The Story of the Mendicants: A Reappraisal of Religious Scene in Western Indian Buddhism

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Abstract: The existing historiography has hardly questioned with scepticism on the religious evaluation of Ajanta as a Buddhist monastery or on the religious processes existing among the common people of Western India. Present study wished to look at the dimension of inability of the existing art-historiography to focus on the geography of western India in regard to the Buddhist religious process and calls for a re-reading of the Buddhist community existent in this specific landscape. This article will bring out the importance of hitherto unexplored religious landscape, forests as both Buddhist resort and abode of mendicant in Western India and forest mendicants as one of the active and crucial agencies in mentioned religious scenario.

Keywords: Buddhism, Western India, Ajanta, Religious Landscape, Forest Saints, Village, Town

Introduction

The History of Buddhism since beginning has shown us humility manifested philosophically as well as in the tradition of wandering ascetics, existing only for the well deliverance of all living beings. Shakyamuni Buddha was only a new arrival to the lineage of ascetics or Sramanas of Upanishad tradition. As it came to be with the development of Samgha, sedentarism in form of monasteries became the way of being. However the tradition of secluded renunciant, dwelling in forest was not discarded. The cult of forest renunciant continued in India with Theravadin, Mahayana and Vajrayana tradition, though with changing forms. Present research discusses the cult of forest monks, a significant agent of the religious process but not academically well discussed, in context of western Indian landscape in Mahayana Buddhism.

Studies on earliest Buddhist scriptures bring forth the life of Buddhist ascetics in its incipient stage which was fairly different from the monastic life of monks in later days, looking from historical as well as modern anthropological points. They lived in humble huts, forests or caves in isolation or with some fellow ascetics, in spaces designated as ‘assama’. The term ‘vihara’ appeared only once in one of earliest text, Sutta Nipāṭa and meant just an ‘abode’ (Nakamura 1987: 57-82). Although both textual
and non-textual (mostly antiquity and epigraphy) evidences have been studied from the beginning of Buddhist studies, such exercises have put over-emphasis on texts, praising its art historical antiquity. In simple words, concentration upon an art-historical study leading reconstruction of Indian religious historical past and more and more academic enquires on monks living in beautiful monastic architecture with a commanding view, have left us with little or no option to look beyond Buddhist religion practiced in religious establishments such as temples or monasteries. At this context, present research tries to bring about role of different agents which constituted the religious past, experienced in Mahayana Buddhism with special emphasis on the Buddhist forest saints and the cult of Dhutagunas.

With little material remains on hand to prove the existence of forest mendicants in western Indian hilly landscape archaeologically, present research has looked into various literary references in Theravadin and Mahayana literature. These texts provide significant direct and indirect references in support of the tradition and practices of forest mendicancy. Epigraphic evidences regarding the existence of forest monks in western India have been discussed and identifications isolated abodes of forest monks of natural and semi natural nature have proven to be supportive. Drawing anthropological analogies from forest mendicant tradition of Thailand and Srilanka have contributed in understanding the dynamics of interrelationship between forest monks and other agents of Buddhism and to reconstruct a critical preview of past. Present research has tried to bring forth historiographical discussions on western Indian Buddhism where it has been necessary but it does not constitute main theme of the paper.

Utility of ‘Forest’ in Religious Landscape of Buddhism

Here it is necessary to distinguish the forest or forested valley as the spot for a monastic resort and an abode for the mendicants respectively. Western India (Fig.3) is located in areas of heavier rainfall and structural activity in such hill-slopes would have been costly due to necessity of constant repairs. Thus rock-cut architecture command a beautiful view of the natural surroundings, usually located in places little way from the towns so that the monks could engage themselves in monastic practice without much distraction, but not to a great distance as keeping various contacts with the ardent devotees (Nagaraju 1981) was necessary. Well-known sites, especially the presence of large vaulted chaitya or chaityas attest to considerable socio-economical support. No insignificant numbers of lesser-known Buddhist caves are located in far deep spot, thus they were seemingly intended to be isolated from mundane world. This shows that forests of the Western Ghat might have been favoured for the forest wanderers or settled mendicants, despite life in forest would not have always been a preferable experience. Many Buddhist scriptures praise great advantages of forest life in spite of its rigors. The bodhisattva reportedly lived in the wilderness, practiced breath-control, gave little care to his manner of dress, and fasted for long periods, strictly controlling his intake of food. Anthropological study (Tambiah 1984) of contemporary saints in Buddhist Asia suggests that those who follow ascetic practices
enjoy tremendous prestige. Although Buddhist emphasis on moderation for the sake of ‘Middle Path’ talks against extreme asceticism, it is equally clear from textual and anthropological studies that ascetic practices are deeply woven into the fabric of Buddhism and even before from the *Upanishadic* times. Thus we can postulate convincingly that ascetic practices have been the central focus of Buddhism in early days, though its position gradually marginalized with the growth of settled monasticism, or ‘domestication of *Samgha*’.

**Locating Forest Monks in the Religious Scene of Western Indian Buddhism**

To understand ourselves what role did the forest monks played in context of Western India, it is important to familiarize ourselves with the different actors in the practiced form of Buddhism in mentioned time and space. Max Weber (1958) in his monumental work on Indian religion has projected a two-tiered model of the Buddhist population, with most noticeable groups, the ‘monks’ and the ‘laity’. However, filling the gap in the proposition with more acute observation, Ray, Reginald (1994) has recommended that the monastic monks were not the sole components of Buddhist renouncers. Agreeing with ray’s point present paper identifies a three tiered model of Buddhist population comprising the Buddhist monastic renunciants, forests renunciants and the laity instead of the earlier two tiered model of Buddhist population by monks/laity, given by previous scholarship (Weber 1958). This change in the structure of Buddhism with the identification of one more component of the Buddhist population, the forest renunciants offer us a chance to reevaluate many established standpoint about the practiced form of Buddhism.

The Buddhist scriptures, both the Nikaya and the Mahayana sutras, tell the presence of the different types of Buddhist renunciants, not only various strata of monastic renunciants but also forest renunciants such as the *Pratyekabuddhas* (or the solitary saints), forest *arhants*, the Bodhisattva saints of the forest and many such other ascetic Buddhists saints (following Dhutaguna tradition).

The inscriptions in Western Indian caves tell us about the monastic organization as well as various activities of its members. The common terms like *Bhikkhu* or *Bhikkhuni* were used for monks or nuns whereas special terms like *Pavaitika* referred to the monastic status of a concerned person. Terms such as *Yati* or *Tapasini* denote those who had taken upon themselves the observance of some special ascetic practices. They were not the same class with those observing *Dhutaguna* or *Dhutagnas* tradition but were basically the forest renunciants, known as the *Arannikas*(or forest-dwellers) and *Pindapatikas* (or securing their foods by going on round for alms) in Western Indian inscriptions These types of saints merited special status, for an example memorial stupas were erected over their relics by their disciples in Bedsa(Gokhale1976: 72).

Inscriptions in Nasik caves provide an interesting picture. The mountain dwelling renunciants recorded as the *Bhadrayanikas* at mount *Trirashmi* were the recipient of a
special cave, excavated for meditation purpose here from Gotami Balasri, the mother of Gotamiputra Siri-Stakarni, which is known as the Devi-lena (or Queen’s cave) (Gokhale 1976: 85). These evidences tend to prove that mendicants with their charismatic character who were dwelling in mountains or forest acquired the attention of the laity or common people for donations of small caves over many part of western India, then both gradual or burgeoning evolution can be noticed, from the small caves with one or two chaitya toward the larger monastic complex like Nasik or Karle with advanced plan. The small caves might have been first excavated for vassavasa (or rain retreat) by the mendicants themselves or with local support, and then some of them were got donated by royal authority or rich merchants include far-region or foreign, thus transformed them from the forest wanderers to monastic monks.

Dutt, Sukumar (1962: 35) suggested the main reason behind the origin of Buddhist monastery had been the universal nature of Buddhism and Buddha’s teachings, “the welfare and happiness of many”. And he speculated that isolation from society was never the cue of Buddhist monasticism. Ray, Reginald A (1994:402) opined, apart from the universalism of Buddha’s teaching, the tendency towards self-perpetuation, self-aggrandizement explains the rapid success of the early Buddhist monasticism. The emergence and historical background of Mahayana has been one of most discussed theme of discussion among Buddhist scholars. Accumulated view suggests Mahayana has multiple origins and a set of overlapping sequences in the long-run structural change. Interestingly, according to Ray (1994: 407-417), Mahayana was originated as a tradition of non-monastic forest renunciation and continuation of the forest ideal originally established by Buddha himself. “...the trends identified as Mahayanist owe their origins to the cult of Bodhisattva-Buddha, it may be observed that the various trends, diverse as they may now appear, can be seen to represent one or another development of this cultic type” (1994: 416).

The forest renunciants of Mahayana, generally designated as Bodhisattvas of the forest, are discussed in detail in Siksasamuccaya as the “Praise of the forest” and a variety of other Mahayana sutras. They are distinguishable as a different type(as the forest Bodhisattvas of Mahayana are identified as a kind of Buddha) from their Nikaya counterparts, arhants and pratyekabuddhas, while retaining the main motivation towards renunciation and realization(Ray 1994: 251-275). Visuddhimagga, the Mahayana text on non-monastic ascetic tradition highly recommends observation of thirteen dhutangas or ascetic practices by all kind of renouncers. Practices nos. 8, 9, 10, 11 and 13 refer to the importance of residing in non-conventional places, Āranyaka: one who dwells in the wilderness, Vrikshaamūlika: one who lives at the foot of a tree, Ābhyavakāuluika: one who dwells in the open air, that is, without roof or cover, Umāūañika: one who dwells in cremation grounds, Yathāsamstarika: one who accepts whatever seat is offered, respectively (Boucher 2008).

Therefore, a point can be made that the forest saints of Buddhism, idealistic since earliest times (needless to say, historical Buddha himself was a forest renunciant) did
not evaporate with the coming of monasticism and that they were well recognized in the Mahayana tradition as well. The existence of the forest saints in Western India seems to be under the speculation of very probable circumstance and is consistent with the absence of archaeological remains unless we discover footprints of wanderers. It is quiet natural that the forest renunciants might have not left behind any assets since they are supposed to possess none or least. Only their references preserved in the chapters of texts along with in few inscriptions bring dim light on their existence of being.

All the early accounts of draftsmen and artists in 19th century, appointed by the British government to work in Ajanta, stress the difficulty of reaching the site and dangers posed by both tigers and the local tribesmen, the Bhils (Patel2007). The discovery of Ajanta is well evident of this fact; Ajanta was discovered accidentally by the John Smith of the Cavalry army while chasing a tiger through the woods. It is likely at a time of 5th century A.D. the ghat was more densely forested than it is today and was inhabited by wild beasts along with hard accessible nature of the cliff. Similar difficulty exists in reaching few sites, for an example, Ghatotkach caves which apparently appear as very much unfavourable for refuge were excavated and planned to be inhabited by monks. The difficulty caused by the wild animals in reaching Buddhist sites amidst of jungle in ancient India is not exclusive to Ajanta. According to itinerant monk, Hye-cho who travelled and then visited Kusinagara in 8th century A.D., reported harsh danger of predators for Buddhist laities who want to visit Buddha’s very place of Purinibbana. The site of Ajanta and the surrounding hills were similarly forested, in 5th century as well as the 19th century A.D. unlike today’s time when most of the woods have been cleared by the attempts of A.S.I. for the convenience of the tourists. As the accounts of the officials appointed in 19th century by the British government for the conservation of the site tell us Ajanta couldn’t be accessed by the woods and was reached by following the dried river course of Waghora and for this reason the work at site of Ajanta was put to halt in rainy season. The ‘Litany of Avalokiteswara’, depicted in Ajanta, Aurangabad and Kanheri etc account for the popularity of this bodhisattva as the savior from thieves, wild-beasts and ran shakers of forests (fig. 1).

A great number of rural population in Western India are still using perishable materials except modern cement for housing. A brief field-survey conducted in the surroundings of the site of Ajanta and the village of Faridapur, and the surrounding area of Ghatotkach brought into attention on diverse small huts, set up for temporary use by perishable materials like fallen leaves and birch etc, housing maximum one or two people (Fig 2). It is less unlikely those might have been used by the forest renunciants in a similar manner. Parallels in modern Buddhist Asia, even in land of Trans-Himalayans, the saints still preferred to live in secluded shelters include temporal hut, for orthodox practices. Exploration (Fig.4) in surrounding region Ghatotkach cave has revealed similar caverns which were not undertaken by any political authority for patronage. These can be treated as secluded spots used for meditative purposes often by the forest saints or by members of monasteries, following
strict austerities. Many such caverns existing in the mountainous plateau of Western Ghats, signifying that, all of the later prosperous monastic sites were selected primarily because of the solitary location in the forest for the convenience of meditation.

Figure 1: Danger from forest, shown in the ‘Litany of Avalokiteswara’, Aurangabad cave 07

Overlooked yet recent discovery of caves, for an example at Dhondase (Fig 5), Konkan region, tells its evasive nature even in our age of satellite remote-sensing archaeology. This site seems to be far away from main agenda of hitherto research concentration namely ‘dynasties’, ‘Indo-Roman trade’, ‘monastic business’, ‘Golden Age’ etc. None of the previous hypothetical propositions can explain its location unless we accept that solitude is what was intended for the excavation of a cave in such remote part. Moreover, Dhondase is not a single name or case, Western ghats is home of so many of similar cases as Dhondase.

The saints named as the ‘Bodhisattva of forest’ were not totally secluded but were in touch with other populace. The relation between the settled renunciants and the forest renunciants also runs an interesting course as given in Mahayana sutras. The ‘Ugrapaipriccha Sutra’ advised the forest Bodhisattva that after achieving some realization, he must interact with people, acharyas, upadhyayas, bhiksus of whether rural or urban. In all the cases he should be polite and respectful, in addition he should show compassion to the sick, listen to the preaching of Dharma by other monks, reside alone keeping mind like ‘a forest cave’ (Ray1994: 254).
Ajanta’s community includes those people whose thoughts and actions were re-formed through their participation at the site evident in the concept of the ‘Three Jewels’. This community broadly included monks and nuns, courtiers and royal advisors, artisans, and coolies, and patrons, running the gamut from simple monks, to travelling merchants, to local dignitaries, to a high minister of the King and the King himself (Cohen 1995: 4). Thus one can assume that the surrounding villages of Ajanta and other monastic sites in western India, might be visited by both the forest and monastic renunciants. In turn, it might have been routine for the laity to listen to the preaching of the monastic renunciants from Ajanta, along with occasional visit to the remote dwellings of the forest saints particularly of charismatic character. Let us evaluate more closely, this process of religious inter-relationship.

**How It Worked: Facets of Interdependence**

A close web of interdependence was executive between the components of Buddhist population in the mentioned time. Forest saints were connected with the laity independently and in many cases through the independent ascetics living in rural and urban settings. Contemporary case-study of the merit making festival in Thailand by Jane Bunang has shown the symbiotic relations and intricate interdependence between...
monks, their families and laypeople (Fig.6). In context of national, political and social Buddhism of Ceylon, S. J. Tambiah (1994) has proposed ‘Center-Periphery dialectic’ model to explain the dynamics of inter-relationship between political authority and Buddhist samgha. Realization of the region-specific attributes of western Indian Buddhism has led present research to demarcate diverse points of interdependence between different agencies in Buddhist religion of western India in a graphic representation (fig. 7) independent of any previous hypothesis.

Points of interdependence might have been on various levels and links such as Ritual, Education, Economy and Ideology (Dutt: 1962). The Laity was consisted of people of differing economic and political background, from merchants to common householders, from tribal communities to kings and clergy. The connection between
the village and town householders and the monks of samgha is well understandable looking the numerous donative inscriptions at various monastics sites such as Ajanta (Fig. 8), Kanheri etc. Their point of reverence towards the forest renouncers was termed by supranormal powers, meditative exercises and accounts of ascetic lives. Tambiah (1984: 76) has reported similar scenario in case of the living tradition of forest renouncers in Srilanka in specific and south East Asia in general.

Though Vimuttimagga, the handbook of ascetic tradition has prescribed complete solitude and freedom from all ties, the forest renunciants remained crucially linked to the laity chiefly for material sustenance. Ray (1994: 437) is of the opinion that forest renouncers’ reliance on the laity was termed by another greater debt, “that is defined from one side by the laity’s suffering, generosity, and spiritual need and, from the other, by the Buddhas and other saints, whose examples and explicit teachings make mandatory the service of others”. Now, looking at the advantages political authorities who were an essential part of the laity, we see a continuous patronage on their parts to the samgha and in return their political authority was also supported by the monk communities, in times of establishment of kingdoms and in times of economic upheaval or disintegration of social order. Kenneth G. Zyskin his work ‘Asceticism and
Figure 5: Dhondase Cave, Kanheri (Photo Courtesy: Ganvir Shrikant)

Figure 6: Model of possible monk-layman relationships in the context of merit-making ceremonies in Thailand (after Bunang, Jane 1973)

Healing in Ancient India’ (1991) has shown how the ‘sramanic’ Buddhist tradition had enriched the medicinal tradition in ancient India. Collection of medicinal herbs and healing practices were often performed by ‘Aranyavasin’ monks who had least social
taboos in treating forest dwellers of people of lower social strata. Buddhist canonical literature provides evidence of importance of medicine, the comingling of different forms of healing within Buddhism and spread of Indian medical ideas beyond Indian subcontinent.

We comprehend that Hinayana didn’t evaporated overnight and still continues in parts of the world. Modern East Asian Buddhism, ‘Sōn’ or ‘Zen’ solely means anything but meditation. These traditions are still consisted of wandering forest saints who often speak against idolatry and countless divinities of Trans-Himalayan Buddhism and in favour of realising Šúnyatā (or Emptiness). The conventional art historical understanding about the evolution from Hinayana via Mahayana to Vajrayana doesn’t fit the actual picture of Buddhism (Deheja 1991). The cult of the forest saints has retained an antiquity from the time of Sakyamuni upto living tradition. In Theravadin times, Nikayas, Atthakavagga of Suttanipata and forest saints such as Phussa or Parapariya refer to the cult of Arhants and Pratyekabuddhas. In Mahayana times, ‘RastrapalapariprchnaSutra’ and ‘SamdhinirmocanaSutra’ speak of the ‘Boddhisattvas’ of forest. The Vajrayana period gives us textual and material evidences of the cult of
Figure 8: Pillar in Ajanta Cave 10 showing devotion to Buddha
eighty-four ‘Siddhas’ representing the non-monastic ascetic trend and finally in living
tradition, examples can be drawn from the hermit monks in Himalaya, Srilanka, Thailand and Mayanamar.

**Summary**

Critical analysis of ancient Indian art or Buddhism is not recent at all. Present research was aimed at a constructive anthropological alternative on practiced religion rather than deconstructing on reading ancient religious heritage. Present research has tried to find a very probable continuity in Western Indian Buddhist milieu, although there can hardly be denial that the romanticized view by over-imposing texts also obscure actual picture of it.

Mainly the suggestive widening on religious landscape is attempted by preliminary discussion in this paper. Not only viewed as mere art historical monuments but often as a parameter of big story, Buddhist remains have been usually treated by curator’s eyes, otherwise as trading post for mapping global trade-network in the discussion of western Indian Buddhism. Actual explorations in the ‘western ghat’ plateau bring forth the necessity of re-picturing Buddhist landscape and mindscape. The man –land relationship and hard struggles with the environment for rain, groundwater or agricultural lands in the uneven geography surrounding the monastic sites might explain the popularity achieved by Buddhism as a saviour religion from hardship. The geographic and material hardship might reason for the faith in charismatic forest mendicants, residing in remote parts of western India in hey-days of Theravadin and Mahayana tradition, an indicated by epigraphic and scriptural evidences. Limitation in archaeological investigations to substantial number of religious artefacts such as amulets, sealings etc. used in rituals and other religious activities can be assigned to the limited scope of excavations and concentration of academic attention on monastic sites. However, the votive stupas in Karle or Vedsa in memory of charismatic forest renunciants call in for some amount of remedy. The quantitative and qualitative importance of lesser known caves similarly has not found importance in the academic discussions. Secondly, present research has tried to bring forth the limitation of monastery centric Buddhist historiography in India which has been unable to identify the different agencies in Buddhism or to consider Theravadin or Mahayana Buddhism as a practiced religion. As a result Buddhism of Theravadin and Mahayana period has remained as limitedly conceived in textual dimensions.

As concluding remarks, it can be said, the prescription of selecting a secluded life and lifestyle was essential to original Buddhist practices. The monastic development had led to sedentary lifestyles for the monks and gradually the *samgha* has assumed a role of annual retreat instead of periodical monsoon adobe. It does not mean that all types of Buddhist renunciants were adherents of the *samgha*. The forest renunciants were embodiment of the process of transition from original tradition to authentic tradition in Indian Buddhism without being a part of the process of monasticism. Significant references in Theravadin and Mahayana sutras, such as *Rstrapâlapariricchā-sūtra,*
AndhakavindaSutta, Dantabhumisutta, Maha-Saccakasutta etc., to the forest saints, individual renunciants or hermit monks explain that the non-monastic saint tradition held a important position in scriptural consideration. What remainare the attempts of locating the scriptural information in sanctification of above investigation for producing a closer view to the religious process of Theravadin and Mahayana Buddhism in Western India and its actors. This preliminary work on the religious process and agencies in western Indian Buddhism is willing to transcend its present limitations by future explorative and ethnographic investigations.

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References


