Kaniska and Sarvastivada School of Buddhism

Kaniska succeeded to an extensive empire. He was as great a patron of Buddhism as king Asoka and his name is as familiar to the Buddhists as that of Asoka. In other words, he played the part of a second Asoka. He used to read Buddhist scriptures in his leisure time with a monk who daily went to the royal palace and gave him instructions, but was much puzzled at the conflicting interpretations of the different sects. He expressed his desire to Parsva, the noted monk living at the time, to reconcile the varying opinions of the different sects and ‘to restore Buddhism to eminence and to have the Tripitaka explained according to the tenets of the various schools. Parsva, having agreed, a Council was held at Kashmir under the presidency of Vasumitra.  

It should, however, be remembered here that 500 monks of different sects- the Sarvastivadins forming the majority-took part in the Council. The monks assembled there, devoted themselves to the settlement of the texts of the canonical literature and composed extensive commentaries on the Sutra, Vinaya and Abhidharma texts. These are known as the Upadesasastra, Vinayavibhasasastra and Abhidharmavibhasasastrar respectively each of them containing 1, 00,000 stanzas explanatory of the Sutras. “King Kaniska had the treatises, when finished, written out on copper plates, and enclosed these in stone boxes, which he deposited in a tope made for the purpose.

He then ordered the Yakashas to keep and guard the texts, and not allow any to be taken out of the country by heretics; those who wished to study them could do so in the country. When leaving to return to his own country Kaniska renewed Asoka’s gift of all Kashmir to the Buddhist Church.” It is, however, to be regretted that the Sastras are preserved in Chinese translations only—the originals are lost. Of the valuable works so prepared, the Abhidharmamahavibhasa- the Sanskrit original of which is lost and now extant in Chinese- is regarded as an encyclopaedia of Buddhist philosophy. The Ceylonese chronicles ignore the Council of Kaniska, but Yuan Chwang, and works preserved in Tibetan, speak of it—their accounts, however, are discrepant and legendary. ²

As regards the location of the Council, Yuan Chwang maintains that it was Kashmir, while some Tibetan writers maintain it to be Gandhara. Bu-ston speaks of 500 arhats, 500 Bodhisattvas and 250 or 1000 ordinary pandits having assembled there. He adds that the texts belonging to the different sects were all acknowledged as holding the true tenets of the Master. Taranatha is of the opinion that the Council put to writing the while of the Pitakas or the portions already in script were corrected.

Paramartha (499-569 CE) in his life of Vasubandhu, while dealing with the Council maintains that it was held in Kashmir in the 5th century after the Mahaparinirvana of Buddha and it was held through the strenuous efforts of Katyayaniputra, a great philosopher. Asvaghosa, the Buddhist writer of repute, who was then living in Saketa in the province of Sarvasti, modern Saheth-Maheth in U.P., was requested to put the commentaries (Vibhasas), as drawn up by the members of the Council, into a literary form. As observed already, the Sarvastivadins were also known as the Vaibhasikas by the later writers on account of their

² Ibid.
relying not so much on Sutras as on the Vibhasas (Commentaries) – the fundamental works of the Sarvastivada school and especially the Mahavibhasasastras (Commentaries on the Abhidharmā literature)-an encyclopaedia of Buddhist philosophy.

It should, however, be noted here that the Vibhasasāstra occupies such as conspicuous position in Kashmir that the masters of this Sastra are usually called the Vibhāsha-shi or the Kashmir-shi in Chinese. According to V.A. Smith the Council was of the Sarvastivada School and the works so prepared were also of that school.

Thus, it is pertinent to note that the object of this Council was not to establish fresh Canons but to prepare explanations or large commentaries on them with a view to reconciling the varying interpretations of the different sects. This Council bears witness to the literary and religious activities of the Sarvastivadins and in or immense value from the point of view of the history of religion and literature.

Asoka and Sarvastivada School of Buddhism

At the time of King Asoka, there were different schools of Buddhism. But Buddhism which was in vogue during his reign was Theravada, the original form of Buddhism. As a matter of fact, the Mahasanghikas were also wielding their influence in India at that time. The Pali tradition speaks of Asoka’s adherence to the Theravada and his support to the Sarvastivada School towards the latter part of his life. Asoka - it is said - finding Theravada practices going out of use and apprehending that Theravada might be supplanted by the new sects that had seceded from it, convened a Council under the guidance of Moggaliputta Tissa, the leader of the orthodox group. It is stated that those monks, who subscribed to the Theravada or Vibhajjavada view, were recognized as orthodox and the rest as unorthodox. The monks, other than the Theravadins had to leave Magadha-the Principal seat of the
Theravadins and went to Kashmir-Gandhara. They occupied a prominent place there and later on came to be known as the Sarvastivadins.  

An account of the flight of the Theravadins from Magadha to Kashmir is recorded in the Abhidharmamahavibhasasastra and HieunTsang’s Records of the Western Land. While giving a description of the country of Kashmir Hieun-Tsang says, “In the hundredth year after the Nirvana of Tathagata, Asoka, king of Magadha, extended his power over the world and was honoured even by distant people. He deeply reverenced the 3 gems and had a loving regard for all living things. At this time there were 500 Arhats and 500 schismatical priests, whom the King honoured and patronized without any difference. Among the latter was a priest called Mahadeva, a man of deep learning and rare ability: in his retirement he sought a true renown; far thinking, he wrote treatises, the principles of which were opposed wholly to the doctrine, all who heard of him resorted to his company and adopted his views.

Asoka raja was not knowing either holy or common men and because he was naturally given to patronize those who were seditious, was induced to call together an assembly of priests to the bank of the Ganges, intending to drown them all. At this time the Arhats having seen the danger threatening their lives, by the exercise of the spiritual power, flew away through the air and came to this country (Kashmir) and concealed themselves among the mountains and valleys. Asoka raja having heard of it repented and confessing his faults begged them to return to their own country, but the Arhats refused to do so with determination. Then Asoka raja for the sake of the Arhats built 500 Sangharamas and gave the country as a gift to the priesthood”. Thus it becomes clear that the monks who fled to

Kashmir from Magadha were no other than the Sarvastivadins and through their activities Kashmir became the centre of Buddhistic philosophical studies in Northern India.

It should, however, be pointed out here that the Chinese pilgrim Hieun-Tsang had made a confusion between the two Mahadevas. There is no room for doubt that there were two persons of the name of Mahadeva; one was responsible for the origin of the Mahasanghika School through his five articles of faith and the other was a noted leader during the reign of Asoka. He was-it is said- “a man of great learning and wisdom, a subtle investigator of name and reality who put his extraordinary thoughts into a treatise which taught heresy”. It may be said that the one is a Mahasanghika, and the other a Sarvastivadin- the principal tenet of which deals with nama and rupa.

**NAME OF THE SCHOOL EXPLAINED**

The term Sarvastivada, Pali Sabbathivada (sarva, ‘all’ + asti, ‘exist’ + vada, ‘doctrine’) means all exists. In other words, it is a doctrine advocating that all things, external and internal, are real. Thus Sarvastivadin means one who upholds the doctrine that all things exist. Prof. Winternitz says, “The literal meaning of Sarvastivada is ‘the all-is doctrine’, the doctrine that everything exists permanently.” It is often rendered in English as “Realists”. This ‘Realism’ in the Buddhist philosophy maintains that ‘the substance of all things has a permanent existence throughout the three divisions of time, the present, the past, and the future. This term, as understood in the Buddhist philosophy, conveys a sense different from its ordinary one, as usually found in English philosophy. It is used as opposed to Idealism and Nominalism.

In the *Kathavatthu* is given the plain meaning of the term Sarvastivada. It points out that the Sarvastivadins maintain that everything exists everywhere, at all times and in every
way. Prof. Gopinath Kaviraja suggests that this is evidently associated with the implications of the doctrine of Trikalavada on which there was a great controversy in ancient India not only in the Buddhist schools but also among the Naiyayikas, Vaiyakaranas, Samkhya Yogins, and others. The Samkhya view of Satkarya which holds a dharma to be existent in all the three times is basically allied to be Sarvastivada in certain aspects.

In the Dipavamsa, it is mentioned that Sabbatthavada for Sabbatthivada. Thereafter, there is Sanskrit Sarvastivada for Sabbatthavada. Here, it is found ‘attha’ in one case and ‘atthi’ in the other. However, it may be applied that the law of euphony – it has ‘atthi’ for ‘attha’ – ‘a’ being changed into ‘i’. Hence Sabbatthavada stands for Sabbatthivada. Dr. F.W. Thomas suggests that it may stand for Sadvada as opposed to Asadvada. His suggestions, however, lack satisfactory corroboration to put it beyond the range of doubt. It should be noted here that there is another term Sarvastivavada standing for Sarvastivada. This term has been employed both by Sankaracarya and Vacapatimisra in their philosophical writings.

In this regard, the Mahavyupatti gives two names Mulasarvastivada and Aryasarvastivada. I-tsing maintains that the appellation Mulasarvastivada was given to this school when there were further sub divisions of it in the 7th century C.E. In the words of Prof. Winternitz, ‘The relationship between the Sarvastivada and the Mulasarvastivada is, however, by no means clear. Bu-ston is, however, of the opinion that the Sarvastivadins, who maintain the reality of all elements, are so known since they admit that all the objects-present, past and future-really exist.

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He further adds that like the upper caste, which introduces the body of rules and usages of a country or race, the Sarvastivadins, who used Sanskrit, account for the root (mula) of all the schools, and hence they are called the Mulasarvastivadins. All these traditions have tried to establish the great antiquity of the Mulasarvastivadins, though, in fact, this sect came into being at a late date of claimed that is preserved the original tenets (mula) of the Sarvastivada School.

Further, According to the Doctrines of the Different Schools, the schism that formed this school occurred about two hundred year after Shakyamuni’s death. Katyayaniputra is often regarded as the founder. The Sarvastivada School sets forth the view that everything has an existence of its own. It holds that since living beings are formed by a temporary union of the five components there is no real or permanent self, but that the dharmas, or elements of existence that compose the living being, are real and have their own existence throughout the past, present and future.

The Sarvastivadins developed the Abhidharma, the section of the canon composed of doctrinal commentaries, to an extent surpassing that of any other Hinayana school. They produced a total of seven Abhidharmas, including The Treatise on the Source of Wisdom. Further commentaries were later written on these seven, the most famous of which is The Great Commentary on the Abhidharma, an exhaustive statement of Sarvastivada thought. Vasubandhu included the essentials of this work in his Dharma Analysis Treasury. The Dharma Analysis Treasury, however, departs from the traditional Sarvastivada position and interprets the school’s doctrine more broadly, drawing on the views of other schools, particularly the Sautrantika. The Sarvastivada School gave rise to a total of nine other schools. It was the most influential school of Hinayana in India, and had an important
influence on Mahayana thought as well. Its doctrines were widely studied in China and
Japan.

In the historical and philosophical developments, important schools of Indian
Buddhism that separated from the main body of the Elders around the mid 3rd century BCE
were Theravada, Mahasanghika, Sarvastivada, and so on. Sarvastivada – ‘the school that
holds that everything exists’- derives from its philosophical views concerning the nature of
phenomena. Like other early schools, its ontology was pluralist and realist, and the
Sarvastivadins believed (not unlike the ancient Greek Atomists) that reality could be
analyzed into a collection of discrete entities, known as dharmas. In the Sarvastivada
taxonomy there are 75 dharmas, 72 conditioner and there unconditioned. 5

While agreeing with other schools that conditioned dharmas are momentary
(Ksanika), they nevertheless maintained that they also enjoy real existence in both the past
and future. Four theories were proposed to explain this, one being that these dharmas exist
from beginningless time and simply undergo a change of mode from latent to manifest. Time
itself, it was suggested, was simply the change of mode undergone by dharmas. Although the
Sarvastivadins were apparently expelled at the Council of Pataliputra, they went on to
become extremely influential particularly in the north-west of India in Kashmir and
Gandhara where they survived until Buddhism disappeared from the subcontinent. The
school possessed its own canon, much of which survives today, and is renowned for its
Abhidharma texts, notably the Abhidharma-kosa of Vasubandhu, and the Mahavibhasa. The
Kashmiri branch of the school is alternatively known as the Vaibhasika, from the name of
this text, while the Gandhari branch became known as the Mula-Sarvastivada or Sautrantika.

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