

BUDDHA IN ART : FROM SYMBOL TO IMAGE

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There is a common impression about Buddhism that its impact was completely lost sight of in India long before the present age. Facts bearing to the contrary are, however, not quite rare to trace. One of the positive outcomes of the impact of Buddhism was probably the realisation of objects of veneration into technically formulated shapes held as images which have been used for the purpose of divination and worship. Realisation of divinities in visual form of idols and the worship of the same have been existing as a common phenomenon among many ancient civilizations of the world. But in India there has been a marked difference in the phenomenon of image worship from the same as existing elsewhere. Here, the figure of the deity put into visual form is found to have evolved as an aid in the endeavour on the part of the worshipper to attain concentration. It came to be technically known as a *yantra* or instrument, which has been processed in order to help the worshipper to imbibe within his or her inner consciousness a complete identity with the object of veneration and full realisation of the essence of the same within one's own inner self. In every possibility, as traditions may help in establishing, it had been through the endeavours of some thinkers owing allegiance to Buddhism that this aspect of image worship was evolved as a means of absorption and fulfilment. The realisation of this highly efficacious measure had not been accomplished all at once at a particular time. The process had probably started when the followers of Buddha had developed the idea of looking upon the master as an ideal to be meditated upon as a means of attaining *arhat*-hood. As long as the master was alive and present in the company of his followers, the very effulgent personality of the master could keep them inspired and drawn towards the ideals of *nirvana*. As Buddha had obtained *mahaparinirvana*, there had ensued a void in the wake of visual perception and at this state the Stupa enshrining the mortal remains of the master was held as a perpetual reminder of the very presence of the master. The Stupa had thus come to be held as a visual embodiment of the ideals that Buddha had propounded and lived for. This abstract symbol and several other motifs such as the Bodhi-trees at Gaya, supposed foot prints of the master at places sanctified by his presence or the Wheel of Law symbolising the master engaged in preaching had held the ground for long as sustaining the message and ideals preached by Buddha. But a demand for a likeness of the master in the concentrated attitude of the fulfilment of his ideals was being increasingly felt and some visualiser ultimately had taken the daring step of bringing into realisation an idealised likeness of the master in order to provide the seeker an instrument

to gain access to the ideals sought for. An attitude commonly known as *bhakti* could have been an element leading to the realisation of the likeness of Buddha in visual form but the basic factor which could have inspired the artist to bring into realisation the image can probably be discerned from such texts dealing with the Dhyanas of the dieties, as the Nispanna Yogavali attributed to Abhayakara Gupta (c. 1114 A.D.) and the Sadhanamala. In these texts the devotee is enjoined to meditate upon one self as one and identical with the deity held in divination. These texts bear affiliation to Buddhist thinking of quite late development, pertaining to the philosophical system known as *Yogachara* descending from the tenets known as *Madhyamika* propounded by the celebrated proponents of Buddhism, Asanga and Vasubandhu. There is every reason to believe that concrete realisation of Buddha image had been brought into being not by the orthodox followers of the Theravada school but had been accomplished by those belonging to this new dispensation known as the Mahayana school.

A mere representation of a person of veneration in visual form cannot be held as an icon; to be held as an icon a figure has to have some definite characteristics indicating the significance of a figure to be deemed as an image. It has been pointed out by some in this respect that the Rigveda has a passage wherein a person is stated to have offered his Indra for sale. (Rv. IV. 24.10) From this it has been concluded by some that this indicated the existence of image in the Vedic tradition. There is however, no positive indication that this Indra offered for sale had actually been a figure of Indira in human form. It could as well have been a symbol representing Indra. Even if this Indra was a figure of the deity in human form, this was definitely not an image put into shape for the purpose of worship, but could have been something like a protective talisman. The same holds good for many symbolic or human representations of deities to be met with upon the punch mark or cast coins of ancient age.

With the passage of time the accounts pertaining to the life of Buddha had gained very wide popularity and in artistic representation of such accounts symbols of various denomination such as the foot print, the vacant seat, the *dharma chakra* wheel and a tree with railing around its bottom came to be used as indicating the presence of the Master. In literature and accounts dealing with the life of Buddha, the presence of Buddha is always described in human form. In the artistic representations, however, the artists, it appears, had been prevented by some powerful injunctions, from the representation of the master in human form for quite a length of time. This tradition of non-exhibition of the master in human form was pursued with great strictness in such monuments at Bharhut, Sanchi, Bodhgaya, all belonging to the pre-Christian era. In the art of Gandhara, artists are found to have worked under no such inhibition and the stories pertaining to the life of Buddha here are all through shown with representation of the master in

human form. At Mathura also events from the life of Buddha are represented almost uniformly with figures of Buddha in human form. It is only in the Krishna-Godavari region of Andhra at Amaravati and such other places, where scenes from the life of Buddha are found represented with the use of symbols in some of the panels of the same age with figures of the master in human form. As it is the case with the figures of Buddha shown in the life-stories at Gandhara, at Amaravati region also the figures appearing in these life-stones are found to represent the master as a monk engaged in dispensations as required in the particular scene and not as an image, commanding worship. Though the presence of the Buddha had come to be shown in human form in such life scenes, at these centres of Buddhist art, when and how the Buddha figure had come to be accepted as an image for worship does not appear to have been established yet with any amount of certainty.

Born as Siddhartha, the son of a patriarch of the oligarchic tribe of the Sakyas, Buddha had been reared up in a cultural environment which prevailed among people pursuing the Vedic traditions. Some old texts hold that the Sakyas were scions of the Ikshvakus (Okkaka) descended from the legendary name called Manu. Though some modern scholars are sceptic about this claim, poet Asvaghosa is known to have upheld this idea. This association probably indicates a link with the family of rulers known as Janakas, also claiming descent from the ancient Ikshvakus; one of these Janakas, has been celebrated as the patron of Yajnavalkya of Upanishadic fame. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, attributed to Yajnavalkya is considered to have given a new turn to the philosophical quests developed in India. This Upanishad is known to have laid supreme stress upon the pursuit of wisdom, laid emphasis on the doctrine of *Karma* and rebirth, and had virtually nullified the efficacy of sacrifice. The way of fulfilment as laid down by Gautama after attaining Buddhahood, is found to bear intimate awareness of those Upanishadic principles. Though growing out of Vedic thinkings, the Upanishads had emphasised on the pursuit of wisdom and a right course of action and behaviour but did not promote any idea conducive to image worship.

In this perspective it may be worthwhile to point out that nowhere in the accounts dealing with the life of Buddha there is any indication of existence of image in worship. As Buddha moved about, meeting people and admitting eager persons to the *Sangha* by giving *pravarya*, he was growing in estimation and respect of his followers who had given him such adulation as would be given to a person of unparalleled veneration. In the dispensation preached by Buddha there was no prescription of any rites or rituals. The veneration commanded by Buddha during his life time could not have taken the place of any functional ritual; however, offerings were brought to him with great respect and he was certainly adulated with great

touching his feet. Performance of Vedic rituals and pouring oblation into sacrificial fire invoking such deities as Indra, Vishnu, Bhaga, Pushana etc. were abandoned and to those in the *Sangha* and to the lay disciples, Buddha had become the supreme recipient of veneration, homage and prostration (*Pranama*).

Mahaparinirvana of Buddha and the rise of the Stupa :

After a long and eventful life after the attainment of Bodhi, the Master had obtained *Mahaparinirvana* at a village called Kusinagara situated in the kingdom of the Mallas. The death of the master had cast a spell of deep sorrow and gloom and had brought about a sense of void among the followers of Buddha. The sacred remains of the body after cremation were distributed among the tribes who had contended to gain possession of the sacred remains and monuments in the form of stupas had come to be erected at different places upon such remains. The erection of the stupas and the shape of those stupas appear to have been ordained by Buddha himself. It is on record that on the eve of his *parinirvana* Buddha had stated that in his absence all advice given by him in his lifetime regarding *Dhamma* and *Vinaya* would remain as the all time guide for his followers. It is further known that Buddha had made a sign with his two hands indicating a spherical shape, apparently suggesting a stupa which would be symbolical of his presence for all times.¹ All these facts had laid the way for the establishment of the stupa and acceptance of the same as symbolical of the presence of the master and as such a symbol of supreme value to the Buddhists after his *mahaparinirvana*.

The practice of erecting *stupa* upon the mortal remains of a deceased person was probably in vogue from long before the time of Buddha and such stupas had been erected not only by the Buddhists but the Jainas as well. Though the practice appears to have been discontinued by the Jainas, with the Buddhists the stupa came to acquire characteristics of very significant nature, having come to be recognised as important as the very presence of Buddha himself. Some early Buddhist texts tend to indicate that the *stupa* had come to be recognised as a symbol of the presence of the Buddha and commanded respect and veneration as such. Buddha himself is known to have stated that after his *mahaparinirvana* his *Sarirapuja* would be performed by *Khattiyas*, *Brahmanas* and *Gahapatis* (*Santananda khattiya panditani bahmmana panditapi/Gahapati panditapi tathagate abhippasanna/tetathagatassa sarirapuja.karissanti*). This idea of *Sarirapuja* had given rise to the acceptance of the stupa as an object of veneration in course of time as would be apparent from the stupas surviving at different places and also scenes showing stupas being venerated as objects of worship as found depicted in the sculptured panels at Bharhut, Sanchi and

other places. In the process of its being held as an object of veneration, the stupa had come to be known as a *chetiya*. The term *chetiya* as a place of veneration finds mention in the Ramayana,² as having railings (*Vedika*), stairs and high roof. Coomaraswamy felt that this indicated a temple (Coomaraswamy, A.K., *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, p.48). The Atharvaveda has mention of *chaitya-vrikshas*.³ This may be held as the earliest mention of the word *chaitya*, here attached to *vriksha* or tree, indicating that such trees as were held in veneration. Pali texts have mention of *rukkhacetiani* and the celebrated Bodhi tree at Gaya had been held as a *rukkhachetiya*.

No literary source can be cited as bearing any sure evidence as to when exactly a stupa came to be known as a *chetiya* or *chaitya* and as such an object of veneration. In this connection mention may be made of the Rummindei inscription of Asoka. In this inscription it has been stated that "Twenty years after his coronation king Priyadarsi, beloved of gods, visited this spot in person and offered worship at this place, because Buddha, the sage of the Sakyas was born here. He had caused a stone wall to be built around the place and also erected this stone pillar to commemorate his visit." (Pillar inscription of Asoka at Rummindei). This inscription mentions of Asoka's offering of worship at this place but there is no indication as to what specific object this worship was offered. That the place was marked can be inferred from the fact that a stone wall was set up around the place. A similar pillar existing at Nigalisagar (Niglibha in U.P.) bearing another inscription of Asoka states that the king Priyadarsi, beloved of gods, had visited the place after fourteen years of his coronation and had enlarged the *thuva* (*stupa*) existing there enshrining the relics of the Buddha Kanakamuni and had offered worship at this place. The word for *stupa* used here is *thuva*. From this record it is apparent that the *puja* offered by Asoka at this place was directed towards the stupa enshrining the relic of Buddha Kanakamuni. It may be inferred from this evidence, that though there is no mention of the existence of a *stupa* at Lummindei, there could have existed a *stupa* here as well, built to enshrine some holy relic of the Buddha of the Sakya clan.

It is quite possible that Asoka had set up the wall that is mentioned in the inscription round this stupa existing at Rummindei and he had actually offered worship to this *stupa*. Thus it can be inferred that formal offering of worship to a stupa as a symbol representing the Buddha had already come into practice before Asoka the emperor had followed a practice well in existence from an earlier age.

Stupa turns into Chetya (Chaitya) :

A stupa is usually held as synonymous with *Chaitya*; but nowhere it can be found clearly stated as to when and how a *stupa* came to be accepted as a

chaitya. The word *chaitya* derived from the root *chi* probably indicated some high rising object held in veneration. Coomaraswamy held *chetiya* as standing for an altar or fire-altar.⁴ Earliest mention of the word *chetiya* in any inscription is probably found in a railing pillar of the *stupa* of Bharhut. The inscription reads as *Migasamadaka-chetaya*.⁵ An inscription found at Jagatpur near Derhadun (U.P.) there is mention of the erection of a *chetya* to commemorate the fourth Asyamedha sacrifice by a ruler, named Silavarmana,⁶ dateable from about the third century A.D. All these references would establish that a *chetya* or *chaitya* (or *chitya*) would stand for a shrine commanding respected veneration, where people would come to offer worship. As a *thuva* or *stupa* grew to command respect and worship, it also came to be known as *chetya* or *chaitya*. Though Asoka does not explicitly mention that the *thuva* at Nigalisagar was a *chetya*, the *thuva*, as it has been stated, it can be presumed that the *chetiya* had already come to be held as an object calling for worship. This was because of the *stupa* did enshrine the holy relic of the person held in reverence. The very saying about Sarira-puja put in the mouth of Buddha had given rise to, and establish the validity of relic worship enshrined in stupas. The famous relic inscription from Piprawa mentions Buddha as Bhagavata and the relic as Salila (Sarira) (*Jyam salila-nidhane Budhasa Bhagavata sakiyanam*).⁷ The *stupa* containing sarira remains had thus come to be held as an object of veneration, and had come to be known as *sariraka stupa*. Though the idea of *sarira-puja* is found attributed to Buddha himself, the actual promotion of the idea of worship of the *stupa* as a *chetya* could not have taken place all at once unless the initiative was taken in this direction by somebody at some particular time, after the *Mahaparinirvana* and before Emperor Asoka, by which time it had come to be an established practice.

In this connection mention may be made of one Mahadeva who is credited to have brought into practice of a cult known as *chaityavada*. This Mahadeva is held by some as different from the person of the same name who is widely known as the convenor of the Second Buddhist Council. According to this creed of *Chaitya-vada*, great merit could be earned by worship of *chaityas* by offering of flowers, garlands and incense and also by circumambulating the same. After the *Mahaparinirvana*, eight *stupas* containing the sacred relics of Buddha were reported to have been built by king Ajatasatru at different places as stated in the *Mahaparinibbana Suttanta*. Later Asoka is credited to have distributed these relics to be enshrined in numerous *stupas*, set up at different places under his orders. Inscriptions of Asoka, however, do not preserve any mention of such an endeavour on the part of the emperor. The inscriptions at Rummindei and Niglibha would prove that Asoka had undertaken pilgrimage to places sanctified with the memory of Buddha Sakyamuni as well as such previous Buddhas as Kanakamuni. In the Rummindei record Buddha has been referred to as Bhagavan and offering of worship by Asoka is indicated by the

word *Mahiyite*. It may be concluded from these records that a *sariraka-stupa* containing *sarira dhatu* relic of Buddha had come to be held as an object fully symbolic of Buddha held as *Bhagavan* deserving of worship and as such had come to be held as a *chetya* or a shrine of utmost respect and veneration. Numerous representations may be found of scenes showing *stupas* being worshipped by devotees with flowers, garlands etc. and devotees prostrating before such *stupas* and circumambulating the same, upon the sculptured panels at Bharhut, Sanchi, Bodhgaya, Mathura and Amaravati, indicating how the *stupa* had come to be a symbol of the ever existing presence of Buddha, even after his *Mahaparinirvana*. Other symbols, such as the seat with lotus marks, foot prints, Bodhi tree, Dhammachakra were, however, used in art to indicate only the presence of the master during his life time.

From the *Stupa* symbol to the rise of the image :

Early Buddhist monuments such as the works sponsored by Emperor Asoka, the *stupa* balustrades and gateways at Bharhut and Sanchi, the sculptures at Bodhgaya, Mathura and Bhaja bear positive proof of non-existence of any representation of Buddha in human form. The earliest Buddha figures so far known, hail from Gandhara and date from either the closing parts of the pre-Christian era or the beginning of the first century A.D. It is probable that Buddha in human figure had appeared for the first time in the sculptured panels showing stories from the life of Buddha at Gandhara. There was a strong inhibition against the realisation of the figure of Buddha in human form in Indian tradition for many centuries after Buddha. There have been several reasons advanced in explaining this phenomenon by scholars, none of which, however can be held as quite convincing.

The balustrades of the *stupa* at Bharhut bear representation of a number of male and female figures identified by accompanying inscribed labels as *Yakshas*, *Yakshinis*, *Nagas* and *Devatas*. Prof. J.N.Banerj ea, depending on Jaina source had called those as *vyantaradevatas*, who according to him were held in worship by ordinary folks of people.⁸ It is to be noted in this connection that though such *vyantara devatas* are found represented upon these balustrades, no Vedic deity has been found represented in the same way, as showing respect to Buddha, upon these Buddhist monuments. In every possibility, figures of such Vedic deities were not put in iconographic form or worshipped as such by people pursuing the Vedic creed of performing *yajna* or sacrifices. It has been generally held that the worship of such *yakshas*, *nagas* and the like had been influenced by folks of non-Aryan or un-Aryan or pre-Aryan stock and bore evidence of 'contact of the Aryans with the previous settlers of India' as stated by Prof. Banerj ea.⁹ European

scholars had tried to establish that the Buddha image was brought into existence for the first time by artists in Gandhara under Graeco-Roman influence and this Buddha type had served as the model of Buddha images produced by artists in India. Coomaraswamy had, however, strongly argued that the Buddha figure in the Indian tradition had been modelled on *Yaksha* figures existing in Indian artistic tradition from a much earlier age. The strong sense of avoiding the display of the figures of Buddha in the anecdotal sculptures had held the ground for long as would be evident from the Buddhist monuments of the pre-Christian era. It was in the monuments of Amaravati region that the phenomenon of the appearance of the figure of Buddha in such panels dealing with the life of Buddha appears for the first time. However, here at Amaravati region also, in many of the panels dealing with the life of Buddha, the old tradition of non-representation of the figure of Buddha was followed. This region in Andhra country had become a centre of artistic activity already in the third or second century B.C. and this activity had continued to flourish here till the third-fourth century A.D. almost in a continuous stretch. In the style of modelling, physical features, grace and liveliness the art at Amaravati region stood significantly different from the art forms of other art centres like Bharhut, Sanchi, Bodhgaya, etc. However, in the figures of Buddha found here scholars have found influence from Gandhara and Mathura.

Without going into details about the stylistic peculiarities of the Buddha figure of the Amaravati school, certain matters may be taken into Amaravati art. Broadly speaking, as in the case of earlier monuments, here Amaravati art. Broadly speaking, as in case of the earlier monuments, here at Amaravati also, the *stupa* was held as the principal object of veneration as the living symbol of the ever existent presence of the Master. Mention has earlier been made of *Chetiya-vada* according to which sect a *chetiya* was to be worshipped with flowers, garlands and incense etc. Likewise as at Bharhut and Sanchi, the carvings upon the *stupas* here at Amaravati have numerous panels showing worship of *stupas* by devotees. There is no mention of *chaityavadins* at Bharhut and Sanchi but at Amaravati there is an inscripational reference to *chaityavada*.¹⁰ In Tibetan translation of a canonical book attributed to a noted monk named Bhavya there is mention of this sect of *chaityavada* being founded by a monk named Mahadeva. This sect was held as a branch of the celebrated Mahasanghika school which broke away from the orthodox *Theravada* school on principles of the true character of *Vinaya*. According to the *Mahaparinibbana Suttanta*, Buddha, before his decease had enjoined a *thupa* of the Tathagata to be erected at the crossing of four roads: 'whoever shall there place garlands or perfumes or paint or make salutation there shall be to them a source of *hita* and *sukha* (*hitaya sukhaya*)'.¹¹ According to *Suttanipata* commentary a *dhatughar* was a *chetiya* (*Dhatugharam katva chetiyam patitthapesun*). Thus a *stupa* became a receptacle of worship. Originally the body of the *stupa* was left in the form of a plain dome with the *harmika* and the *chhatra*, the *chhatra* being a symbol of the *Chakravartihood* of Buddha.

Early sculptured panels :

At Vengi region there are *stupas* without any decoration. But some panels belonging to the pre-Christian era have representation of the *stupas* shown with snakes are shown as covering the *anda* of the dome. In one such panel showing a *Stupa*, dated by Coomaraswamy in the second or first century B.C., a snake having five hoods is shown represented as occupying a rectangular panel at the front while two human figures fitted with snake hoods upon their heads are found shown on two sides of this five-hood snake standing with folded hands in pose of worship (Coomaraswamy, HIIA, Pl. XXXIV, 146). Another similar panel has the representation of a bigger *stupa*, shown covered by a number of snakes entwining each other.¹² Here on either side of the *stupa* are shown quite a few human figures with similar snake hoods upon their heads, paying homage or bringing offerings and *puja*. Then, in a number of other panels showing representation of *stupa*, Buddha is found shown in human form, either seated or standing, often with ornamentations of very wide nature around. Of these panels, one may call for particular attention. In this panel, stated as a votive slab, upon the central position in the front of the *stupa*, a figure of Buddha is shown as standing in the *abhaya* pose, as if he has descended there from above. At a height on two sides of Buddha are shown two human figures and beneath the platform upon which he stands are also shown two figures in kneeling posture. On two sides of the enormously tall figure of Buddha are shown a male and a female figure with folded palms as if receiving the master with great devotion. The male figure here is shown with a big auriola of snake hoods behind his head while the female figure has one snake hood upon her head. The appearance of the figure of Buddha becomes almost a certainty in the front of the *stupa* onwards from this time as would be evident from the *stupas* found in the *chaitya* caves at Karle, Bedsa, Nasik, Ajanta, Ellora, Aurangabad and such other places. When the idea of devotion as such, commonly expressed by the word *bhakti* found admitted into the tradition of Buddhism cannot be said, though there had been very little scope for this phenomenon in a pursuit mainly based on wisdom and logic. Conservative *theravada* creed had never given any consideration to this cult of *bhakti* and the eight-fold path of ancient Buddhism bore no credence to devotion to Buddha as such. It was not probably before Buddhaghosha who flourished about the 5th century A.D. and lived in Sri Lanka, that the cred of *trisarana* or taking refuge in Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha had come to be sanctified in the *Theravada* creed. But Buddha had come to be qualified as *Bhagavat* in the inscriptions associated with the *stupas* found at Bharhut and other places. The inscription found upon the relic casket found at Paiprawa also bears the qualifying word *Bhagava* before the name Sakyamuni (*Budhasa bhagavate sakiyanam*). This attitude of worshipfulness associated with the *Sarira-dhatu* of Buddha as can be inferred from the relic casket of Piprawa and the *chaityas* enshrining such reliquary had probably a definite

influence in bringing about the aspect of deification of Buddha and ultimately the realisation of the figure of Buddha as an image.

Now the question may be posed as to whether the image had preceded the emergence of Buddha figures to be put in the visual representation of the life stories of Buddha or such figures used in anecdotes were formulated earlier than the image. A study of the two types of figures would definitely show that the import of the two had been quite different in character and ideation. The image had a clear import of commanding veneration and worship while a figure shown in illustrations of the life stories had the bearing of a living being engaged in affairs of his many wanderings and involvement in many events. The figure found at Katra bearing an inscription qualifying the figure as that of a Bodhisattva and the figure found at Aniyor with the inscription stating this figure as that of Buddha would probably bear out the inhibition which had been operative in the realisation of the figure of Buddha as an image. In every possibility the visual form of Buddha represented as an image commanding worship had made its appearance for the first time upon a *stupa* as an ancillary of the relic or *sarira-dhatu* which was installed inside such *stupa*.

In this connection some reflections may be dwelt upon regarding the contribution of a group of people known as the *Nagas*. In the Indian tradition frequent mention is found of a people known as the *Nagas* from quite an early time. These people very probably came to be known as *Nagas* from their adherence to the cult of snake worship. The *Atharvaveda* has mention of a number of snake gods,¹³ who are sometimes mentioned in this text along with *Gandharvas*, *Yakshas* (*Punyajanas*), *Pitris*, etc.¹⁴ Here is also found mention of the name of *Airavata's* son *Dhritarashtra* who, according to the *Mahabharata*, was the best of the *Nagas*.¹⁵ In the *Rigveda*, *Vritra* the formidable antagonist of Indra, the king of gods, had been mentioned as *Ahi* or a snake. In the *Grihyasutras* there is mention of snake worship as *Sarpabali*. Coming to the Buddhist tradition, mention is found about a tribe *Ahiraja-kulani* in the *Chullavagga*.¹⁶ Here, four snake kings are named as Virupaksha, Erapatra (Elaputra), Chhabyaputra, and Kanhagotamaka.¹⁷ There had been a very widespread distribution of these *Naga* people over the whole of India, and the cult of *Naga* worship was in a flourishing condition in different places from a very ancient time. From Mathura region have been recovered several figures bearing *Naga*-hood. One such figure found at Chargram, five miles south of Mathura, is held as a typical cult object where a figure delineated in a vigorous gait is shown standing in front of a polycephalous serpent.¹⁸ This *naga* figure, as well as a similar figure found from Kakargam^{18A} have their right hands raised in *abhaya-mudra* pose. All these figures are attributable to early Kushana age revealing that Mathura had been a centre of *Naga* cult, probably from a much earlier age.

The *Vaishnava Puranas* have the legend of the Naga king *Kaliya* dominating over the region around the river Jamuna near Mathura. This *Kaliya* had been overwhelmed by Krishna during his childhood. Krishna after his being deified as *Narayana-Vishnu* came to be held as one and the same with the primeval serpent *Ananta* while *Balarama* also was held as an incarnation of this same serpent *Ananta* or *Sesha*.

In the balustrade of the stupa at Bharhut are found representations of several figures shown with snake hoods upon their heads. One of these figures is named by the accompanying inscription as *Nagaraja Chakovako* (*Chakravaka*) while in a sculptured panel there is a story represented in continuous narration about the Nagaraja named Elapatra, who got redeemed from a curse through the grace of Buddha. The accounts dealing with the life of Buddha have the story of how *Nagaraja Muchalinda* had spread his enormous hood upon Buddha to protect him from the great storm which had broken out after Buddha had obtained *Nirvana*. These accounts in the Buddhist sources and the representation of *Naga* figures with human body and snake hood upon their heads as showing their devotion to Buddha would undoubtedly reveal that quite some people of the *Naga* community had come under the influence of Buddhism. But among common people there was a general apprehension about the trickiness of the *Nagas* since they were believed to be capable of assuming human form at will though they were actually fearsome reptiles. That is why they were held in apprehension because of their superhuman powers. It is held in some Buddhist accounts that a candidate desirous of admission into the Buddhist order was often asked whether he was a naga or not.¹⁹ Though there was such apprehension about the people known as *Nagas*, many celebrated adepts to Buddhism are known to have hailed from the *Naga* community. Of such celebrated *Naga* followers of the Creed, mention may be made of Nagasena who has been immortalised by the extremely reputed Buddhist text known as *Milindapanho*. The book has records of the very learned discussions which had transpired between the Indo-Greek ruler called Milinda (Minander - c.100 B.C.) and the Buddhist monk Nagasena whose exposition of Buddhist creed is acclaimed as of a very high order. In this discourse with Milinda, Nagasena had revealed his great wisdom and independent thinking. Regarding the worship of the relic (*Sarira-puja*) he is said to have observed that this was meant for the laity only, while the monks should rather practise "understanding and meditation".²⁰ The entire tenor of the discourse of Nagasena, delivered to meet the scepticism and doubts of his distinguished and learned disciple Milinda was imbued with deep confabulation of metaphysics not met with in the general types of Buddhist texts like the *Kathavatthu* where it had been stated that all legends about Buddha were heresay and Buddha had never existed in this world as a man.²¹ Thus Buddha was raised to the status of a celestial sphere, and virtually held as deified. Nagasena's clear exposition regarding this

problem has been held as having a considerable importance in respect of the development of Buddhist philosophy.²² The venue of this disputation as mentioned in the *Milindapanho* was at Sagala, modern Sialkot, one of the capitals of ancient Gandhara. Nothing is, however, known about where Nagasena hailed from. Gandhara itself was associated with *Naga* tradition; the Mahabharata has mention of Takshasila in Gandhara as the venue of the well known snake sacrifice. In historical times a *Naga* dynasty called the Sisunagas are known to have ruled in Magadha sometimes after the advent of Buddha. A powerful *Naga* dynasty had established itself in Padmavati (Paidaya near Gwalior) after the Kushanas while one of the Satavahana rulers, Satakarni I, known as a great conqueror had a queen named Nayanika or Naganika, apparently a daughter from a *Naga* family. The empire of the Satavahanas extended over wide areas including what are presently known as Naga-Vidarbha region and Nagpur area in Maharashtra. The famous city of Dhanakataka, modern Amaravati has been the capital of the Satavahanas, where Nayanika had exercised her power. The remains of the *stupas* and the wide range of Buddhist artistic remains from the area around Amaravati bear out very close association with a powerful *Naga* tradition that had been prevalent over this area. The human figures with naga hood upon their head at Bharhut would remind one of the association of the locality of Bharhut with *Naga* tradition having been known as Nagodh.²³ Similarly the name Nagarjunikonda in the Andhra area recalls the name of the celebrated Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna who is known to have been a founder of the *Mahayana* creed. Traditions hold close connection of the Satavahanas with the propagation of the *Mahayana* school. It is claimed that Buddha himself had predicted that "There will be a king named Satavahana in South India. When the Law is on the point of extinction -- he (Satavahana) will appear and propagate the Vaipulya-sutra of the Mahayana and will save the Law from extinction."²⁴ Apart from the *stupas* at Dhanyakataka (Amaravati) region, the caves at Karla, Nasik and the earlier *Chaitya* caves at Ajanta belonged to the period of the Satavahanas. Nagarjuna held as the founding mentor of the *Mahayana* school is known to have been a close friend of the Satavahana king, Gautimiputra Satakarni, to whom he had addressed an epistle named *Suhrillekha*.

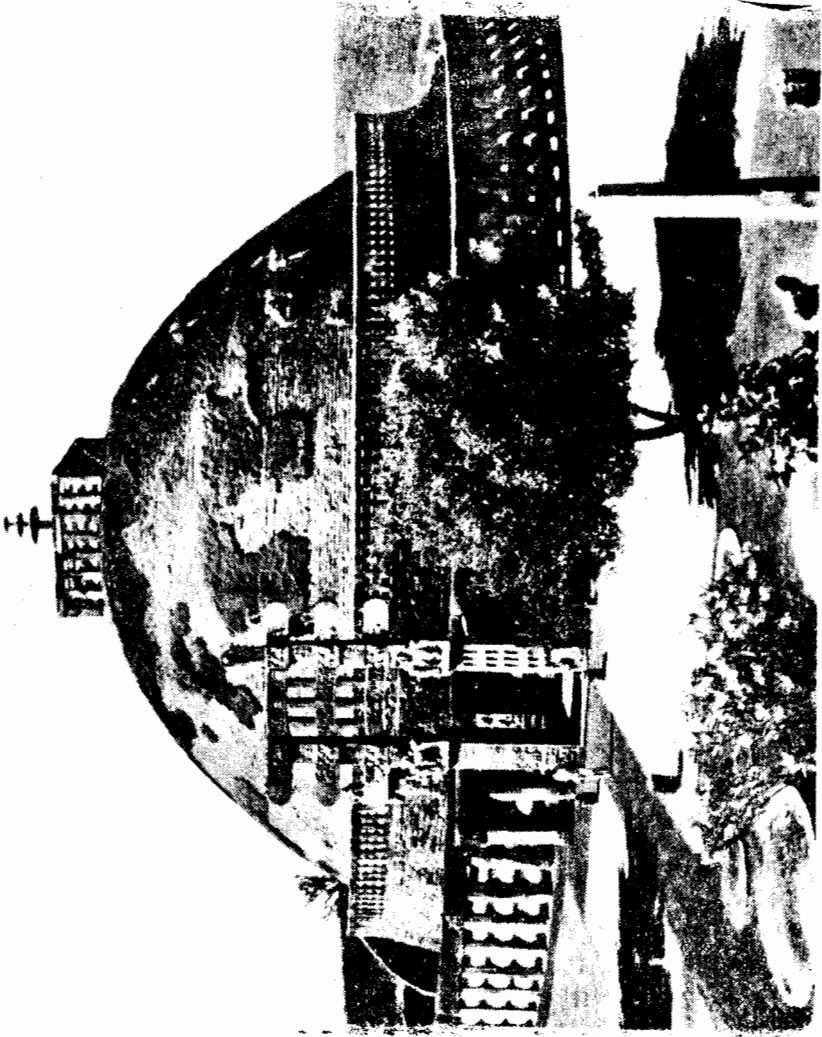
It has already been shown earlier how the art at Dhanyakataka region reveals very close imprint of *Naga* tradition. The worship of stupa had been brought into being very probably by the foundation of *Chaityavada*, a school of the *Mahasanghikas*. Here at Amaravati region the representation of quite a few *stupas* are found as being guarded or intertwined by snakes. Finally appears, what may be held as the figure of the Buddha, which can be held as an image, occurring at the outset upon the body of the *stupa*. As a matter of fact the worship of the *sarira-dhatu* had the sanction of this creed, and since this *sarira-dhatu* was enshrined in *stupa*, such *stupas* came to be

held as objects of veneration. The image in itself had no sanctity as an object of veneration, but it was its association with the *stupa* that the image had come to earn its sanctity being held as an object of worship. Coomaraswamy had strongly pleaded about the origin of Buddha image from *Yaksha* figures depending on a study of the figures representing Yakshas found from Patna, Parkham, Gwalior and other places. Traditions hold that Asoka had entrusted a large number of *Yakshas* with the sacred remains of the master for erection of *stupas* enshrining those relics.²⁵

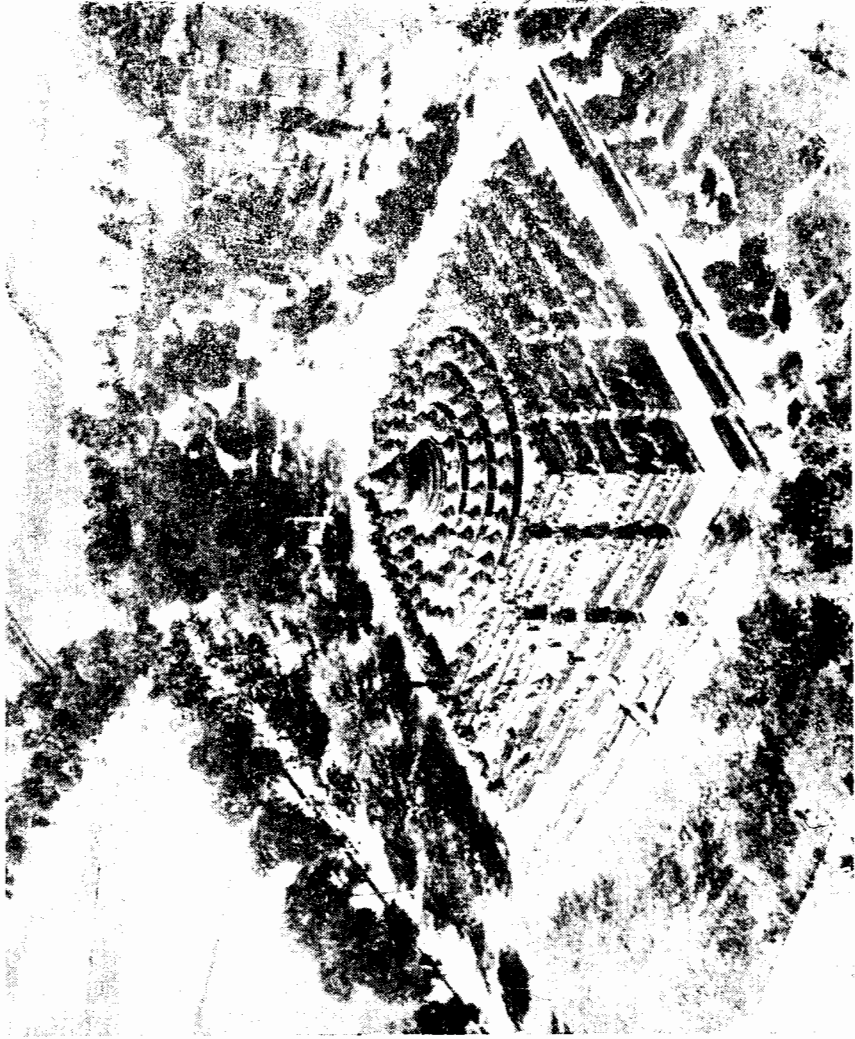
A sculptured medallion found at Amaravati bears representation of a small *stupa* installed upon a throne around which appear a throng of figures in poses of deep devotion and profound submission.²⁶ It is worthwhile to note in this representation that snake hoods are invariably to be found upon the heads of all the male and female figures shown around the throne, particularly a big police-phalous canopy behind the head of one having the most dignified appearance, shown standing with folded hands just behind the *stupa* bearing the throne. This representation showing worship of the *stupa* by people bearing *Naga* affiliation may be held as holding some close relationship with such panels where the *stupas* are shown as being protected by snakes and finally may be cited the case of the appearance of the image of the Buddha upon the body of the *stupa*, almost invariably shown as being flanked by couples with *Naga* hoods upon their heads. This aspect of veneration, an outcome of the cult of *bhakti* might have been a phenomenon developed by the community of people who had this *Naga* affiliation. In Brahmanical tradition the cult of *Bhakti* is found associates primarily with Vaishnavism in which tradition the god Narayana-Vishnu's connection with the serpent *Sesha* is well established. In case of the other most popular Brahmanical deity named Siva, the images of Siva are also always found represented with a snake hood upon his head. In the Jaina tradition the images of *Parsanatha* are invariably shown with a snake hood canopy. The earliest association of this attitude of *Bhakti* may be traced in a seal hailing from Mahenjo-daro in which is shown a male human figure shown seated in *yoga* pose upon a raised seat flanked by two persons on either side bent down on their knees in an attitude of supplication. The most interesting feature to be noted in regard of these two side figures happen to be the representation of two snakes holding their raised hoods upon the heads of these two persons on the two sides of the central figure, which can unmistakably be identified as an image.²⁷ A few similar seals showing the same scene have also been reported from Mohenjo-daro revealing the widespread distribution of the motif. No other artistic representation from Harappan sites reveal so clearly the idea of *bhakti* and worship of image as such and it may not be unreasonable to think that the cult of *bhakti* could have been conceived and promoted by people having *Naga* totem affiliation, as these scenes from Mohenjo-daro would strongly uphold.

The development of image and the worship of the same could have been a direct outcome of this cult of *bhakti* and it may be concluded that the image of Buddha could have been actually brought into being by the people of *Naga* tradition, who had taken to the cult of Buddha and had given a new turn to the creed under the dispensation of the famous saint Nagarjuna, the founder of the *Mahayana* creed. That is why such figures of Buddha, held as worthy of worship as images are to be found represented only upon *stupas* at the initial stage and are shown as being venerated and worshipped by persons shown with *Naga* hood upon their heads, indicating their *Naga* affiliation.

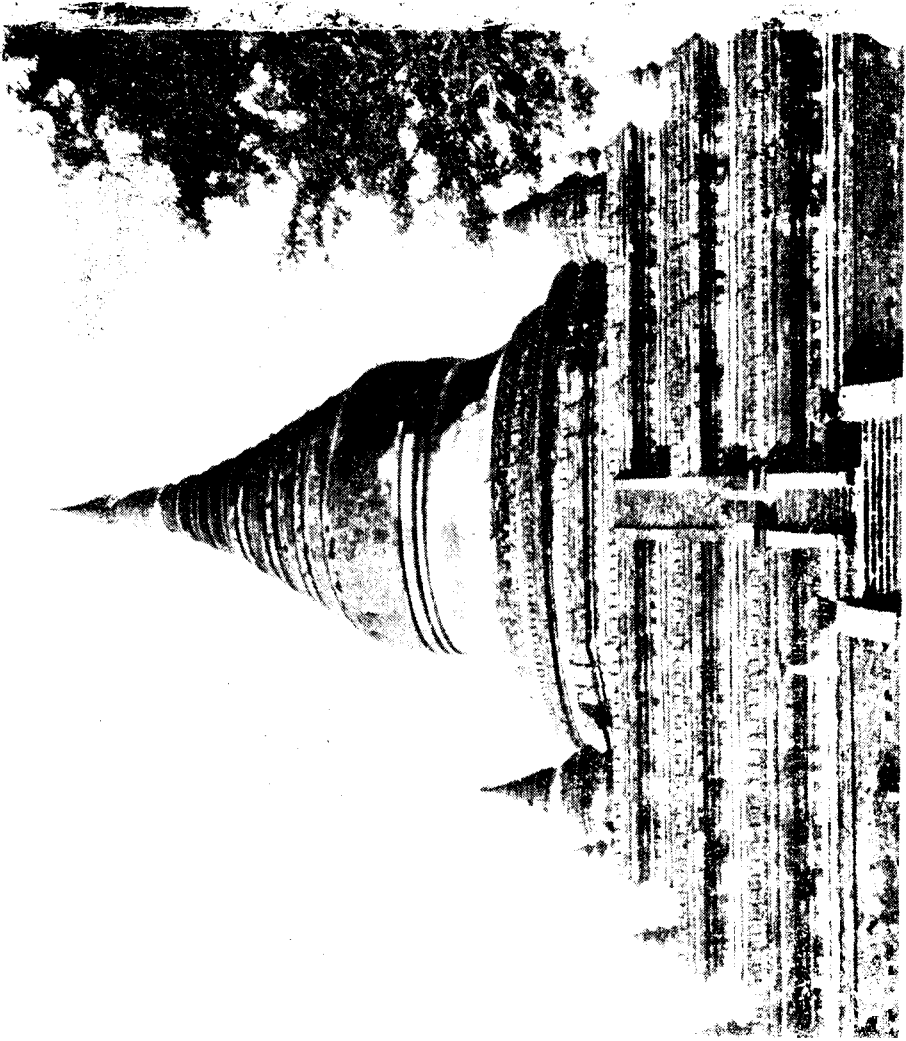
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MAIN STUPA : SANCHI



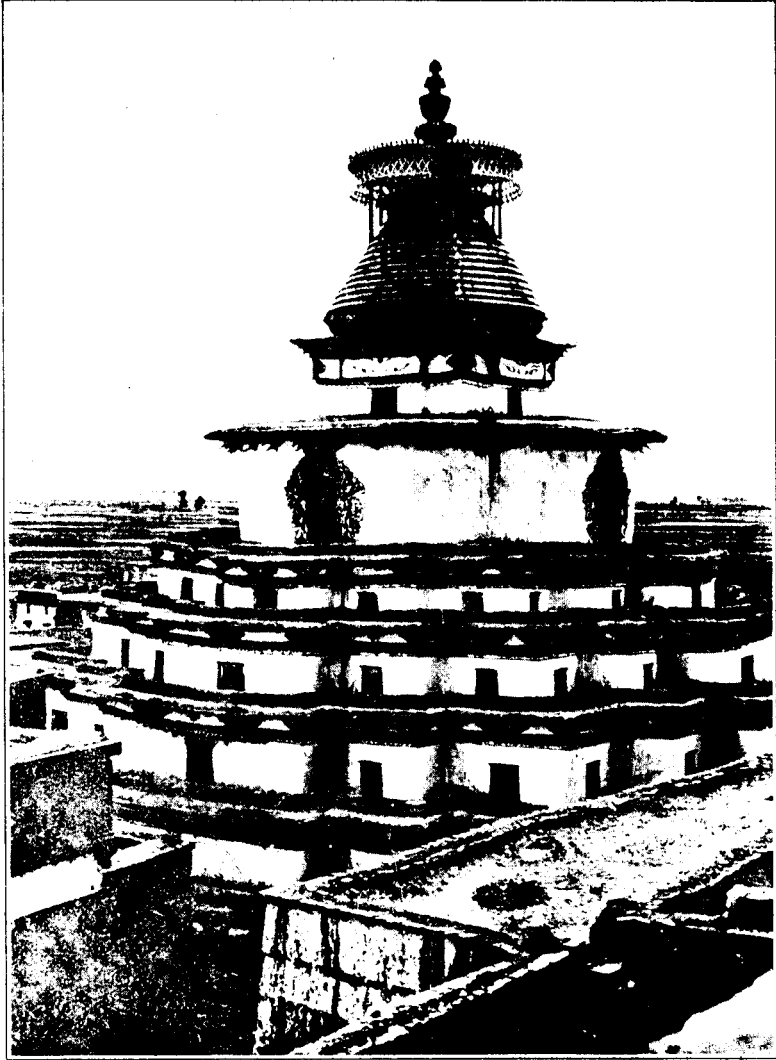
AIR VIEW OF BOROBUDUR : JAVA



MINGALAZEDI PAGODA : PAGAN, BURMA



SVAYAMBHUNATHA : NEPAL



CHORTEN : GYANTSE