

BUDDHIST ARCHITECTURE IN ODISHA: A STUDY ON THE STŪPAS OF RATNAGIRI

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Prior to Ashoka's Kalinga-war in 261 B.C., Buddhism had already crept into this land by two merchants named Trapashu (Tapassu) and Bhallika (Bhalluka) of *Ukkala* (Utkala- a large tract of eastern Odisha in ancient times) who met Lord Buddha on their way to Madhyadesha, offered him rice-cake and honey and earned the credit to be the "first in the world to become the lay-disciple of the Buddha (*Mahābhāga*, 1st*khaṇḍaka*). The contemporary of the A ṅguttaranikāya states that the Buddha gave them his hair which was brought by them to their native place called Asitañjana and deposited in *chaitya* built by them¹. Thus began the history of evolution of Stūpas in the Buddhist world. The Buddhist's relics were distributed in the large Stūpas or burial mounds, and according to the authority of the canonical texts, he recommended the laity to obtain religious merit by worshipping them².

Intense research on "how so many Stūpas were supplied with relics?" reveals that four-fold policies were innovated by the laities which increased the number of Stūpas around the Buddhist world. They were: *i.* the deposit of the tiniest fragment of bone or hair, or the used articles like robes or begging bowls of the deceased Holy monks; *ii.* Recourse to the Buddha's dictum, "he who sees my Dharma sees me". It made the devotees to deposit Dharma body consisting of the scriptures, or rather in fact a section of them, sometimes inscribed on precious metal or earthen clay tablets considering it as a doctrinal equivalent to a corporeal relic; *iii.* To install a Stūpas a 'reminding relic' (these Stūpas were without relic) to remind the beholder of the Buddha's Final *Nirvāṇa*; and, *iv.* While visiting the Holy Places of the Buddhist centres, some pilgrims installed the Stūpas

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to acquire religious merit. *MahāsaṅghikaVinaya* (preserved in Chinese) states that it is called a Stūpa when it contains relics of Holy Ones and a *chaitya* when it does not³.

The theme of the present study is to highlight on the rich and overwhelmingly large number of Stūpas of all dimensions of Ratnagiri from analytical and evaluator perspectives. Ratnagiri (20° 38'N; Long 86° 20'E) is situated in an isolated hill of Assia range in the district of Jajpur of Odisha. In its neighbourhood exists two other Buddhists sites called Udayagiri and Lalitagiri forming a triangle of Buddhist centers. Ratnagiri is really a treasure trove of Buddhist architecture containing monasteries (2), temples (8), impressive massive Stūpas (2), minor Stūpas, votive Stūpas, *chaityas*, *mantras*, *dhāraṇīs*, gods, goddesses, Buddha and Bodhisattvas. It competes with Bodhagaya, the holiest of the Buddhist centers. Ratnagiri Mahāvihāra is referred in many texts as an important centre of tantric Buddhism, especially Kālachakra Yāna. Tārānāth's 'History of Buddhism in India highlights that king Buddhapaksha (identified with Narasimha Gupta Baladitya) established Ratnagiri Mahāvihāra in the east of the kingdom of Odiviśa (modern Odisha) and kept three sets of Mahāyāna and Hinayānaśāstras where eight great groups of Dharma (religious school) and five hundred monks were kept⁴.

From the findings of religious structures and its date, 5th century AD as its probable date for origin is ascertained by the scholars. The principal focus of attention is excavated *Mahāstūpa* (main Stūpa -47ft high) of exceptionally ancient brick work being the unique object of worship and obeisance of the Buddhist world, sited on the apex of the southwest directions of Ratnagiri Hill. Very adjacent to the Mahāstūpa in the eastern side is the grand brick built imposing Stūpa no-2 *insitu*. Both the Stūpas are seen symmetrically designed in the conventional order of *triratha* ground plan. Hieun Tsiang's *Si-Yu-Ki* (638AD) highlights about the wonderful presence of this Stūpas nearby monasteries called *Pu-sie-p'o-ki-li* (restored by Julianas "*Pushpagiri*") exhibiting supernatural lights and miracles in the country of *Wu-Tu* (Odra-larger portion of ancient Odisha)⁵.

Moreover, the pristine precinct of the main Stūpa and Stūpa no-2 are honeycombed by the beehives of small Stūpas of various dimensions and form. Most of the Stūpas are built in bricks and on the platforms of various types like circular, square, square with *ratha* projection, octagonal, square with central projections with or without the horizontal moldings. Some of the minor Stūpas are found to be decorated with prominent motifs, such as, series of thunderbolt (*vajra*), drums, images of the Buddha, Boddhisattvas, AryaSaraswati, Tārā, Lokeswara, Mañjusrī, Aparājitā, and sometimes figures of deities of the typical Vajrayāna pantheon. It is also interesting to note that the deposits inside the structural Stūpas are varied from each other: They are *śārīrika* (corporeal relics), plain earthen vases, plain stone blocks with sockets, or *Gāthā of Causation*; Other things like gold beads, Ganga *fanam*, crystalline quartz, gold coins, copper discs inscribed with the Buddhist Creed in six lines, a tiny globular casket of silver alloy consisting of two hemispherical bowls enclosed with hollow ball of gold alloy, etc., are also found either with *śārīrika*, or with the *Gāthā of causation*, or with the images of the Buddhist pantheon; the *Gāthās* are inscribed on stone slabs, terracotta plaques, and tablets. The purports of the inscriptions are; *Pratityasamutpāda-sūtra* together with its *nirodha* portion; Buddhist creed; and, dhāraṇīs.

The building-spree of the Stūpas received a great momentum after 7th century AD and continued unabated till 13th century AD. The minor Stūpas are categorized under two sections: 1. Structural Stūpas are built either of stone (khondalite) or bricks; 2. Portable monolithic Stūpas. Mortar was not used for Stūpas of stone, clay was used for brick ones. Due to the uneven configuration of the rocky ground, the minor Stūpas are found to stand on different levels. Some Stūpas are also seen to build upon the earlier ruined Stūpas of masonry, or over the intact monolithic Stūpas. It was a strong Vajrayāna centre.

Ratnagiri is pregnant with more than seven hundred Stūpas. It was held in high esteem by the Buddhist world due to its series of votive Stūpas. In this respect, it differs from other Buddhist sites. Debal Mitra holds that probably the small Stūpas were installed by the devotees according to their

means, inclination and status to acquire merit⁶. It is stated by I-tsing, the Chinese pilgrim, that “even if a man makes an image of small as a grain of barley, or a *Kaitiya* (*chaitya=stūpa*) the size of a small jujube, placing on it a round figure, or a staff like a small pin, a special cause for good birth is obtained there by, and will be as limitless as the seven seas, and good rewards will last as long as the coming four births⁷.”

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