

INDIA'S DEBT TO BUDDHISM.

Looking at the map of Asia, one is struck by such names as Indo-China and Indonesia in the South-East of the Asian continent. The Hsin-chiang Province of China in the Heart of Asia is often designated by the compound word Serindia. What does it all mean? It means that in these vast areas Indian culture powerfully contributed towards the building of local cultures, and in fact transformed these areas into provinces of India's cultural heritage. The spread of Indian Culture to these areas was facilitated by propitious political events, by the creation on the sub-continent of India of great empires. The Kushan Empire in the North helped the spread of Indian Culture to Central Asia, and from there by the old Silk Road to China, Korea and Japan. The steppe belt of Central Asia and its riverine oases were destined to become a channel of cultural influences coming from India, Iran and China. This interplay of different cultures created a unique and colourful blend of culture, the background of which was largely Indian. The archaeological discoveries in Central Asia, in the basin of the Tarim, in the first two decades of the present century rank among some of the most important events in the history of archaeology. For about 1200 years the influence of Indian art and philosophy was paramount in Central Asia. We know now this influence was chiefly Buddhist. Thanks to its pan-human appeal Buddhism was able to cross national borders. Through Buddhist channels, the Indian secular sciences, astronomy, medicine, drama, poetry and grammar became known and appreciated throughout Central Asia, from the steppes of South Russia to the shores of the Pacific. In the Kushan period numerous and prosperous colonies of Indian traders and artisans established themselves along the ancient caravan Silk Road to China. With time important Buddhist cultural and scholastic centres were founded in Bamiyan in Afghanistan, Khotan and Kucha in Central Asia, and Tun-huang in Western Kansu Province of China. Their influence was

felt in China and Tibet and even in India. In the second half of the fourth century A.D. Kucha produced a famous Buddhist teacher and translator of Buddhist texts - Kumarajiva (344-413) with whose name is connected the first period of active Buddhist propagation in China. Kumarajiva belonged to an Indian family settled in Kucha, and as a young man studied Sanskrit in Kashmir. About 382/3 A.D. Kumarajiva was carried away as a prisoner by Chinese troops, and spent some years in China availing himself of the given opportunity to spread Buddhism in China and translate into Chinese Buddhist sacred texts. In the sixth century A.D. Buddhism spread to Japan, where the brilliant period of Nara (710-784), so rich in artistic and literary achievements, can be considered to have been the culminating point in the history of Buddhism in Japan.

In the seventh century A.D. and especially in the next, Buddhism spread across the Himalayas and became the national faith of Tibet, from where it was propagated in the second half of the sixteenth century to distant Mongolia and Siberia.

In the early centuries of our era, Buddhist influence stood preeminent in the countries of South-East Asia. The kingdom of Funan (modern Cambodia, Laos and part of Siam) seems to have been of Indian origin. The strength of India's maritime trade in the Gupta period, facilitated the spread of Indian culture across the ocean. As in the case of Central Asia, trading communities were established in South-East Asia and became centres of Indian culture. The Empire of the Khmers lasted from the seventh to the thirteenth century A.D., and the ruins of Angkor, its capital, can be counted among the greatest monuments on earth. The Indian culture of the Funan kingdom influenced that of the Khmers who adopted Sanskrit and Pali as literary languages.

Since the second century A.D. Buddhism and Indian culture were well known in the kingdom of Champa. Here also Sanskrit

became the language of culture. The spread of Sanskrit in a foreign environment is in itself a remarkable event in the cultural history of the area. It shows that a language, the carrier of a refined culture and civilization, can become the lingua franca of a large area inhabited by different races, notwithstanding its grammatical complexity.

To the same epoch belongs the spread of Buddhism and Indian Culture in Annam which penetrated there from India by sea, and from China by land. Since the first century A.D. the island of Yavadvipa (modern Java) is mentioned. In Sumatra Indian cultural influence reached its peak under the Shailendra dynasty of Shrivijaya. Indian colonies were established in Java since the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. The early settlers must have been followers of Hindu Brahmanical sects. The influence of Buddhism became paramount towards the eighth century, and the ruins of Borobudur (eighth century A.D.) are an eloquent testimony of the greatness of this period.

For those who were born in countries adjacent to India, Buddhism always was the messenger of Indian Culture and Thought, and ancient Magadha was considered to be the very heart of India.

In honouring this Year of the Buddha was reverently pay homage to this Great Inspirer who made the treasures of Indian culture available to countless multitudes throughout Asia. And in doing so, we acknowledge our debt to this Great Son of India who brought forth a great movement of emancipation, spiritual and social, and kindled numerous lights of goodwill among men.

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