

The Origin and Development of Buddhist Monasteries in India: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract: *This research paper explores the origin and development of monasteries in India, shedding light on their historical significance. Monasteries have played a vital role in shaping the religious landscape of India, particularly in Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism. By examining ancient texts, archaeological evidence, and religious traditions, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the origin of monasteries in India.*

Keywords: *Monastery, Vihara, Varsha-arama, Sangha-arama and Avasa*

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Introduction

India is a country of oldest civilizations and religions of the world. In sixth century BCE Buddhism, one of the oldest religion of world, was founded by Lord Buddha (Siddhartha or Gautama). The Buddha was born as Siddhartha, in the family of chief of the Sakya Clan, who ruled from Kapilavastu. His mother Maya gave birth to him in a grove at Lumbani, while travelling towards her parents' home, and died within few days, after which he was brought up by his stepmother Gautami. He lived from about 563 BCE to 483 BCE.¹ Siddhartha married a young woman named Yashodhara at the age of sixteen and they had a son named Rahula. The ravage of poverty, disease, and old age were unknown to Siddhartha, who grew up surrounded by every comfort in a luxurious palace given to him by his father Suddhodana, as he did not want his son to turn his back to the world. But at the age of twenty-nine, Siddhartha made successive chariot rides outside the palace and saw four things that completely shattered his composure – an old man, a sick man, a corpse, and a renunciant.

The first three scenes brought home to him the harsh realities and inevitabilities of old age, sickness and death, while the fourth pointed to the way of dealing with these inevitabilities. Because

he knew his father would try to stop him, Siddhartha secretly left the palace and family in the middle of the night and wandered around for six years, seeking for truth. At a place now known as Bodhgaya, he sat and meditated under a peepal tree (Bodhi tree) and reached enlightenment and became Buddha (“enlightened one”) at the age of thirty-five. The Buddha gave his first sermon on deliverance from suffering to his five former companions in a deer park near Benaras.² This event is known as *Dharmachakra-Pravartana* (turning the wheel of *Dhamma*). He died at the age of eighty at Kusinara (identified with modern Kushinagar). A monastic order was established by Lord Buddha, called as *Sangha* that included both male clergy (*bhikkhu* or monk) and female clergy (*bhikkhuni* or nun). *Sangha* consists of two Pali terms, *sam-gha*, means assembly or community. Lord Buddha founded the *Sangha* for those who wish to practice *Dhamma* full-time, free from the restrictions and responsibilities of the household life. The *Sangha* also included laymen and laywomen, who were personally dedicated to the discipline of *Dhamma-Vinaya*. The *Sangha*, the order of Buddhist renunciant (*sannyasi*) began near Varanasi with five young men from respected Brahmana families who became monks not long after the Buddha achieved enlightenment and started teaching.³ Gradually, they were joined by other monks and nuns as well. Initially, the message of *Dhamma* was propagated by the first sixty disciples of Lord Buddha. As the *Sangha* grew, the Buddha sent the monks out to spread the teaching far and wide.

The Buddhist monks were mere wanderers, for their livelihood, they had to depend on the alms given by the laymen. Their only shelter was under the shade of the trees of the forest, or huts constructed of leaves and branches. Only during *Vassa* or *Varsha*, the season of the rains, when traveling became unviable, monks were allowed to take rain-retreat for four months. During the lifetime of the Buddha monks used to take shelter during *Vassa* in *Avasa*.⁴ *Varsha-Avasa* or rain retreat were probably the earliest settlements of Buddhists monks during the time of the Buddha. *Avasa* is a term used for a dwelling built by monk for himself, it can be a hut, made of grass, wood and bamboos. These type of dwellings were of a semi-permanent in character and used by the monks for a temporary period. With the increase in *Sangha*, the need of bigger and better place came in the form of *Arama*. The term *Arama* is used for an enclosed site, usually a donation to *Sangha* (community of monks) by a king and a devotee in or near a town, looked after by the donor himself. The gift of *sangha-arama* is the chief gift.⁵ So early Buddhist settlements developed from *Varsha-arama* to *Sangha-arama*. The Veluvana-arama⁶ at Rajagriha is the earliest evidence of an *arama*. It is said to be the first gift of an *arama* to the Buddha and his *Sangha* by King Bimbisara. A reference to a large number of *arama* is found in the Buddhist texts like *VinayaPitaka* and *Cullavagga*. These are - Jivak-arama⁷ at Rajagriha, Ambapalivana-arama⁸ at Vaisali, Udambarik-arama⁹ near Rajagraha, Kukkut-arama¹⁰, Ghosit-arama¹¹ and Pavarikamba-vana-arama¹² at Koshambi, Jetavan-arama¹³ near Sravasti, Badarik-arama¹⁴ at some distance from Ghosit-arama, and Nigradh-arama¹⁵ at Kapilavastu. Initially, these *aramas* were used by the monks during the raining season. After Lord Buddha’s death, his celibate wandering followers gradually settled down into these *aramas*. With the passage of time these *aramas* developed into *viharas*.

The term *vihara* is used for a Buddhist monastery. A Buddhist monastery may be defined as a residence for monks, a center for religious activities, meditation and yoga. These temporary residences eventually evolved into permanent Buddhist monasteries, developing into separate communities for the monks and nuns. In primitive Buddhism there was no monastery or any such Buddhist institution for the permanent abode of monks.¹⁶ These *vihara* were mostly located near settlements, close enough for begging alms from the population but with enough seclusion so that they are not disturbed during meditation. Trade routes of ancient India played an important role in spread of Buddhism and growth of

viharas. These trade routes were used by merchants, travellers as well as the Buddhist monks. Through these trade routes merchants and guild came in contact with monks. These merchants and guilds supported *Sangha* religiously as well as economically. Many *viharas* were built by kings, and rich merchants as merit-producing gifts.¹⁷ The merchants or the kings were in return taught by the monks. Trade routes helped in continuous flow of alms and donations from the merchants and travellers. The trade routes were therefore considered ideal location for constructing a *vihara* for which donations from wealthy traders were received. There are many *vihara* on the trade route of *Uttarapatha* and the *Dakshinapatha*. There is a reference to a merchant of Rajagriha in the *Cullavagga*, who built about sixty such *viharas* for the *Sangha*.¹⁸ According to inscriptions found from Mathura region, many *viharas* are named after the trading communities¹⁹, such as Pravarika-*vihara*, Kashtikiya-*vihara* and Suvanakara-*vihara*. According to *Cullavagga*, Buddha allowed monks to take dwelling in five type of *lenas* or dwelling, which are *viharas*, *addayogas*, *pasada*, *hammiya* and *guhas*.²⁰ Presently out of these *pancha-lenas* only *viharas* and *guhas* have survived. With the development of *varsas-arama* to *sangha-arama* and lastly to *vihara*, the material of construction also changed from wood to rock and lastly to brick.²¹ There are no archaeological material remains of *varsas-arama* and *sangha-arama*.²² Material used for building the *vihara* depended upon the availability. The earliest archaeological remains of *viharas* of India are built in rock-cut cave style. Most of these rock-cut cave or *guha* were built in the secluded places and on trade routes of deccan, eastern and western ghats. The size of these *vihara* varied from small structures to bigger structures, some of these are of multiple stories. The smaller *vihara* consisted of a single or double cell whereas bigger *vihara* consisted of several structures like assembly halls (*salas* or *mandapa*), residential cells (*apavaraka*), dormitories, prayer halls (*caitya-gharas*)²³ and dining area. From third–second century BCE onwards the earliest cave monastery were built, in this connection such as Bhaja cave near Pune in the Western Ghats.²⁴

With the development in Buddhist philosophy, Buddhist schools and sects, the architecture plan of these *vihara* also developed. On the basis of these developments, the construction of *vihara* can be divided into three phases:

Viharas built between the Mauryan and Satavahana period,

Viharas built between the Kushan and Gupta period

Viharas built during the Gupta period and later.

During the first phase the *viharas* of Hinayana Buddhism were built. The Hinayana *vihara* mainly consists of a *Chaitya* hall and a dwelling. During the second phase the *viharas* of Mahayana Buddhism were built. In this phase, the image of Buddha was introduced in the *viharas* along with the stupa. Both served as a center of meditation, religious activities and residence for monks. The religious activities included the recitation of Buddhist texts, discussions and interpretations of Buddhist philosophy. These religious and meditation centers gradually developed into the residential educational centers for the *Sangha*. In the third phase some centers came into existence, which evolved as per needs of the Buddhist communities. These *viharas* were called as *Mahaviharas* or great seats of learning. These type of *viharas* served not only as a residence for the monks but also served as a centers of meditation, religious activities, monastic education and other social activities as well. Thus, the *vihara*, which had begun as a temporary settlement for monks during rainy seasons, developed into a great center of learning in later stage. The development of *vihara* resulted in the emergence of great ancient universities as centers of learning. There are many reference to *vihara* and *mahavihara* in the accounts of Chinese travellers. The Chinese travellers such as Fa-Hien²⁵, Song Yun, Hsuan Tsang²⁶ and I-tSing²⁷, who visited India during fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh century respectively, noticed a large number of *viharas* and *mahaviharas* in different parts of north-western, northern and western India belonging

to both Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism. Their account furnish the magnificence and grandeur enjoyed by some of the monasteries at that time. However, during the time of Hsuan-Tsang most of the monasteries were deserted and in ruins.²⁸ The archaeological excavations conducted at various sites in Indian sub-continent, yielded ruins of a large number of monastic establishments. The monasteries of deccan and central India were built in rock-cut style whereas monasteries built in north-western, northern, eastern India were structural and mainly built of baked bricks. The Buddhists have been the first to establish a well-organized monastic communities in India, many of which evolved into famous educational centers. Regardless of how the transition to permanent monasteries took place, during the fifth to seventh century CE in India, a number of great monasteries and monastic universities like Takshashila (Taxila) in Pakistan and Nalanda in India housed several thousand Buddhist monks and nuns from various traditions.

Conclusion

During the period third century BCE to eighth century CE numbers of monasteries were built by the kings, merchants and devotees in various part of Indian sub-continent. Some of them developed into great universities of ancient India. These include Nalanda, Telhara and Odantapuri in Bihar, Somapura in Bangladesh, Sharada Peeth in Pakistan, Jagaddala in Bengal, Nagarjunakonda in Andhra Pradesh, Vikramashila in Bihar, Valabhi in Gujarat, Pushpagiri in Orrisa, Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu, Manyakheta in Karnataka, Abhayagiri, and Jetavanaramaya in Sri Lanka. However, these great monasteries were destroyed during twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, when Turks invaded Indian sub-continent.

Notes

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