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VOLUME-III

Heritage of Indian History, Culture & Archaeology is a Festschrift in three Volumes presented to Dr. M.D. Sampath, renowned Epigraphist in India, on his 77th birth anniversary (15th July 1941). These articles in other way serve as garland of flowers to decor Dr. M.D. Sampath; A great scholar in Epigraphy, Archaeology, History and Cultural Studies. There are more than 89 articles shedding light on *History, Culture and Archaeological Studies*. This prestigious volume contains a wide spectrum of research articles covering Archaeology, History, Art, Architecture, Epigraphy and Numismatics, Buddhism, Religion and Philosophy Tourism, Modern History and Economic history, Folklore, literature and culture. This volume was edited by Prof. Pedarapu Chenna Reddy who is already well-known for similar volumes in honour of Prof. B. Rama Raju, Dr. P.V.P. Sastry, Prof. R. Soma Reddy, Dr. I.K. Sarma, Dr. V.V. Krishna Sastry, Robert G. Bednarik, Prof. A. Sundara, Dr. Deme Raja Reddy, Dr. Annapareddy Venkateswara Reddy, Prof. K.V. Raman, Dr. Janumaddi Hanumath Sastry, Prof. K. Rajayyan, Prof. Alan Dundes, Prof. Bhakthavathsala Reddy, Prof. K.K.N. Kurup, Dr. A.K.V. S Reddy, Dr. Y. Gopala Reddy, Prof. M.L.K. Murty etc.

These volumes containing a good collection of research papers contributed by renowned authors will serve as an important source of information and reference book for research students and teachers as well. Incidentally, this volume also highlights the love and affection of Dr. Sampath enjoys in the intellectual world.

Buddhist Centres in Pre-modern India through the Eyes of a Chinese Buddhist Monk: An Historical Survey

Dr. Dhriti Roy

Introduction

The image of ancient and pre-modern India has been re-created over the centuries in the imagination of the common people through myths and legends of the land and her inhabitants, fables and folklores, and religious texts. Textual historical sources documenting life in ancient India are few in number, a fact which poses a great challenge for historians to re-study, re-explore, re-discover various aspects related to the social, political, cultural and religious history of ancient and pre-modern India. However, it is interesting to note that some of the non-Indian textual sources extant today, do have some of the most accurate portrayals of ancient and pre-modern Indian society. One of those foreign countries to have maintained meticulous and detailed records on India happens to be China¹. The tradition of historiography and cartography has been profound and deep-rooted in the history of the Chinese civilization. Motivated by the objective of recording information about its neighbouring, peripheral, frontier regions, Chinese ruling dynasties have had a common policy of appointing historians to record incidents and events at the court, while also depicting in great detail the flora, fauna, customs, traditions, social structure and cultural distinctiveness of the borderland areas of the Chinese empire. India, by the ancient name of *Tianzhu* and *Shendu*² featured prominently in some of those ancient historical records like *Shiji*, *Hanshu* and *Hou Hanshu*. Such detailed information gathering was later studied by the concerned members of the royal house and used in the formulation of Chinese frontier policy. Adding value to this Chinese tradition of historiography and cartography and running almost parallel to these Chinese official historical records were another set of Buddhist religious and philosophical texts which introduced to the

monastic fraternity in China some of the most fundamental Buddhist teachings and philosophical principles. India being the fountain head and the source land of the Buddhist *dharma*, naturally evoked interest amongst the early Buddhist practitioners in China. First-hand eye witness accounts of different regions in India, especially of those with prominent Buddhist presence, surfaced in the travel narratives of some of the earliest and most well-known Chinese Buddhist pilgrim-monk-scholars, who lived between the fifth century, through the seventh and up until the ninth and tenth centuries, and made pilgrimages to the Buddhist sites in India. In this context, the following few Chinese Buddhist monk-scholars namely, Shi Faxian, Song Yun, Xuanzang and Yijing remain unrivalled in history³.

Even when Buddhism as a religion in India came to be eventually overpowered by Hinduism, and Buddhist centres lost much of their relevance, the travel accounts of these Chinese Buddhist pilgrim-monks, still preserved the identity of these Buddhist centres in pre-modern India. And when these Buddhist centres eventually faded away, with their accurate depiction of the then prevalent Buddhist customs and traditions, and popular Buddhist legends, these travel narratives opened up a fascinating chapter of Buddhism in the context of pre-modern India. One of the most significant historical known to have not only kept ancient India alive through his vivid portrayal, but to also have also fostered India-China Buddhist brotherhood in pre-modern times⁴, was the fifth century, eastern Jin dynasty pilgrim-monk-scholar, Shi Faxian⁵, whose name remains embedded in history and in the minds of many a Buddhist monk and laymen. Here, we re-discover facts related to some of the most significant Buddhist centres in pre-modern India, as was recorded almost one thousand years back by one of the most dedicated Chinese Buddhist pilgrim-monk-scholars that the world has ever known.

For the common people in both of our countries of India and China, the name Shi Faxian sounds familiar. Occasionally, it rises from the crevasse of time, in conversations, articles, storytelling sessions, and captures the imagination of the common masses through simple depiction in history books as a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, who once upon a time traveled to India, the holy land of the Buddha, in search of Buddhist scriptures and left behind a travel narrative for the future generation. This travel narrative, being a repertoire of authentic first-hand information on the religious and social life of some of the prominent pre-modern Indian Buddhist centres, and its detailed narration of the famous legends associated with Buddhist sites, Buddhist relics preserved therein, and most importantly the imperial participation in relic veneration ceremonies, bears immense importance to the critical study of the evolutionary history of Buddhism in India.

Shi Faxian and his travel narrative *Fo Guo Ji*

Two of the most reliable sources which share information about the secular life of Shi Faxian and his travel diary are the Buddhist bibliographical and biographical literature, Sengyou's *Chu sanzang jiji* 僧祐出三藏记集⁶ and Huijiao's *Gaoseng Shi Faxian zhuan* 慧皎高僧释法显传⁷. As per records in the above, Shi Faxian is believed to have been born in the first year of the Xiankang reign period of the eastern Jin dynasty 东晋咸康元年, corresponding to the year 335 C.E. and to have passed away around the age of about eighty two at the Jingzhou prefecture of China between the years 418-423 C.E.⁸ Shi Faxian's biography, *Gaoseng Shi Faxian Zhuan* 高僧师法显传 depicts

him as one who had always been earnest towards upholding the precepts of monastic discipline with utmost sincerity. He was in possession of correct demeanor and expressed deep reverence towards Buddhist monastic discipline. It is important to note that Buddhism was never disseminated into the foreign soil of China as a homogenous set of Buddhist teachings corresponding to any particular sect or school of Buddhism⁹, but rather in fragmented versions, highlighting some of the early concepts and notions of Buddhist philosophy, as those related to rebirth, *karma* (actions), retribution, mortuary implications, continuous birth (*samsara*) and birth stories of the historical Buddha as *Jataka* tales and stories of Buddha's leading disciples in the form of *Avadana* literature¹⁰. Around the early years between the first and fifth century C.E., Buddhism in China was still struggling to consolidate its position against the indigenous Confucian and Daoist schools of thought. Authentic Sanskrit texts on Buddhist monastic discipline were unavailable to the monastic community.¹¹ The Chinese Buddhist monastic Order was still far from being institutionalized. Buddhist monasteries functioned with fragmentary, abbreviated, piecemeal versions of monastic disciplinary codes or *vinaya*¹². Shi Faxian was one amongst his community members who vowed to put an end to the dearth of authentic Buddhist texts in China and became the first such pilgrim-monk-scholar in the history of Buddhism worldwide, to have undertaken an extremely perilous journey across hazardous terrains around the Taklamakan desert, cutting across snowy mountain passes, oasis states and river systems, walking through almost thirty different Buddhist kingdoms all across central Asia, northern Pakistan, northwest India, central and eastern India, Sri Lanka and Java before finally returning to south China, in quest of the *dharma* and to have left behind a written record of his travels. Shi Faxian's itinerary lasted for fourteen long years, commencing from 399 C.E. and ending around 412 C.E. During this historical sojourn, Shi Faxian noted down every intricate detail related to the social customs, conventions, Buddhist practices based upon existing Buddhist legends, prevalent in the Buddhist centres in pre-modern India. Faxian's travel narrative *Fo Guo Ji* 佛國記, alternately termed *Faxian zhuan* 法显传 was composed around the twelfth year of the Yixi reign period of the Eastern Jin dynasty 东晋義熙十二年 corresponding to 416 C.E., after his return to China around the year 412 C.E., based upon his first-hand experiences during his sojourn which he recollected and recorded himself upon request from fellow Buddhist monastics and lay devotees.

Glimpses of Buddhist centres in pre-modern India as depicted in Shi Faxian's *Fo guo ji*

It is important to note that the study here primarily focuses upon those particular Buddhist centres in pre-modern India as has been depicted by the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim-monk-scholar Shi Faxian in his travel narrative *Fo guo ji*. Since Shi Faxian's sojourn and composition of his travelogue, both date back to the fifth century C.E., therefore by pre-modern India, the study only takes into account some of the important Buddhist centres in India around the fifth century. Although there have been many more Buddhist centres prospering in pre-modern India, the research here confines itself to the critical study of only those which have found mention in Shi Faxian's travel diary.

Bhida

The first mention of India in Shi Faxian's travel diary begins with a kingdom called Pitu, 毗荼国, identified with present day Bhida in Punjab¹³. In Shi Faxian's words, "...Buddhism was in a very

prosperous state here with both the Mahāyāna and Hinayāna forms of Buddhism being practiced. Seeing the Buddhist monastics, having arrived from the distant land of the Qin (dynasty in ancient China), the local monks were touched with empathy. They said to themselves, “How is it that the borderlands have come to know of the practice of renouncing family ties? How is it that for the quest of the *dharma* they have come here from such afar?” They supplied the monks with all necessary provisions and attended to them in accordance with all stipulated rules of the Buddhist faith.

Mathura

From the kingdom of Bhida, the trek continued further southeast for almost eighty *yojanas*. There were countless Buddhist monasteries on the way and members of the Buddhist monastic community added up to over ten thousand. Further south was a kingdom, Motouluo 摩頭羅 (Mathura)¹⁴ by name. The following is recorded about the kingdom. “...The banks of river Buna 捕那 (Yamuna)¹⁵, both on the right and the left, were dotted with about twenty *saṃgharāmas*, housing about three thousand Buddhist monks. The *dharma* was quite prosperous in this region. In all of the kingdoms of Tianzhu 天竺 (India), situated to the west of the rivers of sand (desert landscape), there were sincere believers of the *dharma*, who would be regularly making offerings to the Buddhist monastic community. At times the ruler would put down his crown, and in accompaniment with other members of his clan and group of ministers would himself go to places around and beg for alms. After having done so, the king would spread out a carpet on the ground and be seated in front of the assembled monks, facing the Seat of Honour of the Sthavira 上坐¹⁶. He would not dare to sit on the main seat. From the lifetime of the Tathāgata Buddha down to the present, the manner in which the rulers of every kingdom paid obeisance to the Lord has still remained the same...”

The Middle Gangetic Plain or *Madhyadesa*

The region further down south of Mathura, in Shi Faxian’s travel diary was termed Zhongguo 中国 (Middle kingdom).¹⁷ Shi Faxian’s writes that, “...Climate here was noted to be moderate, both during the summer and winter months, with neither frost nor snow. The common masses were prosperous, peaceful and happy. Speaking of local governance, Shi Faxian mentioned very specifically that there existed no system for registering the resident population nor was there any definitive judicial system under the administration of officials. However the cultivators of the royal land were supposed to hand over the profit derived from the soil. If they desired to leave they could leave, if they wished to stay, they were free to do so. While governing the country, the ruler did not impose punishment of any kind, all offenders were supposed to pay the ruler penalty, the amount being determined by the severity or leniency of the matter, although recurrence of any misconduct resulted in severing off the right hand. Nearly all imperial body guards received official emoluments. None of the residents killed living animals, none consumed alcohol nor garlic and onions, the exception being the people belonging to the caste called Zhanchaluo (*Chandalas*). These people were looked down upon and were not permitted to reside with the common people. If they entered the city they were supposed to strike a piece of wood in order to inform others of their presence or

arrival so that the residents could avoid contact with them in person... Neither pigs, nor fowls were raised within the territory of the kingdom. Living animals were never put on sale. Local markets and country fairs did not have people engaged in the profession of slaughtering animals or selling alcohol. Business transactions and exchange of commodities was done by means of cowrie shells. Only the *Chandalas* and hunters were the people associated with trading in meat. Ever since the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* of Lord Buddha, the rulers of each and every kingdom in the region, all venerable elders and lay devotees would raise *vihāras* for the Buddhist monastic community and would make offerings to them. Buddhist monasteries in and around the middle kingdom were provided with securities in the form of farmlands, residences, plots for growing vegetables, civil households, cows, calves and so on... The residence quarters and all necessary provisions were in adequate supply. For members of the Buddhist monastic community to engage in meritorious deeds was part of their monastic resolution. When travelling monks would arrive from afar, local monks would go over to welcome them, carry for them the Buddhist mantle and the alms bowl, provide them with water for cleansing their feet, anoint oil to them and offer them butter and fruit juice. After having them rest for a while, the resident monks would enquire of the guest monks their age, and accordingly arrange for their accommodation and bedding. In fact, the protocol related to attending to guest monks was all in accordance with the stipulated rules of the monastic community. The place where the community of monks resided had *stūpas* raised in honor of Śāriputra, Maudgalyāyana, Ānanda as well as in respect for the *Abhidharma*, the *Vinaya* and the *Sūtra*. After one month of summer retreat, the Buddhist monks of the region would come over to the residences of the common house holders, who were desirous of attaining good fortune. In this way the Buddhist monastic community would receive generous offerings from the common masses. The Buddhist monastic community would assemble and expound the *dharma*, after which they would make offerings to the *stūpas* of Śāriputra. With fragrant flowers of all kinds, they would pay obeisance to it, burn lamp all night long, and arrange for musicians to perform. They would also ask some people to act out the role of Śāriputra. At a former time, Śāriputra was a Brahman disciple, seeking wisdom from Gautama Buddha, preparing to renounce family ties. It was also the same with Mahāmaudgalyāyana and Mahākāśyapa. Ever since the *Mahāparinirvāṇa* of Lord Buddha, the fraternity of devout Buddhist monks practiced everything in strict accordance with Buddhist monastic regulations. This tradition has remained in continuation till the present times. The *bhikṣuṇīs* consecrated the *stūpa* of Ānanda, since he was the one who had requested Śākyamuni to let women leave their homes, renounce family ties and join the *saṃgha*. Buddhist *śramaṇeras* were worshippers of Rāhula, scholars of *abhidharma* made their offerings to *abhidharma* texts, while scholars of *vinaya* to paid their respect to *vinaya* texts. Such offerings would be made once every year, each having their respective days of reverence and worship set aside. The Mahayanists were however worshippers of Prajñāpāramitā, Mañjuśrī and Avalokiteśvara. After each of the Buddhist monks finished their 受歲 shousui ceremony¹⁸, the Venerable Elders, lay devotees and Brahmins, all carrying necessary provisions of clothes and food would hand over the alms to the congregation of monks, who in turn would also give away alms to the common masses...”

Sankasya

The kingdom of Sankasya was eighty yojanas away, located in a southeasterly direction from the Middle kingdom and was recorded in the pilgrim's narrative by the name of Sengjiashi 僧伽施.

Buddhist legends and prevalent Buddhist practices related to the land have been discussed at length by Shi Faxian in the following words in translation. "... This was the place where Tathāgata Buddha had ascended the Trayastriṃśas Heaven, expounded the teachings of the *dharma* to his mother for three months and later descended to the mortal world. In performing this act, Tathāgata had employed his supernatural power. Not even one of his disciples had a hint of it. When there were still seven days left for three months to be over, Anuruddha put forth his divine foresight and saw from afar the Tathāgata. He then immediately reported it to the Venerable Maudgalyāyana, requesting the latter to go and enquire of Tathāgata of the matter. Maudgalyāyana then left for Tathagata's abode. He paid reverence to him by touching his head on the ground at the feet of the Lord, and then putting across his queries. This being over, the historical Buddha is believed to have said to Maudgalyāyana, "After seven days I will descend to the mortal world." Having heard so, Maudgalyāyana returned. At about this time, rulers of eight kingdoms, as well as all of their officials, ministers and common masses, not having seen the Lord for quite long, were all yearning to see him. It was there at that kingdom, that they all gathered, awaiting the return of the Venerable One. At that time Bhikṣuṇī Utpala thought to herself, "Today the king, his ministers and the commoners have all gathered to receive the Tathāgata, by what means will I be able to catch a glimpse of the Lord before anyone else does that?" By making use of his spiritual power, Lord Buddha then transformed her into a *cakravartin* king, thereupon she became the first one to pay obeisance to Lord Buddha... There were about a thousand Buddhist *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* in this place. All of them took their meals together and practiced both the Hinayāna and Mahāyāna forms of Buddhism. The place where they resided had a white eared dragon (*naga*), serving as the benefactor (*dānapati*) for the Buddhist monastic community. It blessed the kingdom with bumper harvest and caused rains to come on time. It also prevented calamity from befalling the kingdom. It would also let members of the Buddhist fraternity to live in peace and contentment. The monks felt indebted to the dragon for his sincere grant of favour. For this reason, they constructed a dragon vihāra for it, offered it a suitable place to reside in there, and in addition made offerings of delicious food to it..."

Kanyakubja/Kanauj

Shi Faxian expressed his deep gratitude towards the monastic fraternity at Sankasya, who very generously had granted the Chinese pilgrim-monk a temporary abode at the dragon vihara, where he spent the summer retreat. Walking for seven yojanas to the southeast, Shi Faxian records to have then arrived at the kingdom of Kanyakubja, present day Kanauj. The following has been recorded, thus, "... The city was close to the river Ganga. It housed two *samgharāmas*, both of which practiced the Hinayāna form of Buddhism. At about six or seven li¹⁹ approximately to the west of the city, on the northern bank of river Ganga, was the place where Lord Buddha had preached to all of his disciples. It is said that during this preaching he had brought to light thoughts like "impermanence, lack of constancy, void and that the body can be likened to a bubble". The *stūpa* that was erected over there still stands till date..."

Śrāvastī

Shi Faxian's sojourn also brought him to the city of Shewei 舍衛國 (Śrāvastī)²⁰ in the kingdom of Jusalu 拘薩羅 (Kosala)²¹. Shi Faxian seems to have been familiar with the information about

the founding of the kingdom by King Bosini (Prasenajit) and records the same in the travel narrative. Information about this kingdom was recorded, thus, "...The city was sparsely populated with only over two hundred households in all. The King (Prasenajita) had been extremely fond of the *dharmā*. The place where there used to be a former *vihāra* of Prajāpati, the place where the Venerable 須達 Sudatta had dug up a well, the spot where 鸯掘魔 Aṅgulimala had attained the Path, and where his body had been burnt after the attainment of *parinirvāṇa*, had all been commemorated by *stūpas* raised by people of later generations, all of these were within the vicinity of the city. Many non-Buddhist Brahmins had become envious, and had a certain point of time intended to destroy these *stūpas*. Right then there was lightning accompanied by thunder. Finally they failed to destroy them..."

Kapilāvastu

Shi Faxian during his sojourn across kingdoms of Middle India made notable observations about the state of Buddhism prevalent therein. Kapilāvastu, the birthplace of the historical Gautama Buddha was also one amongst many of the other prominent Buddhist sites in India and featured in the travelogue under the name Jiaweiluwei 伽维罗卫²² as under, "...The city had neither a ruler nor a resident, resembling a vast, barren mound by large. There was barely a little over ten residential quarters housing the entire monastic fraternity. The place where the former imperial palace of 白净王 Baijing Wang (King Suddhodana) stood, displayed an image of Lord Buddha's mother, with a depiction of the young prince mounting on a white elephant and entering the mother's womb. The places which witnessed him having come out of the city's eastern gate and upon encountering a sick man, had his heart broken, quickly retracing his steps to the imperial palace was commemorated by raising stupas. The city was dotted with places rich in legends associated with Lord Buddha's life. The city housed the site where 阿夷 Aśita had read out the prince's fortune, the spot where the prince in accompaniment with 难陀 Nanda and several others threw themselves in front of an elephant and also the place where they shot arrows in trial of their strength. The arrows flew in a south-easterly direction for a distance of about thirty *lis* approximately before penetrating deep into the ground, letting a fountain gush out. People of later generations also dug a deep well in there, providing drinking water to all travelers who passed by. Having attained nirvana, when Lord Buddha returned to his father's imperial palace, five hundred members of the Śākya clan renounced familial ties, paying obeisance to Upāli. Mother Earth gave rise to six vibrating regions. When Buddha expounded the *dharmā* for the gods, four heavenly kings were in constant guard at the four doors, denying entry to even Lord Śākyamuni's father, the imperial head of the state. Śākyamuni once sat under a Nyāgrodha tree facing the east...Fifty *lis* to the east of the city of Kapilāvastu was an imperial garden, called Lunni (Lumbini). The Queen of King Suddhodana entered a pond to wash herself, she then stepped out of the northern bank of the pond, took twenty steps ahead, then holding on to the branch of a tree, facing the east she gave birth to the young prince. Soon after his birth, the child took seven steps. Two *nāgarajas* cleansed the child's body. Thereupon a well was sunk at the site, where the child was bathed. Even at present, at the bathing site, monks draw up water for drinking on a daily basis...The kingdom of Kapilāvastu wore an extremely deserted look, the local population was sparse. There were frightening wild beasts on the road like elephants and lions, one would not wish to trudge along at one's will..."

Vaiśālī

The Buddhist heritage of the kingdom of Vaiśālī was brought to life through the narration of Buddhist legends associated with the kingdom in Shi Faxian's travel narrative. Thus records the Chinese pilgrim-monk, "...To the north of the city, there stood a double storey *vihāra* amidst a large grove. The *vihāra* housed the residential site of Lord Buddha as well as a *stūpa* with half of the bodily remains (relics) of Ānanda. The city also had a *stūpa* raised in honour of Buddha by the famous courtesan 庵婆羅 Āmrapālī within the premises of her household. About three li south of the city, to the west of the road was the place where Āmrapālī had offered her pleasure garden to the World Honoured One, which was used by the historical Buddha as his residence. When Śākyamuni was about to attain *parinirvāṇa*, he departed through the western gate of the city of Vaiśālī together with all of his disciples. He turned himself to the right, then turning his head around glancing at the city said to all of his disciples, "This will be the last place to be walked upon by me." People of the later generations raised a *stūpa* over it..."

Pāṭaliputra

Having crossed the river and travelling down south for about a yojana, Shi Faxian arrived at the city of Balianfuyi 巴连弗邑 (Pāṭaliputra)²³ in the kingdom of Mojieti 摩竭提 (Magadha)²⁴. Pāṭaliputra was a city ruled by King Aśoka. The imperial palace together with its halls and temples, built of stones, were known to have been the handiwork of divine powers and deities. The rich engravings of decorative patterns were not the creation of the mortal world. All of those existed till date... Among all the kingdoms of Madhyadeśa, the cities and towns of this kingdom were the largest of all, its residents being affluent and prosperous, being benevolent and righteous while dealing with people. Every year on the eighth day of the 'Tianmao'²⁵ month, a grand procession of images would be held. A four wheeled chariot would be made with bamboo sticks tied together to form five storey, some of them had a supporting structure resembling sets of brackets on top of columns, while others that could be likened to pillar like structures resembling the canine tooth in shape. It rose to a height of about a little over two zhang. It resembled a *stūpa* in structure. White felt was fastened atop, followed by colored writings representing the various forms and images of all the supernatural deities. Gold, silver, lapis lazuli, would be employed for adorning while silken streamers would be hung as canopies. Niches would be constructed on all the four corners, all with images of seated Buddhas, while standing 菩萨 (pusas (Bodhisattvas) would be depicted waiting in attendance. There would be about twenty such chariots, each magnificent and yet distinctly different. On that day, the followers of the *dharma*, as well as all lay devotees within the country would assemble, they would sing, dance, be merry and make offerings with fragrant flowers. The Brahman disciples would come over to receive the image of Lord Buddha. The image would then be made to enter the city. After the entry of the image into the city, on the evening of the second day, lamps would be made to burn all through the night, offerings would be made through song and dance. This would be the same for each and every kingdom. The veterans, lay devotees, and every other resident of the entire kingdom would build charitable medical establishments. All kinds of sick and disabled people residing in the country from the needy and the impoverished, lonely down to the crippled and lame, would all come over there, receiving all necessary provisions from the

elders and lay devotees. The doctors would treat their illness and accordingly prescribe them medicine. They would help them resume their peaceful and happy lives. On being cured, they would all return by themselves...”

Rajagṛha

In and around the city of Pataliputra, there were other cities as well with an ancient history of Buddhism. The new city of Rajagṛha, recorded under the Chinese name Xinwang cheng 新王城, was said to have been built by King Ajātaśatru. The city housed *saṃgharāmas*. Three hundred paces ahead of the west city gate was the site where King Ajātaśatru after having received a relic of the Buddha, raised a *stūpa* in order to make offerings. The *stūpa* was magnificent and resplendent. Walking four lis away from the city, keeping to the south, they entered a valley of five hills. The five hills surrounding the city resembled the inner and the outer city walls. It was the ancient city of King Bimbisāra. The east-west extent of the city would be about seven or eight lis. The city housed some important sites like the ones where Śariputra and Maudgalyāyana for the very first time had met Upasena, and where Nigrantha had dug a pit of fire and had invited Buddha to have a poisonous meal, and also Ajātaśatru had intoxicated a black elephant and had instigated him to harm the Buddha. The north eastern corner of the city, beyond the bent, also carried reminiscences of the spot where Jīvaka had raised a *vihāra* at Āmrāpālī's garden, inviting Lord Buddha together with one thousand and two fifty disciples to accept his offerings. All these places existed even then. The city however wore a desolate look with no trace of human population.

Gayā

One of the most significant of all Buddhist sites in India has been Bodh Gaya. In the fifth century Chinese travel narrative, however there is no distinction made between the city of Gaya and Bodh Gaya. It is recorded under the Chinese name Jiaye 伽耶. The fifth century city in Shi Faxian's depiction appears thus, "... The city was no more than a stretch of desolate, barren land. Walking southward for a distance of twenty lis, was the site where Bodhisattva originally indulged in severe ascetism for six long years. The place had turned into a forest. The site where Lord Buddha entered the river to bathe and the Devas pressed a branch of a tree into the water to enable the Lord, climb out of the pond holding on to it, the place where two village ladies had offered Buddha milk porridge, and the site where Lord Buddha having sat over a stone, under a large tree, facing eastward had taken the porridge were all deeply revered. The tree as well as the stone existed even then. In the north east at a distance of about half a yojana was a stone cavern. Bodhisattva had entered right into it and facing westward had sat over there cross legged, contemplating, "If I were to attain the path of the dharma, there should be divine signs to testify the occurrence of the event." At once, there appeared on the stone wall of the cavern, a reflection of the Lord, about three chi in length. Even today, the shadow appears to be as bright as ever. Right at that moment, heaven and earth shook vigorously. All the *Devas* high up in heaven then said, "This is not the place for the attainment of Buddhahood, neither for the previous Buddhas nor for the future. Nearly half a yojana to the south-west of the place, where stands the peepal tree Beiduo 貝多樹, is the designated place where all the previous as well as the future Buddhas have in the past and will in future attain the path of the dharma. All the *devas*, having made such proclamation, then lead the way, making

Bodhisattva also rise and follow them over. At about thirty paces away from the tree, Lord Buddha stopped for a while and the *devas* handed over to him a tuft of auspicious grass, *kuśa*, which the Lord accepted. When the Lord took fifteen steps further, five hundred green sparrows came flying over and having encircled Bodhisattva three times, again flew away. Having walked further on, Bodhisattva arrived under the Beiduo tree. Spreading the *kuśa* grass over to the ground, facing the east, the Lord seated himself. At that moment, Mārā, the evil prince dispatched three extraordinarily beautiful women, who came over from the northern side, attempting to distract the Lord and putting to test the sincerity of his will. Mārā, was also doing the same from the south. Bodhisattva then pressed the ground with his toes, so that Mārā's troops were forced to retreat and eventually were dispersed. The three beautiful maidens also got transformed into old ladies. In each of the above mentioned sites, people of later generations raised *stupas* and set up images, (the places were the ones ranging) from the site where Lord Buddha practiced austere asceticism for six years, down to the ones that have long been talked about. Each of these were in existence even today. Seven days after Lord Buddha's attainment of Buddhahood, the place where he (sat in) contemplation under the tree and achieved the joy of Vimukti, the place where Lord Buddha under the Beiduo tree, paced east west for seven days, the site where all the *Devas* built a seven treasured mansion and offered it to the Buddha for seven days, the spot where the blind nāga, Muchilinda encircled the Tathāgata for seven days, the place where the Buddha was invited by Deva Brahmā while sitting on a square rock facing the east under the Nyagrodha tree, the place where the *Devas* of the four heavens offered him the begging bowl, where five hundred came over to offer him roasted flour and honey, the site where the Buddha converted the Kāśyapa brothers and another thousand people, including both the ācaryas and the Śisyas, all had *stupas* erected over there in utmost reverence. The place where Lord Buddha attained Buddhahood, had three *samgharāmas*, each having been occupied by the monastic community as residential quarters. Members of the monastic fraternity as well as lay house holders would make adequate supplies to these *samgharāmas*, leaving nothing more to be wanting. Religious admonitions related to rites, ceremonies and demeanor were all strictly observed. Monastic disciplinary codes related to acts like that of sitting, getting up and entering were being followed with same rigidity and sincerity as was stipulated by the Buddha during his lifetime and it has continued to be so even during the present times. Since Lord Buddha's attainment of *nirvāṇa*, all the four places, housing the four great *stūpas*, have been carrying forward the legacy of such strict adherence to *Śīla*. Those that are called the four great *stūpas* are the ones related to the site of Lord Buddha's birth, the site where he attained the Dharma, the spot where he set the wheel of Law, the Dharmachakra into motion and the place where he attained *parinirvāṇa*..."

Tāmralipti

Travelling eastward for eighteen *yojanas* downstream along the River Ganges brought them over to the kingdom of Champā, located on the southern bank of the River Gangā, there stood a *vihāra* at the site where the Buddha took strolls, while *stupas* were raised where once all the four Buddhas. At that moment there were monks residing in there. From there having walked eastward for nearly fifty *yojanas*, brought them over to the kingdom of Tāmralipti. It was apparently a seaport or an estuary. The aforementioned kingdom housed twenty four *samgharamas*, each of which had residential quarters for monks. The *dharma* was also in a state of prosperity.

Important findings and critical observations

The fifth century travel account of Shi Faxian meticulously puts to record the state of Buddhism prevalent at the Buddhist centres mostly located in and around the central Gangetic Plains. It also depicts, with intricate details, the forms of Buddhism as practiced by the monastic communities²⁶, the approximate number of monks in the different cities that he traveled, the infrastructural facilities available in the monastic institutions there, the regular Buddhist practices and ceremonies which the common lay people engaged in, the relationship between the monastic fraternity and the lay community, veneration and preservation of Buddhist relics and the endeavour made by the royal houses of most of the kingdoms towards that, imperial patronage to Buddhist monastic centres and more broadly on issues related to social life in the central part of India around the fifth century, highlighting differences in behavior towards certain castes and classes, as well as the hierarchal structure of society in some cases. The other important area of concern which draws attention is the fact that some of the centres visited by Shi Faxian, although had legends associated with the life of the historical *Sakyamuni* and his disciples, were found to have been turned into desolate, barren lands without any human population residing. This is wherein lies the significance of the travel narrative. For those Indian Buddhist centres where Buddhism continued to flourish or in the least continued to be tolerated against the Indian Brahmanical system of thought and religious faith, the travelogue could possibly offer new dimensions in research, in addition to what archaeological discoveries and surveys have provided in terms of research findings on Buddhism. However, for those regions which for long lost their Buddhist relevance already during Shi Faxian's travel there, and were eventually replaced by some other religious faith, archaeological findings would also not always prove to be substantial and conclusive in offering an authentic picture of the state of Buddhism in pre-modern India. The travel narrative, therefore, helps to re-look into that particular period in history related to the decline of the once flourishing Buddhist centres and re-frame their lost status, which otherwise, in the absence of surviving documents or archeological finds would not have been able to support the claim of the Buddhists in the present times.

The travel narrative also exerted a profound influence upon the followers of the Buddhist faith in China. In the first place, Shi Faxian's audience were introduced to various Buddhist legends and therefore, were able to perceive the gradual evolution of the *dharma* and most importantly could view its development in the context of the pre-modern Indian reality. The narrative through its depiction of elaborate relic veneration ceremonies, Buddhist image worship, erection of *stupas* also caught the attention of the common masses in China. In the second place, therefore, the concept of veneration, one which is central to Mahayana Buddhism, gradually started to gain pace. Thirdly, while Buddhism between the first and fourth centuries was far from being granted official recognition and formal acceptance, the minute portrayal of the role played by the rulers in pre-modern India towards the protection and propagation of the Buddhist faith, for the first time in the history of Chinese Buddhism, brought the imperial house and the Buddhist clergy in communication with each other, a development which grounded Buddhism firmly into the foreign soil of China in the following few years.

Afterthought

Buddhism is neither only a religion, nor only a particular system of thought, nor only a philosophical doctrine. It is a complex combination of all of the above, in close unity with the social reality of the time and space concerned, perceived against indigenous religious and socio-cultural framework that the mind is trained in, and eventually translated into a way of life. Therefore, the study of Buddhism is dynamic and can be said to have a continuing evolutionary history from the time of the historical Buddha until the present, received differently in different locations around the world. The study of Indian Buddhism cannot therefore be limited to the Indian understanding and perception only, but also needs to take into account the non-Indian understanding of the same. Diverse approaches only help reconstruct better, a clearer picture of its evolution, development and decline. Indian Buddhism cannot be treated as a monolith and studied in isolation with available Indian textual sources only, but with a combination of tools and resources, including foreign records on the same. Pre-modern Indian Buddhist centres coming to life in Shi Faxian's travel diary could be reconstructed better and more successfully when critically examined and interrogated against all other available textual sources, literary narratives, art and architectural figures and constructions, and archaeological findings. Thus would emerge a holistic understanding of Buddhist India through the ages.

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Notes and References

1. The earliest Chinese official record to have mentioned India is *Shiji* 史记 (*Record of the Grand Historian*), authored by the court historian Sima Qian 司马迁 between the years 110-86 B.C.E. Some of the other well-known Chinese official historical documents depicting India include the *Hanshu* 汉书 (History of the Former Han Dynasty) written by Ban Gu and completed in the year 111 C.E. and the *Hou Hanshu* 后汉书 (History of the Later Han Dynasty) compiled by the author Fan Ye around the 5th century C.E. Thereupon the tradition of composing court histories continued with the all the later Chinese ruling houses.
2. Tianzhu 天竺 and Shendu 身毒 were both Chinese transliterated terms, based on the Indian pronunciation. The latter term Shendu is based upon the Indian name Sindhu.
See Ji Xianlin. *A History of Sino-Indian Cultural Exchange* 中印文化交流史 (Beijing: zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2008), p. 10-13.
3. Shi Faxian and Song Yun were fifth century Chinese Buddhist monks who had traveled to India, while Xuanzang and Yijing belonged to the seventh century. All four of these eminent Buddhist pilgrim-monks left behind travel records, Shi Faxian being the first amongst them all.
4. Prabodh Chandra Bagchi. *India and China, A Thousand years of Cultural Relations* (Calcutta: Saraswat press, 1981), p. 68-72.
5. The modern day romanization of the name stands as Faxian 法显, the term Shi 释 preceding the name refers to *Sakyaputra*. People are more familiar with the old Wade-Giles romanization of the name as Fa-hian or Fahsien and the latter appears in most of the history books.
6. Sengyou's *Chu sanzang jiji* is a Chinese Buddhist catalogue and bibliographical text, compiled between 510-518 C.E. by Sengyou (445-518 C.E.) which enlists the translations and compositions of Buddhist scriptures between the first and the sixth century C.E.
7. Huijiaos' *Gaoseng Faxian zhuan* is a biographical work containing details of the secular and monastic life of Shi Faxian. This is a section under the main work titled, *Gaoseng zhuan* (Biographies of Eminent Monks) and is known to have been compiled by Huijiao in 519 C.E.
8. Zhang, Xun, *Faxian zhuan jiaozhu* 法显传校注 Zhongwai Jiaotong Shiji Congkan (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2008), p. 1-12.
9. See Eric Zurcher. *The Buddhist Conquest of China, The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 23-25.
10. See Tansen Sen. *Buddhism, Diplomacy and Trade, The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600-1400* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press), p. 7-8.
11. See Jan Nattier. *A Guide to the Earliest Chinese Buddhist Translations, Texts from the Eastern Han 东汉 and Three Kingdoms 三国 Periods* (Tokyo: Soka University Press, 2008).
12. See Ann Heirman. "Vinaya from India to China" in *The Spread of Buddhism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), p. 167-177, ed., Ann Heirman and Stephan Peter Bumbacher.
13. Pitu is the Chinese transliteration for Bhida. The place Bhida has been identified as a region in present day northwest Punjab.
See James Legge. *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms Being an Account by the Chinese Monk Fa-Hien of His Travels in India and Ceylon* (Delhi: Oriental Publishers, 1971), p. 41, n. 7.
See Samuel Beal. *Travels of Fah-hian and Sung-Yun, Buddhist Pilgrims from China to India 400 A.D. and 518 A.D.* (Sushil Gupta, 1964), p. 51.
14. Motouluo is the Chinese transliteration for the Indian name Mathura.

15. Buna is the Chinese transliteration for the Indian name Yamuna.
16. Sthavira in the Buddhist context refers to the highest Seat of Honour.
17. Middle kingdom ideally refers to *Madhyadesa* or the central Gangetic Plains.
18. Shousui ceremony has been identified as the annual tribute receiving and offering ceremony prevalent amongst the Buddhist monastic community members and lay devotees including the heads of Vaisyas and Brahman mercantile groups. See James Legge. *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms Being an Account by the Chinese Monk Fa-Hien of His Travels in India and Ceylon* (Delhi: Oriental Publishers, 1971), p. 47.
Samuel Beal associates this ceremony with the end of the harvest season. See Samuel Beal. *Travels of Fah-hian and Sung-Yun, Buddhist Pilgrims from China to India 400 A.D. and 518 A.D.* (Sushil Gupta, 1964), p. 60.
19. The li also known as the Chinese mile is a traditional Chinese unit of distance. It is approximately half a kilometer or five hundred metres.
20. Shewei is the Chinese transliteration for Sravasti. The term guo in Chinese originally refers to country, but here it stands for kingdom.
21. Jusaluo is the Chinese transliteration for the city of Kosala.
22. Jiaweiluwei is the Chinese transliteration of the Indian name Kapilavastu.
23. Balianfuyi is the Chinese transliteration of the Indian name Pataliputra.
24. Mojieti stands for the kingdom of Magadha.
25. This refers to the eighth day of the second month according to the lunar calendar. See James Legge. *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms Being an Account by the Chinese Monk Fa-Hien of His Travels in India and Ceylon* (Delhi: Oriental Publishers, 1971), p. 79.
See Samuel Beal. *Travels of Fah-hian and Sung-Yun, Buddhist Pilgrims from China to India 400 A.D. and 518 A.D.* (Sushil Gupta, 1964), p. 106.
26. See Wang, Bangwei, *Buddhist Nikayas through Ancient Chinese Eyes* (Gottingen: Vandoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), p. 3-5.