

Buddhism in Khotan

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Khotan which lies in the eastern region of Central Asia, also called Ser-India or the innermost Heart of Asia, became in course of time one of the famous centres of Buddhism and Buddhist Culture.

Geographical position

Buddhism entered Khotan during the reign of King Vijitasambhava, grandson of Kustana who was the son of Asoka and founded the royal dynasty at Khotan¹. The ancient annals of Khotan tell us that a monk named Aryavairocana came to Khotan from Kashmir and made the king Vijitasambhava build for him a big monastery outside its capital. It is said to have been the first Buddhist monastery constructed in Khotan. He also brought the sacred relics of Buddha from Kashmir later on. We are told that during the reigns of other subsequent kings a large number of monasteries were also built.

Introduction of Buddhist in Khotan

Khotan became an important centre of Buddhist studies from the very early times. It was also known to China as a well-known seat of Buddhist learning before the famous Chinese pilgrim Fa-Hein's visit to this place. Chu-shin-Hsung, a Chinese Buddhist monk, came to Khotan in about 260 A. D. from Loyang to study the Buddhist works. He devoted himself seriously to the Buddhist studies and collected a number of original Buddhist works and sent them to China. Moksala, a Khotanese Buddhist scholar, who went to China in 291 A. D. and translated all these works sent to China by Chu-shin-Hsung with the help of an Indian monk. Of the works translated in China, mention may be made of the Pancavimsatisahasrikaprajnaparamita, Vimalakirtinirdesa and other Mahayana texts. It is thus apparent that Khotan was a great centre of Mahayana studies in the early third century A. D.

Khotan - an important centre for Buddhist studies

1. Stein Konow, JRAS, 1914. pp. 344 ff.

In 480 A. D. Fa-hsien visited Khotan and stayed along with his companions at the Gomativihara which was one of the premier institutions of Buddhist learning and Culture in Central Asia. In his itinerary the famous pilgrim has given a very interesting description of this Vihara. He writes that in this Vihara "there were three thousand monks who are called to their meals by the sound of a bell. When they enter the refectory their demeanour is marked by a reverent gravity, and they take their seats in regular order, all maintaining a perfect silence. No sound is heard from their almsbowls and other utensils. When any of these pure men requires food they are not allowed to call out for it but only make signs with their hands".

Fa-hsien's visit
to Khotan

A number of well-known Indian scholars lived in this Vihara. Instead of coming to India many Chinese pilgrims stayed in Khotan for their Buddhist studies. The monks of Gomativihara wrote a large number of works which were regarded as canonical¹.

His itinerary throws ample light on the condition of Buddhism in Khotan. He writes that "there were some tens of thousands of monks mostly followers of the Mahayana and in the country where the houses of people were scattered "like stars" about the oases, each house had a small stupa before the door".

He has further written that apart from the famous Gomativihara there were other principal monasteries in Khotan. The king's new monastery, situated outside the city, was the second largest monastery in Khotan. It took eight years to build.

After Fa-hsien Hiuen-Tshang visited Khotan on his way back home in 644 A.D. His itinerary gives us a fair picture of Buddhism in Khotan in those days. He tells us that there were about a hundred monasteries with some five hundred monks who were adherents of Mahayana Buddhism.

Hiuen-Tsang's
visit to Khotan

1. P. C. Bagchi, India and China, p. 15.

The people were devout Buddhists and supported the Sangha with their magnificent gifts. The monasteries were not lacking in the observance of the disciplinary code and the monasteries were still the centres of learning.