

BUDDHIST MISSION VISITS AMERICA BEFORE COLUMBUS

By V. G. Nair

The early centuries of the Christian era were marked by intensive Buddhist missionary activity beyond the borders of India. Continuing the tradition of Asokan missionaries, Buddhist monks from Ceylon, South India, particularly Kanchipuram and Central and Northern India were engaged in the early centuries of the Christian era in propagating the teachings of the Buddha in distant lands like China, Japan, Tibet, Mongolia, Burma and other countries. These monks carried with them images and sacred relics and also manuscripts of Buddhist scripture.

In many cases they mastered the languages of the countries they visited and translated many Buddhist texts from Pali and Sanskrit into those languages. In this way Buddhist literature was translated into many Asian languages. The trials, tribulations and exploits of these pioneer Buddhist missionaries have been recorded in inscriptions and in the literature of the countries where they preached. Their missions abroad have left their imprint on the culture of the lands they lived in.

Although India is the birth-place of Buddhism, and we have a vast Buddhist literature accumulated through centuries and handed down to us, we do not find in it any allusion to Buddhist missionary activities in lands beyond the Atlantic and the Pacific. But it seems that Buddhist monks visited also the Pacific Islands and America.

Chaman Lan and some American scholars hold that it was not Columbus who discovered America but Hindu immigrants from India. This ingenious theory is based on certain traditions prevalent in Central America and Mexico. But the theory lacks support of literary evidence. We have, however, at least one recorded reference in Chinese annals to a party of Buddhist monks who went over to America in the 5th Century A.D. and introduced Buddhism among the people there.

Hui Shen's Mission

On the other hand, two American scholars and two Canadian scholars have brought to light the activities of a Buddhist mission to Central American and Mexico during the 5th Century A.D. The findings of these scholars are based not only on Chinese annals, but also on the traditions and religious customs existing in Central America and Mexico. It is a thrilling story: it adds another chapter to the history of Buddhism and ancient Indo-American cultural relations.

According to Professor John Fryer of the University of California, a Buddhist monk called Hui Shen in Chinese and four other priests who were originally natives of Kabul in Afghanistan visited Central America and Mexico in 458 A.D. for the purpose of preaching the message of the Buddha. The party split into two and separately reached Central America where they carried on their missionary activities for more than forty years. Hui Shen, the leader or one of the members of the party returned to China in 499 A.D. travelling alone after a lapse of forty years.

It is not known whether the party travelled from Kabul to China overland and to Central America by sea or came to one of the Indian ports from Kabul and thence set sail for the Pacific coast. It is presumed that the party first went to China from where they sailed to Central America. At that period, China was a noted centre of Buddhist missionary activities, in Asia. Whatever might have been the route followed by the party, Hui Shen, on his return journey arrived at Kinh-Chow, the capital of the Tsi dynasty, situated on the Yangtze. The traveller waited for three years for an audience with the Emperor to report on his activities in Central America but he was unable to meet the Emperor owing to civil war then prevalent in the country. But in 502 A.D. Hui Shen met Emperor Wu Ti of the new Liang dynasty and told him all about his Buddhist mission to Central America.

It appears from Chinese annals that Hui Shen was not a Chinese national and spoke only imperfect Chinese, and that Emperor Wu Ti treated him like an envoy from Central America apparently because of his alien nationality. Hui Shen presented the Emperor with curious articles which he had brought from Central America and Mexico. Wu Ti, who was a pious Buddhist and a patron of Buddhism, was much impressed with the narrative of Hui Shen and deputed one of the feudal lords, Yu Kei, to interrogate Hui Shen for details about his mission to America and to make a complete record of his activities in the strange country. This was accordingly done and Hui Shen's narrative was included in the Imperial archives of the Liang dynasty and handed down to us with the full authority of the celebrated Chinese historian Ma Tuan-lin.

In the course of his statement to the feudal Lord Yu Kei, Hui Shen stated that a party of five Buddhist monks including himself went to America during the reign of Emperor Ta Ming of the Sung dynasty in or about 458 A.D. They carried with them images and sacred texts on Buddhism. The message of the Buddha was unknown in America. The mission was successful and they were able to ordain monks among the people. The party travelled along the Kurile and Aleutian Islands to Alaska. They started from Kamtchatka known to the Chinese in those days. Hui Shen gave a vivid description of that country known in the Far-East as Fusan, the customs and manners of the people and said that the country was 2,000 miles to 6,500 miles to the east of Kamtchatka and also

due east from China. The party apparently made the voyage in an open boat or canoe.

After a lapse of nearly forty years, Hui Shen, for some unknown reasons, was persecuted by the people, and when his life was threatened, he disappeared from the country. But he left some inscriptions on a rock. At Magdalana in Mexico, there is a statue erected in his memory with his name inscribed on it. There is evidence existing in Central America, both traditional and archaeological to prove that remaining members of the party, who followed a different route also reached Central America and carried on their activities there. Hui Shen returned to China alone and nothing was known about the remaining members of the mission.

This evidence from Chinese Buddhist literature supported by traditional customs, rites and objects of antiquity found in Central America extending all the way down to the Pacific coast from Alaska to Mexico and also in other localities lying inland, betrays Buddhist influence.

Religious Customs

Referring to the wide prevalence of Indian cultural influence in Central America and Mexico, Professor John Fryer says:

“The religious customs and beliefs of the nations of Mexico, Yucatan, and Central America, their architecture, their calendar, their arts and many other things which were found by the Spaniards when they conquered America exhibit the most surprising coincidences with the details of Asiatic beliefs and Asiatic civilisation. So much is this the case that those independent observers who know nothing of the story of Hui Shen are convinced that there must have been some kind of communication between America and Asia since the beginning of the Christian era.”

Edward P. Vining of San Francisco, who made a study of the subject has pointed out thirty five remarkable coincidences to prove the existence of Buddhism and Indian culture in Central America and Mexico in the early centuries of the Christian era. In his opinion, such coincidence clearly goes to prove that both Hindu and Buddhist religions had been implanted in Central America long before the Spaniards arrived there.

Another valuable piece of information regarding Hui Shen and his party comes from two Canadian scholars. Professor John Murray Gibbon and Tom MacInnes have given credit of the discovery of America to Hui Shen. According to them, Hui Shen crossed the Pacific in a Chinese junk. He reached Vancouver about 499 A.D. Professor Gibbon quotes a geographer of the time of George III who studied the problem of Chinese contribution to Trans-Pacific voyage. MacInnes says that Hui Shen passed the winter in the Island of Nootka Vancouver,

where he left three monks to propagate Buddhism. Chinese coins of the Tsin dynasty were discovered there in 1876. Remains of Buddhist temples were discovered also in Mexico, in the state of Sonora on the Pacific coast and near the town of Ures in the same State, with a statue of the Buddha with Chinese Buddhist inscriptions.

The facts that Hui Shen and his party came from Kabul and that he spoke imperfect Chinese suggest that he might have been either an Indian monk and missionary living in Kabul or a native of Kabul which formed part of India in those days. Kabul, which was also known as Gopen Kiplin, Kandaha or Balk was in Gandhara now merged in Afghanistan and was a centre of Buddhist activities. A famous monk of Kabul who went to China during the 4th Century A.D. and translated many Buddhist texts into Chinese was Sanghadeva. Although Hui Shen's Indian name is not known to us it is very probable that he was an Indian either from India or Kabul.

The "March of India"