
Buddhism in the Borderlands of Ancient and Early Medieval India as Represented in Taranatha's History of Buddhism in India

M. N. Rajesh¹ and Nilam Kakati¹

¹. Department of History, The University of Hyderabad, Prof. C.R. Rao Road, Gachibowli, Hyderabad, Telangana – 500 046, India (Email: mnraja@gmail.com; kakatinilam@gmail.com)

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Abstract: *The paper tries to grasp the vitality of the borderland regions which had a remarkable contribution to the spread of Buddhism during the early medieval period as brought forward in the text Taranatha's 'The History of Buddhism in India'. Borderland regions can be said to have developed an independent personality, which often displays a hybrid character drawing from the indigenous culture and the other co-regions and the larger cultural regions that served as a reference point and in this case, it was India. The paper focuses its study primarily on one borderland region known as Thogar in Tibetan sources, or the Tukhara of the Sanskrit sources and the paper also touches upon the eastern Himalayan borderlands of India. This region is however not situated in the eastern part which is frequently discussed regarding the spread of Buddhism as a geographical location. Thogar is situated between Kashmir and Afghanistan. Taranatha's text has a complete chapter dedicated to the region. The study of the region is important as it reveals the clear Zoroastrian influence and thus the persistence of Buddhism along with Zoroastrian elements that are Iranian and the local elements. A similar situation is also noticed in the borderlands of eastern India that are not the prime focus of Taranatha but the different types of Buddhism practised here and the ethnic groups and the places associated with them are clearly mentioned and offer the potential for identification and historical reconstruction.*

Keywords: Buddhism, Taranatha, Thogar, Early Medieval Period, Borderland, Tibet, India

Introduction

Taranatha's *The History of Buddhism in India* is one of the most important works for the reconstruction of the history of Buddhism in India and has been widely employed by many historians for the reconstruction of the history of Buddhism in India and one of the areas where this text has been extremely helpful is the narration of the last days of Buddhism in India. Lama Taranatha (1575-1634) was one of the foremost spiritual practitioners in Tibet and an adept of the Jo nang Pa school that was deemed heretical and later suppressed by the Vth Dalai Lama (Powers 2013: 217). But, Taranatha is most remembered as a historian and his work titled *The History of Buddhism in India* (Tib.

Rgya' gyar chos byung) belongs to the class of literature called *chos byung* or dharma origins as the word *chos* is the Tibetan translation of the Sanskrit term dharma (Martin, 1997:13). Though written in the 17th century, it draws extensively on the earlier Tibetan narratives on Buddhism in India and has been employed by many historians to reconstruct the history of Buddhism in ancient and early medieval India.

K M Shrimali's article on '*Buddhism under the Palas—a Study based on Taranatha*' recounts the spread of Buddhism in the context of the historical geography of ancient India and draws exclusively from Taranatha's work to reconstruct the history of the spread of Buddhism in Magadha and the territories of Aparantaka and Kashmir (Shrimali 1970: 188.). At some points, it appears that Taranatha's work has been extremely well utilized and there is not much to extract in terms of geographical information and the material culture as described in the text since they have been the subject of earlier works. This does not exhaust all other options and one notices that there is a vast scope to reconstruct the historical geography of the borderlands of ancient and early medieval India from Taranatha's *The History of Buddhism in India*. Therefore, this paper tries to focus on the narrative of the borderlands as represented in the text and try to locate these places in their historical context that would help us further to explore the archaeological analysis of the Buddhist sites and reconstruct a more holistic narrative about the borderland regions.

In the modern rendition of Indian history, the geographical focus on the study of Buddhism has primarily centred on eastern and northern India which was the birthplace and the main catchment areas of the spread of Buddhism respectively in the early period. Furthermore, later studies regarding the spread of Buddhism in the Deccan in South India have followed in the recent years beginning from BSL Hanumantha Rao in his work titled *Buddhism and Jainism in Andhra Desa* (Rao 1997) that has made a significant intervention in establishing the presence of both Jainism and Buddhism in Andhra Desa and more recently Sree Padma's *Buddhism in the Krishna River Valley of Andhra* (Padma 2008).

We also find many works that deal with the spread of Buddhism in Tibet and a long list of more than 700 primary sources that are clearly annotated and categorized according to different historical genres (Martin 1997). Many of these texts and the secondary sources that deal with Tibet do not take up the borderlands of Tibet as a separate region seriously. In the secondary sources, the borderlands are treated as regions of transit between India and the neighboring regions and the borderland 'places' do not have a very strong cultural base on account of a weak material base that is not well articulated and therefore these nomadic societies were only seen as points of transit, thereby ignoring their contributions of the varieties of Buddhism. There are many texts that devote considerable space to the borderlands, and it is possible to identify and reconstruct some of the Buddhist sites taking a clue from the texts. Since many of these regions have not been excavated and surveyed by the archaeologists, there is no possibility for co-relating the literary data with the archaeological findings with regard to the places mentioned.

Recent studies on borderlands have articulated the differences between borders and borderlands, thereby recognizing the borderland regions, not just as transitory points between two cultural regions, but as liminal regions that are spread over a considerable area and have an independent personality, which is more often a hybrid of the indigenous culture and the other co-regions and in the case of the western Himalayan regions of Spiti and Kinnaur there is ample proof of this phenomenon. Laxman Thakur makes a case for the prevalence of local idioms in both Spiti and Kinnaur based on the study of murals, texts and architectural forms thus bringing out the personality of these regions (Thakur et al. 2001: 139,145). It is in this approach that the borderlands have been given an agency to many regions. In the case of Indo Tibetan Buddhism, the regions of western Tibet and the Himalayan regions of Ladakh, Lahaul and Spiti have now been understood as regions that are not just copies of Tibetan Buddhist or watered-down versions of Tibetan Buddhism, but rather hybrid regions. Archaeological excavations are few in the western Himalayan region and the findings from these excavations have pointed out to the existence of the pre-Buddhist religion called Bon. The archaeological findings regarding the presence of Bon are available primarily in the petroglyphs wherein a number of images are inscribed that portray many forms unique to the region (Thakur 2001: 341). We also find inverted swastika, horses and animals, and stupas which are unmistakably part of the Bon religion as has been proved in the petroglyphs of Ladakh (Thangspa 2014: 22-24). In the case of western Himalayas, it is only with the recent excavations and surveys that the presence of the Bon religion that has been alluded to in religious literature has now been confirmed by archaeology. A similar trend is also visible in Tibet where there are few archaeological excavations and the painstaking work of John Vincent Bellezza has clearly established the presence of a large number of pre-Buddhist sites all over the Yarlung river valley in central Tibet and their continuance into the later period as Buddhist sites (Bellezza 2014: 27).

However, in the case of the borderlands beyond Northwest India in the regions of modern Tajikistan, and Afghanistan we do not have much archaeological data and therefore have to use literary texts to reconstruct the historical geography and material culture of the region. One of the exceptions in this region is the site of Ai Khanum which is situated on the northern extremity of India on the northern borders of Afghanistan. The excavations between 1964-1978 have revealed a number of coins and buildings and they co-relate well with the image of the settlement reconstructed from coins and a few texts (Jakobsson 2009: 505).

Such an approach based on co-relating literature and archaeology has already validated the findings in the western Himalayas and also in Tibet and Taranatha's the history of Buddhism in India is one of the important texts to source information regarding the spread of Buddhism in the borderlands of India. In the extreme northwestern region, we find the repeated mention of a region known as Thogar in Tibetan and this is the name in the Tibetan texts for a region known as Bactria or Tukhara that is presently identified as one of the regions in modern day northern

Afghanistan and Tajikistan. “After the Third Council, king Kanishka passed away. There lived a very wealthy householder called Jati in Asmaparanta in the north, near the Thogar country to the west of Kashmir” (Tāranātha 1980: 196).

Taranatha refers to Thogar around seven times, beginning with the description of the country that is placed on in the north-west of Kashmir and the path between Thogar and Kashmir was not usable (Tāranātha 1980: 46, 65, 96, 117, 149, 253, 351). Thogar was ruled by a king named Minar, who worshipped the sky in the form of a sky god as all the people of the country did (Tāranātha 1980: 46). Taranatha also goes on to add that there were festivals for the sky god that were celebrated with a display of great smoke by burning fragrant woods, food grains, clothes and even jewels (Tāranātha 1980: 46). Thogar is mentioned in chapter 5 of the book and is titled as the account of the period of Arya Dhitika. The central focus of this chapter is the life history of Arya Dhitika born as a Brahman and in the later part of his life became a follower of the Law and his travels from his native Ujjain to Mathura and from there to different parts of the country and is said to have delivered sermons to the four classes of followers in six cities. This was in following with the advice of his spiritual preceptor Upagupta who had entrusted him with the law. In the course of his travels, the first place which he visited was the country of Thogar (Tāranātha 1980: 46). True to his spiritual stature, he performed miracles and in the country of Thogar during one of the festivals of sky worship, Arya Dhitika appeared recklessly. As the sky was held sacred by them, he flew through the sky and directly landed at the altar and took a seat there. This act was interpreted as a miracle and greatly enhanced his reputation among the people who immediately started worshipping him. During his short stay of three months during the rainy season, the number of people who became his followers and also the followers of the doctrine greatly swelled in addition to the initial 1000 people who along with it and embraced the law (Tāranātha 1980: 46).

Tukhara is described in much more detail by the Chinese traveller Huiyen Tsang (Chandra et al. 2008: 120) and therefore the question arises as to why is there a need to use Taranatha's *the history of Buddhism in India*. “The Khraoshthi records on wood, like those of the Niya site which they closely approached paleographically, undoubtedly belonged to the second or third centuries CE and thus to the very period of the ascendancy in the Tarim Basin of those Indo-Scythians whom Huiyen sang, from the main seat of their power on the Oxus, knew as Tukhara.” (Stein 1968: 132). In the context of new works, we understand that Huiyen Tsang's works seem to have a Buddhist bias as he talks of the people of Tukhara as wholly Buddhist in contrast to the neighbouring region of Sogdiana that was Zoroastrian. Recent excavations have confirmed the presence of Shaivaite artefacts and other deities including Zoroastrian deities in Tukhara that indicate a hybrid religious culture which was informed by both Persia and India on an already existing set of practices. This particular point is what attributes the borderland character to this region of Tukhara. According to Andre Wink in the book *Al Hind*, he places Tukhara as the first sedentary region that the nomads encountered while coming to India and was situated on the gateway to India (Wink

2002: 57). Taranatha is not wrong when he attributes the borderland character to this region and also its connection with Kashmir. This connection that Taranatha establishes with Kashmir is also correct, but he limits it to just religion and the Buddhist connections though he also speaks of the communication that has been established between Kashmir and Thogar (Tāranātha 1980: 65, 96). We also find that the Kashmiri king Lalitaditya had a minister Cankuna who was from Thogar (Wink 2002: 74).

One of the important points that concerns both the historian and the archaeologist is the sentence that says that around fifty monasteries were built (Tāranātha 1980: 46). This is not verified empirically and the lead can come from the names of the kings who was Mi-nar and his son the king I-ma-Syawho have been variously identified as king Menander and his son the king Herrmaios (Tāranātha 1980: 46). This is also the contention of Halkias (Halkias 2013: 82) who links the description of Thogar and its emergence into the Buddhist world beginning with the conversion of the pagan Greeks. However, if this is accepted then Taranatha's claim about Asoka's period and the spread of Buddhism to Thogar which is dated earlier is wrong.

Thogar again surfaces during the period of king Asoka who is said to have made a vow to offer 96 crores of gold coins to the samghas of Aparantaka, Kashmir and Thogar. "The Tibetan historian Taranatha (1575-1634) refers to generous donations granted by the King Asoka to Buddhist monastic communities in Thogar (Tib. Tho-gar), the Tibetan term for the Hellenistic areas of Tokharistan- Bactria" (Halkias 2013: 82). However, it is mentioned that he could not offer the gold to Aparantaka and Thogar is only mentioned along with Kashmir. This formulation seems problematic given the fact that Buddhism was established in this region only after Kanishka (Halkias 2012: 81). Thogar again comes up for discussion during the period of Arya Nagarjuna when there is a discussion on the rise of the mlechha religion and this is attributed to a renegade follower of the dharma, Kumarasena (Tāranātha 1980: 117). What is important to us is that the location of Thogar comes to focus again and it is always mentioned along with Kashmir. In this particular instance, and to other countries, namely Sulika to the west and Khorasana are mentioned. It is in the country of Sulika that the mlechha religion of the Turuskas was born along with their dynasties (Tāranātha 1980: 117). Recent interest in the spread of Islam has brought about a renewed focus on Thogar and Sogdiana in the form of a project that seeks to investigate the sustenance of Islam in the early period immediately after the fall of Buddhism and the rise of Islam. Recently discovered documents in the Bactrian language reveal these religious trends and also point to a regional particularity that stands beyond placing Tukhara into the binary of the Indic and Persian influence as a repository. There is also a mention of the spread of Indic culture by means of the worship of flowers to the deities and the presence of Brahmanas, Kshatriyas and the other two castes here indicating that this was also one of the outposts of Indic culture (Tāranātha 1980: 117). Narain is of the opinion that "the earliest anthropomorphic Buddha images occur on a coin type of the Saka King Maues who reigned 95- 75 BCE

in the area of the Swat valley and Kashmir. The cross legged figure of Maues coins although long considered but mostly rejected by scholars as a Buddha image, should be considered and indeed the Buddha. The ideological underpinnings for the creation of the anthropomorphic image came from the Sarvastivada School of "Hinayana" Buddhism and its philosophy of "realism". The period from the appearance of the Maues coin-type to the numerous examples of anthropomorphic images during the reign of the Kusana king Kaniska some 200 years later is one of the experimentations. Extant Buddha images of the period are few, however, and mostly on coins, except for those on the Bimaran reliquary" (Narain 1985).

After the fourth Buddhist Council was held during the period of Kanishka, Thogar is again mentioned in association with Kashmir and the location of Thogar is mentioned to the best of Kashmir and there is also a mention about another town named as Asmaparanta near the Thogar country (Tāranātha 1980: 96). "The tradition that Jalandhara was born in Turkestan can be supported by our legend if Nagara- thod- tha is taken as a corruption of Thogar (of Turkharadesa or Tocharistan) on the upper Oxus below the Pamirs. There is no doubt that he was initiated into the mother Tantra lineage in Oddiyana but the place where he practised his sadhana and which gave his name, does present a problem. Outside contemporary Jullunder in east Punjab is a complex of ruins that Huein Tsang visited between A.D. 680-720, when fifty monasteries stood there inhabited by two thousand monks of both Hinayana and Mahayana sects. Kanishka's great council had convened there and the Mahavibhasa had been compiled there by five monks in A.D. 300" (*Masters of Mahamudra* 2010: 248). Kanishka is important as the recently discovered inscription by Nicholas Sims Williams translates a range of divinities including Indian, Zoroastrian and also other Inner Asian deities. These point out to the borderland character and the diversity of experiences here in religious terms. This is important to ascertain and establish the fact that Buddhism did not obliterate the entire range of earlier divinities (Sims-Williams 2004: 58). We again find mention of Thogar during the period of Asanga and Vasubandhu when there was a change in role in Kashmir and Thogar is also brought under the role of Kashmir (Tāranātha 1980: 149). In the following chapters, there are few references to Thogar and the late references occur during the period of King Gobicandra when the most important monks were mentioned detailed- they are the monk Asvabhava hailing from Bengal in the East, who was an exponent of the Vijnana-Madhyamika view. Following this mention comes the name of the famous Vaibashika practitioner acarya Dharmamitra hailing from Thogar (Tāranātha 1980: 253). Punyakirti from Maru in the west, Santipraba from Citavara an expert in the Vinaya and Matraceta from Kashmir also an expert in the Vinaya and specially mentioned (Tāranātha 1980: 253). The book reads then that would put apart from these, I have not come across any detailed account of others indicating the esteemed place for Thogar.

The last reference in Taranatha's *the history of Buddhism in India* to Thogar is after the fall of Buddhism in Magadha and dwells on the fact that Buddhism could not spread here though the dharma was spread a bit in Orissa and other parts. Further, the study

of the Bactrian calendar also reveals the clear Zoroastrian influence and thus the persistence of Buddhism along with Zoroastrian elements that are Iranian and also the local elements (Sims-Williams and De Blois 1996: 150). The region in Taranatha's representations is marked off as different from Sogdiana and Khorasana which are validated by later representations. Similarly, Gajni is also mentioned and is identified with the Ghazni of the modern day and is linked with Kashmir after a Kashmiri king had subdued the region according to Taranatha (Tāranātha 1980: 149). Further north in the region of Khotan known as Kamsadesa, Taranatha mentions this as the country of Li-Yul and there is also a mention of Buddhism here after the conquest by Asoka and also one of the places that housed some caityas among the 84000 supposedly built by Asoka to honour the relics of the Buddha. "Ashoka then follows the advice of Yashah to collect relics of the Buddha and disperse these in eighty four thousand stupas throughout his empire as far as Li-Yul in the North" (Allen 2012).

"Taranatha goes on to recount the story of the blinding of Ashoka's favourite son Kunala, but with significant difference from the version found in *Legend of King Ashoka*, in that Kunala is rendered unfit to rule by his blindness and becomes a monk. 'That is why' adds Taranatha 'though it was his turn to be king, his son Vigatashoka was placed on the throne.'" (Allen 2012). This may seem a bit problematic as in the case of the offerings of gold by Asoka to Thogar as Buddhism was understood to have developed there after Kanishka. In the case of Khotan, it is the number 84000 that creates a doubt as this is a conventional number. In the later period of Nagarjuna there was Acarya Samghavardhana of Li-Yul and Acarya Vamana of Thogar along with the important Vaibashika acaryas like Kunala of Kashmir and Subhankara of central Aparantaka and Samghavardhana of the east (Tāranātha 1980: 116). "Taranatha adds that Nagarjuna, whose name has been perpetuated in Nagarjuankonda and who had been ascribed to the second century A.D. began his studies in Nalanda and later became its high priest or abbot." (Ramaswami 1979: 151).

It is important to note that in the history of Buddhism the integration of these scholars from the peripheral regions as part of the discourses of Buddhism prevalent in India shows the thriving state of Buddhism and the scholarly pursuits emanating from all the far off corners of the country. Thogar or Tukharistan was one of the strongholds of Vaibashika and the famous Buddhist scholar Ghosaka was born there and also attended the fourth Buddhist council at Purushapura after which he returned to the same region. As the author Taranatha also mentions in detail about the northern regions, we understand that the central focus of his works is on Magadha, Aparantaka and Kashmir as these were the main regions of Buddhism in ancient and medieval India till the coming of the Turks. Some points that emerge from this narrative of Taranatha is that Kashmir is not at all understood to be a borderland, rather a center among one of the important centers and the main center for transmission of Buddhism to the borderlands of northwestern India. Secondly the geographical orbit of these regions like Thogar, Li-Yul, etc. are all oriented towards Kashmir and to India, even though they are situated near Persia and the Chinese regions.

When we come to the eastern borderlands of India also get a fair amount of treatment from Taranatha when he talks of the regions beyond Aparantaka, i.e., the region of *Girivarta* which includes Assam, Kamarupa and Tripura and the eastern regions (Tāranātha 1980: 142,198,330). “We learn from two faithful Tibetan historical records, Pagsam Jon Zan of Sumpa Khan- po and Kahbab Dun Dan of Lama Taranatha that after the downfall of Magadha one of the chief centers of Buddhism, and the destruction of Nalanda and Odantapuri Buddhist Universities in Bihar at the hands of Bakhtiar Khilji (in A.D. 1197) a large number of Buddhists fled towards Nepal, Munan (Burma), Arakan and other places. Some of them dispersed in the plains and hills of Assam including Cachar, Shylet and Tripura and propagated Buddhism. Towards the east, Buddhism spread more and more than before. A place called Nan- gate or Naingate (the Hill tracts of Assam, Cachar and Tripura) was inhabited by the Buddhists and ruled over by Sundara- Hachi, one of the four sons of Bablasundar, a Buddhist king of Chittagong and Tippera. During his rule some of the tribes of the said hill tracts might have come within the fold of Buddhism.” (Singh 2009: 95). “H.H. Wilson in the translation of *The Vishnu Purana: Hindu Mythology and tradition* identifies Kamarupa as the northeast part of Bengal and the western portion of Assam. This seems to accord to some degree with Taranatha’s account which also places Kamarupa in northeastern India” (Wallace 2001: 78).

The demarcation between Bengal and Assam is very clear and there is a presence of Buddhism but not of a great magnitude, and hence there are fewer references. In the eastern regions, the regions of Arakan, Burma, Pegu and also some other borderland regions are mentioned. They served as places of refuge for the panditas after the collapse of the dharma in Magadha and this is clearly mentioned of particular importance as the name of the monk Vanaratna who visited these countries and later fled to Tibet (Tāranātha 1980: 330). “Three other dynasties were active in Bengal, particularly in eastern and coastal Bengal, at the time of the Palas—the Chandra, the Barman and the Kharga (Khadga). The Chandra dynasty most probably came from Arakan. Nine Chandra Kings preceding those known in Bengal during the Pala period are mentioned by the Chroniclers of Arakan. Lama Taranatha’s study on Indian Buddhism also gives a list of the Chandra Kings (Dasgupta 2005: 22). It is the monks who went to Tibet and their writings and later translations that were an important source for Taranatha. As a Tibetan he was well acquainted with the Tibetan narratives and it is from these narratives of the earlier monks who lived during the time of the last days of Nalanda that we will be able to reconstruct a clearer picture of the last days of Buddhism in India. In a small digression, we may note the objective strain of Taranatha when he talks of the last days of Nalanda and notes that during the Turkish invasions, some of the monks acted as messengers of the Turuska rulers which goes beyond the binary narratives of Hindus and Muslims as fixed adversaries.

In the eastern regions of Mu-nan, Pu-khan and Ma-nan known collectively as the Ko-ki country comes into focus as a safe place from the monk Candrakaragupta and 200 panditas who again fled from Magadha where according to Taranatha the doctrine

became extinct. There is also mention of south India and like eastern India, Taranatha says that this region was not well endowed with monasteries but surfaced as a repository for the secret tantras that were lost during the time of the pala ruler Kumarapala (Tāranātha 1980: 332). Thus, the peripheral regions are integrated into the narrative of India and this complicates our understanding of the geographical space called India. According to B. D. Chattopadhyaya in his book titled *Bharatavarsha*, there was a unity that was imagined by different groups of people and which was a lived reality and the Buddhist specimens of the same is apparent in the above examples (Chattopadhyaya 2018: 61).

The development of Tantric Buddhist thoughts and practices clearly gained great momentum in the 7th century for during his time compilation of Tantric texts were being written and widely disseminated. By this time the great monastic universities of eastern India—Nalanda, Vikramashila and Uddandapura were increasingly becoming centers for tantric study and practice. Chinese monks and travelers of the 7th century such as Yi-Jing reported that Tantric practices were underway at Nalanda monastery by the late 7th century. From about the 8th century onwards, Tantric Buddhism in India entered a new phase with the emergence of Tantric specialists and teachers, the Mahasiddhas or great Adepts. The adepts and scholars of the monastic universities developed a vast body of commercial literature to explain obscure and difficult aspects of the esoteric teachings. Thus, the texts that form the Tibetan canon are divided into two collections: the revealed texts in the Kanjur and the exegetical literature in the Tanjur.... From the mod 8th c onwards, several celebrated adepts and Tantric masters, who played a major role in the propagation of Highest Yoga Tantra in India and its transmission to Tibet became associated with Nalanda (Huntington and Bangdel 2004: 25).

Other interesting cases mentioned in the extreme peripheries of eastern India are the Chittagong region and the case of Cag-Ma is also discussed. It is well known that the Chakmas had an association with Arakan and were a significant presence in the Arakan court (Tāranātha 1980: 330). Atitavahana is a name that is given by Taranatha as the ruler of the Chakmas (Tāranātha 1980: 331). It is well known that the Chakmas are the only group who had an indigenous script and a state in this region of the Burmese borderlands. Therefore, the representation of Taranatha seems to be right when he discusses these smaller groups and peoples on both the western and eastern peripheries of India.

Conclusion

The paper ends by positing that while Taranatha's narrative was primarily religious, there is a sense of objectivity in the representation of places and peoples. This is more evident when his expertise in both the ancient Indian and Tibetan texts have helped him to understand the historical context and the unique setting of the borderland regions. Therefore, this work can greatly help us in understanding the history of the borderlands of India in the ancient and the early medieval period. Thogar as a region

that is historically relegated to the margins is given an exalted place like many other borderland places and the display of both the Great and Little traditions in the religious discourse of this place. The Great Tradition is in the form of the Vaibashika masters who are part of a larger pan-Indian Buddhist imaginary. The Little Tradition represents the local forms and the practices as the element of sky worship. Thogar was also oriented geographically to Kashmir and is revealed in the geographical connections and also the political connections. In the case of the eastern Indian borderland regions, the fact that they have served as a refuge for the Buddhist monks after the fall of Buddhism in Magadha. Thus, the pan Indian networks of Buddhism are clearly represented in Taranatha's works.

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