

Development of Srinagar under Ashoka

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ABSTRACT

Kashmir is perhaps to possess an authentic account of its History from the very earliest period. This past account of the valley, its culture and traditions, rise and fall of various Kingdoms, victory and defeats of the people have been noted carefully by the sons of its soil. Kashmir is an ancient principality. The Mahabarta and Buddhist literature refers to it as Kashmir, while for Greeks it was Kashperia. The famous chronicle of Kalhana, i-e Rajtarangni mentions about the great king Ashoka. Ashoka's reign was marked by great building activity and spread of Buddhism. Ashoka setup in Kashmir many Viharas and stupas and repaired an old siva temple at Vijayesvara. This research paper is an attempt to provide detailed account of the Ashoka's role in development of Srinagar (Kashmir).

KEYWORDS: Ashoka, Kashpereia, Rajtarangini, Vijayesvara, Buddhism, Viharas, Stupas, Pandrethan

INTRODUCTION

Chandragupta's successor Bindusara appointed his son Ashoka as the Governor of Kashmir. It was in his early life that Ashoka came into contact with Kashmir. Kalhana's reference to Ashoka's building in Kashmir valley indicate that his stay in Kashmir was quite long. It can be inferred that he paid regular visits to the beautiful valley when he became the emperor of Magadha Empire.

According to Kalhana, Ashoka's reign was marked by great building activity and spread of Buddhism. Ashoka setup in Kashmir valley many Viharas and stupas at Vitastara and sus-Kalatra repaired an old siva temple at Vijayesvara and build two new temple called Ashokeesvara. Kalhana credits Ashoka with the foundation of town Srinagari, three miles above the modern city of Srinagar. it had " ninety six thousand dwelling houses resplendid with prosperity"¹. The important event concerned with Ashoka's reign was the spread of Buddhism in Kashmir.

Pandrethan 5-km to the southeast of Srinagar was the old capital site of Srinagar. The modern name is derived from the ancient appellation purandhishthana, which represents the site of the ancient capital, Srinagari, believed to have been founded by the great Maurya emperor Ashoka (circa 276-36 BC) .²

The selection of the site of the capital at pandrethan in olden days might have been due to its providing certain advantages against the menace of devastating floods which used to cause havoc in the valley till suyya, the engineer of king Avantivarman (AD - 855-83), devised means for the better drainage of the valley by regulating the course of the Vitasta (Jhelum). The gentle slopes of the spurs of the high mountain on the northern and eastern sides of Pandrethan were above the level of the flood of meandering Vitasta, which flows now on the southern and western sides of the site.

The chief source for the history of Pandrethan and also for Kashmir as a whole upto the middle of the (12th) century

AD is the 'Rajtarangini' by Kalhana. According to Kalhana, the town of Srinagri built by Ashoka had ' ninety - six lacs of houses resplended with wealth '. It may be conceded that the city was both populous and prosperous at that time. Ruins near pandrethan contains large masses of stones on the slopes at the foot of the spur, pieces of sculptures and some enormous lingas, vigne felt the existence here once of a city and a vast Hindu temple complex. Worth noticing ancient remains consist of numerous carved stones, architectural fragments, old walls and pottery, extending for a long stretch of 5-km from the foot of the takht- I Sulaimain (Shankaracharya Hill) on the northwest to pandrethan in the southeast of pandrethan.

The most important contribution of the king Ashoka was that he laid down the city of srinagri identified at the site of the present village of pandrethan³, which remained the capital of ancient Kashmir till the end of sixth century AD.

The present city of Srinagar is at least thirteen years; for the first mention we hear of it, apart from the Rajtarangini - in the account of the famous Chinese pilgrim Huen Tsiang who visited Kashmir in (631) AD. But the same Srinagar or Srinagri goes back to the time of Ashoka, who is said to have built a capital of this name in Kashmir.

The modern village of pandrethan, three miles above Srinagar, on the Anantnag road, represents the ancient purandhishthana, Besides the well known and beautiful medieval temple which is its chief attraction nowadays, the site is replete with heaps of ancient ruins. Some of these have recently been excavated and have yielded a number of sculptures nearly all of which are unfortunately fragmentary. But, such as they are, they give a sufficiently clear idea of the quality of the Kashmir artists' work, about the time the old city was finally abandoned in favor of its younger rival.⁴

¹ Khan Mohd. ishaaq, History of Srinagar 1846-1947.

² www. indiatravel portal.com / Jammu Kashmir.

³ Khan Mohd. Ishaq, History of Srinagar 1046- 1947 pp-3-6

⁴ Kak, Ram. Chandra, Ancient monuments of Kashmir, p-27.

A number of sculptures have come from the historic town of Vijabror (wrongly pronounced Bijbehara). The town has a comparatively long history, as the Rajtarangini mentions that Ashoka built two temples here, which he named Ashokesvara after himself.

In the ancient times Kashmir was the standard school of Sanskrit learning and scholars from all parts of India came to the valley to study at the feet of great teachers and savants. "For upward of two thousand years," declares Grierson,⁵ Kashmir has been the home of Sanskrit learning and from this small valley have issued master pieces of history, poetry, romance, fable and philosophy. Kashmir is proud and justly proud of the literary glories of their land. For centuries it (Kashmir) has the home of the great Indian religion, saivism, has found some of its most eloquent teachers on the banks of the vitasta (Jhelum). Some of the greatest Sanskrit poets were born and wrote in the valley, and from it has issued in the Sanskrit language a world famous collection of folk-lore.⁶

In the age of Ashoka when Buddhism was carried to the valley, the text and literature of the new religion were written in Sanskrit, in contrast to those written in pali in the rest of India. With the development of Mahayana the entire Buddhism literature was composed in the Sanskrit language and it was perhaps because of this that Sanskrit was diffused in central Asia by the numerous Buddhist missionaries from Kashmir. In recent years a large number of Sanskrit Buddhist manuscript ever discovered in India has come from Gilgit in Kashmir.

Not only did the students from the rest of India come to the valley for higher studies, but we find pilgrims and scholars from central Asia and china coming to Kashmir to study Sanskrit texts. Huen Tsiang spent two years in the valley studying Buddhist texts in Sanskrit and so did the earlier scholars che-mong and fa-yong, Ou-kong spent four years in Kashmir and studied Sanskrit and vinaya from three teachers.

In the age of Ashoka, Sanskrit was written both on the kharosthi and the brahmi script. In Kashmir, the scholars developed a script of their own – the sarada which though differing from the Devanagiri details, follows it in its essentials. In the 9th century AD the Tibetans who had no script for their language adopted the sarada script of Kashmir.

Birch-bark was widely used for both literary writings and Governments correspondence and commercial transactions. It was also used for packing parcels and lining roofs to make them watertight. The ink used for writing on birch-bark was prepared by a special process so that it might not get faded or washed off by water. Birch-bark like-wise is not affected by damp. This way many old manuscripts by being hidden in wells and pits escaped destruction at the hands of many ignorant and unscrupulous ruler.⁷

Kashmir occupied the pride of place in having a large number of libraries of Sanskrit manuscripts. Temples and vharas were the repositories of these literary treasures, but there were huge private libraries too, maintained by families

having literary traditions. Even as late as 1875, when George Bhular went to Kashmir in search of Sanskrit manuscripts, and when Sanskrit learning there was not as flourishing as in ancient times, he found more than twenty-two Sanskrit speaking pandits as well as traders and officials who were possessors of most considerable collections of manuscripts.

The fact that Srinagari, the capital of Kashmir was founded by Ashoka, a Buddhist king, who is credited to have erected several stupas and viharas around his capital, at and around pandrethan. The whole area which is at present occupied by the military cantonments built during reign of maharaja Hari singh (1925-48) was a royal site, where several palaces were built by Ashoka. Some of the stone statues of the Buddha, which more removed from site have been deposited into the S.P.S museum, lal mandi, Srinagar.

In the reign of Ashoka, Kashmir was over run by the mleechhas, i.e. followers of Jainism, Buddhism, fire worshippers, and naga worshippers. He is said to have permitted heretical beliefs to enter his realm from tartar neighbours. Accordingly, he worshipped Siva and obtained a son for the their expulsion.⁸

Ashoka's missionary established Buddhism in Kashmir and then fourth council was held in Kashmir under kanishka some time in first century A.D. King Ashoka set up in Kashmir many viharas and stupas. Muslims of Kashmir still continue to follow the Buddhist tradition of 'chaityas' and stupas in their own Islamic manner. Sufism, Kashmir folk literature too is influenced by Buddhism. Buddhism has influenced to a large extent Kashmiri architecture.

Thus Ashoka's reign was a glorious period for the development of literature, architecture and socio-cultural activities of Kashmir and Kashmir became the center of learning.

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⁵ Kak, Ram. Chandra, ancient monuments of Kashmir p-27.

⁶ Linguistic survey of India vol-ii, part 2.

⁷ Linguistic survey of India vol-ii, part 2.

⁸ B.G. Gokhale, Ancient India p-159 and the life of Buddha, Thomas, P-170