

A Study on Buddhism in the Parthian Era in Iran

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Abstract: Religion among Iranians, like other nations, has always been very important. Religious tolerance in Achaemenid Empire continued in Parthian Era as well. This religious openness among public lasts in Seleucid Empire and after them, in Parthian era, and let the other religions to enter to Iran. Of course it shall be considered that after Seleucid's attack to Iran, the Iranian's lost their self-esteem, therefore their belief to religion became poor and acceptance of foreign religions was common in this era. One of these foreign religions was Buddhism. Buddhism formed in east and northeast of Iran. Its missionaries tried to extend their influence inside Iran and find some followers among Iranians. This is a library study to investigate Iranians approach toward Buddhism in Parthian Era, the followers of this religion, and the areas affected by this religion in the Parthian Era. This investigation is performed using different reference texts, historical resources and the literatures regarding Buddhism in Iran in Parthian Era. This is worth to mention that one can conclude that due to the religious tolerance in Parthian Era, a lot of new religions emerged in this era and Buddhism is one of them. The main problem of the author is the lack of references for the chosen subject and there is no direct reference about Buddhism history in the Parthian Era.

[Mehrnaz Behroozy, Khadijeh Naghipourfar. **A Study on Buddhism in the Parthian Era in Iran.** *Life Sci J* 2013;10(7s):799-804] (ISSN: 1097-8135). <http://www.lifesciencesite.com>. 128

Keywords: Buddha, An Shih-kaio, An Xuan, Thian Ti

Introduction

The need to worship stems from the human's nature, thus, human has long ago sought to worship god to find peace and refer to him in hard times to overcome their fears. This worship has been connected to the life style, culture, environment and so on in any period of time.

Study on the current religions indicates that the current religions are rooted in the past, and religion in any period of time may be formed based on traditions, perspectives, fears, hopes, and mythology of the people of that period of time.

In Parthian Empire era, since Greeks attacked to this country, and due to the conflict of Iranian – Hellenic cultures, and Iranian's historical records, many developments happened in religion, clothes and interests of the Iranian people in this era. This is among unique complications and points of this era, and one of the effects of this developments can be found in people's invocations and consequently in their religion. After the rise of the Parthian, who was of Iranian descent like Achaemenid, Iranian culture emerged again; yet their tolerance and lack of prejudice toward other religions provide the stage of emergence of the neighbors' religions in this country. This thought provides the other existing religions with a chance to offer themselves to the people of Iran and try to grow in this country. So in the light of the religious tolerance, they advertised their religious beliefs among Iranians and increased their followers.

Anyway, one of the best methods of knowing the people who had been lived in this era is having a

good knowledge about these people's beliefs. Thus, this paper seeks to investigate the religious atmosphere of this era and the way of the people's treatment with Buddhism religion in Parthian era in Iran and the scope of its influence in this period of time. But the author pays a little attention to the time before Parthian reign as well.

The present paper contains a review on the life of Buddha and salient Parthian people who spread this religion after Buddha. Then it will investigate the status of this religion in Parthian Empire era.

The status of Buddhism in Iran in Parthian era

Seventh century BC and middle sixth century BC in the Indian history is regarded as among dark eras. The alive and sensitive spirit of Vedic religion has worn out behind the thick curtains of traditions and superstitions and has lost its existence. The real meanings of the hymns of the Vedas were faded in the minds, and only Brahmins have entertained the people with a series of superficial rites and rituals. A deep gap had been created between people and the clergymen. Class privileges that constituted the basis of Brahmacharya religion were increasing and became more distinct day by day. The masses had immersed in the whirlpool of ignorance and superstitions, and moral decline had reached to the pinnacle (Mashkour, 1967: 93-94).

Buddha religion emerged in the fifth century (BC) in the north India where Aryan and indigenous cultures of South Asia interacted for about one millennium. Thus from the beginning this cultural

environment had shares in the legacy of the Iranian plateau (Foltes, 2009: 82).

Invasion of Scythian to Arsacid dynasty caused a severe tension. Yet Mithridates II (88-123 BC) established a new order. He settled Scythian tribes in the south east of Iran and thus he dominated over India (Hertsfeld, 1975: 100) and the stage for the cultural interactions between these two sister nations was provided.

In the first century, a desert dweller tribe known as Kushan came from Central Asia, passed from Afghanistan, and went to the north west of India (Nas, 2004: 214). Kushanian who overthrew Bactrian Greeks government (Balkh) were firstly independent people; however, they were soon dominated by Parthian till Sasanian era. Albeit, it must be noted that some regards Kushanian government as being independent from Parthian (Mohammadi Far, 2010: 48). But some people such as Diakonof consider them as being Iranian and dependent upon Parthian (Parthian, 1995: 247).

In the beginning of the first century BC, in Arachosia and in the East such kings as Gondophares and Paker ruled who had apparently relationship with Sakstan dynasty. In the second quarter of first century BC, Kushan kingdom was gradually established (Diakonof, the Ancient Iran, 2005: 247).

When Buddha left his homeland and led a monastic life style, away from luxuries, he was named as "Gautama" or "Pious"; and when he became a Buddhist he attained another title, i.e. Sakyamuni which means the wise of Sakyans (Razi, 1981: 177-295). This name may refer to the Scythian people who were present in these regions and might have created a sense of intimacy between Scythian people and Parthian.

Kushan is one of the Scythian – Indian and Parthian Satraps who extended its reign to Indus (Kulp, 2008: 49). All the primitive tribes have had tolerance towards religions. So there is no wonder that Buddha statue or as the coins show Bizagubudu Sakam (Uni) has entered into the Kanishka temple (120-160). Kanishka is known as a fanatic Buddhist. As per an available legend, he primarily humiliated Buddhist rules, but when Buddha was embodied in his dreams in the form of a shepherd boy, he converted to the Buddhism. The question is whether Kanishka, converting to the Buddhism, wanted to add a new god to the previous lords or not? Yet it is evident that Buddhists were highly fanatic and had a organized structure, they used the grace of the king more than followers of any other religion and they were not concerned about why Buddhism were not the only prevalent religion in that country. In fact, due to the specific combination of Kushanian dominion which had united different nations, Buddhism expanded and

flourished unprecedentedly (Guteschmidt, {Bita}: 251-252; Nas, 2004: 215).

As per these kings instruction, particular concourses for Buddha followers and monasteries and towers were built; and among them, Kanishka built a monastery called Vihara on the occasion of his conversion to the Buddhism in Purushapura (today known as Peshawar) which existed until 11th century. A temple belonged to this monastery had eighty meters height and had a gold-plated copper dome constituted from 25 smaller domes. Ten Chinese dishes containing the remains of the Buddha were maintained here. Kanishka invited a council comprised of 500 Buddhists to the Keshmir so as to collect a set of Buddha speeches known as Three Pitakas and write a proper interpretation for it. In Ptolemy period, Kaspirayi Ouei government i.e. Takharestanian (Keshmir belonged to Takharestan) had been extended Hydaspes to Vindhia Mountains and included Mathura city where many inscriptions were explored (the same). As regards Kanishka, Duchene Gimán states that the coins witness that Kanishka has not been Buddhist contrary to some people beliefs. He has been a patient ruler who has left a space for Buddha besides the Iranian divinities of his reign (1996: 196).

Ashoka (232- 273 BC) converted to this religion in 260 BC. Since in Buddhism, contrary to Brahma religion, class privileges had been eliminated and this fact had prevailed Buddhism among people, Ashoka ordered to establish the Buddhist third religious council in Ashokarama in Pataliputra, a village to which the Buddha had gone once. In that council, eighteen problems were discussed and decided about; more importantly, it was decided to send missionaries for promoting Buddhism among all nations. Hence several missionaries were sent to the south and west, but nobody was sent to the east. As a result of these endeavors, Ceylon Island people who were called Hinayana (i.e. small wheel or boat) converted to Buddhism. Within 165 to 180 BC, Buddhism underwent cultural, geographical and religious changes, and two main schools emerged: Buddhism followers in the south of India who relied in the old school and Buddhism followers in the north of India who established a new school. The southern school was called Hinayana and the northern school was called Mahayana. Mahayana Buddhists integrated this religion with the masses thoughts and beliefs and Indian traditions. The main difference between Mahayana school and the southern school is that Mahayana followers believed in the future Buddhas, i.e. the holy and pious men who deserve to be named Bodhi Sattva as the inspirational successor of the first Buddha, i.e. Sydarta, who learn his religion in their own times, and guide people to the right path. They

regarded this phenomenon sacred and called it Dharmakaya (1981: 195-196)

Among the efforts of the primary missionaries, there are yearbooks according to which a person named as Maharakeshtira sent a group of missionaries to the Greece; yet there is no detail about their works. To spread Buddhism or the religion of piety, Ashoka carved his orders on the stones imitating the Achaemenian kings (Mashkour, 1967: 98).

From Ashoka era, we are informed about the existence of 39 inscriptions all indicating the moral criteria of Buddhism (Kulp, 2008: 49). In the inscriptions left from this era, sometimes Kharoshthi script derived from Aramaic alphabet (in two inscriptions) and sometimes Aramaic alphabet have been used. One of these inscriptions has been found in Afghanistan in 1958. Using Aramaic alphabet in these inscriptions witnesses the Iran influence on these regions. In Shahbazgari and Manshra, two Prakrit inscriptions (derived from Kharoshthi script) were found in which Iranian, Greek and Indian words have been used that indicates Buddhism has firstly extended among non-Indians (Emmerick, 1985: vol 4/492). In this border region, Indians, Greeks and Iranians lived together; the first signs and evidence reveal that Buddhism has been accepted among non-Indians as well (Emmerick, 2010: 357). For example, it has been written in Ceylon yearbooks that Ashoka has converted a lot of Greeks to Buddhism (Mashkour, 1967: 100).

Albeit one can state that the presence of different people in this place evidenced that the message of this religion has reached these regions. Since the Parthian government had religious tolerance, we cannot say that they have gone there for freedom in rites and the main message of this text is the expansion of these religions among Syrians, Greeks and Scythians.

After Ashoka, Buddhism found a great dignity all over the India and was prevalent there for eight hundred years; although forty years after Ashoka death, the feelings against Buddhism intensified in the Central India (Nas, 2004: 214; Emmerick, 2010: 357).

Consequently, Buddhism changed its location, turned to the west and extended in the north-west of India. In the first and second centuries BC (coincident with Parthian reign in Iran), new people such as Syrian, Greeks and Scythians attacked west of India, i.e. Punjab. They created civilization and a culture known as Greek and Western culture (Greco-Bacteria) in the history. One of the kings of this country named Menānder converted to Buddhism, so all over of his territory was influenced by Buddhism (Nas, 2004: 214).

Ashoka sent several missionaries to the West. On the coins explored from a Greek king known as Agathocle who reigned in Arachosia in 165 to 180 BC, the image of Buddha is observed (Mashkour, 1967: 100). Agathocle had a Buddhist temple (College, 2009: 123; Guteschmidt {Bita}: 161). Since he was the representative of the Greeks, his Buddhism religion may evidence the influence of Buddhism among the Greeks.

Iranian – Buddhists Translators:

Some of the old Buddhism to Chinese translations has been attributed to Yue – Chi; a term seems to be applied for many dwellers of their territory. Among these old translators, Iranians were salient: Parthian, Sogdians, Khotanians. There were also a number of first Kushanian translators (Emmerick, 2010: 370).

The first translators of Buddhism in China were neither Indian nor Chinese; yet they were Iranians of the Central Asia, i.e. Parthian or Sogdian, who were fully familiar with both Chinese and Sanskrit languages. Buddhists church of Luoyang, China capital, was founded in the late first century and the early second century by these Iranian missionaries who have gone to China from the Central Asia (Tajadod, 2000: 368).

After the establishment of Buddhists temple, these missionaries translated their sacred texts into the Chinese language. This Iranian group started translation in China from the middle of the second century. If the translator was fluent in Chinese language, he translated the Buddhism text into Chinese orally; otherwise a Chinese assistant helped him. Any way Chinese scribes wrote the translated texts and asked the opinions of the experts for correction. Iranian translators taught, explained, and interpreted Buddhism issues besides translation. Their interpretations were presented as an independent version along with the translation. Chinese Buddhists rewarded the translators with gifts and supported them. The first translators of Buddhism to Chinese, An Shih-kao and An Xuan, were both Parthian (the same: 368). College says that Kushanian did not translate the Buddha Holy Book into the Chinese language; rather it was translated by a Parthian prince when living in China (College, 2009: 124).

According to Bradley, the Chinese people were satisfied from their schools of thought and did not like Buddhism. Yet by the collapse of the political and social systems of China in the second century, the circumstances changed. In 148, a Buddhist missionary named as An Shih-kao presented the first Chinese translation of the Holy Book (2003: 55; Mohammadi Far, 2010: 49).

An Shih-kao

An Shih-kao (Teting Shih-kao) was the first Buddhist translator and missionary in China. He entered China after fall of Han in 148 and at the time of Huan- T dynasty (Hirakawa, 1993:231; Sen, 1999: 509; wood, 2001: 93; Pulleyblank: vol 1/1985; Bosworth, 2003:77). He went to Luoyang and revived the White Horse Monastery (Lishchak, 1998: 262-263; Tajadod, 2000: 371). The first part of his name, i.e. An or An Shih, means Parthian land. The first person that wrote his biography was a Chinese Buddhist priest named Seng-U who lived in the fifth century AD. As regards An Shih-kao ancestry, and his journey to China, he writes that An Shih-kao was a Parthian prince familiar with foreign texts and literature. He was interested in astronomy and planetary science. He followed the movement of the winds and clouds. He was familiar with medical sciences and was a master of Acupuncture and pulse changes. When he saw an ill person, he diagnosed the illness immediately and prescribed the proper drugs. He could recognize the sounds of birds and wild animals and guessed their requests. Thus An Shih-kao had attained a particular fame in all the regions of the West China. Though An Shih-kao had not still become a Buddhist priest in Iran and his own family, he constantly advertised Dharma religion (Tajadod, 2000: 369).

An Shih-kao went to Luoyang in 148 and translated Buddhism texts for 22 years (148-170). He founded the first school of Buddhism translation and training in China. His colleagues were two Buddhist priests. One of them was An Xuan, an Iranian Parthian; and the other was Chinese Yanfuti Ao. These three founders of Buddhism School in China, two Iranians and one Chinese, were named as three inimitable persons in the history of China (the same).

Some believe that An Shih-kao had been sent as a hostage from Parthian court to China. The kings of Han dynasty respected these princes. In the history of Han dynasty, the name of Shih-kao has been mentioned as a hostage. Antonio Fort considers the translator An Shih-kao to be the same as the hostage An Shih-kao. Furthermore, Chinese documents indicate that after joining to the priest community, An Shih-kao married. His survivors that were both Iranian and Chinese had a high dignity in China due to their monarchy. The Chinese kings sent some of them to the Central Asia as their representative. These Iranian and Chinese survivors played an important role in the field of business between Iran and China. For example, some of them in Sabao, State Bureau of Foreign Trade in China, gained key positions (the same).

An Shih-kao has left 176 Buddhism texts, and as some narrates, one million words (the same). Thirty four written texts have been reported from him,

four of them are doubtful. From thirty texts, nineteen ones have been left and four of these nineteen texts are closer to his time (Pulleyblank, 1985: copy write).

In the collection of Taisho, fifty five translations have been attributed to him, and catalogue of Daoan formulated in 347, attributes thirty four works to him. There is no doubt that among these thirty four works, four works have been written by An Shih-kao. He was particularly interested in enjoying Meditative breathing techniques. Similarity of these Buddhism techniques named Diyama with Taoism breathing techniques made Buddhism to be welcomed by Taoism intellectuals when entered into China (Tajadod, 2000: 371).

An Xuan

An Xuan was originally a Parthian Businessman. In 181, at the time of Ling Di dominance, he went to the China capital, and soon afterwards he gained the position of the General Command of the Emperor riders and was called Colonel An. Then he joined the Buddhist priests, and in the school founded by his compatriot, An Shih-kao, started translating Buddhism texts. He has translated two Buddhism books in 181 in that city (Verstendig, 2008: 372; Nafisi, 1952: 29). His biographer, Seng- U, writes that An Xuan came from Parthian land to China. He learnt Chinese language in the capital and constantly discussed about Sūtra meaning with Buddhist priests. His main colleague was a Chinese Buddhist named Yan Futi Ao who was the first Chinese Buddhist priest. An Xuan translated Buddhism texts from Sanskrit into Chinese and Yan Futi Ao wrote them. An Xuan translations are mostly from Mahayana school texts, literally the "Great Vehicle" (Verstendig, 2008: 372).

Thian Ti

He was a Parthian person who has travelled to China in the middle of the second century as a religious missionary (Hirakawa, 1993: 23).

Ten Wuten

He was a Buddhist from Parthian country and has quoted several pieces in Chinese language in 452 in Levink (Nafisi, No. 4, 1952: 29).

An Fahin

He was a monastic from Parthian land. He has had two books that have been disappeared before 037 AD. An Fahin has translated several books between near 182 and 603 AD in Levink, and three volumes of them have been lost before 037 AD. Today only two volumes of his books have remained (Nafisi, No. 4, 1952: 29).

Other Iranian Buddhist translators and missionaries:

Some of the first Buddhist translators were Sogdian; such as Kang, Mang Hesinang (from Samarkand) who worked from 194 to 199 AD in Lu-

Yang which cannot be regarded as an evidence for the prevalence of Buddhism in Sughd region. Archeology has enlightened about any old building and Buddhist works in the north of Oxus, Termez region. Excavated areas and Varkhasha near Bukhara, Afrasiab, and Panjakent, near Samarkand, are clearly non-Buddhist (Emmerick, 2010: 371). Albeit with regard to the existing works in Buddhist lands, it must be noted that the main missionaries of this religion in other lands were Sogdians (Thundy, 1993: 234).

It seems that one of the Kushan painters was named Tita which may be derived from the Latin word Titus. We know that Kushan has extended his dominance within the north part to Khorezm and Sughd; yet there is doubt whether these regions have been governed by the Kushans. Also there is no evidence indicating Buddhism has existed in these regions in the Kushanian era.

Since no evidence has been gained from exploring Mount Khajeh to specify the exact date of the works, archeologists have determined the date of the works and other decorative elements of Mount Khajeh through the method of comparative studies and comparing plans of buildings with similar buildings and through considering the type of materials applied (mainly bricks) and the scattered pieces of pottery. Archeologists deem these works as the remains of a Buddha temple which is unmatched in Iran (Mohammadi Far, 2010: 91). As mentioned earlier, Agathocles, the king of Arachosia and Zerang in 165 to 180 BC, has drawn the image of Buddha temple on one of his coins (Guteschmidt, {Bita}: 161) which might be the temple of Agathocles. It must be noted that there is no evidence approving this theory and it can be neither approved nor rejected.

One of the major places in Taxila is Jondian. This place was excavated by Jean Marshal. Here the remains of a stone temple with a rectangular plan were explored. Two square columns are seen in the entrance of this building. The rectangular space of the temple has been surrounded by another rectangular. It has three arches except for the corridor. This temple has been built in Scythian – Parthian era (the same: 87).

Another work remained from Iranian Buddhists is a place near the Buddhist pagoda on the top of Mountain "Carly" or "Carla" between Bombay and Pune in India built for the Buddhist monks. A pagoda known as "No Bahar" in Balkh is another major work which has been mentioned frequently in our books and has mistakenly been considered as Zoroastrian fire temples, and even Daghighi in his poems left in Shahnameh has regarded it for Zoroastrians as the Shrine for the Muslims (Nafisi, 1952: 29).

Iranian pioneer center in the Parthian era that was not far from Buddhist centers in Punjab region soon became one of the representatives of this religion (Verstending, 2008: 368).

Parthian played a role in extending Buddhism in Far East. In contact with Kushans, many Parthian princes in Afghanistan and East of Iranian plateau ultimately accepted this philosophy which promised peace and friendship in the harsh and full of enmity social life of that era. Parthian presidios in this era had a little distance to the Buddhist centers in Punjab region and they soon became missionaries of the Buddhism (the same: 367).

Buddhists were among kings of Greece and this might refer to polices located in Mesopotamia and Damascus. In a reference about the life of Patak, father of Mani (near 200 AD), it has been written:

Once Patak in a pagoda, to which he frequently went, heard a sound from altar, "Patak! Do not eat meat, do not drink wine, and refrain from women." Three consecutive days he heard that sound that gave him the same orders. Immersed in the sea of thoughts, Patak pondered about this revelation and decided to join to a sect in Maysan whose followers were called Baptists (Ibn Nadim, 2002: 391-392). There is no information available in the Arabic text about how was the temple called Beyt Al-Asnam. This term is both consistent with Syrian bēt Petakre regarded as the temple of the infidels in Syria in the Julian story and butxaneh in Persian language which probably means the house of Buddha. Any way it seems reasonable that it means a Buddhist temple, because a group of Buddhist missionaries have always resided in Mesopotamia since Ashoka era (Videngern, Mani and his teachings, 2008: 36-37; Nafisi, 1952: 25).

So the fact that the father of Mani has been Buddhist before joining Baptists and advertising Buddhism among Syrians and Greeks might be an evidence indicating the activities of Buddhists in these regions; yet as there is no evidence of these pagodas and it has not been mentioned in the other references of the west of Iran, it can be regarded as an unsuccessful attempt which could not add the west of Iran to the followers of this religion.

Buddhism firstly formed in the border regions of Iran and India; yet in the areas located in the eastern borders of Iran, there was a culture integrated with Buddhism, particularly in the west that was mostly dominated by the Provisions of the Seleucid, in the northeastern of Iran that is the neighbor of Scythians, and in the southeastern parts that Scythians resided. As we know Scythians welcomed Buddhism and joined it. Adjacency with Scythians and establishment of Scythian- Parthian reign in Balkh and Kushan provided the stage for

acceptance of Buddhism in the eastern borders of Iran with regard to the governing religious tolerance. Albeit it must be noted that although this religion extended in the eastern neighboring countries of Iran by contribution of Parthian nationals, the presence of this religion in the east of Iran cannot be denied and it was one of the religions that had developed in the east of Iran and its influence could not eliminate Zoroastrian religion and get the governing religion. Although in other parts of Iran there may be a few signs of orientation toward this religion, they are so small and minor that its presence in the other parts can be ignored and it is specific to some eastern cities of Iran.

Conclusions

Formation of Buddhism dated back to the birth of an Indian prince in India in sixth or seventh century BC. Then the followers of this religion tried to extend it, yet it did not extend until third century BC. It entered Iran by influencing Scythians and then Kushanians, and as per references its effects have probably been seen in Mesopotamia. All mentioned about father of Mani such as seeking refuge in a Buddhist pagoda and then joining to the Baptists, and sending Buddhist missionaries to Mesopotamia and even Greece by Ashoka confirm that in spite of all endeavors for extending this religion in Iran and Western parts, it only penetrated in the eastern parts of Iran, Kushan, Zerang, and Sughd.

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