

A Survey Of Buddhism In *Dakshin Kosala* Region

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Abstract

Chhattisgarh state of India once boasted to be the central part of the ancient *Dakshin Kosala*. The extent of this kingdom goes to the south-eastern part of the present day Madhya Pradesh and western part of Orissa. The mountain ranges of *Mékal*, *Mahendragiri*, *Machakā*, *Sihawā* and *Śuktimān* (*Śuktimat*) form the natural boundaries of this ancient region. It is noteworthy that during his lifetime, Gotama Buddha visited the *Dakshin Kosala* as evident from certain inscriptions. Buddhism was firmly rooted during the Nala Dynasty which ruled in the regions of Chhattisgarh and Orissa during 600 CE. The Chinese traveler Xuanzang who has travelled to India around 630-645 CE has mentioned in his travelogue '*Si-Yu-Ki*' that Sirpur was one of the largest centre of Buddhism consisting of more than one hundred of viharas and sangharamas. The centre belonged to Mahayana Buddhism where around ten thousand monks resided and studied. After the decline of Nala dynasty, the propagation of Buddhism in the *Dakshin Kosala* continued with the Panduvamshi Dynasty ascending the throne of the kingdom. The extraordinary dissemination and assimilation of Buddhist elements in the art and culture of *Dakshin Kosala* went uninterrupted during the reign of Kalachuri Dynasty which is evident by the discovery of a number of inscriptions, copper plates, archaeological remains, images, sculptures etc. from the region. The present paper shall examine and discuss the assimilation of Buddhist thoughts in the art and culture of ancient *Dakshin Kosala*.

Keywords: *Dakshin Kosala*, Xuanzang, Sirpur, Buddhist art, Kalchuri dynasty

Introduction:

India bears a very glorious past since very ancient times and the region of *Dakshin Kosala* (Chhattisgarh) situated in the heart of the country shares no less glorified history. It has been observed on several occasions that the region encompassing modern Chhattisgarh has been accepted as *Dakshin Kosala*. But in reality, modern Chhattisgarh only forms the central part of that ancient region. The term South or *Daksin Kosala* has been used only for the geographical expansion situated between 20° to 30° northern latitude and 81° to 84° eastern longitude. The mountain ranges of *Mekal*, *Mahendragiri*, *Machaka*, *Sihawa* and *Shuktimaan* (*Shuktimat*) form the natural boundaries of this region. During the ancient times the region of south Kosala also encompassed regions including the southern east part of modern Madhya Pradesh and western part of Orissa.

Geographical background:

It is noteworthy fact that no mention of Chhattisgarh is found in any of the stone, pillar or copper plate inscription across the lengths and breadths of the country. However, it is on the basis of the prevalent oral narratives and ancient beliefs that this region was referred to as *Kosala*, *Mahakosala* or *Dakshin Kosala* during the ancient times.

The origin of the word *Kosala* has been derived from the Sanskrit word '*Kushala*' which means 'to be happy' or 'happy'. The present Chhattisgarh region was also known by the names of *Dandakaranya*, *Mahakoshala*, *Mahakantara*, *Kosala* etc. during the ancient times. The region of modern Chhattisgarh comprises a part of the Deccan Plateau or Deccan Peninsula which is situated in the middle and southern east part. Chhattisgarh, also commonly known as the Plateau of Relics is surrounded by the Relic Mountains and plateaus.

Buddhism in *Dakshin Kosala*:

From the records obtained from Bilaspur, it is clear that Buddha himself visited *Dakshin Kosala*. From time to time, this religion has been sheltered by many dynasties. In the South Koshal region, the first mention of Buddhism is mentioned in the Nala period. In the north of the Santipur division, a record of 7th century on a Vedika located in a village named Padmapur, has a genealogy of three Buddhist teachers *Chandrakal*, *Maddhakhan* and *Dharmakirti*, which reflects Buddhist influence on this region.¹ Buddhist religion had spread almost in entire India before the era of Kalachuris in *Dakshin Kosala* and Chinese traveler *Xuanzang*, who came to India in the seventh century A.D., also visited *Dakshin Kosala*, according to which there were more than 100 monasteries there whose resident monks were followers of the *Mahayana* branch of Buddhism and their total population were around ten thousand.² According to Xuanzang, the ruler of that period was *Kshatriya* and the follower of Buddhism.

After the era of early Kalachuris, the decline of Buddhism started due to the rise in Brahminic religion and its patronage rulers. Despite the shrinking of popularity, some rulers continued to donate to the Buddhist monasteries. In the Bilaspur region, an inscription of Panduvamshi ruler *Bhavadeva Ranakeshari* was found from which it is known that before the arrival of the Panduvamshis of *Bhandaka*, there was a king named *Suryaghosh* who built a temple of *Shākyamuni Buddha* in memory of his late son. There is the mention of donating a village named *Kailāshpur* to the Buddhist Union in *Malhar* copper plate of Panduvamshi ruler *Mahāshvagupta Bālārjuna*. Buddhist remnants have been found in the village of *Jaitpur* or ancient *Chaityapur* near *Malhar*.³

Similarly, in the inscription of *Buddhaghosa* obtained from *Sirpur*, names of two Buddhist teachers *Jungosh* and *Buddhaghosha* are mentioned. The largest statue of Buddha in South Kosala is at *Sirpur*. On the right side of this statue, *Avakoliteswar Padmapāni* is depicted as an attendant.

According to the inscription obtained from *Koni*, the Kosala king had knowledge of *Buddha*, *Dhamma* and *Sangha* and he was well versed in Buddhist texts.⁴ Apart from this, some of the broken temples of *Tututari* of South Kosala are engraved with idols of Buddha which are of the eighth-ninth century, as well as information about the viharas of Buddhist monks.⁵ In the first four verses of the inscription received from the *Bhandaka* of *Bhavadeva Ranakesari*, in the form of *Mangalācharana*, praising Lord Buddha by the name of *Jina* and *Tayi*. According to an inscription obtained from *Ratanpur*, the master of Kalachuri king *Jajalladeva*, *Rudrashiva* had studied the Buddhist philosophic texts.⁶ It is noteworthy that the famous Buddhist philosopher *Nāgārjuna* lived in Dakshin Kosala for some time in the second century A.D.

There is a collection of Buddhist statues in the *Gandhaveswar Mahādev* temple situated on the banks of *Mahānadi*, some of which are in the *Bhalmaspara* posture, and the Bodhi tree is also beautifully marked with idols.⁷

The most beautiful statue of Buddhist idols from *Sirpur* is of the goddess *Tara*, which represents the local developed sculpture of South Kosala. The most attractive aspect of this idol is its hairstyle.⁸ Apart from this, four metal sculptures of *Padmapāni Aakoliteswar* are discovered from *Sirpur*, which are depicted the *Lalitāsan* sitting pose and presently they are kept in *Raipur Museum*. In addition, the statue of *Tara* of *Vajrayana* branch of Buddhism in *Sirpur* is the best symbol of the artistic beauty of South Kosali style, which is from 8th-9th century A.D.

Many Buddhist sculptures, which are mostly collected from excavation has been stored in the archaeological museum at *Malhar* of *Bilaspur*. The earliest Kalachuri inscriptions does not mention Buddhism but there is scattered mention of Buddhism in later records.

During the Kalachuris in *Bilaspur*, there was a lot of progress in Buddhism. In *Koni* inscription of *Prithvideva II*⁹, there is the discussion of the Trinity of the Buddhists. The author of this inscription *Kasala* was the interpreter of many scriptures and proverbs. The discussion of three principles of Buddhist sect - *Kshana*, *Samanya* and *Pramana* are found in the *Akaltara*¹⁰ stone inscription of *Ratnadeva II* and *Raipur* museum stone inscriptions of *Prithvideva II*. The texts of *Dignāga* are discussed in the *Ratanpur Stone Inscription*¹¹ of *Jajalladeva I*. Intreacately carved Buddhist idols have been found at different places of the Kalchuri Empire, which is a distinct representation of the Buddhist art of that era. The *triratna* symbol of Buddhism are also found on bricks and coins. The place of *Tara* in Bauddhism has been assumed similar than the place of *Durga* in Hindu religion. *Sirpur* was an ancient place during the Kalachuris of *Ratanpur*. In the excavation here, some of the Buddha's idols have been found in *Varadamudrā*. Many more Buddhist sculptures, in which *Bodhisattva*, *Avalokiteswara* and *Tārā* idols are the main ones, have been found here. Most of these idols are made during eleventh-twelfth century.¹² In the recent decades, the archaeological excavations unearthed various facets of Buddhist art and culture which has placed the ancient region of *Dakshin Kosala*, particularly the *Sirpur*, as an important Buddhist heritage site of India.

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Plates:

Plate-1: Buddha in *Bhumisparsh mudra* at Tivara Deva Vihara, Sirpur, Chhattisgarh, 8th cent. CE. ((Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>))

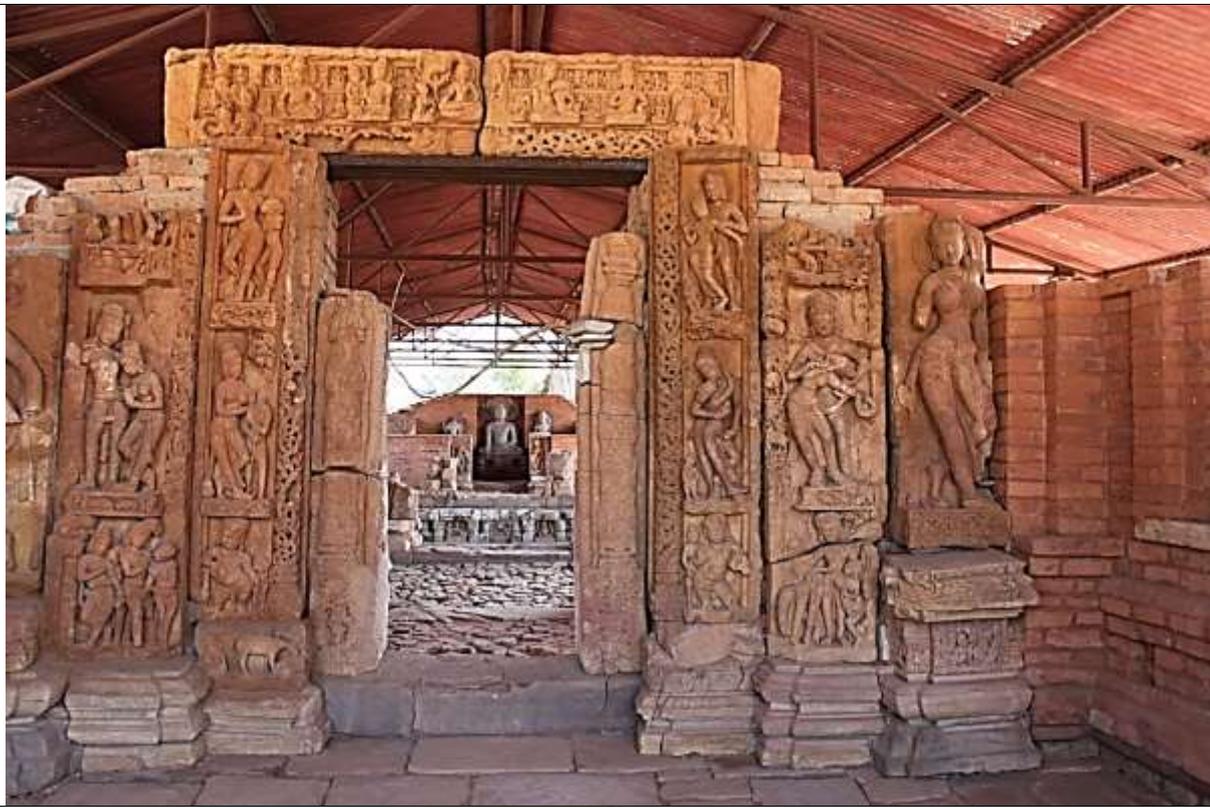


Plate-2: Buddha Vihara built by Mahashivgupta Teeverdeva (520-540 CE) (Source: <https://puratattva.in>)



Plate-3: Buddha statue at Gandheshwara Temple (Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org>)