

# **How Buddhist Records Helped Recreate The History of India**

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Your Excellency, the Ambassador of India, respected members of the audience and friends,

I thank the India Bhutan Foundation for having invited me to deliver a talk on a subject that is so close to my heart. For the last two decades I chose a rather unusual combination of subjects for my research, namely, History and Religion, and it feels satisfying to see some positive results emanating out of this combination. This is not the first occasion when I have expressed India's indebtedness to Buddhist records for reconstructing Indian history in the last two centuries. Those who are familiar with this issue would be aware of the basic problem of deciphering history as an empirical discipline from materials that were never meant to serve as historical records or documents. I refer to Indian texts, more specifically the genre of sacred texts. We must remember that in ancient India which covers the period from 3500 BC to 1200 AD, i.e, more than four-fifth of India's recorded history, the chronicling of events was primarily the task of what we call the Brahmanical intelligentsia that was also the keeper of religious traditions.

For various reasons, history was not their focus and though we get large volumes of literature, primarily sacred, from the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Sutras, the Puranas and numerous commentaries thereof, we hardly get any historical narratives. The Puranas do recite genealogies and some parts

are substantiated by facts, but they mix up a lot of fiction and religion and cannot, therefore, qualify as historical texts. They have, of course, been treated as source materials of history, but with a lot of caution and very selectively. Where India's secular side is concerned, India was not known to have produced histories except rare ones like Kalhana's Rajatangini in the 12<sup>th</sup> that chronicles the dynasties of Kashmir and some others. With the arrival of Muslim rulers, the emphasis changed and political records were kept quite rigorously and it is needless to say that during the colonial period, this was obsessive but one needs to be extremely careful about imperial bias and other failings.

While it is not difficult to produce the history of India from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards, there were considerable problems in delineating a linear history of India from the earliest historical period. India had completely forgotten even the grandeur of Harappan civilisation and its large cities on the Indus and its tributaries and distributaries like Mohenjo Daro, Harappa, Lothal that were built as early as 3500 BC and flourished for almost two millennia. The Vedic period has left behind almost no such direct material civilisation but archeology has been able to retrieve remains of pottery, metals, small towns and other evidence. The next major phase, that is personified by the great Gangetic kingdoms, the Mahajanapadas and the Mauryas have considerable material artefacts and architecture but much of the Buddhist glory was sadly forgotten in the land of its birth. In fact, the first two major discoveries of British archeology, i.e, the Amravati stupa, that Col. Colin Mackenzie had stumbled upon first in 1798, and the Ajanta caves that were discovered accidentally by a team of soldiers in 1819 are two of the grandest evidence of the efflorescence of Buddhist art and culture that had lapsed from human memory. Mackenzie returned to Amravati in 1816 as the Surveyor General of India as he knew that his earlier visit was quite superficial and spent four

years in documenting the find and sketching the ruins. He made a presentation on Amravati before the Asiatic Society in Kolkata in 1819 with 85 illustrations, but he made the mistake of mistaking the site to be one of Deccan Jainism rather than of Buddhism. Ever after it was discovered, it took both the British and Indians several decades to understand the uniqueness of the art of Ajanta and hence, it was not incorporated into India's historical timeline till the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. That journey is another interesting story in itself.

Both Ajanta's discovery and Amaravati's presentation were in the year 1819. This means that even two hundred years ago, 1817, there was no proper linearity in Indian history and there was, for instance, no idea of the glory of the Mauryas, the greatness of Ashoka and the magnificence of the Buddhist phase. Almost all the architectural grandeur of pre-Islamic India is represented by the mighty stupas at Sarnath and Sanchi and the ancient universities of Taxila and Nalanda. In 1817, their existence was not known or visible as they had been lying in ruins from centuries of neglect. They had become highly avoidable ruins that were dreaded because of snakes and ghosts. Buddhism had survived and prospered outside its homeland, but in its cradle and nursery its existence was forgotten. Today, we shall briefly touch upon the fascinating process through which India rediscovered her past in the next hundred years, bit by bit, and how Buddhist memory helped the process.

Let us quickly recapitulate some of the other major Buddhist monuments that were discovered during this exciting phase. The next significant discovery after Amaravati and Ajanta was in 1830, General Ventura uncovered the Manikyala Stupa at Taxila. This very ancient city, was said to be the capital of Parikshit, the grand-son of Arjuna of Mahabharata,

and it had been an important Buddhist centre that the Jataka tales describe in great details. Taxila had seen Darius of Persia and Alexander the Great. Taxila carried valuable evidence of several periods, pre-Mauryan, Indo-Greek and Kushan. This ancient centre of India's first university had been destroyed by the Huns in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD and it lay in ruins for 1400 years. But how did the British find out what Indians had forgotten? One was their boundless curiosity and the other was their scorn for Indian concepts of 'purity' and 'impurity', as well as for ghosts and evil spirits that prohibited Indians from venturing into ruins. Cobras, and other dangerous creatures that inhabited these ruins did not deter them either.

More interesting is the fact that British scholars and archaeologists utilised Indian or Chinese texts, mainly Buddhist, to provide them with valuable clues to many historical sites. After all, James Rennell had used the writings of foreigners, i.e, classical European geographers like Pliny and Ptolemy to identify Pataliputra with modern Patna in his 1783 Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan. But, Alexander Cunningham, who later became the first Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India depended a lot on the testimony of Chinese pilgrims and their travel accounts of the Buddhist sacred places in India. By using the bearings and distances mentioned by travellers like Fa Xian and Xuan Zang, Cunningham succeeded in fixing the locations of many of the famous sites mentioned in ancient Indian texts and thus rediscovering them. These records, of course, had their own limitations which resulted in all kinds of controversies as, for instance, the identification of Kapilavastu. Here, for instance, the field of speculation was very wide because the bearings in the accounts of Chinese pilgrims were not consistent. While Nepal has claimed Tilaurakot as ancient Kapilavastu, we in India have identified it with Piprahwa-Ganwaria in Uttar Pradesh. And while it is true that freely occurring monastic seals of the first-second centuries CE which

mention the Kapilavastu Sangha have been found at Piprahwah-Ganwaria, at Tailaurakot too, a terracotta sealing with 'Sa-ka-na-sya' ('of the Sakyas') in the Brahmi script has been reported. So, where exactly was Kapilavastu located is a question that neither archaeology nor literature can still answer to everyone's satisfaction.

Cunningham unravelled the mighty Dhameka Stupa at Sarnath in 1835, which was cylindrical and quite unlike other hemi-spherical stupas. It marked the spot of the 'Deer Park', where Buddha gave his first sermon after attaining his enlightenment. The holiest of Buddhist sacred texts like the Vinaya Sutras and the Dhamma-Chakka-Pavattana Sutta contain the Lord's message of the four noble truths that were delivered at this very spot. But it was James Prinsep's remarkable decipherment of the Brahmi script two years later in 1837 that really shook history. The earliest messages of the Buddha and Buddhism were transmitted orally but when they were first recorded the script used to convey the Pali language was ancient or archaic Brahmi that was completely forgotten. For centuries, Indians had come across strange epigraphs or carvings on rocks and metal that none understood. What is more regrettable is that even the Maurya, the first emperors of India and Ashoka the great were almost gone and existed more in fables and legends rather than in written texts.

The mystery was unraveled by epigraphist and scholar of numismatics, James Prinsep of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal in Kolkata. As editor of the Society's journal, he received all types of coins and copies of inscriptions from all over India for decipherment, translation and publication. He was intrigued by the strange unknown alphabets on the rock engravings of Allahabad and Delhi that lay in front of him. From the middle of the 1830s, he embarked on a serious mission to make sense of them. With extreme

patience and his extraordinary command over other foreign scripts, he managed finally to decipher the words 'Devanampiya Piyadasi'. This was the term by which Ashoka was addressed in the sacred texts and translated as "Beloved of the Gods of Gracious Mein". Prinsep managed thereafter to decipher the Brahmi script in which most Ashokan rock edicts were inscribed and he produced the most solid form of historical evidence to establish that emperor Ashoka was truly a historical character. He had been mentioned in the Buddhist chronicles of Sri Lanka by the same epithet, but he could now be fixed with historical accuracy: after a few hiccups. Prinsep assumed first that this Ashoka was a Sri Lankan king who used the same epithet. It was only when George Turnour, who had considerable knowledge of Lankan Buddhism, sent him correct evidence from Pali sacred literature did Prinsep rectify his error and declare this monarch as Ashoka the great of Indian legends.

After so many years of speculation, Ashoka Maurya was finally demystified and firmly established on the throne of Buddhism and India. This helped in joining the dots of the missing grandeur of India's real heritage, for none personifies the plural soul of India more than him. If the Buddhist texts had not been there as a back up there are grave doubts as to how well we would have succeeded in establishing a credible history of ancient India. Cunningham's subsequent discovery of Sanchi Stupa in 1851 that had been lost in our memory was the most educative of all our stupa sites. The restored stupa brings out the characters from the Jataka Tales that embellish the gateways. In 1854, Cunningham published the Bhilsa Topes which attempted to establish the history of Buddhism based on whatever architecture and archaeology evidence was available. Himanshu Prabha Ray mentions Sanchi with special emphasis in her significant work 'The Return of the Buddha: Ancient Symbols for a New Nation'.

Cunningham's doggedness led him to rediscover and re-excavate Bodhi Gaya in 1861 that Hamilton Buchanan had reported half a century ago as a place covered by a thick forest. Cunningham's further discoveries in 1862-63 were as important in the treatment of historical amnesia. He identified Ramnagar as the ancient 'Aihich-chatra'; Kosam as the great 'Kausambi' and Sahet Mahet as the historic 'Sravasti'. British archaeologists could retrieve these jewels from our past mainly on the basis of Buddhist textual evidence. The indefatigable Cunningham then moved to the Bharhut Stupa and physically uprooted large number of stone carvings from this site, in true imperial style, and transported them to Calcutta's Indian Museum. They served there as a 'classroom' and exhibition of the excellence of Buddhist art and architecture. Succeeding generations of art historians, archaeologists, museologists and connoisseurs derived their education from these eloquent stones in Kolkata. Thus, within just eight decades, Buddhist architecture was suddenly brought back into our memory and served to stoke a strong sense of pride among Indians who were thoroughly demoralised by the systematic campaign of British rulers to belittle their past. These structures and sculptures of Buddhism compensated somewhat for the apparent lack of outstanding tangible cultural heritage that stared at us where ancient Indian history was concerned, except the few temples like those of the Pallavas and Cholas, Vijayanagar and Jagannath.

Before concluding, we need also to appreciate that though Buddhism disappeared from large parts of India by the middle of the first millennium, the Buddhist Pala dynasty of Bengal established their kingdom as late as the 8<sup>th</sup> century and ruled till the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It created the 'Pala School of Sculptural Art' and constructed massive architectural structures at Vikramshila Odantapuri and elsewhere. In fact, the Buddhist Vihara of Somapura in

Paharpur, Bangladesh, that the Palas erected is considered to be the largest such structure in the Indian sub-continent and is now a "World Heritage Site". What is interesting is that once Buddhism was rediscovered, however, several Indians came forward to celebrate its glory.

The revival of Buddhism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was also due to great social reformers like Jyotiba Phule and Babasaheb Ambedkar. Even Rabindranath Tagore's creative genius drew inspiration from Buddha's teachings on social equality and to him Buddha was the greatest human being. The poet laureate chose to prostrate himself before the image of the Buddha at Bodh Gaya which is the only time in his life that he ever did so. Tagore made a profound observation on the 8<sup>th</sup> May, 1935, the Buddha Purnima Day: "Materials of different shades of Indian thought and culture are confined in Buddhist literature and due to the lack of intimacy with them, the entire history of India remains unfulfilled. Being convinced of it, cannot a few youths of our country dedicate themselves for the restoration of the Buddhist heritage and make it a mission in life?"

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