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Indian Buddhist Circuit but not Indian Ramayana Circuit

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As the discourses of the Pali Canon reveal, Buddhism has gained root in the entire Gangetic valley during the life time of the Buddha. The names of the villages, towns, mountains, rivers, clans and states found in the Pali discourses stand testimony to this assumption. Politically speaking, the Gangetic valley was divided into sixteen nation states in all of which Buddhism was well known at its formative years. It is to be noted that the Buddha himself visited most of these states as the discourses inform us. Four out of sixteen of these states had become more prominent. They are Avanti, Vaccha, Kosala and Magadha. Out of these four too, two states had emerged as the super powers, in the 6th century B.C. when the Buddha was still alive. They are Kosala and Magadha. The Buddha spent most of His 45 year career either at Rajagaha, the capital city of Kosala, or at Savatthi, the capital city of Magadha. When the Buddha passed away at the age of eighty, India had thus witnessed Buddhism to be the state religion of an empire to which Magadha blossomed after nearly three centuries under king Ashoka.

It is interesting to note that the places which were closely associated with the life of the Buddha belong to the state of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in modern India. Bodhgaya, Benares, Rajgir, Nalanda and Vaisali are situated in Bihar while Kushinagar, Sravasti, Sankassa and Saranath belong to Uttar Pradesh. Lumbini, the birth place of the Buddha, is now situated in Nepal while Patna, the ancient Pataliputra which became the capital city of Magadha within a short period of the demise of the Buddha, too belongs to modern Bihar state.

The Indian Buddhist Circuit came into existence in its religious and official sense with the Buddha's sanction. In the Mahaparinibbana Sutta of the Digha Nikaya, the Buddha is said to have stated: there are these four places where the Buddha was born, the Buddha attained Enlightenment, the Wheel of the Doctrine set in motion and the Buddha passed away are the most fascinating and emotional sites of His followers. Accordingly, Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Benares and Kushinagar became the most sacred places which paved the way for thousands of other places of worship in the Buddhist world.

It was king Ashoka in the 3rd century B.C. who widened the horizon of the Indian Buddhist Circuit and changed it into the world Buddhist Circuit. Firstly, he added places like Sanchi in Madhya Pradesh and Dhauli, Udayagiri and Khandagiri caves in Orissa to the Circuit. It is to be noted here with utmost gratitude that most of the places of Indian Buddhist Circuit could not have been identified had not Ashoka been to these places notably with his pillar inscriptions. Secondly, he, on the instruction of Arahant Moggaliputtatissa, sent missionaries to nine territories for the propagation of Dhamma. Some of these territories were within the Indian peninsular while others were outside its boundaries. It was this effort of king Ashoka which introduced Buddhism to Sri Lanka. It is justifiable to suppose on archeological evidence that the account of the Ashokan missions in the Sri Lankan chronicles are historically true. Ashoka in this way widened the Indian Buddhist Circuit and introduced a global dimension to it.

As can be justifiably assumed all these happened long before the assumption of Ramayana Circuit emerged. As the critics have rightly pointed out, the earliest date that can be assigned to Ramayana is the 3rd century B.C. It may probably be a post-Ashokan Sanskrit epic.

Due to the efforts of king Ashoka and king Kanishka the Buddhist Circuit expanded from the North Indian to South Indian territories through out centuries. The caves of Ajanta and Ellora in Maharashtra and the

monastic ruins and archaeological remains at Nagarjunikonda and Amaravati in the Andhra Pradesh stand testimony to the fact that the Buddhist Circuit had its centres from North to South and West to East in the Indian sub-continent. There is concrete evidence to this effect, in addition to the ruins, artifacts and inscriptions, in the travels of the Chinese pilgrims Fa hien and Yuan Chewang.

The interaction between India and Sri Lanka was established, strengthened and continued due to their mutual and separate contribution to Buddhism. The foundation stone of Maha Thupa at Anuradhapura was laid amidst the representatives from Rajgir, Benares, Vaisali, Sravasti, Kosambi, Ujjeni, Patna, Kashmir, Vindya Forest, Bodhgaya and various other overseas destinations. In the 4th century A.D. king Meghavanna built the Mahabodhi monastery at Bodhgaya. It is said that the teacher's teacher of the author of the Sinhala text Saddharmaratnakaraya, the Venerable Dharmakeerthi Sangharaja, went to Dhanyakataka in South India to restructure a stone monastery which is believed to be the Mahavihara of Nagarjunikonda. It is to be noted that the Pali commentators like the Venerable Buddhaghosa came to Sri Lanka from the close proximity of this vihara. The Sinhala vihara mentioned above at Bodhgaya would have been planned and built to represent the Mahavihara at Anuradhapura. Therefore, it could have been not only religious centre but also an academic centre. The Sri Lankan model of Mahavihara could have been followed in India to establish the universities of Nalanda, Vikramashila, Odantapuri and Jagaddala. There is evidence to show that there was a mutual respect between India and Sri Lanka in carrying out the exchange of academics of high caliber. I give below four names so far retained in the relevant sources: (1) Aryadeva (2) Chandragomin (3) Vajrabodhi and (4) Amoghavajra.

The religious interaction between India and Sri Lanka was too close that various individuals came to Sri Lanka from India to enter the Order of monks. Two of them are noteworthy here. As recorded in Visuddhimagga, Visakha, a rich house-holder from Patna came to Sri Lanka for this purpose. According to the Papancaśudani, a house-holder named Pitimalla came here from India for the same purpose. In later times Sri Lanka was attracted not only by the Indians but also by the foreigners of various denominations due to the Buddhist places of worship like the Bo-tree, Great Thupa, Tooth Relic Temple and Sripada mountain. There is no historical evidence to prove that Ramayana Trail played a role whatsoever of this nature to strengthen the ties between India and Sri Lanka.

It is also to be mentioned here that the events depicted in Ramayana are not carved out or painted either in the temples of Sri Lanka or in the temples like Sanchi, Nagarjunikonda and Amaravati and in the caves like Ajanta, Ellora, Udayagiri and Khandagiri of India, even though the prominent events of Sri Lankan history are depicted at places like Amaravati. The Buddhist sacred places are always decorated with the Jataka stories. As far as Buddhist art is concerned, the Ramayana was a non-existent entity.

The Epilogue

The Ramayana is a poetic creation which has no historical truth. It was an expansion of two Jataka stories with the help of the tool of imagination. The two Jataka stories are Dasaratha (No.461) and Sussondi (No. 360). According to the Pali commentaries, the Ramayana belongs to the 32 categories of condemned talk (tiracchanakatha). The Amawatura written in the Polonnaru period considers the Ramayana as a meaningless talk (nirarthaka katha) where there is no value and essence. As the Gira Sandesaya informs, the Ramayana should not be recommended as a text in our Pirivena education.