

History of Mahayana Buddhism in South India

Evidences and Pointers

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(Paper presented at the National Conference on The Socio-Cultural Impacts of Buddhism in Kerala, on 24th-26th February 2016 in Pathanamthitta, Kerala, Organized in collaboration with Indian Council of Historical Research and Indian Council of Social Science Research)

Abstract: South India had a major role in the genesis and development of Mahayana Buddhism. This paper looks into some of the contributions by the Buddhist scholars of South India in the development of Mahayana movement. It also sheds light into the widespread presence of Mahayana in South India from 2nd-11th century CE by bringing evidences from various Buddhist scriptures and other sources. The purpose of this paper is to give pointers for further research and archeological investigation.

Introduction

In the context of Indian history, the presence and influence of Buddhism in North India is quite well known, including the places associated with Shakyamuni Buddha as well as remnants of many Stupas, statues and monasteries. Ancient Mahayana Buddhist Universities like Nalanda and Vikramashila are also quite well known and acclaimed world-wide. However it remains a lesser known fact that Buddhism was also widespread in South India with many important Buddhist centers like Kanchi, Amaravathi, Vanchi and Srimulavasam. According to the travel accounts of the Chinese Buddhist monks Faxian (also spelt as Fahien, 4th-5th century CE) and Xuanzang (also spelt as Hsüan tsang, 7th century CE), both Sravakayana (also known as Hinayana) and Mahayana were widely present in the South with many monasteries with tens of thousands of monks.

A great scholastic culture flourished in the South, which gave rise to many acclaimed Panditas (scholars) of Buddhism. This includes the progenitor of Mahayana as a movement, the great Acharya Nagarjuna himself. The different Mahayana philosophical streams like Prāsangika and Svātantrika which these Panditas formulated thrives even now in many Asian countries. Similarly, the Buddhist logic was developed predominantly by the South Indian Panditas like Dignaga and Dharmakirithi. South Indian scholars also contributed significantly to the development of Yogacara Buddhist philosophy.

South India was also famous for many thriving Buddhist practice places and temples. Evidences suggest that Mahayana practice, especially the practice of Avalokitesvara (also known as Lokeshvara) and Tara were very popular in the South. Some areas in the South like Sriparvata and Malayagiri served as places of conglomeration of the Buddhist Siddhas (accomplished Buddhist Yogic practitioners).

South India also remained an important hub for the spread of Buddhism to many other countries. Since there were established trade routes from South Indian coast to the rest of Asia, many Buddhist masters travelled to China and other countries to teach. The resulting lineages still flourish there which includes Zen and Shingon Buddhism.

Origin of the Mahayana Movement from South India

According to Mahayana Scriptures, the Buddha taught Mahayana Sutras only to a select audience and they were not widely disseminated during the Buddha's period. Historically, Mahayana Sutras surfaced at a later time. Though the Pali canon of Sravakayana also indicate the journey of Buddha as a Bodhisattva before his enlightenment, Bodhisattva ideal as a separate Mahayana path did not appear in those teachings. In Sravakayana, the focus is on individual liberation as a Sravaka Arhat. Whereas, Mahayana path is towards perfect and complete enlightenment as an Arhat-Samyak-Sambuddha. Mahayana as a distinct movement, emphasizes the Bodhisattva ideal of striving for the liberation of all beings instead of focusing on individual liberation. This movement crystallized around the 2nd century CE.

Some of the Mahayana Sutras throws light into their origin in South India (Hirasawa, 1990). According to Ashta-sahasrika-prajna-pāramita-sūtra (Perfection of Wisdom Sutras in 8000 lines) (trans, 1995), after the passing away of the Tathagata (Buddha), the Perfection Sutras appear in the South (dakshinapatha), then from the South they will spread to the West, and from there to the North. Astādaśa-sāhasrikā-prajna-pāramita-sūtra (Perfection of Wisdom Sutras in 18000 lines) (trans, 1990) also mention similarly.

Acharya Nagarjuna (2nd-3rd Century CE) was instrumental in bringing to surface many of the major Mahayana Sutras. He resided in Sriparvata (present day Nagarjunakonda) in Andhra under the patronage of the Satavahana kings. Before his time, Mahayana existed in the form of a few Sutras expressing the Bodhisattva path of boundless compassion and wisdom in experiential terms and was not easily understandable to the multitude. It is Nagarjuna who brought to light the elaborate versions of Prajnaparamita such as Śata-sahasrika-prajna-pāramita-sūtra (Perfection of Wisdom Sutras in 100,000 lines). Further, he wrote the earliest shastras expounding Madhyamaka philosophy in terms of logical arguments to make the vision of Mahayana Sutras understandable to a wider audience. These Sastras such as Mūlamadhyamaka-kārika made the meaning of Prajnaparamita more accessible. Thus, Nagarjuna systematized this doctrine with his path breaking works and paved the way for the seeds of Mahayana to flower into a mass movement (Abhaya devi, 2016).

In one of the Sangam period works of Tamil, 'Manimekhalai' by Chithalai Chathanar (trans. 1989) of 2nd/3rd century CE, there are strong evidences suggesting that the Mahayana ideal is already in its strong phase of formation by then. In Manimekhalai, though Mahayana is not identified as a separate school of Buddhism, there are strong underpinnings of it with the emphasis on compassion and alleviating of the suffering of other sentient beings. The protagonist Manimekhalai, who is a Buddhist nun, quenches the hunger of countless beings with Amuda Surabhi (The Vase of Nectar) during the famine in Kanchi. It is possible that this period signifies the transition to Mahayana through the Mahasanghika school which had a strong presence in the South.

In the context of the promulgation of Vajrayana (Tantric Buddhism) teachings also, South India is very significant. According to Kalachakra Tantra, one of the most important Buddhist Tantras, Shakyamuni Buddha gave these Tantra teachings in Amaravati in Andhra at the site of the Mahachaitya there.

South India's Contribution to the Development of Mahayana Buddhism

A great scholastic culture thrived in South India in the first millennium CE. Many philosophies and viewpoints were studied in-depth and debated upon. Kanchi in Tamil Nadu and Vanchi in present-day Kerala were great centers of learning. In the epic Manimekhalai, the protagonist was sent by her Guru Aravana Adikal to Vanchi to learn other Darsanas (philosophies) like Vedavadi, Mimamsa, Śaivavadi, Vaishnavavadi, Brahmavadi, Samkhya, Vaiśeshika, Ājivika, Nirgrantha and Bhūtavadi (which includes Lokayata).

This became a fertile ground for the development of Mahayana philosophy. Many shastras (treatises) on Mahayana were composed by the South Indian Panditas. This includes the great Acharya Nagarjuna's treatises of Madhyamaka such as Mūla-madhyamaka-kārika and Mahā-prajñā-pāramita-śāstra. His disciple Aryadeva from Sinhala (Sri Lanka) who stayed in Sriparvata and Kanchi, wrote the renowned Madhyamaka treatise Catusataka. Deriving inspiration from these luminaries, many scholars later arose in the South.

Different schools of Mahayana Philosophy came up based on the works of these Panditas. Some of them are listed below.

Buddhapalita (5th-6th century CE) from Hamsakrida in the South wrote a well-known commentary on the Mūla-madhyamika-kārika of Nagarjuna, named Mūla-madhyamaka-vṛtti and used the Prāsangika method (reductio-ad-absurdum) for his arguments. His works gave rise to the Prāsangika school of Madhyamaka.

Bhavaviveka (6th century CE) from Mālayara in the South (possibly Kerala) wrote many Madhyamaka treatises, including Madhyamaka-hṛdaya-kārika and a commentary to Mūla-madhyamika-kārika named Prajñā-pradīpa. He used the Svātantrika method (syllogism) for his arguments giving rise to the Svātantrika school of Madhyamaka.

Dharmapala (6th century CE) from Kanchi was a great Yogacara Pandita and became an abbot of Nalanda. He developed the work of his guru Dignaga, the famous logician and epistemologist.

Candrakirthis (7th century CE) from Samanta in the South, wrote the most acclaimed works of the Prāsangika school like Prasannapāda and Madhyamakāvātāra.

Buddhist logic was developed by the South Indian scholars Dignaga and Dharmakirthis. Dignaga (5th-6th century CE) from Kanchi laid the foundation for Buddhist logic and epistemology. He wrote many treatises like Pramāna-samuccaya and Hetucakra. Dharmakirthis (6th-7th century CE) another great Buddhist logician from Trimalaya (Tirumala in Andhra), further developed the work of Dignaga. He is the author of the most sublime works on Pramana like Pramānavārttika.

The practice systems of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara were very popular in the South. One of the early Mahayana Sutras, Gandavyuha Sutra (1st century CE) mentions the aspirant Sudhanakumara going to meet Avalokitesvara in the Potalaka Mountain in the deep south. Sudhanakumara started his journey from Dhanyakara (probably Dhanyakataka in Andhra) traveling further south upon the instruction of Bodhisattva Manjushri, in search of Dharma, meeting many great masters on the way including Avalokitesvara. According to Xuanzang (trans, 1884), the very abode of Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion is in Mount Potalaka in South India.

Vajrayana was also quite widespread in the South. There were great Vajrayana practice centers like Sriparvata (Nagarjunakonda to Srisailam) and Malayagiri (the southern part of Western Ghats) where Siddhas congregated. Many of the Mahayana masters from the South like Nagarjuna, Aryadeva and Candrakirthis were also Tantric adepts and wrote many commentaries on Buddhist Tantra. Nagarjuna and his disciples Aryadeva and Nagabodhi also prominent figure in the list of 84 Mahasiddhas of Vajrayana.

South Indian masters also majorly contributed in taking Buddhism to other countries especially China with which the South had prominent trade relations.

Chan/ Zen Buddhism was brought to China by the great master Bodhidharma (5th-6th century CE) who was from Kanchi. Bodhidharma was a prince of the Pallava dynasty. His guru was Prajnatara who particularly taught the sudden realization approach of Mahayana. Zen school later spread all over East Asia like China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam.

Acharya Dharmapala from Kanchi, was the guru of Xuanzang's guru Silabhadra. Dharmapala's Yogacara lineage was carried to China by Xuanzang. Xuanzang studied Dharmapala's Yogacara treatises thoroughly, translated them into Chinese and wrote commentaries. He became a highly acclaimed master in China founding the Faxiang school of Buddhism.

Tantric Buddhism was taken to China by Vajrabodhi (7th-8th century CE) from Malayagiri (Kerala) and his Sri Lankan disciple Amoghavajra, which later became famous as Shingon Buddhism in China and Japan. Vajrabodhi was a renowned Yoga Tantra master in the lineage of Nagabodhi. He also translated many Yoga Tantra texts to Chinese.

Buddhist Siddha Padampa Sangye/ Paramabuddha (11th-12th century CE), the founder of Chod/ Zhije traditions in Tibet is according to Tibetan legends, from South India from the land of coconuts (Beta'i Yul) close to the outer ocean. This description depicts a place which could be either in Kerala or the Konkan coast.

Major Mahayana Centers in the South

Archeological and textual evidences abound for many places in the South where Mahayana Buddhism thrived. Some of those centers are listed below.

Dhanyakataka located near the present day Amaravati in Andhra was the capital of Satavahana kings (1st century BCE - 3rd



Fig 1: Amaravati Stupa relief

century CE) who were patrons of Mahayana Buddhism. Remnants of a large Buddhist Mahachaitya built by king Ashoka is located here. Xuanzang in his travels stayed at Dhanyakataka and studied Abhidharma Pitaka. He gives a glorious description of the monasteries and Buddhist temples there. This area was also a Vajrayana stronghold where Shakyamuni Buddha is said to have given the Kalachakra Tantra teachings. A large number of images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas such as Avalokitesvara, Manjusri, Cunda, Maitreya, Vajrapani and Heruka have been found from Amaravati dating up to the 11th century CE, showing the widespread presence of Mahayana Buddhism at this site (Knox, 1992).

Sri Parvata, particularly surrounding the area of present day Nagarjunakonda was another place in Andhra where Mahayana thrived. Many great Buddhist masters like Nagarjuna, Sabaripada, Saraha, Aryadeva and Nagabodhi stayed and practiced there. The area from Nagarjunakonda to Srisailam was an abode of the Siddhas from different traditions who did many yogic practices there. When Nagarjunasagar dam was made, many sites, predominantly related to Mahayana were excavated and art works and inscriptions were saved in a hilly region now formed as an island.

Kanchi (Kanchipuram) in north Tamil Nadu played a significant role in the history of Buddhism in the South. It was a great centre of learning in the South like Nalanda and Vikramashila in the North. Xuanzang records hundreds of Mahayana monasteries and 10,000 monks in Kanchi. He also mentions about a Stupa built by king Ashoka in Kanchi. Chithalai Chathanar, in his epic novel Manimekhalai, depicted Kanchi as an important centre of Buddhism. In that work, the protagonist Manimekhalai, as mentioned before, spend her life in Kanchi taking teachings from the Buddhist master Aravana Adikal. Many great Mahayana masters like Dignaga, Bodhidharma and Dharmapala were from Kanchi. Cambridge manuscript (Cambridge, Add.1643) from the 11th CE mentions about a Vasudhara (a form of Tara) statue in Kanchi. This manuscript was obtained from Patan in Nepal. This is a manuscript of *Aṣṭa-sahāsrīkā-prajñāparamitā-sūtra*. It has paintings of many deities including Avalokitesvara, Tara, Manjusri etc. from then famous Buddhist temples from different parts of India.

Nagapattinam, the port city, was another important centre of Buddhism in Tamil Nadu. Many Mahayana artifacts including Lokeshvara, Maitreya, Tara, Jambala, Vasudhara etc were found from here. Xuanzang mentions about a Monastery built by Ashoka here. Chola king Rajaraja made a Buddhist monastery called Chudamani Vihara in the 11th century in Nagapattinam.

Srimulavasam was a famed Mahayana monastery in Kerala. The Paliyam copper plate inscription of Vikramaditya Varaguna (9th-10th century CE), an Ay king (South Kerala), says that he gave a grant of extensive land to the Buddhist monastery of Tirumulapadam (Srimulavasam) in Chera country. The inscription starts with homage to Avalokitesvara who has moon like radiance and from whom the nectar of grace flows down profusely and purifies everything, producing prosperity everywhere. Mushikavamsam written in the 11th century CE by the poet Atula also mentions about Mulavasa vihara. Cambridge Manuscript of *Aṣṭa-sahāsrīkā-prajñāparamitā-sūtra* has a painting of a four armed Avalokitesvara with the description "Dakshinapathe Mulavasa Lokanatha" which could be the replica of a famed Avalokitesvara idol in Srimulavasa Monastery (Cambridge, Add.1643). Exact location is still not found of this place with many favoring Trikunnappuzha as a possibility since the ancient Buddha idols found in Kerala are all from near this area.



Fig 2: Depiction of the statue of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara at Mulavasa, present in Cambridge Manuscript.

Many evidences point to the fact that the sacred mountain of Avalokitesvara named Potalaka mentioned in the Mahayana scriptures is Potiyil/Potikai which is also called Agastyakoodam situated in the Malaya Mountains (Southern portion of Western Ghats) between Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Gandavyuha Sutra mentions Sudhanakumara going to meet Avalokitesvara in the Potalaka Mountain situated in the deep south. Xuanzang, mentions in his travel records about Mount Potalaka. In his own words (Xuanzang, 1884),

"To the east of the Malaya Mountains is Mount Po-ta-lo-kia (Potalaka). The passes of this mountain are very dangerous; its sides are precipitous, and its valleys rugged. On the top of the mountain is a lake; its waters are clear as a mirror. From a hollow proceeds a great river which encircles the mountain as flows down twenty times and then enters the southern sea. By the side of the lake is a rock-palace of the Devas. Here Avalokitesvara in coming and going, takes his abode. Those who strongly desire to see this Bodhisattva do not regard their lives, but, crossing the water (fording the streams), climb the mountain forgetful of its difficulties and dangers, of those who make the attempt there are very few who reach the summit. ...Going north-east from this mountain, on the border of the sea, is a town; this is the place from which they start for the Southern sea and the country of Sang-Kia-lo (Ceylon). It is said commonly by the people that embarking from this port and going south-east about 3000 li we come to the country of Simhala."



Fig 3: Potiyil/ Agastyakoodam in Western Ghats, is likely to be the Mount Potalaka, the abode of Avalokitesvara mentioned in scriptures as in deep south.



Fig 4: Depiction of the statue of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara at Potalaka, as in Cambridge Manuscript

In Manimekhalai, Vidyadharas from Himalayas travel to Potiyil and take rest there. With these evidences the Japanese scholar Shu Hikosaka (1989) identified Potiyil as the mountain Potalaka of Avalokitesvara. Additionally there is evidence in the Buddhist praise to Avalokitesvara called Potalakashtakam which praises Avalokitesvara as enjoying the sandalwood scented breeze of Malayagiri ("Malayagiri chandana dhuparatim") (<http://www.dsbcproject.org/canon-text/content/130/823>).

Vanchi the capital of Chera kings was a great centre of learning of Buddhist and other philosophies as mentioned before. It is identified by many scholars with Muziris near Kondungalloor in Kerala. The epic Manimekhalai mentions the presence of a large Buddhist Chaitya there.

Konkan area was a stronghold of Mahayana practice with many Avalokitesvara and Tara temples and Stupas. Many of these temples and stupas find mention in the Cambridge manuscript (Cambridge, Add.1643), including a thousand armed Avalokitesvara statue at Sivapura in Konkan, Lokanatha statue at Sri Khairavana (possibly Kadri) in Chandratura in Konkan, two chaityas at Krishnagiri (possibly Kanheri caves) in Konkan and Marnava Lokanatha chaitya at Valivankana in Konkan (Foucher, Alfred, 1900).

Till 11th century CE, Kadri on the outskirts of Mangalore, Karnataka was an important centre of Mahayana Buddhism. Inside the premises of Kadri Manjunatha Temple (presently a Shiva temple), there are three exquisite panchaloha idols of six-armed three-faced Manjunatha (a form of Bodhisattva Manjusri), four-armed Lokeshvara (a form of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara) and Buddha of height five feet, four feet and four feet respectively. The inscription found at the base of the Manjunatha idol states that the idol was commissioned by Alupa King Kundavarman in Kadarika Vihara (dated 1068 CE). The Manjunatha idol has 'Dhyani Buddha Akshobhya' at the crown. From that it can be inferred that it is a form of Manjushri. Similarly, the Lokeshvara idol has 'Dhyani Buddha Amitabha' at the crown which indicates that it is Avalokitesvara. The name of the Temple 'Manjunatha' is possibly derived from the Manjunatha idol present there, though presently it is taken as another name for Shiva. The pillars in front of the garbha griha (sanctum sanctorum) also has Buddha figures carved on them. From this, it may be inferred that this temple was originally Kadarika Buddha Vihara (Monastery). After the

demise of Buddhism in the area the Temple gradually came to the hands of Nath Panthi tradition. There is currently a Nath Sampradaya Matha and some laterite caves in the hillock behind the Temple.



Fig 5: Bodhisattva Manjunatha Idol in Kadri Manunatha Temple at Mangalore, Karnataka

Cambridge manuscript (Cambridge, Add.1643) also mentions about a Khadiravani Tara at Kodgo-mandala (possibly in Coorg district in Karnataka).

Xuanzang recorded the presence of 100 Monasteries and 10,000 monks both Hinayana and Mahayana in a place named Konkanapura. There is no agreement on the exact location of this place. According to various historians it may be Banavasi or Anegundi (on the opposite bank of the River Tungabhadra across Hampi). Xunazang also mentions about the crown of Siddhartha kept in a monastery and a fifty foot sandal wood statue of Maitreya Buddha there. Xuanzang also recorded about a 100-foot Stupa built by Ashoka in that locality.

Inscription dated 1065 CE (Rice, B Lewis, 1898) found at Balligavi in the Shimoga district of Karnataka mentions that minister Rupa-bhattaya under king Somesvara I, constructed a Buddhist vihara and a temple for Tara Bhagavati, Avalokitesvara and Buddha. Another inscription dated 1067 CE mentions that a lady named Nagiyakka constructed a Tara Bhagavati temple and offered some land grants.

Buddhism was widespread also in north Karnataka. An inscription dated 1095 CE in Dambal in Dharwad district mentions a temple built by 16 merchants for Tara and a vihara for Buddhist monks. Another Temple of Tara was built at Lakkundi. In Kolivada, in Dharwad district, an icon of Tara has been discovered belonging to about 13th century CE. A statue of Padmapani (a form of Avalokitesvara) is found in a cave in Badami in North Karnataka.

The earliest of the caves in Ajanta and Ellora and its sculptures were constructed by the Satavahana kings of the South India (Andhra) when they controlled this region.

Presence in the Later Period

Buddhism started waning in South India after the 8th/9th century CE. However there were some Buddhist scholars and Siddhas in South India for many more Centuries.

Nīlakesī, a 9th century CE Jain work which is written as a reply to the Buddhist work Kundalakesi mentions three Buddhist sects, Mahāyāna, Śrāvakayāna, and Mantrayāna which are present in the South. Kundalakesi is not available now except for excerpts from it present in other works like Nīlakesī.

Viracoliyam, the 11th century CE grammar text was written by Puttamittiran (Buddhamitra), a Mahayana Buddhist from Tamil Nadu (*Viracoliyam*, 1881). Viracoliyam applies Sanskrit grammar categories to Tamil syllables and words. In Viracoliyam, Puttamittiran pays homage to Avalokita. He also says the lineage of this grammatical tradition comes to Agatya (Agastya) from Avalokitesvara.

Even when the presence of Buddhism waned in other parts of India, it continued in South India. Buddhist Tantra although not popularly known in the South, was albeit secretly present even up to the 16th century CE as evidenced by the chronicles of the Buddhist master and historian Taranatha of Tibet based on his Indian guru Buddhagupta Natha's (16th century) accounts of his travels (Taranatha, 1970). Buddhagupta Natha started his spiritual life as a Yogin in the Natha Panthi tradition and later got exposed to Mahayana and Vajrayana in the Dravida country. He told Taranatha that Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions still existed in the Dravida country whereas it had perished elsewhere in India.

A manuscript of the Mahayana scripture Manjusrimūlakalpa discovered by T. Ganapati Sastri (Aryamanjusrimulakalpa, 1925) at Manalikkara madam near Padmanabhapuram in 1909 provides another interesting piece of evidence. Manjusrimūlakalpa is a Maha-vaipulya-mahayana-sutra and can be classified as a proto Tantra (2nd century CE). It is one of the very rare manuscripts of Buddhist Tantra discovered in India. In this particular manuscript it is written that it is copied by Pandita Ravichandra, who came from Madhyadesha, and is the Adhipathi of Mūlaghosha Vihara. Ganapathi Shastri mentions that the palm leaves are written in Devanagari script and have the appearance of being 300-400 years old.

Conclusion

This paper presented evidences for the widespread presence of Mahayana and Vajrayana in South India from 2nd to 9th century CE. Though most of the historians and commoners alike remain oblivious of this fact, the scriptures of Mahayana and Vajrayana, recovered in Sanskrit as well as present in Tibetan, Chinese and Japanese, show the pathbreaking contributions of Buddhist masters from South India in establishing many lineages of Buddhism around the world. The records and travelogues from these places also document many large conglomeration of Buddhist practitioners and Siddhas in various locations in South India.

Suggestions for Future Work

In the past, British Archeologists under the leadership of Sir Alexander Cunningham were able to do large scale archeological studies across North India and discover many monumental evidences related to the Indian History of Buddhism by following the clues from Xuangzang's travelogues. Such a large scale research is yet to happen in many parts of South India. However, there are occasional findings of Buddha statues from various parts of South India by villagers. In spite of such spotting of statues and references to places in scriptures, not much archeological excavations happened in places like Kerala and Tamil Nadu. It will be of great benefit to historical research if more archaeological studies are undertaken in the South too.

Another pointer for future research could be the Cambridge manuscript of Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā and other similar manuscripts. It has references to many famed places of Mahayana Buddhism with statues of Avalokitesvara and Tara. This includes many places in the South and thus points to locations for further archeological studies.

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