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THE CONFLUENCE OF POETIC ART AND PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT IN AŚVAGHOṢA'S BUDDHACARITA

Dr. Shweta Sharma

Assistant Professor for English, School of Shastric Learning,
Kavikulaguru Kalidas Sanskrit University, Ramtek

Abstract

This paper represents a comprehensive exploration of *Buddhacarita*, a substantial work in Buddhist Sanskrit literature, created by Aśvaghoṣa. As one of the earliest Sanskrit epics, *Buddhacarita* describes the life of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, using distinguished poetic skills to depict both historical and philosophical content. This paper observes the literary form and stylistic devices used by Aśvaghoṣa, the representation of the Buddha's life as an ideal, and the philosophical foundations rooted within the narrative. The paper also explores the diffusion of *Buddhacarita* through various beliefs, emphasizing its importance as a literary and religious text that has shaped Buddhist philosophy and practice across centuries.

Key Words: Aśvaghoṣa, Sanskrit Epics, Religious Text, Buddhist Philosophy

The *Buddhacarita*, authored by the prominent Buddhist poet and philosopher Aśvaghoṣa, is a chef-d'oeuvre of Buddhist Sanskrit literature. Comprised around the 1st or 2nd century CE, the text is one of the earliest examples of a Sanskrit epic (*mahākāvya*). The work states the story of the Buddha's life from his birth to his enlightenment, and its literary and philosophical significance has made it an crucial text for intellectuals of Buddhism, Sanskrit poetry, and Indian intellectual history. Aśvaghoṣa, through his poetic style, communicates both the factual details of the Buddha's life and the vital teachings of Buddhism.

This paper aims to explore the *Buddhacarita* from multiple dimensions: its literary craftsmanship, its philosophical themes, and its historical significance. The analysis will demonstrate how Aśvaghoṣa blends poetic techniques with Buddhist doctrine to create a text that is both aesthetically rich and philosophically profound.

Aśvaghoṣa was not only a poet but also a philosopher and spiritual thinker. He is attributed for spreading Buddhist ideas through the medium of classical Sanskrit, thereby making them reachable to the broader intellectual society of ancient India. His works, including *Buddhacarita* and *Saundarananda*, played a pivotal role in the propagation of Buddhism, particularly Mahāyāna teachings.

The *Buddhacarita* is a prime example of the *mahākāvya* or epic genre in Sanskrit literature. This genre conventionally focused on the lives of kings and heroes, often with divine interference. Aśvaghoṣa alters this form to recount the life of the Buddha, imbuing it with religious and philosophical significance. The *mahākāvya* form allows Aśvaghoṣa to weave intricate descriptions, dialogues, and philosophical debates into the narrative, while adhering to the conventional structure of an epic poem.

The original Sanskrit text of *Buddhacarita* was composed in 28 cantos, but only the first 14 are existing in the original language. The other chapters have endured in Chinese and Tibetan translations, designating the extensive impact of the text across Asia. The early translations into Chinese (by Dharmarakṣa in the 5th century) and Tibetan further determine the implication of the text in shaping Buddhist stories across cultural boundaries.



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The *Buddhacarita* follows the conventional arrangements of Sanskrit epics, retaining strict metrical patterns such as *anuṣṭubh* (a common meter in classical Sanskrit poetry). The meticulous narrative is divided into cantos, each concentrating on different episodes of the Buddha's life, from his incredible birth to his enlightenment.

Aśvaghoṣa employs various poetic techniques, such as similes, metaphors, and vivid imagery, to convey both the external events of the Buddha's life and the internal, spiritual alteration that occurs. For instance, the account of Siddhartha's renunciation is instilled with imagery of fading beauty, symbolizing the transience of worldly pleasures.

A recurring technique in the *Buddhacarita* is the use of contrast. Aśvaghoṣa juxtaposes the material luxury of Siddhartha's early life with the spiritual severity he later incorporates, creating a dramatic strain that highlights the Buddha's journey toward enlightenment.

The central character, Siddhartha Gautama, is portrayed as both a historical figure and a divine being destined for enlightenment. Aśvaghoṣa presents him as the ideal model of the bodhisattva, whose concern and wisdom lead him to repudiate worldly pleasures in pursuit of spiritual truth. Other characters, such as King Śuddhodana, Queen Māyā, and Yashodhara, are portrayed as deeply human, their emotions and reactions adding depth to the narrative.

At the heart of *Buddhacarita* is the bodhisattva ideal, which is central to Mahāyāna Buddhism. The text emphasizes the Buddha's role as a bodhisattva who, out of compassion for all beings, renounces personal nirvāṇa to guide others on the path to liberation. The renunciation episode, where Siddhartha leaves his palace and family, exemplifies this selfless commitment to the welfare of all sentient beings.

The text integrates key Buddhist teachings, such as the Four Noble Truths, the concept of suffering (*duḥkha*), and the temporariness (*anitya*) of all phenomena. These doctrines are not merely abstract ideas but are presented through the Buddha's life story, making them reachable and relevant. The Great Renunciation, for example, symbolizes the understanding of suffering and the rejection of momentary pleasures in quest of ultimate truth.

A key philosophical teaching in the *Buddhacarita* is the Middle Way, which rejects both extreme asceticism and indulgence. This is exquisitely portrayed in Siddhartha's accomplishment after years of practicing severe asceticism. His enlightenment under the Bodhi tree marks the crowning of this insight, where he transcends extremes to find the balanced path to liberation.

The *Buddhacarita* has had a lasting influence on Mahāyāna Buddhism, particularly in its portrayal of the bodhisattva ideal. The work emphasises the belief that the Buddha's life is a model for all desiring bodhisattvas, who must nurture compassion, wisdom, and selflessness.

The *Buddhacarita* was not only prominent in India but also played a essential role in the dissemination of Buddhist teachings to China, Japan, and Tibet. Its narrative provided a widespread and accessible account of the Buddha's life, which became central to Buddhist art, literature, and religious practice in these regions. The translation of the text into Chinese by Dharmarakṣa in the 5th century greatly expanded its influence, shaping Chinese Buddhist literature for centuries.

The life of the Buddha as described in *Buddhacarita* has been portrayed in various forms of Buddhist art, particularly in the Gandhara and Mathura schools of sculpture. Scenes from the Buddha's life, such as the Great Renunciation and the enlightenment, are commonly found in Buddhist art, inspired in part by Aśvaghoṣa's vivid descriptions.



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The first 14 cantos of *Buddhacarita* survive in Sanskrit, while the remaining cantos are preserved in Chinese and Tibetan translations. These translations have provided scholars with the prospect to study the full narrative, though the extant Sanskrit portions remain the primary source for literary and linguistic analysis.

Over the centuries, numerous commentaries on *Buddhacarita* have been written, both in India and in countries where Buddhism spread. These commentaries often focus on the philosophical aspects of the text, offering interpretations of the Buddha's actions and the symbolic meanings of key events in the narrative.

The *Buddhacarita* is an exemplary text that bridges the worlds of literature and philosophy. Aśvaghoṣa's poetic genius allows him to craft a narrative that is both aesthetically pleasing and spiritually profound. Through the story of the Buddha's life, the text conveys central Buddhist doctrines in a way that is accessible to both scholars and practitioners.

The influence of *Buddhacarita* on Buddhist thought, art, and literature cannot be overstated. Its transmission across Asia and its continued relevance in Buddhist studies today demonstrate the enduring power of Aśvaghoṣa's work. Future research could further explore the comparative study of *Buddhacarita* with other Buddhist texts and its role in shaping the religious and cultural landscape of ancient and modern Buddhism.

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