



(L) A stupa dedicated to Sariputra at the ancient Nalanda monastery, Bihar, India. (R) Mahasiddha Chandragomin, Black Schist, Bangladesh, 12th century



# Buddhist theatre in South Asia and beyond

**The significance of the corpus of Buddhist plays is immense. Firstly, it indicates that the genesis of theatre in South Asia is well before the 2nd century CE, because when Āsvaghōṣa emerged as a playwright at this juncture, he was already well-adapted to the craftsmanship of playwriting, and appears to have inherited a long tradition that flourished before him. Secondly, and more importantly for Bangladesh, 'the genesis of theatre in the country can now be firmly pushed back to the 5th century CE, since we have Lokānanda-nāṭaka as a piece of 'hard' evidence.**

SYED JAMIL AHMED, PHD

Considerable research conducted by renowned Orientalists such as Moriz Winternitz, Heinrich Lüders, Arthur Berriedale Keith, Sylvain Lévi and Sten Konow between the 1880s and 1960s have established that between the 1st century CE to the 7th century CE, a tradition of Buddhist theatre flourished in South Asia. This tradition, generated by a host of Buddhist scholars and practitioners, is an important source for the study of the indigenous theatre not only of Bangladesh, but also of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The problem with Bangladesh is that very few scholars and practitioners engaged with theatre demonstrate any interest in the tradition. Consequently, the Indian State, media and academia have exerted their hold on the tradition to such an extent that the world recognizes ancient Buddhist theatre in South Asia as an exclusive intellectual terrain of modern India. Although Bangladesh can lay a rightful claim to the tradition, it has failed to do so, mostly because the State, media and academia in Bangladesh are hardly enthusiastic regarding the non-Islamic past of Bangladesh. This piece presents a summary of current research on ancient Buddhist theatre in South Asia, in order to serve as a catalyst that hopefully will trigger enough interest in establishing Bangladesh's rightful claim to its Buddhist past.

Existing evidence indicates that Āsvaghōṣa (c. 80-150 CE) was not only the earliest Buddhist playwright, but also the earliest Sanskrit playwright in South Asia. He was a renowned Buddhist philosopher and poet at the court of Kushan emperor Kanishka, whose capital was situated in Puruṣapura (what now is Peshawar in Pakistan). Another important playwright from the 5th century CE was Chandragomin. It is now certain that he was not only a famous Buddhist scholar-monk renowned for his work on Sanskrit grammar but also the composer of a play titled *Lokānanda*. As the famous Buddhist traveler-monk Yijing (I-Tsing) observed, he was from the eastern part of South Asia. Other scholars are in agreement that the eastern region referred to was ancient Bengal. Besides these two playwrights, scholars also believe that a mysterious Buddhist acharya named Rāhula composed a treatise on theatre (*nāṭya*), which is now completely lost. It is also argued that Buddhist theatre beginning with Āsvaghōṣa in the first century CE, down to Emperor Harṣavardhana in the 7th century CE, was not only well-developed theoretically but was also quite popular among the people. When an exact accounting is done, the corpus of Buddhist plays is found to include the following eight texts, one extant in original, one in translation, five in fragments, while one has been completely lost. Given below is a brief

account of these works.

1. *Sāriputra-prakarāṇa* (a play in 9 acts) by Āsvaghōṣa. Only fragments of the last two acts are extant. Recovered by Lüders at Turfan in Tarim Basin, in 1911, the play is based on the legend of Sāriputra and Maudgalyāyana ordaining as monks under the Buddha, as related in the *Mahāvagga* of the *Vinayapiṭaka*. As shown in the last two acts of the play, Sāriputra has an interview with Āsvajit, the Buddha's first disciple. Then he engages in a conversation with his friend the Viduṣaka (jester), on the merits of the teachings of Gautama Buddha. The Viduṣaka advises Sāriputra against accepting Buddhist teachings, since Sāriputra is a Brahman and the Buddha hails from the *kṣtrīya* (warrior) caste. But Sāriputra rejects the Viduṣaka's argument on the ground that the Vaidya (physician) is capable of healing the sick despite belonging to a low social caste. Next, when he meets his dear friend Maudgalyāyana, the latter enquires as to why Sāriputra appears radiant. Sāriputra informs Maudgalyāyana about the Buddha and his teachings, and they both decide to seek refuge in Buddhism. The Buddha receives them warmly and foretells that the two will be the highest in knowledge and magic power among his disciples. At the end of the play, Gautama Buddha and Sāriputra engage in a philosophical dialogue which rejects the belief in a permanent self (*atmā*).

2. Fragment of a play, possibly a *nāṭaka*, with allegorical characters such as Buddhi (Wisdom), Dhṛti (Firmness) and Kirtī (Fame). It was found at Turfan in Tarim Basin, but the playwright's name is unavailable. Nevertheless, because the fragment has been recovered with Sāriputra-prakarāṇa and because it demonstrates remarkable linguistic similarity with the same play, it is believed that the playwright of this fragment is also Āsvaghōṣa. The fragment shows the three allegorical characters conversing in Sanskrit. At one stage, the Buddha enters the stage. It is uncertain whether he engages in a dialogue with the allegorical characters, because the play is fragmented at this point.

3. Fragment of another play that appears to be a *prakaraṇa* like the *Mycchakaṭikā* by Shudraka. It was also recovered at Turfan. The author remains unknown but this too is believed to have been authored by Āsvaghōṣa. The characters of the play are a heterogenous lot: a courtesan named Magadhābatī, a Viduṣaka named Komudhagandha, a hero named Somadatta, a rogue named Duṣṭa, a prince named Dhanananjaya, a maid-servant, Sāriputra and Maudgalyāyana. One scene of the play takes place at Magadhābatī's home and another at a park. The play also mentions a festival held at a hilltop.

4. *Raṣṭapala-nāṭaka* by Āsvaghōṣa, which has disappeared completely, but

its existence is confirmed by references found in a Chinese translation of *Sri Dharma-piṭaka-sampradāya Nidāna* (472 AD), titled *Fu ja tsang yin yüan ch'üan*, and two other Buddhist liturgical texts. The plot was possibly based on the Raṭṭhapalasutta in the *Majjhimanikāya*, showing how Raṭṭhapala, after renouncing worldly life to become a monk, could not be enticed back to worldly life even with heaps of gold and alluring advances of his ex-wives. As recounted in *Fu ja tsang yin yüan ch'üan*, a performance of the play, in which Āsvaghōṣa himself



Ivory relief depicting Sāriputra and Maudgalyāyana becoming disciples of the Buddha

conducted the orchestra, was so successful that five hundred *kṣtrīyas* renounced worldly life to become Buddhist monks. In order to make sure that such a mass exodus is not repeated, the king of Pataliputra forbade all future performance of the play.

5. *Lokānanda-nāṭaka* by Chandragomin, a play in five acts composed in the 5th century CE. The original text in Sanskrit has disappeared. In the first half of the 14th century, the play was translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan in Kathmandu. Michael Hahn used the Tibetan version to translate it in German in 1974, and in English in 1987 as *Joy for the World*. The play shows how Prince Manicūḍa (later the king) of Saketa, who is gifted with a benevolence-showering jewel implanted on the crown of his head, sacrifices all his possessions including his kingdom – and even his wife and son – in order to remain steadfast to his commitment to munificence. He dies when he sacrifices even the jewel implanted on his head to a wicked Brahmin, but is revived by the gods because of his commitment to munificence.

6. *Nāgananda-nāṭaka*, a play in five acts attributed to Emperor Harṣavardhana (reigned 606 – 648 CE). It is based on King Jimutavāhana's

self-sacrifice to save the Nagas (a race of semi-divine half-serpent beings who live in the underworld). The play is still extant in original Sanskrit. *Nāgananda-nāṭaka* may demonstrate signs of Buddhist lineage superficially, but a close reading demonstrates that its religio-philosophical inclination is a curious blend of Hinduism and Buddhism.

7. *Maitreyasamiti-nāṭaka* (lit. "Encounter with Maitreya"), a play in 27 acts bearing a Sanskrit title but written in the language known as Tocharian A. Quite a few fragments of the play were recovered from Turfan and Yanqi (Tarim Basin), all dated to the 8th century CE. *Maitreyasamiti-nāṭaka* is based on Buddha Maitreya, the future saviour of the world. An Old Uyghur translation of the Tocharian text, dated to the 10th century CE, has also been recovered.

8. In 2007, fragment of an unnamed another play was recovered in Afghanistan and has been published by Uwe Hartmann. The recovered fragment shows that it was composed in Sanskrit and Prakrit, in prose as well as verse. It appears to indicate dialogue among three characters: Viduṣaka, King, and Minister.

The significance of the corpus of Buddhist plays is immense. Firstly, it indicates that the genesis of theatre in South Asia is well before the 2nd century CE, because when Āsvaghōṣa emerged as a playwright at this juncture, he was already well-adapted to the craftsmanship of playwriting, and appears to have inherited a long tradition that flourished before him. Secondly, and more importantly for Bangladesh, 'the genesis of theatre in the country can now be firmly pushed back to the 5th century CE, since we have *Lokānanda-nāṭaka* as a piece of 'hard' evidence. It may be recalled that hitherto, the earliest evidence of theatre in ancient Bengal was dated to the 8th-10th century, as ascertained by the occurrence of the term 'Buddha-nāṭaka' in a *caryā* song by Vinā-pada. Thirdly, by the 10th century CE, Buddhist theatre appears to have generated the growth of a lively world of performance not only in what today is Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan, but also in Central Asia. Indeed, the Silk Road was key to this transmission. As I argue elsewhere, Buddhist dramaturgy also 'travelled' to Tibet, where it was rejected by Vajrayana Buddhism. However, nurtured by Mahayana Buddhism, it prospered in the Tarim Basin and the adjoining oases kingdoms, where it was transmuted into Buddhist plays in Tokharian and Khotanese Saka. These plays were produced during Buddhist festivals in Khotan and Kocho, at mass public gatherings in the vicinity of temples. The Khotanese Buddhist theatre may have met with a sad demise at the hands of the Muslim Kara-Khanid rulers. Nevertheless,

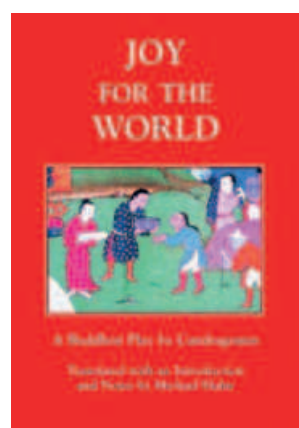
Tokharian Buddhist plays, possibly performed in pavilions in temple precincts, travelled on to the Northern Song empire (China), and were further transformed to give rise to *zaji*, and the performance pavilions such as those in temple compounds located in Shanxi and Zhejiang provinces in China. Towards the end of the Tang period and during the political upheavals of the 10th century, when Buddhism lost favour of the state, and subsequently in early 11th century, when the Muslims began to control the Silk Road in central Asia, all traces of Buddhist plays were erased by neo-Confucianism and Taoism. Nevertheless, the performances continued to live in transmuted forms.

Laying aside the 'scholarly' importance for the academics to ponder over, it is important to turn to *Lokānanda-nāṭaka*, the miracle-recounting Buddhist play from ancient Bangladesh, to recognize that its significance extends beyond that of a heritage object preserved in museums. Let us begin by acknowledging that miracles have been recounted in all major religions, such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. It is pointless to argue about the validity of any of these miracles, for their worth are embedded deep in the belief system of the devotees. Instead, I argue that a particular significance of *Lokānanda-nāṭaka* lies in its validity as a root paradigm. As the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner explains in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, root paradigms are not univocal concepts nor stereotyped guidelines, but extend beyond the cognitive and the moral to the existential domain.

Paradigms of this fundamental sort reach down to irreducible life stances of individuals, passing beneath conscious prehension to a fiduciary hold on what they sense to be axiomatic values, matters literally of life or death. Root paradigms emerge in life crises, whether of groups or individuals, whether institutionalized or compelled by unforeseen events. One cannot then escape their presence or their consequences.

The root paradigm that *Lokānanda-nāṭaka* posits is Manicūḍa's commitment to munificence. Similar root paradigms may also be found in Raja Harishchandra's sacrifices as projected in Hinduism and Prophet Ibrahim's *qurbani* as articulated in Islam. Faced with endemic corruption in Bangladesh, to the extent that it is ranked 147th out of 180 countries in Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, perhaps we would do better if we draw on all the root-paradigms of munificence and sacrifices that our tradition offers us.

Syed Jamil Ahmed, PhD is Honorary Professor at University of Dhaka and Theatre Director at Spardha: Independent Theatre Collective



English translation of Chandragomin's play *Lokānanda-nāṭaka*