to time. As he pointed out, initially, Buddhism had no cults to cater to the "specific plebeian religious needs" of society. Hence it did not demand that its followers completely reject non-Buddhist cultic practices. Even during the early years of its history, Buddhism came to terms with popular cults like the propitiation of *Yakkhas* and *Nāgas* and the worship of Brāhmanical gods. Buddhist texts merely claim that the *Yakkhas*, *Nāgas* and the *Devas* accepted the supremacy of the Buddha. In Sri Lanka, some of the pre-Buddhist cults had been appended to Buddhism.

In some cases, “Buddhist” rites were introduced to perform the functions of pre-Buddhist practices. On the other hand, the contact with, Mahāyāna, Saiva and Vaisnava faiths stimulated the development of cultic practices and elaborate ceremonial in Buddhism. Together, these trends represent Buddhism’s development into a comprehensive religious system capable of serving the varied religious needs of society¹ (Gunawardana 1979; 197). Gananath Obeyesekere (Obeyesekere, 1963: 139-153). attempted to use Redfield's concept (Redfield, 1956) to observed this structural nature of Buddhist culture as “great tradition” and “little tradition.” Here, the little tradition has been identified with the ritual transactions with Mahāyāna and other local traditions. With the contribution of Richard Gombrich, in 1990, Gananath Obeyesekere further developed this idea in the publication of *Buddhism Transformed; Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1988: 65-67). Though they attempted to study modern Sri Lankan religious culture, they also clearly pointed out how Buddhism historically assimilated various beliefs and practices for serving the varied religious needs of society. However, the Pāli canonical texts did not indicate Buddhism’s devotional activities in a significant way through the rare indications giving vent to feelings of devotion had begun taking shape from the initial stage of Buddhism (Kariyawasam, 1995: 1-5). As a result, modern academic approaches were widely used in evaluating the history of Buddhist culture using archaeological sources.

Use of Archaeological and inscriptional materials:

As a modern scholar of the history of Buddhism, Gregory Schopen made a valuable statement regarding the importance of archaeology to study the history of religions. Archaeological sources are more relevant than the text-bound studies of Buddhism. Gregory Schopen says:

... it would have been preoccupied not with what small, literate almost exclusively male and indeed atypical professionalised subgroups wrote, but rather with what religious people of all segments of a given community did and how they lived (Schopen, 1997: 114)

Based on pioneering archaeological explorations made by scholars as Alexander Cunningham modern academics also attempted to focus on archaeological and epigraphical material to uncover religious culture’s real nature in southern Asia.

Writing in 1949 on the impotence of inscriptional details for historical studies, L.S. Perera states:

...the inscriptions are contemporary records. Therefore, these reflect the conditions of the time they relate to, much more accurately than academic records, because the latter (academic records) were first handed down by word of mouth and then set down in writing. Further, these have again gone through much editing before being put in the final form they have come down to us. However, the authors of the academic records subject the material they had to the story's

requirements they had to relate, the moral they wished to teach or the point of view they wanted to be expressed (Perera, 2001: xvii).

Thus, it is clear that the archaeological and epigraphical reflections are more accurate, truthful and contemporary. Based on archaeological and epigraphical details, modern scholars began to re-examine the various statements made on textual references. While he considering the history of Buddhism Richard F. Gombrich noted that it is difficult to date Gautama Buddha without looking at archaeological sources (Gombrich, 1996: 13).

The territorial categorising which was made based on textual details is one of the other important issue that relates to the South Asian Buddhism. Based on the details reflected in Buddhist canonical texts, both Pāli and Sanskrit, the ancient Buddhist world was divided into two major geographic regions (Bhattacharyya, 1981:1-18). The first region, Sri Lanka and South-East Asia belongs to the Sthaviravāda, Theravāda or Southern Buddhism (Hinayāna) and has been named as “The world of Theravāda Buddhism” (Gunawardana, 2005: 56-89). The second geographic region, which corresponds to another significant Buddhist tradition is North India and Central Asia up to China. This has been reviewed by Gina L. Barnes as follows:

... King Aśoka's enthusiasm into all centres of South Asia, Sri Lanka, perhaps Myanmar, into Central Asia and perhaps to China. Both Hinayāna and Mahāyāna forms were spread in all directions beyond India in the early centuries, but many areas saw the predominance of one or the other at different times. In general, Southeast Asia - after an initial period of entertaining both types - became Hinayāna strongly in the medieval era. In contrast, Mahāyāna Buddhism seemed to win over in Central and East Asia (Barnes, 1995-96: 169).

As Gina L. Barnes pointed out that the archaeological remains show both Theravāda and Mahāyāna forms were spread in all directions beyond India in the early centuries. However, many areas saw the predominance of one or the other at different times. As stated in the Sri Lankan Pāli Chronicles, though the Sthaviravāda tradition spread over the South Asian region in the third-century BCE, other popular religious practices including Mahāyāna and local religious practices were also absorbed it from time to time.

In the article titled “The Axial Age in Asia: The Archaeology of Buddhism” H.P. Ray clearly raised the importance of archaeological materials for studying Buddhism’s history and its expansion across the Bay of Bengal (Ray, 2006: 417-449).

Gregory Schopen also made a remarkable contribution to examine the nature of the Buddhist culture based on archaeological and inscriptional materials (Schopen, 1997). However, most of the time, he attempted to critique the literary tradition's details by comparing them with the archaeological remains. However, he has made great effort to

confirm the idea that the archaeological remains are the most valuable path for the understanding of changing ideological affiliations and the nature of Buddhist culture within any time and space.

The most important example we might look at concern is the popularity of Mahāyāna and Tantrayāna incorporating Vajrayāna and Mantrayāna traditions Buddhism in the Island, which were not concern by the authors of Sri Lankan Chronicles. However, a large number of inscriptions in the Island have been assigned the second part of the first millennium CE, contain most of these new ideas. Many of these inscriptions are written in Sanskrit language, using Sinhalese or Nāgari script. The Kuccavēli rock inscription, one of the earliest known inscriptions in Sanskrit, extols the Bodhisattva ideal (Wickremasinghe, and Codrington, 1933: 158). The Tiriyāya inscription describes “Girikāṇḍa Stūpaas”- the abode of Avalokiteśvara – one of the Bodhisattvas in the Mahāyāna tradition (Paranavitana, 1944: 151-160). In an inscription found on a rock near the Ambastala dāgaba at Mihintale, reference has been made to *Trikāya* or three corpora of the Buddha, namely the *Nirmānakāya*, *Sambhogakāya* and *Dharma kāya* (Paranavitana, 1944: 242-246). Several copper plaques were discovered in several placed in the Island as Mihintale (Wickremasinghe and Codrington, 1933: 199-212; Paranavitana, 1944: 238-242), Vijayārāma (Bell, 1890-91:12-15), Abhayagiri Vihāra (Wickremasinghe and Codrington, 1933: 169-171), etc., containing Mahāyāna and Tantrayāna doctrine. These inscriptional details proved the popularity of Mahāyāna and Tantric traditions and significant development of Buddhism's rituals, beliefs, and practices. However, they were not included in the Sri Lankan Pali Chronicles.

Other than that these inscriptional remains and other artistic creations also reveal the popularity of extreme forms of Tāntric beliefs, rituals, and practices in Sri Lanka. *Dhāranis*- Tāntric incarnations, and *mantras* were among the symbols deposited as relics in the stūpas. They have been described as magic formulas of mystic forms of prayer or spells of Tāntric order (Mudiyanse, 1967: 99).. *Dhārani* stones from Abhayagiriya contain the words “*ratipūjāpravarttaya hum*” and “*guhyapūjāpravarttaya hum*” inscribed in North – Eastern Nāgari characters of about 9th century CE, (ASCAR., 1940-45: 41). The word “*Rati-pūjā*” furnished the epigraphical evidence to the existence of the erotic forms of Tāntric Buddhist practices in Sri Lanka about the 8th century. “*Rati-pūjā*” in the inscriptions is sculptured in stone at the Buddhist temples where the Tāntric rituals were practised. Though these practices seem to be contrary to the Theravāda moral doctrines, these archaeological sources reveal that they have influenced Sri Lankan Buddhism. Other than that the extreme forms of *maithuna* sculptures from ancient Buddhist shrines on the Island contain several sufficiently powerful symbols as new material for Tantric Buddhism's popularity.

Thus, it is clear that the archaeological and epigraphical material are the sources that can be reasonably

well located in time and space, and material that is mostly unedited and much of which was never intended to be interpreted. They reflect at least a part of what Buddhists-both lay people and monks-actually practiced and believed. Thus, the archaeological reflections are extremely important for studying the history of religions in southern Asia. Most of these materials play a significant role for understanding religions practices, rituals and believes in the communities both monastic and lay. They contain several sufficiently powerful symbols as contemporary sources (Clark, 1981: 68).

III. CONCLUSION

There are two kinds of historical materials: textual as well as archaeological for the study of the history of Buddhism. Traditionally it is accepted that the large body of literary material is the merest suitable for the studies of religious. Undoubtedly they are the most important sources of philosophy of Buddhism. However in most cases they cannot actually be dated and also they were first handed down by word of mouth and then set down in writing. They have been heavily edited before being put in the final form they have come down to us. The authors of the textual records subject the material they had to the story's requirements they had to relate, the moral they wished to teach or the point of view they wanted to be expressed. Therefore attempts should be made to explore new interpretations of the history of Buddhism readdressing some of early implications while reevaluating previous researches on the subject, dealing with architectural and inscriptional materials of the region.

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