

# Impact of Social and Religious Conditions in the Development of Buddhist Architecture in India

Ar. Leena Ganvir

PIADS, Nagpur

E-mail: [leenaganvir2000@yahoo.co.in](mailto:leenaganvir2000@yahoo.co.in)

---

**Abstract**—Buddhism is a religion and philosophy encompassing variety of traditions, beliefs and practices, largely based on teachings attributed to Siddhartha Gautama, commonly known as the " Buddha - the awakened one". Buddhist Architecture has its roots deeply planted in Indian 'soil' - both physically, to existing construction styles, philosophy, in relation to various cosmic theories that influenced the layout of sacred sites. During its roughly 2.5 millennia of history, Buddhism has shown a flexible approach, adapting itself to different conditions and local ideas while maintaining its core teachings. As a result of its wide geographical expansion, coupled with its tolerant spirit, Buddhism today encompasses a number of different traditions, beliefs, and practices. Now however, suppositions harden in to fact and the picture hitherto ill defined comes with an almost dramatic suddenness sharply in to focus. This effect was brought out by the policy of the third Mouryan ruler of Magadha, the emperor Ashoka who ascended the throne. An early decisive step taken by this monarch was his acceptance of teachings of Buddha. In B.C 255 Ashoka inaugurated Buddhism as the state religion of country. The correctness of the royal reformers preception is proved by the whole hearted manner in which the Buddhist faith was assimilated by his own people. Buddhism essentially graphic creed, art became its handmaid, so that wherever penetrated it was accompanied by forms and symbols expressive of its teaching. The paper talks about how these social and religious conditions had a great impact in the development of Buddhist architecture.

**Keywords:** Buddha teachings, Emperor Ashoka, Buddhist faith and beliefs, Architecture.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The origin of Buddhism points to one man, Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, who was born in Lumbini (in present-day Nepal) during the 5th century BCE. The Basic Teachings of Buddha which are core to Buddhism are: The Three Universal Truths; The Four Noble Truths; and the Noble Eightfold Path. The three main branches of Buddhism: Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. It will also highlight Pure Land and Tantric Buddhism, as well as the belief in nirvana and the bodhisattva. With the reign of Buddhist Mauryan Emperor Ashoka, the Buddhist community split into two branches: the Mahāsāṃghika and the Sthāviravāda, each of which spread throughout India and split into numerous sub-sects. The basic doctrines of early Buddhism, which remain

common to all Buddhism, include the four noble truths: existence is suffering (dukkha); suffering has a cause, namely craving and attachment (trishna); there is a cessation of suffering, which is nirvana ; and there is a path to the cessation of suffering. After Siddhartha Gautama passed away, the community he founded slowly evolved into a religion-like movement and the teachings of Siddhartha became the basis of Buddhism. The historical evidence suggests that Buddhism had a humble beginning. Apparently, it was a relatively minor tradition in India, the impact of the Buddha in his own day was relatively limited due to the scarcity of written documents, inscriptions, and archaeological evidence from that time. By the 3rd century BCE, the picture we have of Buddhism is very different. The Mauryan Indian emperor Ashoka the Great (304–232 BCE), who ruled from 268 to 232 BCE, turned Buddhism into the state religion of India. He provided a favourable social and political climate for the acceptance of Buddhist ideas, encouraged Buddhist missionary activity, and even generated among Buddhist monks certain expectations of patronage and influence on the machinery of political decision making. Archaeological evidence for Buddhism between the death of the Buddha and the time of Ashoka is scarce; after the time of Ashoka it is abundant. With the change in the religious system of India also came a marked advance in the arts. Buddhism essentially graphic creed, art became its handmaid, so that wherever penetrated it was accompanied by forms and symbols expressive of its teaching. This give rise to Ashoka School, its elements were due to the rulers initiative, they were practiced only during his reign and ceased when it ended. The principal contributions made by this school to the art and architecture of the time were some six in number, consisting of the following: 1) a series of edicts inscribed on the rocks, 2) s number of tumuli or stupas, 3) certain monolithic pillars, 4) several monolithic accessories to shrines, 5) the remains of a vast palace and group of rock cut chambers .Among these productions that more directly affected the course of the art of buildings were the Stupas on account of their structural significance, the monolithic pillars in view of their artistic qualities, the rock cut chambers because of their techniques. A craving for a symbol of stability occurs in the early evolutions

of most nations, a need for some “substantial link which holds them to the soil” and is a stage in the development of racial self consciousness. In the beginning he carved his famous edicts on the living rocks, was the creations of a memorial of such a permanent nature that it would outlast time itself. With this in view he caused to be raised in many parts of his empire circular tumuli of brick, sacred mounds commemorative of the Buddha. The two phases of Buddhism are:

HINAYANA: 2nd cen.BC to 2ND cen. AD

MAHAYANA: 3rd cen. AD to 7th cen.AD

During the Hinayana Period the Buddha was represented by religious symbols like Dharmachakra, Chattri, footprints. In this period Idol worshipping was not really used. But during the Mahayana period Buddha was represented by the sculptures carved out in various sizes, depicting various postures like standing, sitting, laying etc. Due to change in social belief , Buddhist architecture has monolithic pillars, Stupas, Chaityas and Viharas. Viharas were initially temporary shelters used by wandering Monks during rainy season but later was developed to accommodate the growing Buddhist monasticism. The existing example is Buddha Vihar at Nalanda. Later due to change in religious practices stupas were gradually incorporated in to chaitya Grihas (prayer halls).

**Stupas:** As the stupa from the nature of its structure was subject to disintegration owing to the rigours of the climate, it became necessary for the Mouryan Emperor to seek for some still lasting method of achieving the purpose. Although the imposing special sanctity and importance. Although the imposing monolithic pillars raised in the vicinity of several of these shrines their sacred character was appreciably augmented, it was stupa , as the symbol of Buddha. At early date it is clear that these tumuli of brick, endowed as they were with great spiritual significance. The stupa consisted of a masonry hemisphere solidly constructed of large unburnt bricks. In the centre of this domical mound or anda , a small space was usually left for a receptacle containing a relic of Buddha .The brickwork surface of dome was finished off with a thick layer of plaster , in which at intervals recesses were left for reception of small lamps to be lit on festive occasions. Buddhist ritual consists of circumbalating the stupa, a processional passage (pradakshina path) was provided by enclosing the monument within.

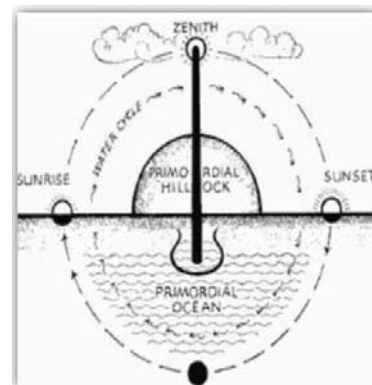


Fig. 1: principle of stupa construction

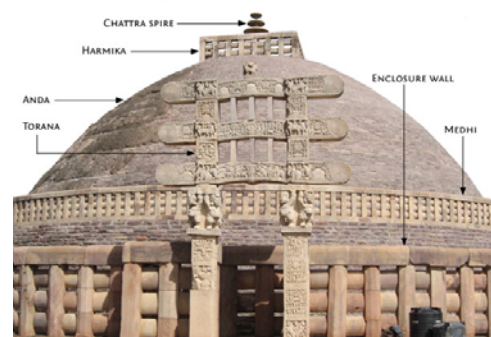


Fig. 2: Sanchi Stupa with dome and railings

Towards the middle of second century B.C a change becomes observable. By this time the religion had fully recovered from Ashoka hand, and the orders of monks had developed in to numerous and powerful monarchism having substantial resources, rich benefices. After the death of the Buddha, those who followed his teachings had formed settled communities in different locations. Language differences, doctrinal disagreements, the influence of non-Buddhist schools, loyalties to specific teachers, and the absence of a recognized overall authority or unifying organizational structure are just some examples of factors that contributed to sectarian fragmentation. The most fascinating contribution of Buddhism to India was in the field of Sculptures and architectures. Buddhist art and sculpture developed with the spread of Buddhism. In art and architecture stone was used from Ashoka's time. Numerous stupas, chaityas and pillars were constructed.

**Ashoka Pillars:** Considering stone as a commonly used material of that era, Emperor Ashoka created an impressive monument symbolizing the creed was devised in the form of pillar, a lofty free standing monolithic column erected on a site especially selected on account of its sacred associations. A number of these Ashokan pillars were distributed over a wide area.

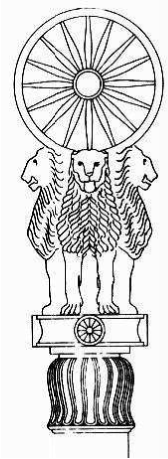


Fig. 3: Ashoka Stambha

**Toranas:** These are related to Buddhist stupa, four elaborately carved gateways were carved. The Eastern Gateway was built in 35 BC and is one of the four gateways located in Sanchi that depict the different incidents of Gautama Buddha's life. The Eastern Gateway displays the incident when Gautama left the palace for his enlightenment.



Fig. 4: torana at Sanchi stupa

Of the construction advances in the stupas it can be said that art of masonry building was moving slowly. The efflorescence of symbolism contained in the accessories to the stupa colored the art of India throughout much of its subsequent course, the shape of the Torana itself became a characteristics architectural feature whenever Buddhism prevailed. Two types of structures came early to the evidence, one being a temple for the performance of the ritual, and the other a monastery for the residence of priests. The temple or chaitya hall arose out of the particular demands of the Buddhist religion. With the appearance of a material cult object in the form of stupa (chaitya), some building for the accommodation of facsimiles of this divine symbol, together with the shelter for the convenience of those who came to pay their devotions to it, became necessary.

**Chaityas:** The monasteries required large living areas. ... As the pat of religious belief, the monastery quickly became

important and had a three-fold purpose: as a residence for monks, as a center for religious work (on behalf of the laity) and as a center for Buddhist learning. Early chaityas enshrined a stupa with space for congregational worship by the monks. This reflected one of the early differences between early Buddhism and Hinduism, with Buddhism favoring congregational worship in contrast to Hinduism's individual approach. Early chaitya grihas were cut into living rock as caves. These served as a symbol and sites of a sangha congregational life.

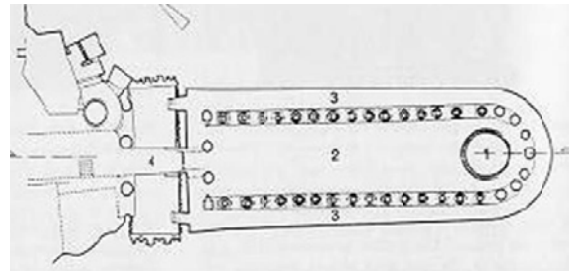


Fig. 5: Chaitya hall at Karle caves

**Viharas:** The other building required in connection with Buddhist shrine was a monastery or vihara. Viharas were for the purpose of living, one of the four states of mind, namely love, compassion, sympathetic gladness, and equanimity, to be developed by every Buddhist. The viharas in India were originally constructed to shelter the monks during the rainy season, when it became difficult for them to lead the wanderer's life. The places of residence were generally planned on the principle, with the rooms opening on to an interior quadrangle, their backs forming a plain outside wall, the whole being so designed to secure both privacy and protection. They took on a sacred character when small stupas (housing sacred relics) and images of the Buddha were installed in the central court. Here it means a central hall, with small cells connected to it sometimes with beds carved from the stone. Some have a shrine cell set back at the centre of the back wall, containing a stupa in early examples, or a Buddha statue later.

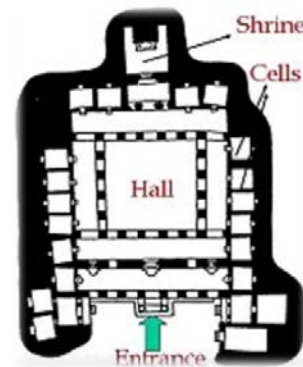


Fig. 6: Plan of Vihara (rock cut)

The diversified arrangement of the Mahayana Viharas, the plan of the monastic hall became more or less standardized, although the detailed treatment of the Viharas shows considerable variety and fertility of invention. In caves at Aurangabad, the various groups of Viharas has several compositions containing representation of deities, some of them comply with requirement of rock technique. The sculptures were able to break away from their endless reproduction of the conventional and stylized images of the deities; they could depict the human form in its most life like manner, realistically and naturally. Thus it is evident that genuine artistic expression was unduly restrained by the exacting conditions of the existing belief.

## References

- [1] <http://www.srmuniv.ac.in/sites/default/files/downloads/buddism.pdf>
- [2] [https://www.google.com/search?q=stupas&source=lnms&tbn=i sch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjg-7H8jJDhAhUBPY8KHSGsBR8Q\\_AUIDigB&biw=1366&bih=657#imgrc=Bis2axPuBq0kAM](https://www.google.com/search?q=stupas&source=lnms&tbn=i sch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjg-7H8jJDhAhUBPY8KHSGsBR8Q_AUIDigB&biw=1366&bih=657#imgrc=Bis2axPuBq0kAM)
- [3] [https://www.google.com/search?q=buddhism+social+issues&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjS-5y-\\_Y\\_hAhVx7HMBHdKwCgAQ1QIoAnoECAsQAw&biw=1366&bih=657](https://www.google.com/search?q=buddhism+social+issues&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjS-5y-_Y_hAhVx7HMBHdKwCgAQ1QIoAnoECAsQAw&biw=1366&bih=657)
- [4] [https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1810/242997/bot\\_11\\_03\\_02.pdf?sequence=1](https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1810/242997/bot_11_03_02.pdf?sequence=1)
- [5] [http://content.inflibnet.ac.in/data-server/eacharya-documents/548158e2e41301125fd790cf\\_INFIEP\\_72/94/ET/72-94-ET-V1-S1\\_\\_ic-25-lec.pdf](http://content.inflibnet.ac.in/data-server/eacharya-documents/548158e2e41301125fd790cf_INFIEP_72/94/ET/72-94-ET-V1-S1__ic-25-lec.pdf)