

MAHAYANA BUDDHISM IN SOUTH INDIA—SOME ASPECTS

—K. A. NILAKANTA SASTRI

Before giving some account of Mahayana centres in the Deccan and South India, a few words may be usefully prefaced regarding the basic differences between Mahayana and the quondam Hinayana Buddhism. The origin of Mahayana is obscure, but very ancient, much more so than is usually held. Its basis is the great idea of Deliverance being pursued not for one's own good as the Arhat did in Hinayana, but for the good of the entire sentient world: superhuman, human, and subhuman. Even Asoka had a glimpse of it when under its potent impulse he dedicated his children Mahinda and Sanghamita to the conversion of Ceylon. Even earlier, we hear, that the elder Buddhism had already created the imaginary type of the great choice between personal escape from liability to rebirth and the rescue of others from the pains and perils of the samsara in the vow of the hermit Sumedha. Far, far back in the days of the Buddha Dipankara he had realised that he might if he pleased then and there cut off the roots of life and cease to be. "But what" he thought to himself, "Would I attain deliverance alone? I will embark on the ocean of existence in a ship that will convey men and devas." By the innate force of such an idea, the welfare of others came to be preferred to individual security, and a new creed with a new discipline of ten *bhumis* was developed in the place of the eight fold path of the original faith. It is not our aim to trace this development of doctrine or the accompanying theology and mythology in detail, but will note as a landmark a beautiful legend about Dinnaga. When he followed the suggestion of the sovereign in whose dominion he was residing, and resolved to devote himself to Arhatship, the Bodhisattva 'Manjusri' himself deigned to remonstrate with him: "Alas! how have you given up your great purpose, and only fixed your mind on your own personal profit, with narrow aims, giving up the purpose of saving all!"

Mahayana proved more popular because of its ultra-altruistic ideology, by its wide range of forms for devotion and worship and above all by the levelling of the quali-

fications for its followers by opening the church alike to the monks as to the householders. By its new ethics, centring around the Boddichitta and the six paramitas (perfect virtues), namely, dana, sila, ksanti, virya, dhyana and prajna and accessibility of Bodhi-sattvahood for all, it struck a tactical victory over Hinayanism. The main difference between Hinayanism and Mahayansim, however, would be the realism of the former and the negativism or idealism of the latter. The philosophy of the creed centred around Sunyavada of which a great exposition had been given in the Madhyamika doctrine of the celebrated southern monk Acharya Nagarjuna of the Mahayana school, who should be historically placed in the middle of the 2nd century A. D. As regards worship, Mahayanists presented offerings to Tara (Prajnaparamita), Manjusri, and Avalokitesvara. The accounts of Fa-hien (c. fifth century A. D.) and Hiuen Tsang (seventh century A. D.), would tend to suggest that Hinayanism in its main schools of Sarvastivadins, Mahisasakas, Theravadins, Sammitiyas and Mahasangikas prevailed for quite some time, along with Mahayana development of the Madhyamika and Yogachara schools, and among the southern centres are named the already famous towns in the Andhra country in the Guntur area like Nagarjunakonda, Goli, Gummididuru, Ghantasala etc., and Kancipura in Tamilnad. It is interesting to note that Aryadeva who succeeded Nagarjuna, as his disciple and one of the four luminaries of India, held charge of Nalanda as its chief Abbot for many years and is said to have retired to Kanchi towards the close of his life and passed away there in the second century A. D. He wrote the treatise *Chatuhsataka*.

Buddhapalita was another Mahayana monk from the South who wrote a commentary on the Mulamadhyamika sutra of Acarya Nagarjuna. Bhava Viveka, again from the south, wrote an independent treatise called *Tarka Jvala* and essentially followed in all his works the method of Svatantrika, (direct reasoning) as different from Buddhapalita's method of Prasangika (reductio-ad-absurdum) on the lines of those of Nagarjuna and Aryadeva, in treating the thesis of Sunyata. Another Chandrakirti, also from the south, was again the Abbot of Nalanda and in his travels in the south he defeated many teachers in the Konkana tract (from where he came) and established many monasteries. Of the Yogacara scholars of Mahayana Buddhism, Vasubandhu is doubtless the most famous and had a very long career at Nalanda and counted among his pupils Dinnaga who was originally

of a Brahmana family from Kanchipuram, and wrote the *Pramāṇasamuccaya*, *Nyāyapraveśa* and *Prajñāparamitāpīṇḍartha*. He lived perhaps towards the end of the fifth century A. D. or slightly later. His own disciple Dharmapala, who was also a native of Kanchi is quoted by Hiuen Tsang and Taranatha. He was also in charge of Nalanda Mahavihara.

In the Pali literature relating to the Mahayana Buddhism, the most significant era may be said to have begun with the oldest Pali grammar namely *Kaccayana Vyākaraṇa* by Kaccayana, who was a successor to Buddhaghosha and Dhammapala. As Kaccayana seems to have utilised Kasika vritti (seventh century A. D.) the upper limit of his age is thus available. The Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa were composed during the later part of this epoch. The commentaries mention Kanchipura, Kaveripattina, Madura, Urugapura and Anuradhapura as well known centres of Pali Buddhism.

In the realm of art, the important Indian centres (leaving aside Gandhara—now in Pakistan) of such activity under the Mahayana dispensation had been around Ajanta and Ellora and Aurangabad, in the Upper Deccan, Ter, Chezarla in the lower Deccan and Lower Krishna basin, Ratnagiri in Kalingadesa and Kaveripattinam and Nagapattinam in the Tamil country. It is important to realise that the architectural forms of the main types of Buddhist structures whether rock-cut or of brick and mortar, had been more or less alike, and comprise the Stupa, Chaitya and Vihara or Sangharama. While in the rock-cut tradition, inevitably only the facade and interior receive the greatest ornamentation, in the brick tradition, the accent is on exterior ornamentation of even more prolific motifs and elements than would have been possible on the heavier rock medium. In the last mentioned place in the Tamil land, however, the Vihara, which went by the name Chulamani vihara, enjoying the patronage of the overseas Sailendra king of Sri Vijaya (Palembang), Kataha (Kedah), by Sri Vijaya-ottungavarma, whose father's name it was, took the shape almost of a multi-storeyed Dravida temple, but without its minor turrets. This was around the second decade of the 11th century A. D. during the time of Raja Raja I. This monument was razed down by Jesuits for building their institutions in the last century.

AJANTA: This was verily one of the most glorious interludes in Buddhist art under Mahayanism in India, when the

brush and paint of the artist dedicated itself to Buddhist cause and was guided by equally persevering monks of Mahayana order, flourishing in the Vakataka kingdom, whose rainy season hibernation (Vassa-vasa) was located at Ajanta. Mahayanism considered Hinayana Arhatship inadequate and replaced it by Bodhisattvahood where guiding others to salvation is the supreme goal, engendered by a pervasive sense of humanity. Mahayanism did not certainly bother about having to import Hindu gods in its pantheon. Indra, who was already Sakra to Hinayanaism became Satamanya and Vajrapani under Mahayanism, and his world was the Trayas—trimsaloka, i. e., 33rd. Brahma's attributes were transferred to Manjusri (the god of wisdom) and Padmapani; Sarasvati continued to be a consort of the former. Padmapani is a variant of Visnu; Virupaksa, Ganesa, Sapta Tathagatas (seven sages), Mahakala, Aditya etc., were all duly gathered into the Buddhist pantheon. The five skandhas or elements that Buddhists believed in were Rupa, Vedana, Samjna, Samskara, and Vijnana. These are apotheosised into the five Dhyani Buddhas complete with their associative counterparts like Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha, Amoghasiddhi and Aksobhya, and portray the vyakhya, varada, dhyana, abhaya and bhumisparsha mudra respectively. They have their Taras also. Maitreya or the future Buddha is in the Tusita heavens and is to descend to earth 4000 years after Gautama Buddha. He usually holds, in Indian sculpture, lotus in right hand or Dharmachakra mudra, while his left has a vase. Avalokitesvara is the Bodhisattva who reigns between the time of Gautama and Maitreya, and is said to take 108 forms all of which have been elaborated in painting in the Macchandar Vahel Vihara at Khatmandu, Nepal. Rhys Davids has remarked that "Mahayana theology is the greatest possible contradiction to the Agnostic Atheism which is the characteristic of Gautama's philosophy!"

In the Buddhist art at Ajanta, the notable and ubiquitous elements are: the Nagas; Hariti and Panchika; Buddha's meeting of Yasodhara and son Rahula; Temptation Scene of Buddha; river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna; dwarfs; Apsarases and ganas. The Jataka stories are portrayed all over the walls and repeated over and over again in many caves. The most outstanding of these Jataka tales depicted at Ajanta are Sibi Jataka and Mahajanaka Jataka, all in Cave 1 (dateable to early seventh century A.D.), and Nalagiri Jataka, Shaddanta Jataka, Visvantara Jataka, Nigrodhamiga Jataka (in Cave 17).

ELLORA : The Buddhist Caves at Ellora would seem to pertain to a period between the sixth and eighth centuries A.D. This was again an important seat of Mahayana Buddhism and with the resurgent Brahmanism in the seventh century A.D. the activity was apparently shifted to Aurangabad. The litany of Avalokitesvara in Cave No.4 (seventh century A.D.); Bodhisattva Vajrapani and the shrine of Padmapani Avalokitesvara and the sculpture of Mahamanjusri in Cave No 8; the litany of Tara in Cave No.9; the *Raktalokesvara* shrine and sculpture in Cave No.10 and 11-the latter cave also having the three Bodhisattvas Manjusri, Jnanaketu and Padmapani and what is likely to be Prajnaparamita (on the third corridor wall); the Buddha Mandala in cave No.12-the largest Buddhist excavation at Ellora-including such rare forms as *Bhrukuti*, *Chunda* and *Vajrasattva*, the sixth Dhyani Buddha flanked by Padmapani and Vajrapani, are all the most outstanding elements of Mahayanism and what is clearly the incipient Vajrayana Buddhism at Ellora.

Ter and Chazarla were apparently the extension in Mahayana times of the Buddhist activity already set in motion under the Hinayana votaries in a good many centres in Andhrapatha of the Satakarnis and their successors in lower Krishna, as at Nagarjunakonda. These two places represent perhaps the only two extant vestiges of an almost complete apsidal brick temple which were originally dedicated to Buddhism and which by natural supercession of that creed by nascent Brahmanism, were converted to its use—at least in the case of the latter. They could perhaps be dated to the fifth-sixth centuries A.D. This temple at Chazarla is indeed of the greatest importance from the early architectural view point. The fact that the temple is called Kapotesvara and that Sibi Jataka is sacred to Buddhism makes this old Buddhist chaitya of considerable significance. Its age is supported by an inscription in the temple by Sat-Sabhamalla, the son of Avanitalantavati Mahadevi, the daughter of the king Kandara of the Ananda gotra line. This Kandara line is a rare dynasty and appears to have ruled in the Krishna area around fourth or fifth century A.D.

AURANGABAD CAVES: The Caves here, about 12 in number are, though not as impressive as those of Ajanta or Ellora, form indeed an integral stage in the devolution of the Mahayana pantheon. The litany of Avalokitesvara

and the impressive Dance scene in the Cave No.7 are perhaps the most outstanding examples of its art-expression. There is no doubt that the sculptors of these caves have already attained great control over rock-art and were at the same time caring more for self-expression than for traditional forms. The entire range of caves is dateable perhaps to the late seventh to later eighth centuries A.D. There is a Hinayana Chaitya also (Cave No.4). There is a striking representation of *Mahaparinirvana* of the Buddha in Cave No. 8 and 9.

NAGARJUNAKONDA: A study of the provenance of Buddhist sites in South India would show that there were five main ancient routes which converged in the Vengirastra and led to Kalinga, Dravida, Karnata, Maharastra and to Kosala respectively. Necessarily the lower Krishna Valley was a particularly propitious zone for the proliferation of the Buddhist creed and River Krishna (Maisolos of the Greeks) was the life giving arterial water-way that united together the trading patrons given to far flung voyages and devoted monks who annihilated distance to spread the gospel of the Buddha. The valley of Nagarjunakonda (in Guntur District) was discovered in 1936. Since then systematic salvage excavations for nearly six years from 1954 had to be undertaken to retrieve all that was historically and archaeologically valuable in the valley before leaving it to the rising catchment water level of the giant Nagarjunasagar project; the hundreds of sites of early Buddhist faith, mostly of Mahayana that dotted the valley have revealed an outstanding and new chapter in the history of Andhra Pradesh and of early Buddhism at Vijayapuri, as the city here was anciently called, and at Sri Parvata as the hill range from here to Srisailam was also perhaps called. From the scores of inscriptions that we have here (one of which would seem to be also of the time of Yajna Satakarni) which are mostly of the Ikshvaku (Ikkhaku) dynasty—the successors of the Satavahanas here—we get a glimpse of the remarkable part played by nearly half a dozen distinguished ladies of the royal house and princesses, who though their lords were patrons of Hinduism, themselves promoted the cause of Buddhism. We have names of many viharas of the various denominational sects of early Buddhism like Bahusrutiya Vihara, Mahisasaka Vihara, Chula Dharmagiri Vihara, Aparamahavinaseliya Vihara Purvaseliya Vihara, Kulaha Vihara and Simhala Vihara, not, to mention the Maha chetiya in the centre of the valley which is mentioned as holding in its bosom the corporeal relics of Lord Buddha himself.

Thousands of sculptured panels and friezes in greenish limestone were recovered from the site, giving us a continuous bas-relief narration of the life of the Buddha. The scenes are from both Buddha's life as well as from the Jatakas. Andhra stupas are distinguished by the erection of the five Ayaka pillars on the cardinal directions at the front of the drum, on the pradakshinapatha. It is these which carry inscribed records often. Inscriptions were mostly in Prakrit, but Sanskrit records were also found. One of them belonging to the fourth-fifth centuries A.D. mentions a Dharmakathika or Dharma narrator by profession who is said to have been well versed in horoscope casting and for whom the yellow flag or 'order' furnished amply.

Another inscription from a place called Jaggayyapetta in Krishna District mentions the setting up of an image of Buddha in high relief for universal beatitude, by one Chandraprabha, a pupil of Jayaprabhacharya, who in turn was a pupil of the venerable Nagarjunacharya. This Nagarjuna was obviously the later Tantric guru (Siddha Nagarjuna, who was one of the 84 Siddhas) and not the great founder of the Madhyamika school. This Nagarjuna was perhaps living in the fifth century A.D.

A third record from a place called Gummidodurru, also dateable to the fifth century A.D. which states that for the universal beatitude, has been set up an image of Bhagat (Buddha) by Sramana Rahula, pupil of Acharya Dharmadeva, who in turn was the intimate disciple of Acharya Maudgalyayana. The information on the religious life of Buddhist monks at Nagarjunakonda reveals that the Thera Vada (Vibhyya Vada) school of Ceylonese Buddhism flourished side by side with Mahayana Buddhism in the valley, although the latter was dominant.

Here was a typical stupa at Bhattipulu which is said to have been a Mahastupa enshrining a bone relic of the Master with flowers of gold and pearls in a crystal casket. Andhradesa gained a name for producing Buddhist authors of repute who learned by rote the entire canon and were known as Dharmakosakas; while the Dharmakathakas delivered learned discourses on them.

It is accepted, on all hands, that the Mahayana type became deep-rooted in the soil of central and south India. Hence, those things, associated with the concept of Buddha

as a God also grew side by side. A lofty conception of Buddha was evolved, as typified in one passage in the Nagarjunakonda inscriptions. It says that, "The Supreme Buddha, honoured by the lord of gods; omniscient, compassionate towards all sentient beings; freed from lust, hatred and delusion, which have been conquered by him; the bull and musk elephant among spiritual leaders; perfectly enlightened one, who is absorbed by the best of elements." Yet another record describes him as one, "who has shown the road to welfare and happiness to gods and men and all beings; who has conquered and put down the pride and arrogance of Mara's hosts, called lust, hunger, fear, desire, thirst, delusion and hatred; who, of great power, is possessed of the ten powers; who has set, in motion, the wheel of law pertaining to the eight-fold path; whose graceful and well formed feet are marked with the sign of the wheel; whose splendour is that of the newly risen moon; whose sight is lovely as that of the autumnal moon and who is magnified by the thought of the world."

In South India Buddhism lingered even after 1000 A.D. The records of Andhra in the 12th and 13th centuries show that the famous Amaravati stupa was still in good preservation. Provisions were made for perpetual lamps at this stupa as also in another stupa at Dipaladinne by some Brahmins, merchants, ladies and a chief of Keta family, Keta II and his relatives (A.R.E., Madras Govt. 1914-15; pp 16-17 and 104-05). Further, two records from Belgami in Shimoga District and Lakkundi in Dharwar District show the worship of the Buddha and Tara along with some Brahmanical deities and sometimes even of the Jains, in temples. In one such case, the worshipper was no less a person than Akkadevi, the elder sister of Western Chalukya king Jagadekamalla Jayasimha III (1138-1181). Indeed by this time or in a slightly earlier period, Buddha had been included in some regions as one of the avatars of Visnu. But orthodox Buddhists of South India at this stage preferred to migrate north and we have many such instances furnished by the Tibetan Tangyur, of Vajracharyas of South India and Deccan. However, a very large number of images of Mahayana and Vajrayana pantheon dateable to the 11th-12th centuries A. D. found in the Mayurbhanj and Nilgiri tracts of Orissa suggest the continuation of these doctrines in these regions at this time. The best among such sites, though dating slightly earlier, found in Orissa is Ratnagiri.

RATNAGIRI: This site in Orissa, excavated by the archaeological Survey of India, has yielded considerable architectural, iconographic and other material for the reconstruction of the developed Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism that was flourishing in Kalinga from around the 8th century A. D., with well-accented Vajrayana cult leanings. Two brick Viharas and a main stupa built in the typical Buddhist form, were exposed, while the monasteries were more based on contemporary Brahmanical temples. These confirm the testimony of Tibetan traditions that Ratnagiri was a great centre of Mahayana and Vajrayana learning and art. One of the monasteries there was multi-storeyed and was in occupation from circa 8th – 13th centuries A. D. The second one had a shrine on the back wall. Images of bronze, stone and terracotta were yielded in profusion by this site, and indeed their exuberance is the chief feature of the site.

TAMILNAD: The two sites of Kaveripattinam ('Kaveri emporion' of Ptolemy and Periplus) and Nagapattinam further down on the coast, have been great centres of later Buddhism. Recent excavations in the former site have revealed what promises to be a part of an apsidal chaitya and a good wing of the attached vihara. Within the structure, amidst stucco carvings of the structure and broken parts of stucco heads and legs of considerable stylistic interest, was also retrieved a small bronze Buddha in seated posture, of solid statuary of rather crude, modelled workmanship with a flat back and rilievo front, although the entire piece is intended to be in the round. It was perhaps a privately worshipped icon of one of the monks living in the monastery there. The age of this bronze image and along with it, that of the structural vestiges with which it was associated would appear to pertain reasonably to the sixth and seventh centuries A.D. if not later still.

The Chulamani Vihara at Nagapattinam was a brick structure erected on the style of overseas Dravidian order of Greater India, rising at least in two storeys. A copper plate record of the 11th century A. D. states that Raja gave the village of Anaimangalam for the maintenance of the Buddhist shrine in this vihara. Dharmapala in his commentary on the Netti-pakarana mentions this as Dharma-soka Vihara and it was here that he composed this commentary.

Rare Buddhist bronzes have been found in South India. Of these the earliest was found in Buddhapad (Indian Antiquary, 1. p. 153) and Amaravati, both in Andhra Pradesh. These which portray standing Buddha with various types of drapery have been dated from fourth century A.D. to sixth century A.D. on stylistic grounds. A full cache of bronzes was also discovered some years ago from Nagapattinam, some of them inscribed, apparently from the site of old Viharas there. Some of these have been dated to the early period (870-1070 A.D.) and a large number of the rest to the later period (1070-1250 A.D.) It is obvious that it was the bronze casting art that was fostered almost for the first time in Tamilnad by Cholas that gave a fillip to casting of the Buddhist bronze image, as found in such profusion at Nagapattinam. The Vihara here was once and for all lost to us, when it was summarily dismantled to make way for Jesuit activities during the British times. We have lost with it, for ever, a least known chapter of pre-mediaeval Buddhism in Tamilnad.

KANCHIPURA : This was a stronghold of the Buddhists with the Raja Vihara and its hundred monasteries. Many Buddha images have been discovered in the town, particularly around the present Ekamranatha shrine premises. In a 14th century Korean inscription in verse, writing in 1378 A.D. Li Se mentions one Dhyana-bhadra who was born of a princess of Kanchi to the king of Magadha; it is stated that he visited Kanchi and heard a sermon given by a Buddhist preacher there on the *Karanda-vyuha-sutra*.

In spite of the fact that Mahayanism itself continued for quite some time in the early mediaeval period in the deep south, it did not develop any Vajrayana pantheon and creed but continued the Mahayana iconography and hieratic ritual. In the Kalingadesa particularly and in Bengal and Madhyadesa, Vajrayana became incipient even by the 8th-9th centuries A.D. It is probably due to the development of Sakta cults in these northerly regions which were translated into Vajrayana Buddhism also, whereas, such a sakta devloution in iconography did not take place at all in the south. Further, it was perhaps the early adoption of the Buddha into the Visnuite Avataras in the south, as attested by the Pallava inscription in the Adivaraha cave temple at Mahabalipuram, that robbed Buddhism of all individuality and perhaps this, coupled with the high zeal with which

Brahmanical Hinduism was fostered by the Pallavas, the first well-known king of which dynasty dealt with the Buddhist institutions in a most satirical manner (as in his burlesque '*Matta Vilasa*') that was responsible for the exodus of Buddhist acharyas to the north, and even farther to Nepal, Tibet China etc.

KERALA: Srimulavasam on the westcoast near Ambalapuzha had an early Buddhist settlement in the ninth century A.D. We have a very fine seated Buddha discovered at this place and preserved *in situ*.

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