

Hermitage to Premier Monastic site: Sāranātha's Tale, an Epigraphic Account

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Abstract: Sāranātha, a monastic site of world renown had a rather sluggish growth from a humble hermitage at the exterior of the historic city of Vārāṇasī. Its name been abbreviated from Sāraṅnātha, meaning the lord of the deer implied to both Śiva and the Buddha, a place, a fair abode of animals and particularly deer offered a perfect solitude for meditation and contemplation. Its growth as a Buddhist monastic site was determined by two incidents. While the Buddha chose it as the place for his first preaching or Dharmacakrapravartana, immediately set a Buddhist overtone to the place. It again slipped into oblivion until Aśoka, built a stupa here as a part of his programme to propagate Buddhism. The site gained a steady momentum of growth with an eclectic patronage from varied agencies. Epigraphic sources reflect kings, queens, sages, traders and merchants as well as lay people contributed as per their means. Votive stūpas, pillars, statues, railings, lamp posts and even the oil to keep those lamps lighted were all funded by charities of different degrees. Having a solid base of followers, Sāranātha assumed the form of an organized and structured monastic establishment.

Key Words: 1. Buddhism, 2. Monastic, 3. Institution, 4. Organization, 5. Epigraphy, 6. Donation,

The name Sāranātha is abbreviated from Sāraṅnātha, meaning the lord of the deer implied to both Śiva and the Buddha and both had close connections to Vārāṇasī. Initially it was a desolate, forested area located on the fringes of the mighty city of Vārāṇasī, teeming with animals, especially deer offering an excellent recluse for meditation and saintly life. It is alternatively called Mrgadava- deer park or Mrgadaya is known from the Jātakas.¹ The Mahāvastū narrates that one and half yojana from Vārāṇasī there was a great wood where 500 sages lived. On learning that the Buddha was conceived they sacrificed their lives by throwing themselves up in the air and fell on the earth.² Hence the place is named Rṣipattana. The central event that recast the direction of this humble hermitage to a committed religious path is the Buddha's selection of the place for his First Teaching or Dharmacakrapravartana. But the place really had to await Aśoka, for its monastic inception.

Beginning of the monastic form: Dilip K. Chakrabarti has pointed out that two centuries elapsed between the Buddha's lifetime and advent of Aśoka as the first Buddhist emperor of Mauryan India that formed two major stages in the growth of early Buddhism from 6th century BCE to 2nd century BCE.³ Chakrabarti suggests that there should be at least one of the three basic features the stūpa (funeral mound), the caitya (worship hall with a stūpa) and a vihāra in a Buddhist site. A stūpa is the simplest among them containing corporeal relics of the Buddha or his chief disciples.⁴ Physical expansion of the Buddhist sphere was the primary focus of Aśoka as a pious Buddhist. As a propagandist Buddhist he built multitude of stūpas in his vast empire and to maintain solidarity of the infant Buddhist church and supervised disciplinary matters. We get to know from the Mahāvamśa, that bodily remains of the Buddha preserved in eight stūpas were divided by Aśoka to new stūpas that he built to far and distant places of his empire.⁵ Among the Aśokan structures there are magnificent Lion capital to commemorate the Lord's first preaching of sermon and the Dharmarājikastūpa and Dhamek tower.⁶

Here, it may be noticed that Aśoka's attempt to create a pan-Indian empire with the universal religion dhamma as a bonding factor played a vital role in the expansion of original urban base of Buddhism. Stūpas were started to be built in new and unexplored places like Sāncī, Sāranātha, Amarāvati and Takṣasīlā.⁷ Aśoka's inscription inscribed on the Aśoka pillar,⁸ shows Aśoka focused on the regularization of a monastic life. Appointment of the class of officials called Dhammahāmatas served dual purposes of furtherance the message of dhamma to the people and to keep an eye on the disciplinary condition of the monastery and was capable to summarily expel anyone found creating dissension within the monastery. The code of conduct for the community of monks and nuns was also prepared. The Aśoka phase may be considered as the embryonic stage of Sāranātha monastic establishment. The real growth of the monastic set up took place in the post Aśoka period. The blossoming of the site took place along the consistent donations received broadly from the royal, ecclesiastical and lay agencies.

Epigraphic Evidence to the Institutional growth: Sāranātha's closeness to Kuṣāṇa eastern capital Mathurā helped it to receive grants from the Kuṣāṇas and their subsidiaries. The Aśoka Sāranātha pillar contains two other broken and fragmentary inscriptions, of Rāja Aśvaghōṣa who was probably a local ruler under Kaṇiṣka as his modest title suggests and the date of the inscription also probably stands for the time of Kaṇiṣka's reign (Beginning of Kaṇiṣka's rule has been variously placed in 128 CE, 144 CE and 248 CE. But many scholars prefer to place him in the last quarter of the 1st century because the famous Śaka era starting from 78 CE was introduced by Kaṇiṣka. However, there is no unanimity on the chronology of Kaṇiṣka.).⁹ The real nature of grant is not known and records that he made some donations "in the fortieth year, in the first fortnight of winter, on the tenth day".¹⁰

The next one is dated in the third year of Kaṇiṣka's rule, engraved on a massive Bodhisatva statue and records the donation of the Buddha statue on the 22nd day of the 3rd month of winter of the 3rd year of Kaṇiṣka's rule, donated on occasion of a pilgrimage to the sacred Buddhist sites. The process in which the donation was made was complex. Monk Bala, the master of Tripitaka and disciple of Pushyabuddhi appears to be the chief donor in this case. In this inscription, names of two satraps Kharapallana and Vanasphara also occurred. Under the Kuṣāṇas, large administrative units were placed under satraps. Khārapallana and Vanasphara were satraps under Kuṣāṇa ruler Kaṇiṣka and the former was the latter's father. Being a mendicant, it is impossible for Bala to finance building of a monastery. Perhaps, while these satraps supplied the fund, Bala carried on the work of construction and therefore rightfully called himself the chief donor of the monastery. The name of Vanasphara appeared in the umbrella shaft of the Sāranātha inscription, who ruled the eastern portion of his father's domain with Vārāṇasī as an administrative unit and his chief seat.¹¹ They used Kuṣāṇa coinage and the inscription was also issued in the name of the Kuṣāṇa emperor.¹² Vārāṇasī – Sāranātha region became important foci of the Buddhist resurgence under Mathurā's influence that was reflected by the common iconography of Mathurā school of arts, specimens of which are found in important Buddhist centres.

The earliest of the Gupta inscriptions comes from Kumāragupta's time (414-55 CE), inscribed on the base of a broken Buddha statue to inform that this is a pious gift of Kumāragupta.¹³ This edict clearly mentions the date and the name of the donor monk Abhayamitra who caused to build this Buddha image for acquiring the supreme merit for his parents, teachers and other sentient beings. A very well recorded document of gift of a monk Abhayamitra for earning merit to free his parents, preceptors and all sentient beings from earthly existence is the "Sārnātha Buddhist Stone Image Inscription"¹⁴ dated the Gupta Era 154, corresponding to 473 CE when Kumāragupta was ruling who has been identified as Kumāragupta II ruling over Vārāṇasī as a local governor around 473-74 CE.¹⁵ The same Abhayamitra appears the donee, in an inscription of Budhagupta dated 476 CE, the son of Purugupta and grandson of Kumāragupta I. The inscription is found on a standing Buddha image marked by chaste simplicity and refined artistic skill. The epigraph records that on the seventh day of the dark fortnight of the month of Vaiśākha on the 157th year of the Gupta rule when Budhagupta was ruling

over the earth this beautiful image of the Buddha was caused to be made by the Buddhist monk Abhayamitra for earning merit for his parents, preceptors and the whole mankind by erecting this image.¹⁶

An inscription from the Pāla period speaks of building ten caityas by Amritapāla, a scion of the Pāla lineage. This is done with object of filling the world with compassion. The palaeography of the inscription belongs to the 9th century CE.¹⁷

A fragmentary stone inscription written in corrupt Sanskrit found to the west of Dhamekstūpa. Professor Kielhorn identified it as one of Kalacuri (Cedi) king Karṇadeva's dated in 1058 CE. The inscription contains that on the fifteenth day of the bright fortnight of Āśvina, Paramabhāṭṭaraka, Mahārājadhirāja, Parameśvara Karṇadeva, caused a copy of Aṣṭasahasrikā and in order to be recited this eternally by the monks presented something to the sthāviras. Precise nature of this gift is unknown.¹⁸

In the northern area of the main monastery, a group of donative inscriptions were found all dated between 10th- 12th centuries. The first one is a 10th century inscription mentions one Lokeśvaradāsa to have done something to the Dharmacakrastūpa of Sāranātha. Next one only contains laudatory epithets of the Kalacuri king Kṛṣṇa, implying some connection of the king to the monastic site. Near the Dhamekstūpa, an 11th century inscription of Rājaputra Hātharideva, son of Rājaputra Nājunadeva registers some gift. Another donative inscription of the 11th- 12th century where the name of the donor is lost was called Paramopāsaka.¹⁹

The most lavish donation of the early medieval times came from the Gahadvala queen Kumarīdevī, Buddhist wife of king Govindacandra of Kānyakubja. The vihāra, constructed under her will was described to be an exquisite artwork that even evokes the wonder of the gods. It consists of nine segments. The portion describing the grant is of somewhat obscure nature. It has been suggested by Rai Bahdur V. Venkayya that the attention of the queen was drawn to the fact that the Dharmacakra- Jinavihāra set up by Aśoka needs wholesome repair or rebuilding. So, either she restored or rebuilt the vihāra altogether and dedicated to the Buddha and stands there eternally.²⁰

Parallel to the royal grants and favour considerable help and support came from both priestly and lay agencies. The earliest types of priestly grants dated around 2nd century BCE are mainly in the form of sponsoring the construction of pillars (*"thāmbodānam"*) and railstones. Two inscriptions on the polished capitals to the west of the Aśoka column speaking of two pillar gifts by monks Hāriti and Suguta from 2nd century BCE. In two other cases of pillar donations, names of donors are missing.²¹ We have examples of railstones built by priestly grants. The first one is a 2nd century BCE gift of the nun Samvahikā. Second one is about a joint gift by Jatēyikā and Bharini.²² Starting from this time the practice of priestly grants will continue in the successive periods. This point was taken up by Gregory Schopen who cites the example of Sancī where almost from the same time i.e. 2nd- 1st century BCE we have donative inscriptions referring to monks and nuns to have donated railings and pillars. Luders also expressed his surprise about monks making donations at Bhārhūt dated a little earlier, while theoretically they didn't possess any wealth. Then he suggested that probably they collected the funds by begging. However, hoards of coins found in the monastic area of Takṣaśilā and some Ajantā inscriptions recorded that some caves and many images were donated by the monks and nuns. So, in practice, priestly grants formed an important component of the total grants made to monasteries.²³

In the Gupta period there was a great increase in priestly grants exclusively in the nature of Buddha image gifts with the aim of earning merit. For example, a pious gift of unknown nature was made by nun Dharmadevi in the latter half of the 4th century CE for the attainment of merit for the parents and other sentient beings.²⁴

Sāranātha-īśva Buddha image seated in the earth touching attitude is a gift of a senior monk Bandhugupta mentioned in inscription XXII attached to this image. Two short donative inscriptions of the Buddhist monk Dhanadeva are dated roughly from 4th- 5th century. One of them is written below a headless Buddha recording the gift of the same image and the other is found at the Jagat Singh Stūpa mentioning yet another gift of unknown nature. Both are dated around 4th- 5th century CE.²⁵ Another contemporary grant by a Buddhist monk Buddhapriya for attainment of supreme knowledge was found inscribed on the base of an image numbered 50, of which only the feet remain.²⁶

Inscription XIII, composed in pure Sanskrit found on a detached base of a Buddha image but the image is lost. It is dated in the 5th century CE and runs “Of the Sun’s kinsman the Buddha of matchless splendour this image was caused to be made by Śīlayaśas for the attainment of supreme bliss.”²⁷ A monk named Śīlasena also causes to erect a Buddha image is available from a Sanskrit inscription of the 5th century CE.²⁸

Two pious gifts from the Buddhist monk Dhanadeva have been mentioned in short donative inscriptions of the same period. The first one is “*dēyadharmō = yam Śākyabhikshō [r] Dhanadēvasya*” (देयधर्मोयशाक्यभिक्षो [र] धनदेवस्य) inscribed on a headless Buddha image (sculpture no.10). The second one is found on the base of a small Buddha statue to the west of the Jagat Singh Stūpa, recognizing this is the pious gift of Dhanadeva.²⁹

Gifts from the Buddhist monks were common as found from another inscription of the 6th century CE on a rail post reading it is a gift of monk Bodhishena.³⁰ While Mathurā continued to be a Buddhist cultural centre from the preceding Kuṣāṇa period, Sāranātha rose as a new one. In fact, Sāranātha Buddhas are marked by “refined style and harmony of form and content.”³¹

Lay grants also featured regularly in the epigraphic sources. A 5th century inscription was found at the cross bars of a stone rail near the Aśoka column records that pious gift of a sacred lamp by the female lay devotee Sulakṣmaṇā at the chief temple of the lord Buddha. Probably many centuries after the construction of the railing this pillar was set up as a lamp post and it came into use. Sacred lamps were often gifted by the laity. Lay worshipper Kirtti also gifted a sacred lamp to mūlagandhakuṭī is known from a 4th or 5th century inscription.³² A lay gift of a lamp post again was made by Bhavarudra, dated 6th century CE.³³ It appears from the inscriptions that pious devotees of humble means often offered sacred lamps to the principal chamber of the Buddha. Many seals containing the regular wheel and deer symbol were found to the west of the main shrine. One such seal runs that “In the Mūlagandhakuṭī of the Exalted one in the Saddharmachakra”.³⁴ At Mūlagandhakuṭī or the principal gandhakuṭī (hall of fragrance) from the finding of lamps it appears that lamps were kept on burning, because the place was very sacred. Originally dedicated to the memory of the Buddha, gandhakuṭī in the later times it grew personal apartment of the Buddha.

The epigraph numbered XVIII is inscribed in the Gupta characters of the 5th century on the base of the statue of Avalokiteśvara³⁵ mentioning this is the pious gift of the viṣayapati Suyātra for the acquirement of the supreme wisdom of all sentient beings. As per a 10th century inscription a man named Lokeśvaradāsa donated something and an 11th-12th century inscription records a donation from a pious follower where the name of the donor is missing.³⁶ Steady flow of lay grants of various kinds endowed Sāranātha from early historic to later times. Another layman Mabhuka’s pious gift is mentioned in a 10th- 11th century inscription attached to an image.³⁷

Epigraphic sources throw light on different Buddhist schools and their rivalry over the mastery of the establishment. Probably at a point of time, establishment was under the dominance of Sarvāstivādin monks. It goes “*āchāryyaṇam Sarvāstivādīṃparigraha[h]*”³⁸ meaning homage to the Sarvāstivādi teachers. Sarvāstivādins are an offshoot of the orthodox Sthaviravāda school. Its discoverer F.O. Oertel finds a deliberate attempt to superimpose the name Sarvāstivādins by erasing some other sect’s name on a later date to establish themselves as the donor of that railing.³⁹ The next one, inscribed on Aśoka column “*Ā[chā]ryyaṇam Sa[mmiti]yāṇamparigraha Vāatsiputrikāṇām*” (“आचार्यणम् मि तियाणम्परिग्रहवात्सिपुत्रिकाणम्”)⁴⁰ meaning homage to the Masters of the Sammitiyasect of the Vatsiputrika school. Characters of letters and the Sanskrit style of the epigraph resemble the early Gupta records. Hence it has been assigned to the 4th century CE.

Few official seals reveal the formal and organizational nature of the establishment. Two seals dated around 5th – 6th century CE with deer and wheel symbols on the obverse belonged to an individual Guptasimha and the other to the Bhikṣusamgha of ŚrīSaddharmaCakre,⁴¹ hinting that the monastic community had their common seal also. From a 6th-7th century CE seal with usual wheel and deer symbol we learn that Saddharmacakra was the original name of Sāranāthamonastic establishment and retained the name till the 11th century.⁴²

Conclusion: A close look at Sāranātha's tale reveals its organic but complex journey to fame as a Buddhist monastic establishment, from a mere modest hermitage at the suburbs of Vārāṇasī. Placed in the core orbit of major political activities, while it received ample royal grants other agencies like priests and people also showered their affection to it. It acquired an identity of being a repository of artistic images of the Buddha donated by priests. The site underwent a significant physical enlargement by the early medieval times, owing to the opulent endowments mainly through royal agencies. Monastic excellence of the site must have attracted such lavish grants. This was warranted by the presence of a vibrant community of monks who even competed with one another to be in charge of the monastery. Monastic and individual seals recovered from 6th-7th century CE with usual symbols and name speak of its governing and organizational aspect also. A careful examination of evidences suggests Sāranātha stood for a lively monastic environment and attracted a lot of popular admiration which was a forte of its sustenance.

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