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**Trade and Religion:  
Trade and Its Role in the Spread of Buddhism in China from India.  
(1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> Century C.E.)**

**Abstract**

Trade played an important role in the cultural and religious exchanges between India and China since ancient times. This paper highlights the role of the trans-continental trade of luxury items in the spread of Buddhism in China from India en-route Central Asia during the 1<sup>st</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century CE.

Several diverse factors, like development of the Mahayana School of Buddhism, economic prosperity in North India under the Kushana rule, huge support of the *Kshatriyas* (ruling class) and the *Vanikas* (trading class) towards the Buddhist monks, led to the development of flourishing inter-continental trade, which gradually paved the way towards greater religious and cultural exchanges between India and China.

There was also a gradual transformation in the pattern of the Buddhist worship and donation. Luxury items became an integral part of the Buddhist worship which enlarged its market as well as its demand. There was also the development of a new commercial ethos in the Buddhist theology, which gave more impetus to donate.

Lord Buddha was commenced to be worshiped as a deity by seven precious items or the *Sapta Ratna*, all consisting of luxury items. Eventually, these luxury items became the austere symbol of Buddhist worship.

This paper, based on literary, archeological and epigraphic records, will highlight how the trade of luxury items played a significant role in the process of dissemination of Buddhism in the land of the Dragons from India.

**Key Words:** Oriental Trade, China, Buddhism, Religion, *Sapta Ratna*.

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India's relation with the western world and her eastern neighbor is rooted in antiquity. India's geographical location is conducive towards the development of commercial and cultural communication with both worlds. Placed in the heart of Asia at the crossroads between the Mediterranean and the Mesopotamian world and the Far East, India was in a position to pull extensive overland and sea routes

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to reach far flung regions of the occident and the orient. Although initial inter-course was inspired by commercial enterprise, the contacts soon took the color of cultural and religious exchanges.

### The Indo-Roman Trade

The ancient international commercial traffic connecting China up to the Mediterranean via the Indian subcontinent through trans-Eurasian routes started much before the Christian era. This ancient trading network did not consist of a single route but it had multiple bifurcations. It mainly started from China and proceeded westward through Central Asia, Persia and Iraq up to the Mediterranean coast. Indian traders not only followed the trans-Asian highway but also the maritime trade routes connected with various Indian ports. These overland and maritime routes were essentially travelled by caravans and traders but eventually it turned into a road for the spread of the Buddhism. Interestingly, this particular route was discovered by wandering Buddhist monks to propagate the gospel of Buddhism in China en route Central Asia through which it found its way to further East; towards Japan, Korea and South East Asia, to embrace the half of world population with the Buddhist philosophy. However, according to some scholars it could not spread in the Western world because of the dominating orthodox Zoroastrianism in Persia.

Indo-Roman trade was carried out between India and the Roman world mainly through Arabian middlemen. Regular trade dates back to 27 BCE during the reign of Augustus<sup>1</sup>. The Indo-Roman trade got a boost with the discovery of the monsoon winds on the Arabian Sea, probably by a navigator named Hippalus in the 1<sup>st</sup> century C.E. It is not sure clear whether Hippalus himself discovered the monsoon winds or he learned about them from the Arabs sailors<sup>2</sup>.

The route that the Egyptian-Greek ships mainly followed was from the Red Sea to the Arabian Sea. From there they reached sea ports along the Indian coastline extending from the Indus River to the Malabar Coast. The two important North Indian ports were Barbaricon and Barygaza. Barbaricon was connected with Punjab and Gandhara through the routes along the Indus River. Barygaza was linked with Ujjain, Mathura, North West India and with Deccan via the ancient routes passing through Sopara and Kaliyana along the coast which extended up to South East India along the Godavari and Bhima valleys. From the Malabar Coast Roman ships departed for the South East.

Through Barygaza and Barbaricon, Roman traders brought gold and silver coins, silver wares, coral, wine, sweet clover and perfumes from Italy and other Mediterranean countries. Styrax, glass and clothing were coming from Egypt. Wine, chrysoliths or probably topaz, dates, myrobalan (used as herbal medicine), red ointment (used as a cosmetic), frankincense<sup>3</sup> (a kind of aromatic resin) from the Persian

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Herbert Warmington: *The Commerce between the Roman Empire and India*. Cambridge. 1928.

<sup>2</sup> *Pliny's Natural History*, Chapter 1.19. Pliny has stressed on the importance of winds in the sea trade. Pliny stated that if they start sailing before the Ides of January, then they can complete their voyage within one year. Pliny emphasised on the Hippalus winds for voyages to India. And while coming back sailors took the help of South East winds (probably retreating monsoon winds) and on entering the Red sea they used to catch the South West winds or the Southern winds.

<sup>3</sup> Hirth, Friedrich: *China and the Roman Oriental*. Shanghai & Hongkong, 1985, p. 266.

Gulf and Red Sea and colorful girdles of no specific origin<sup>4</sup> was brought to India. Business was carried out with the exchange of gold and silver coins with local currencies<sup>5</sup>. Frankincense and Styrax (kind of fragrances) reached China through Central Asia during the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries CE.<sup>6</sup>

Chinese silk and expensive animal hides came to India via Central Asia<sup>7</sup>. Indian products mainly comprised of indigo, ivory, myrrh (used as medicine, perfume and incense) and long pepper<sup>8</sup>. Other products were bdellium (a kind of fragrant resin gum), lyceum (rich in anti-oxidants and used in medicine) and spikenard (used as essential oil, perfumes, and sedative and also as herbal medicine) from Himalayan foothills, costus (also known as spiral ginger, an aromatic plant used as incense and as herbal medicine) from Kashmir, turquoise from Hindukush and lapis lazuli from Badakhstan.<sup>9</sup> Thus trade links were established from North-West India and it spread towards the West, as well as South Asia and the Far East.

### Symbols of Cultural Interactions

The Indo-Roman trading exchanges not only contributed towards economic prosperity but it led to cultural and religious exchanges. It helped the crystallization of new form of art and architecture which has been manifested in various parts of Asia. A large number of silk relics, dated 5<sup>th</sup> century CE has been discovered from various places in and around the Silk Road, suggesting that the silk merchants must have used silk items as gifts and protection duty to various administrative officials and agents.

A close analysis of the textile patterns indicate the process of cultural interaction. Initially in Chinese textiles auspicious animals like tiger, deer and other Chinese symbols dominated the pattern scheme. With the spread of Buddhism, Indian motifs like elephants, peacock, lion, and Bodhi tree were introduced into textile designs. From the fragments of clothes found in Central Asia, dated 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century shows that the Indian designs started to dominate the scene<sup>10</sup>.

The Central Asian influence resulted in the introduction of new motifs in contrast to lively and floating Han motifs. Comparatively stiff Persian motifs also appear in clothes suggesting cultural interaction;<sup>11</sup> like formation of large circles followed by smaller circles with an animal motif inside. This attitude towards flexibility and absorption of different elements is a pointer to cultural exchanges. In the Indian context, multifarious motifs were also harmoniously blended and it added a new dimension to the textile design pattern in ancient India.

<sup>4</sup> Warmington, *Ibid*, p. 261-272; Schoff, W.H (trans.): *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, New York, 1912. P.167; Pliny, *Ibid*, XXXII, 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, 49.

<sup>6</sup> San-kuo Chih: XXX, 861; Hirth, *ibid*, 266 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Pliny : XXXIV, 41; XXXVII, 78.

<sup>8</sup> Pliny, XXXVII, 23; Warmington, *Ibid*, p.200 ; Periplus, 39,48,49.

<sup>9</sup> Warmington, *Ibid*, p.201,255; Periplus: 39, 48, 49.

<sup>10</sup> Liu Xinru: *Ancient India and Ancient China*, New Delhi, 1988. p. 75.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 72.

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Cultural influences were also found in paintings of the Tun Huang or Dunhuang caves<sup>12</sup> situated in Gansu province, China. Dunhuang was a halting station for merchants and caravans who were journeying to and from China. Dunhuang eventually became a great centre of Buddhist culture. The merchants paid the craftsmen and artists to paint scenes and carve statues from the life of the Buddha as their offering for safe journey. It was also patronized by the royal dignitaries of China. Here manuscripts in Brahmi, Kharosthi, Persian, Tibetan, Turkish and other Central Asian languages and script have been discovered which throws light on the variety of people who passed through this route<sup>13</sup>. The art of Dunhuang cave is an expression of unique admixture of various art forms, viz. Ajanta paintings, Roman, Greek and Persian elements blended in harmony and thereby gave scope for each culture to expand on its own way.

### **Factors Leading to Changes in the Pattern of Worship**

#### **The Economic Prosperity and Cosmopolitan Culture of the Kushanas**

The period between the 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE in North India is marked by the rule of the Kushanas. The Kushana economy was predominantly urban and largely dependent on trade and commerce. Commercial environment led to the growth of cities and urban culture. Kushanas were spread up to the western part of Central Asia, Soviet Central Asia and Afghanistan. It essentially possessed a cosmopolitan culture with various ethnic and cultural groups of different lifestyles, subsisting at different level of production. This unusual unification as well as the commercial exchanges of the contemporary period led to the amalgamation of cultural, ideological and religious ideas through a vast region, extending from East Asia to the border of Europe<sup>14</sup>.

#### **Mahayana Buddhism**

In the early Christian era, Mahayana Buddhism was introduced in India and Buddhism underwent a series of ideological and institutional changes. The Mahayana Buddhism introduced an entire new pantheon of Buddhist worship. They started to worship Lord Buddha as a deity. Buddha was worshipped as Bodhisatva, Amitabha, Avalokiteshvara and as other deities. Many of these deities carved out a piece of heaven for themselves in this newly formed Buddhist cosmology. Interestingly, this new

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<sup>12</sup> The Dunhuang caves are also known as the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, strategically located at religious and cultural crossroads on the Silk Road. The cave contains some of the finest examples of Buddhist art spanning a period of 1,000 years. It has 492 temples and beautiful sculptures and paintings.

<sup>13</sup> Liu Xinru: *op. cit.* p. 43.

<sup>14</sup> Numismatic sources of this period also corroborates to the cosmopolitan culture of the Kushana period. Coins with different motifs and bilingual legends (in Greek and Prakrit) testify to the religious tolerance of the Kushana kings which was indeed needed in order to facilitate commercial exchanges with culturally diverse countries.

cosmos of Buddhist pantheon lay **less stress in achieving the abstract state of nirvana** and more on improving one's material condition and status in the present and next life cycles. Gradually, donations became very important in Buddhist worship.

### Analysis of Contemporary Literature

These ideological changes in the Buddhist theology can be traced by closely examining some of literary sources of this period, like, the *Milindapanha* (Questions of King Milinda), the *Buddhacarita* (The Life of the Buddha), *Saundarananda* (The Story of Saundarananda), the *Mahavastu* (The Great Event), the *Saddharmapundarika* (The Lotus Sutra) and the *Sukhavatīvyūha* (The Land of Bliss). From a close scrutiny of these texts we can trace how Lord Buddha had eventually and very meticulously evolved as a deity from a mere prince. The contradictions in the mind of lay Buddhists had been clearly manifested in the above mentioned books.

The book, *Milindapanha* or the questions of *Milinda* or Menander<sup>15</sup>, reflects the doubts in the minds of Buddhists in that period. The existing contradictions were between the Buddha's personal life, his sufferings as recorded in the Pali texts and his divinity. How Buddha could suffer if Buddha has committed no sins in his former life and then what is the connection leading a pious life and achieving Karma?

The dual trend of divinizing the Buddha and the increasing effort to attract lay devotees emerges more clearly in Asvaghosha's *Buddhacarita*. This book meets the need of a biography of the newly divinised Buddha. This Pali text shows the historical transition of a prince to the Buddhahood and this divine Buddha has tremendous miraculous powers which he willingly displays in order to convince people about his enlightenment.

The *Mahavastu* takes a step forward and introduces the concept of the eternal Buddha. The idea is that numerous Buddhas deriving from this eternal Buddha who appear periodically in this world to help their followers to get rid of the sufferings and this idea consolidates into a rich Buddhist mythology.

The concept of Bodhisattva reaches full maturity in the *Saddharmapuddarika* (the Lotus Sutra). The Lotus Sutra was first translated by Dharmaraksha in the Western Chin and gradually became very popular in both China and Japan. The first part of the book emphasizes the idea that the wisdom of the Buddha is very hard to attain and that only Buddha knows all. No human being but only Buddha can attain true knowledge. The Lotus Sutra then gives importance to the supernatural power. The *Saddharmapundarika* not only gives examples of conversion through magic power,<sup>16</sup> it also provides talismanic charms that protect those who recite the sutras<sup>17</sup> (XXI Trans. pp. 371,372,374). Interestingly, the text coincides with the practice of burying relic caskets with jewels in North India and pre-dates the

<sup>15</sup> The Greek king, Menander ruled in Bactria and some parts of N. India during 2<sup>nd</sup>. Cen. B.C.E.

<sup>16</sup> *Saddharmapundarika* , VII 97, Trans. pp. 421-2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, XXI Trans. pp. 371, 372, 37.

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same practice in North China. If the Lotus Sutra had influenced votary movement in North India then it may have also inspired the Chinese counterpart several centuries later.

Another supplementary text to the Buddhist cosmology was the *Sukhavativyuha* (Land of Bliss). This text gives description of the land of bliss in the western heaven. The simplicity of this text made it accessible to the ordinary devotees. The theory of this utopian land often drew their inspiration from long distance trade and foreign travels. This particular text depicts that enlightenment is often beyond human understanding and difficult to attain. Thus it emphasizes worship and donation which shorten and simplify the process of accumulating merit.

### **Increasing Emphasis on Worship and Donation**

Consequently, the Buddhist literature increasingly emphasized worship and donation, which ultimately became the major route to enlightenment. In early Pali Buddhist texts we find patrons providing Buddhist devotees with food and lodging. But in later texts there was a shift in emphasis from food, lodging towards donation of immovables, such as stupa and monastery buildings along with luxury goods (mainly comprised of luxury trading commodities).

An analysis of these Buddhist texts reveals that the urban prosperity and flourishing trade brought about changes in the pattern of the Buddhist worship and donation. With the changes in the pattern of worship there was also noticeable change in the value of property in the society. Luxury items became integral part of the Buddhist worship which enlarged its market as well as its demand. Traders, artisans and other urban dwellers donated handsomely to the Buddhist monasteries and thereby contributed to their expansion. Apart from fooding and lodging, the Buddhist monasteries may as well provided with banking services for the merchants in the Kushana period<sup>18</sup>. The new commercial ethos in the Buddhist theology gave more impetus to donate. The monks were no longer going out individually with their begging bowls for daily food. A giant stone symbolic of a begging bowl placed in front of a monastery of Mathura testify to the transformation of financial transactions between lay devotees and Buddhist institutions<sup>19</sup>.

Gradually, the concept of seven treasures came up in the Buddhist ideology and donation of luxury items became an integral part of the Buddhist worship. Contemporary Buddhism believed that the Lord Buddha could save a person through the merit he has accumulated. This merit can be accumulated through donations, thus it can be exchanged or transferred like goods. However, this kind of ideological change prompted some kind of institutional changes in the Buddhist monasteries. And this changing scenario created new dimension in the relationship among sovereigns, lay devotees and the Buddhist Sanghas.

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<sup>18</sup> Xinru Liu: *Ancient India and Ancient China*, New Delhi, 1988. P.121.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10.

## Development of the Concept of Seven Treasures or the Sapta Ratna

The traditional Buddhist concept of *sapta ratna* may have been derived from the *Mahavastu*. According to *Mahavastu*, the worship and patronage of Buddha cannot be conducted without certain material commodities and worship with precious material would yield tangible benefits. According to this book, the king who builds a palace of precious materials has full right to claim Buddhahood by virtue of merit. The *Mahavastu* repeatedly mentions specific list of items, like *Suvarna* (gold), *rupya* (silver), *vaidurya* (lapis lazuli), *sphatika* (crystal or quartz), *mukta* (pearl), *lohitika* (red coral or red precious stone), *musaragalva* (ammonite, agate or a kind of coral) and silk. The components of *sapta ratna* were thus fixed in the *Mahavastu*; only minor changes came in this list in the later Buddhist texts.

Pearl has been omitted from the list and two other treasures have been incorporated; they were *rohitamukti* (red pearl or rubies or carnelian or red precious stones) and *asmagarbha* (amber, coral, diamond or emerald). While the translation of *suvarna*, *rupya*, *vaidurya*, *sphatika* and *mukta* are certain, others are open to interpretation. Interestingly, sacred *sapta ratna* mainly consists of important Indian exports to China and on the other hand, silk was the chief Indian import from China.

Gradually, seven treasures evolved as a symbol of collection of best substances of this and other world, thus it became a standard formula in Buddhist worship. A stone casket found in a stupa chamber of Kalawan, Taxila, provides a good sample of how the *sapta ratna* was embodied among Buddhists in the Kushana period. This collection includes gold sheets and discs, silver sheets and discs, a piece of quartz, crystal beads, a beryl bead (a kind of gem stone) which is green, green glass beads, a piece of garnet which is red, pearls, a piece of turquoise, and bones as relics of Buddha. Thus, the doner was quite successful in attaining the requirements of the *sapta ratna*<sup>20</sup>.

However, silk was an integral part of the Buddhist worship. Silk was widely used as banner and draped over the stupas. *Mahavastu* also repeatedly mentions the worshipping of the Buddha with silk banners. Worshipping with silk ensures prosperity, material gain and a higher status. The promise of this kind certainly encouraged the laity to decorate the stupas with thousands of silk banners<sup>21</sup>. A piece silk found in a Buddhist relic casket dated to the early centuries of Christian era in Nagara is an evidence of the role of silk in Buddhist rituals<sup>22</sup>.

The *Saddharmapundarika* (the Lotus Sutra) mentions the worshipping of the Buddha and Bodhisatvas with flowers, incense, garlands, ointments, powder, clothes, necklaces, gems, jewels and as well as with canopies, flags and banners of silk<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Marshall, Sir John Hubert, *Taxila*, 1951, 1, 327.

<sup>21</sup> *Saddharmapundarika*, XXII-2, Trans. pp. 382-3.

<sup>22</sup> Mehta, R.N & S.N.Chowdhury: Excavations at Devnimori. Baroda. 1966. P. 186.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, X-1, Trans. p.215; 15-16; XI 66-7; XXII 2, Trans. p.389).

## Traders and Merchants as Great Patrons of Buddhism

According to James Heitzman, the spread of Buddhist monasteries was intimately connected with urban settlements, trade routes and imperial domains. The distribution of monastic sites during the 1<sup>st</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE closely follows the trade routes and urban centres.

Buddhist monastic sites have been recovered from ancient urban centres, like Kapisi (Begram), Taxila, Kausambi, Mathura, Sanchi, and Sopara. Himanshu Prabha Ray convincingly demonstrates that the survival of the Buddhist monasteries in Deccan depended on the trade routes<sup>24</sup>. Monastic sites of Junnar and Hadda in Afghanistan were also associated with caravanserais<sup>25</sup>.

Buddhist institutions were not only directly related with trade and trade routes but had close ties with the trading community. In the Buddhist texts we find Buddha addressing the audience as *kulaputra* or *kulaputta* (in Pali) meaning sons of good families. In Buddhist literature *Kulaputta* or sons of good families either belonged to Kshatriyas (warriors) or Vanikas (traders)<sup>26</sup>. Activities of the rich merchants and their patronage towards Buddhism was one of the favourite topics of Buddhist literature. The story of the first two lay followers (both were traders) who gave alms to the Buddha soon after his Enlightenment appears many times in Pali literature. We find almost the same repetition in the *Mahavastu*, *Buddhacarita*. In the *Milindapanha* (I, 33), *Nagasena* receives the patronage of a merchant on his way to *Pataliputra* to improve his knowledge of Buddhism. *Nagasena* also uses series of similies related to ships to explain Buddhist doctrines<sup>27</sup>.

The Roman traders mainly came from eastern provinces, they were mostly Egyptian Greeks. These traders made donations in Mathura, Taxila; they had even constructed a sphinx in Karle<sup>28</sup>. Kosambi argues that the structure of some of the Western Indian viharas indicates that certain cells were used as treasuries<sup>29</sup>. The institutional changes of the monasteries during the Kushana period made monasteries to act as financial agents, at least for their own holdings.

## Cosmopolitan Nature of Buddhism

The landscape of the Buddhist literature expanded with the development of long-distance trade. They mention Shakas, Greeks, China, Alexandria, Koshala, Kashmir, Gandhara, Ujjain, Beneras, Bharukaccha

<sup>24</sup> Ray Himanshu Prabha: *Monastery and Guild: Commerce under the Satavahanas*. Delhi. 1986. Monasteries were located on the important points of the trade routes. The silting of the port of Sopara towards the end of the Satavahana period and the resulting disuse of the Nana Ghat routes linking Junnar to Sopara caused the desertion of the large monastic complex at Junnar.

<sup>25</sup> Dupre, L.: *Shamshir-Ghar: Historic Cave Site in Kandahar Province*, Afghanistan. Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, Vol. 46. Part II.

<sup>26</sup> Andersen, Dines: *A Pali Reader*. Copenhagen. 1917. II, 79.

<sup>27</sup> *Milindapanha*, VII, 4.

<sup>28</sup> Andersen, Dines: *A Pali Reader*. Copenhagen. 1917. II, 79.

<sup>29</sup> *Milindapanha*, VII, 4.

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(Barygaza), etc.<sup>30</sup> We find many descriptions of sea voyages in the Buddhist texts. Rich merchants were either maritime traders or caravan leaders.

Buddhism, being a cosmopolitan religion, attracted devotees from various countries. We find epigraphical records about donors from Iran<sup>31</sup>, Greece<sup>32</sup> and Bactria<sup>33</sup>.

### **Buddhism in China**

When and how Buddhism reached China is a topic of debate for both Buddhists as well as scholars. E. Zurcher has pointed out that it is difficult to find out exactly when the Chinese came in contact with Buddhism. Initially Buddhism was practised along with Taoism in China but it was during the reign of the Emperor Ming of the Later Han (A.D 58-75) who after dreaming of a golden image of the Buddha<sup>34</sup> sent envoys to the Yueh-chih (Kushanas). Zurcher points out that Buddhism started to spread in China from the first half of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE and the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. The Parthians, Yueh Chih (Kushanas) and Indians were following the Central Asian route and were entering China.

Old Chinese texts testify for a close contact between Buddhist missionaries and merchants. Facing the anti-commercial Han government and treacherous political situation, the traders' diaspora in China naturally rallied around the doctrine of Buddhism. The Central Asian traditions<sup>35</sup> suggest that the Buddhist missionaries were companions of traders travelling on the trade routes between India and China. Pilgrims were accompanied by merchants; they travelled in the caravans along the perilous Central Asian routes or navigated on the high seas and this increased their hazards; there was always the danger of robbers and pirates. Pilgrims and preachers thus also functioned as agents of transactions by carrying goods; like silk, Buddhist texts, relics, etc. to pay for their travel costs, to win patronage and to receive hospitality<sup>36</sup>.

### **Consolidation of Buddhism in China**

From the 1<sup>st</sup>- to 6<sup>th</sup> century CE contact between India and China intensified. Buddhist institutions and preaching activities in Northern China developed along the model of earliest Buddhist Sangha. The Northern Wei dynasty unified North China in 439 CE. On the other hand, there was a harmonious relationship between monks and the sovereign. Buddhist institutions were becoming more consolidated. Monasteries with royal patronage and financial stability were taking strong roots in the Chinese society.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, IV, 8,88 ; V, 4.

<sup>31</sup> Luders, Heinrich: Mathura Inscriptions. Gottingen. 1961. 91-2.

<sup>32</sup> Konow, Sten: Kharosthi Inscriptions with the Exception of those of Asoka. Calcutta. 1929. 98, XXXVII, No.2.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, Bahaliena Inscriptions; 77, XXVII.

<sup>34</sup> Zurcher, E: The Buddhist Conquest of China. Leiden. 1959. P. 19-22.

<sup>35</sup> Yang Hsuan-chih, Loyang Chieh-lan Chi: V,271.

<sup>36</sup> Liu Xinru: Silk and Religion. Delhi, 1996.

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Emperors and empress-Dowagers patronised Buddhism mainly by building monasteries and conducting ceremonies. *Fa-hsien* on his way back to China from India visited Sri Lanka and from there he brought *Mahasanghika-Vinaya* (the monastic rules of the Mahasanghika Sect). The Monastic Rules of the *Mahasanghika Sect* (*Seng-chih-lu*) became the monastic code of the Northern Wei monks<sup>37</sup>. Monasteries also acquired landed property.

The Northern Wei rulers were gradually entering into deeper relation with monasteries which helped the latter to emerge as a stronger institution in society. The Northern Wei rulers claimed legitimacy from Buddhist monks and thereby they invested more resources in the religious institutions, as evident from the increase in the monastery building activities. Conducting rituals and encouraging donations were the major forms of preaching activities of Northern Wei Buddhism. Various Buddhist texts composed during the Kushana period were translated into Chinese by the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. The list includes *Milindapanha*, *the Buddhacarita*, *the Saddharmapundarika* and *Sukhavativyuha* (The Land of Bliss). Even motifs from the Lotus Sutra appear in the caves of both Yun-Kang near Ping-ch'eng and Lungmen near Loyang<sup>38</sup>.

The concept of rebirth and transferring merit to one's next life became so deeply rooted in the minds of the Chinese that religious services for the souls of the dead, as well as for future lives of the living became increasingly necessary. Thus the Buddhist funeral ceremony is not the occasion to mourn but to send the loved ones to other state of being, ranging from being tortured in hell or to be born as animals or to the better outcome of enjoying heaven as a deity or to the best state of reaching nirvana. We also find various depictions of life after death, especially the scene of various Buddhist heavens, in the sculptures made by the Chinese artists on the cave paintings, stupas, etc.

With the support of political authority, Buddhist monasteries in Northern Wei China were actively participating in economic production as well as in commercial activities. Buddhist monasteries thus not only emerged as a religious institution surviving under royal patronage but also as an ideological and social system assisting in perpetuating the rule of the sovereign. Thus, Buddhism in Post-Han Northern China emerged as a strong social institution which managed to survive numerous disasters through many dynasties and ultimately came to survive even longer than its Indian counterpart.

## Conclusion

A close scrutiny of the spread of Buddhism in China from India through trans-continental trade routes is a fascinating study because it gives an insight into our past and thereby helps us to search our roots and to locate how our cultural identity has evolved through ages. This study reveals that there has been an inter-twining of some of the important historical processes; viz. long-distance trade, urbanization, evolution of Buddhist theology and spread of Buddhism in China from India.

This trans-continental trade not only created a situation where trade and commerce prospered but it led to the religious and cultural interaction between a vast geographical area. Trade also infused commercial values in Buddhism which led to the crystallisation of the concept of *sapta ratna* donations.

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<sup>37</sup> *Wei-shu*: CXIV, 3031.

<sup>38</sup> Tsukamoto, Zenryu: *Study on Chinese Buddhist History*, Northern Wei Period, Tokyo, 1944. p. 525.

The concept of seven treasures or *sapta ratna* constitutes a solid evidence of ideological and economic paths drawing close to, or even crossing each other.

Donation of seven treasures gave a boost to the trade of luxury goods. Luxury goods on the other hand are the means of marking social disparity. Rulers from the ancient times had constantly tried to possess rare goods within and outside their domain to mark themselves off from the ruled.

The Northern Wei rulers who had just come out of their nomadic background used the Buddhist values to improve their status among their subjects and thereby to claim legitimacy for their reign. The Kushana kings, who were less enthusiastic in seeking legitimacy from Buddhism, patronized Buddhism probably because monasteries indirectly contributed to the commercial economy.

The traders, both Indian and Chinese also wanted to improve their status through their association with Buddhist monasteries because monasteries provided them with financial services and travel facilities.

With the changes in the economic situation, the popularity of donation of seven treasures also declined. In India by the end of the Gupta period, society was gradually becoming dependent on sedentary agriculture and Buddhist monasteries also started to depend more on agricultural products. In this changed scenario, lamp oil and grains became integral part of Buddhist worship. Similar kind of change in value pattern was also noticeable in North China where lamp oil in front of Buddha's image became popular from the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Though the seven treasures were still highly esteemed among Buddhist devotees, it became more or less common commodities in trade. From the 7<sup>th</sup> century onwards the Buddhist worship and the Sino-Indian cultural and religious exchanges mainly revolved around relic worship, translation of the Buddhist texts and pilgrimage.

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