



## Principal Buddhist Literature and its Significance

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### Abstract

There are two types of sources of Ancient Indian History. One is Literary and the other is Archaeological. And also there are two types of literary sources to study the ancient India. One is religious and other is secular (non-religious). Of the religious sources, Buddhist literature is of chief importance. The Buddhist literary sources include Tripitaka, Jatakas- Milindpanho, Manjushremulakalpa, Harshacharita, Buddhachaita, Dipvamsa, Mahavamsa and other. The objective of the present paper is to study the significance of principal Buddhist literatures in the reconstruction of Ancient Indian History. The methodology of the paper is, historical, descriptive, analytical as well as qualitative. This paper focuses on the literary sources of Buddhism and it's important in the History of Ancient India. The result shows that Buddhist literary works are useful to reconstruct the Ancient Indian History.

**Keywords-** Buddhist Literature, Buddhism, Tripitakas, Jatakas, Pitakas

### Introduction

Buddhism was the movement that gave the greatest shock to Brahmanism. It was started by Gautam Buddha who was a notable contemporary of Mahavir (Luniya, 2012-13 p. 174). The Buddhist text were collected and compiled some five hundred years after the death of the Buddha. They are known as the Tripitakas, namely the Sutta, the Vinaya and the Abhidhamma Pitakas. They are written in the Pali Language (Ahmed, 2003-04 p. 43). The Buddhist Literature gives a lot of information regarding the period which immediately preceded the accession of Bimbisara. It throws light on many topics which are not dealt with by the Brahmanical writers. The Buddhist literature is found in two languages, viz., Pali and Sanskrit. (Mahajan, 1976 p. 14).

### Principal Buddhist Literature and its Significance

**Tripitakas-** The Tripitaka is a collection of Buddhist teachings that are the foundation of the Theravada Buddhist philosophy. The Tripitaka is also known as the Tipitaka, from the Pali words, *ti*, meaning "three," and *pitaka*, meaning "baskets." (Yog18).

The early Buddhist literature contains the *Vinaya Pitaka*, the *Sutta Pitaka* and the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*. *Vinaya Pitaka* described the code of conduct followed by Buddhist Nuns and Buddhist Monks. *Sutta Pitaka*- it is a source of immense value to know about sermons and religious ideas of Gautam Buddha. It is divided into five *Nikayas* or collections: *Digha Nikaya*, *Majjhima Nikaya*, *Samyutta Nikaya*, *Anguttara Nikaya* and *Khuddaka Nikaya*. **The Abhidhamma Pitaka**- it throws light on philosophical ideas of Buddhism. (Luniya, 2012-13 pp. 198-199). It is a collection of writings, songs, stories and poetry that focuses primarily on philosophy and

psychology, and explains Buddhist doctrine. (Yog18). The *Tripitakas* give valuable information about social, economic and political life in the age of Lord Buddha. The Buddhist Literature *Anguttara Nikaya* gives a list of sixteen great kingdoms called "Sixteen Mahajanpadas" (Ahned, 2003-04 p. 47).

**Jatakas**-*Jatakas* deals with the Life story of Bodhisatvas. About 549 Jatakas stories have published. (Jajoo, 2020). There are reliefs of *Jatakas* in the stone wall around the stupas of Sanchi and Bharhut. We found 82 inscriptions serve as labels for panels depicting the Jatakas, the life of Buddha. (Jajoo, 2020). According to Dr. Winternitz, "The *Jatakas* were of inestimable value, not only as regards literature and art, but also from the point of view of the history of civilization for the period of the third century B. C. (Mahajan, 1976 p. 14). The *Jatakas* are of unique importance as they represent the entire life and thought of their age. The *Jatakas* have been assigned to the second or third century B. C. (Ahned, 2003-04). *Jatakas* are useful to know the social and economic condition of Mauryan era.

**Milindpanho**- The text discusses a number of problems and disputed points to Buddhism. It is a masterpiece of pali literature. (*Milinda Panho* is based on the celebrated dialogue between the king and *Milinda Panho* is the most notable book in the non-canonical Pali literature of early Buddhism. it is named after the Greek king, Menander. It deals with the most important Buddhist ethics and psychology. (Luniya, 2012-13 p. 283).

**Deep Vamsha and Mahvamsa**- There are authentic Buddhist literature that provides the early careers and succession of Mauryan king Chandragupta Maury. These works are written in Sri Lanka in Pali. *Dipavamsa* focuses on the coming of Buddhism to Ceylon(Sri Lanka). *Mahavamsa* also highlights the history of the Mahavira Monastery. (Jajoo, 2020). The Ceylonese Chronicles *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa* throw light on the role Asoka in spreading Buddhism in Sri Lanka. (Ahned, 2003-04 p. 60). It also throws light on Socio-Political events. It tells the part played by Ashoka in the spreading of Buddhism.

**The work of Aswaghosha**- We can take Asvaghosa definitely as the author of three works ***Buddhacarita, Saundarananda and Sariputraprakarana***. The first two are the epics and the third one is a nine-act play. The *Buddhacarita* was originally composed in 28 cantos and was rendered into Chinese and Tibetan sources. It has two parts and each part is divided into 14 cantos. The work describes Gautama Buddha's life from his birth, childhood to his Nirvana and the distribution of his doctrines amongst the different claimants. Possibly, Asvaghosa's *Buddhacarita* was translated into Chinese in the 4th century A.D. and was translated by an Indian priest Dharmaraksha. (Nath pp. 21-22). This text gives valuable materials on different aspects of ancient Indian history during the Kushana period. Kaniska, Kushana ruler gave patron to the Ashwaghosha. (Jajoo, 2020).

**Saundarananda-** The next work i.e. the *Saundarananda* Mahakavya with 18 cantos. The work relates the story of Gautama Buddha but the central theme is the history of the reciprocal love of Sundari and Buddha's half-brother Nanda and also deals with the conversion of Nanda into Buddhism. The epic has 25 both poetic and philosophical values as the poet has named the kavya 'Saundarananda' by combining both the names i.e. Nanda the step brother of Buddha and Nanda's wife Sundari. In other sense when the two names combined together indicate perfect or divine beauty (Nath pp. 24-25).

**Sariputrprakarana-** The third great work of Asvaghosa is a nine act play named as *Sariputrprakarana*. As it contains nine acts so the drama is styled as Prakarana. This work too is connected with Buddha because its theme also deals with the teachings of Buddha. The authorship of this play is considered to be authentic as the last act of the play which has been preserved, records the personal details of its author Asvaghosa. The full title of the play is *Saradvatiputrprakarana*. The story of the prakarana deals with the incidents which cause the conversion of the two chief male disciples of Lord Buddha and they are – Sariputra and Maudgalyayana by Buddha (Nath p. 28).

**Manjushremulakalpa-** it focuses on the personal qualities of Samudra Gupta, the powerful king of Gupta dynasty. (Jajoo, 2020). It also covers a vast historical period from the seventh century B. C. to the Eight century A. D. and contains a lot of information about the Nanda and

Mauryas. It is significance text for the study of Nanda dynasty, Mouryan and Guptas.

The *Lalitavistara* and vaipulya Sutras are important works in Sanskrit dealing with Buddhism. The *Lalitavistara* is an embellished story of the life of Buddha. *The vaipulya Sutra* deal with Buddhist doctrines in nine books. (Ahmed, 2003-04).

The *Nettiprakarana* and *Petakopadesa* works are considered to be the Buddhaghosha lived in Ceylon in the 5<sup>th</sup> century A. D.. It deals with the teaching of Buddha. The *Petakopadesa* explains the four noble truth of Buddhism. He wrote commentaries on practically all the Pali texts of the Tripitkas. He is famous for his *Visudhimagga*. The other famous commentators were Buddhadatta, Ananda, Dhammapala, Upsena, Kassapa, Dhammasiri and Mahasami.

Nagarjuna was the great scholar of Buddhism and he was the author of *Satasaharika, Prajnaparmita and Madhyamika Sutras*. Aryadeva was also a great writer. Asanga was the author of *Sutralamkara*. Vasubandhu was the author of *Abhiharma Kosha*. Dignaga, Chandragomin and Shantideva were great scholars. (Ahmed, 2003-04).

The chief sources for tracing the history of Harsha and his times are the *Harshacharita* written by Bana and the Travel accounts of Hiuen Tsang (Ahmed, 2003-04 p. 113).

*Divyavadaan- and Ashokavadana* contain information about Bindusara, Ashokas's expedition to Taxila and his conversion to Buddhism. It deals with

Mauryan and Sunga history. **The Buddhavamsa** is a collection of legends depicting the 24 lives of Buddha. (Ahned, 2003-04).

### Conclusion

The chief sources for tracing the ancient history of India are Buddhist literatures written by Buddhist scholars and Buddhist Monks. Buddhist literature have immense important in Ancient history of India. It gives a lot of information about the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. It deals with the life of Buddha and his religion. It focuses on the history of Sixteen Mahajanpadas. It throws light on the History of Mauryan Empire and Gupta Empire. It also mentions several great rulers of Ancient India like, Bimbisara, Chandragupta Maurya, Presenjit, Ajatshatru, great Ashoka, Kanishka, Minander, Harshvardhan and many. It helps a researcher to make a picture of religious, social and political history of the time of Lord Buddha. These are significant sources of knowledge for ancient history. Therefore, Buddhist literary works are useful to reconstruct the Ancient Indian History.

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