

CHAPTER 1

Material Culture and the Emergence of Urban Buddhism in Andhra

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The presence of Buddhism in Andhra coincides with Andhra's first urbanization processes. Whether Buddhism was somehow responsible for urbanization in the Andhra region or whether urbanized society was congenial to the spread of Buddhism are not easy questions to answer with precision. Most of the explored and excavated Buddhist ruins in Andhra suggest that Buddhist institutions functioned for almost six hundred years, roughly from the third century BCE to the end of the third century CE. From a study of the majority of these sites, it seems as if Buddhism entered Andhra in a surge that inundated almost the whole populace but then disappeared almost as suddenly as it had made its presence, though there were isolated sites in Andhra, such as Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Jaggayyapeta, Salihundam, and Sankaram, where Buddhism lingered perhaps as late as the fourteenth century CE.¹ However, finding the reasons for the demise of the vast majority of Buddhist sites by the end of the third century CE in Andhra has also remained an intriguing problem for scholars of religion and archaeology alike. Some theories have been put forward to account for the relative disappearance of Buddhism in Andhra, but none have proved to be very satisfactory so far. What has been accepted, however, is that the spread of Buddhism and the first urbanization processes in Deccan and south India coincided with each other. Trade, especially oceanic trade, was one of the major features of this urbanizing culture, activity which no doubt abetted the spread of Buddhism. Moreover, some scholars have pointed out that indirect trade with Rome or with Roman subjects came

to an end in the entire subcontinent sometime in the third century CE, coinciding with the disappearance of Buddhism.²

The aim of this chapter is not so much to see how and when oceanic trade ended and how it affected Buddhist establishments. Neither is this chapter focused on the continuing controversy of whether or not Andhra had direct trade relations with Rome and Roman subjects. Instead, my aim here is to trace out the first urbanization process in Andhra in order to see how Buddhism came to be associated with it. In this study, the lower Krishna River Valley is given a special attention, as this particular region offers a continuum of evidence from the late stone age through its transition to historic ages. This continuity creates a scope to assess the nature of historical vicissitudes that occurred in this fertile valley in which urbanization and Buddhism played concomitant roles. Here, in this context, the term "Andhra" corresponds to the present political unit of Andhra Pradesh, the Telugu linguistic state of modern India. The lower Krishna River Valley includes the fluvial area of the River Krishna and its estuaries comprising the present administrative divisions of Krishna, Guntur, Prakasham, and parts of Nellore and Kurnool districts.

I will begin my survey with the pastoral communities in neolithic societies of the lower Krishna River Valley, people who gradually settled into agricultural communities, the communities that eventually developed extensive networks with the rest of the subcontinent and beyond. Here my first inquiry is to see how these relations helped to spread ideas and goods from other regions of the Indian subcontinent to the south, in the process facilitating the spread of Buddhism to Andhra and its lower Krishna River Valley, a development that served as a springboard for its further dissemination to other regions in the subcontinent and beyond. In each phase leading to the historical period, I will note technological progress, contacts with neighbors, and the evidence of emerging religiosity. My second inquiry is to see under what circumstances Buddhism came to be accepted by these local communities. By doing so, I propose to address two different specific questions: (1) What factors contributed to Buddhism being so popular among the urbanizing populations in Andhra? (2) Were modifications of the same factors somehow responsible for its eventual demise from the land? Considering the scope of this chapter, the first issue will form the main focus of this study while the second is left largely to the hypothesis that I derive from the study of the first.

Archaeological sources indicate that Andhra, particularly the lower Krishna River Valley, witnessed all of the traditionally recognized pre- and protohistoric phases of cultural development that precede the early historical period.³ This simply indicates that the region was continuously

inhabited for centuries and perhaps for even thousands of years before the period of time with which I am concerned. While the archaeological evidence from the early historic sites often has been subordinated to what we might ascertain from textual accounts, I aim to emphasize the former.

Neolithic and Neolithic-Chalcolithic

Archaeological evidence suggests that from 2000 BCE onward, all of the protohistoric communities of Andhra, with few exceptions, had entered the region from neighboring Karnataka by gradually moving east along the banks of the rivers Krishna and Tungabhadra.⁴ Depending on their cultural backgrounds and the availability of resources in their surrounding areas, various communities of neolithic, chalcolithic, and megalithic cultures practiced different ways of disposing of their dead. In general, their burial structures were better built than their homesteads and hence better preserved over time. They provide an excellent source for the study of these cultures, especially due to the fact that they often contained goods that the dead used while living. These worldly possessions that accompanied the dead are referred to as “grave goods” or “burial goods” in archeological terminology. The study of these burial structures and their accompanied goods lead us to think that these protohistoric communities believed in some form of life after death. Megalithic burials with their complicated building methods signal the communities’ respect to their ancestors. These protohistoric burial monuments were succeeded in the historical stage by monuments containing the relics of the Buddha or famous Buddhist monks. Unfortunately, little effort has been made by scholars to connect the afterlife beliefs associated with the burials of protohistoric communities with that of later *stūpa* cults associated with historic Buddhism. Instead, scholarly focus based on literary analysis has often tended to project a picture of how Buddhism and Brahmanism suddenly spread from the north of India to the south thereby exposing the southern tribes for the first time to “civilization.” There were some discussions by archaeologists about the architectural and conceptual similarities between the megalithic burial and a *stūpa* (as I will quote in the following pages), but there was no attempt to show the continuity in the development of ideas and local genius from prehistoric to historic ages. The disjunction between accounts based on literary and archaeological bases has been reflected in various attempts to account for the appearance of urbanization and the historical manifestation of religious behavior.

Indeed, some Andhra sites, such as Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda, reveal successive layers of prehistoric, protohistoric, and historic stages of lifestyle reflecting a very gradual transition from rural, pastoral habitation to urban life. Maurizio Tosi, tracing out early urban evolution in the Indo-Iranian borderland, mentions several background factors for the emergence of a city in that context:⁵

The city, taken as the nucleus of demographic and economic concentration, is necessarily the direct expression of a productive economy. As such, it can hardly be defined as a cultural model or type in itself, since it has no alternatives worthy of consideration . . . The different stages of evolution of human communities—agricultural-pastoral, mercantile and industrial—have created different formulas; nevertheless, the city remains a point of confluence in its initial phase, and its growth is closely linked to possibilities of concentration and cohabitation, as well as to its capacity for attracting external groups.

Amaravati, and Nagarjunakonda in the lower Krishna River Valley witnessed several evolutionary stages (agricultural-pastoral, mercantile, and industrial) through their pre- and protohistoric ages before they emerged as cities during the pre- and early Christian era. Specifically, some of the ancestors of those people who later worshiped Buddhist *stūpas* in Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda can be traced back to neolithic communities who entered Andhra leading pastoral lives. Around 1500 BCE, these neolithic communities began to make use of copper and emerged as characteristically chalcolithic. That is, they used agricultural tools like hoes as well as food-processing equipment, suggesting that they had left behind their pastoral lifestyle and had begun to settle down practicing agriculture. Pieces of jewelry made of copper, as well as copper tools recovered at places like Guttikonda, and Cinnamanur,⁶ indicate their interaction with their northern neighbors, such as the cultures that flourished in Vidarbha in Madhya Pradesh.⁷ For copper was not an easily available metal in these parts. The evidence shows that metallurgy at this period was developed only in the Vidarbha region by chalcolithic and megalithic communities from where the implements must have been imported. Although we don't have any evidence to prove how they imported copper implements, it is plausible that these neolithic communities in Andhra exchanged their surplus agricultural produce. Agricultural production and its surplus must have given these communities some leisure time as evidence points to the development of

certain skills in organizing their society and developing arts and crafts. They showed interest in decorations and paintings, as is revealed from their pottery, terracotta objects, and rock brusings.⁸ Dhavalikar who worked on neolithic sites in the Western Deccan, was of the opinion that these communities were organized into “chiefdom societies” where the surplus was controlled by a few.⁹ His assumption was made on the basis of studying unearthed public buildings, fortifications, granaries, and irrigation structures at Diamabad and Inamgoan in Maharashtra. However, in Andhra, there is no evidence of monumental buildings belonging to neolithic-chalcolithic communities, although we know that these communities were branches of the same stock of people who lived in Karnataka. The kind of structured societies that Dhavalikar encountered in Karnataka were seen in Andhra only during the next stage, the megalithic period.

Be that as it may, I am primarily concerned here with the earliest structures built for the living and the dead. At Nagarjunakonda, the communities who had arrived by 2000 BCE lived in underground dwellings aligned with postholes.¹⁰ They buried their dead in pits and filled them with cairn heaps. Although we don't have enough proof to show that these cairn heaps were venerated in the same way as Buddhist *stūpas* were in the later periods, one can argue that the origins for the concept of the *stūpa* would seem to be traceable to these early burial forms. At the same time, it is hard to miss the similarity between the shapes of Buddhist *stūpas* and the early dwellings of the neolithic communities in the southern part of Kurnool District, people who lived in huts of an apsidal, oval, and circular type.¹¹ The apsidal and circular shapes were so sustained in popularity in later periods that the same huts have continued to be built even to this day in many parts of Andhra.

The newly migrated groups of neolithic-chalcolithic people in Andhra followed a postexcarnation system of burial. A majority of them attempted to arrange the bones of their dead in their original anatomical order thus reflecting their ritualized care towards the dead.¹² The fact that some of these communities buried their dead children either in pots or in pits within their houses may also reflect their belief in afterlife, since these arrangements would seem to indicate that they believed that the children needed to be provided with safety and protection even after their deaths.¹³ From the study of the skulls of the dead, Murthy has argued that the majority of these early communities can be identified as Mediterraneans of the Protoaustraloid complex whose continued presence can be traced up to the early historical period when Buddhism was the dominant form of religious expression.¹⁴

Megalithic Phase (800 BCE–300 BCE)

The Megalithic period in Andhra falls between 800 and 300 BCE. The transition from chalcolithic-neolithic culture to the megalithic was very smooth as far as Andhra and the lower Krishna River Valley is concerned. The evidence shows that there is a continuum in many cultural practices while the new period was characterized by the use of iron and further developments in agriculture, crafts, and building technology. Just like its preceding culture, megalithic culture witnessed many different communities arriving in different parts of Andhra who overlapped each other at times. Although all of them built megalithic monuments for their dead, these communities were differentiated according to the types of these sepulchral monuments.

While chalcolithic-neolithic culture in its final stage witnessed agriculture and settled village life, it was the megalithic culture that would set the stage for urbanization in the first historical period (third century CE forward). The examination of skulls in the lower Krishna River Valley and elsewhere in Andhra shows that the population of megalithic culture was mixed. Some of these mixed groups shared racial affinities with the earlier chalcolithic-neolithic communities while others with those of megalithic cultures from Karnataka.¹⁵ This racial mixing of communities resulted in the development of a new subculture in the lower Krishna valley and elsewhere in Andhra.

The most significant new development in the megalithic period marking this new subculture was the construction of reservoirs at many places in Andhra.¹⁶ While spacious storage granaries dug into the earth suggest that these tanks were used for irrigation, their proximity to living areas may indicate their use as drinking water reservoirs.¹⁷ Spacious platforms built inside and outside of houses may also have been used for temporary storage of grains and other produce just in the same way as platforms in the contemporary Andhra village houses are used today.¹⁸ The houses during this time had enclosure walls with stone slabs probably erected to provide protection for produce from wild animals and thieves.¹⁹ The late phase of megalithic culture also witnessed the use of sun-dried mud bricks thus marking the innovation of brick making technology in Andhra.²⁰

Findings of burial goods suggest that there were further developments in crafts and the trade network during this period. In addition to the usual pottery and personal ornaments, Andhra megalithic burials invariably contained iron implements and terracotta figurines. Although implements of copper continued to be sparse in Andhra, especially in the lower Krishna River valley, the use of iron for a variety of purposes,

from agricultural, domestic tools to defensive weapons, is evident from the findings of these burial goods.²¹ Indigenous technology among these megalithic folk is known from the remains of a number of ancient iron working spots and iron ores found in Karimnagar, Mahaboobnagar, Nizamabad, and Adilabad Districts.²² The bead-making industry known from findings at Kondapur and other places also belonged to this period.²³ Jewelry made of copper and bronze continued to appear in this period. In addition, ornaments made of silver, gold, and ivory have been noticed in burial goods in both lower Krishna River Valley and elsewhere in Andhra indicating their importation from other areas. These imports and exports helped to share ideas resulting in the advancement of technological skills.²⁴

Megalithic burials grew dramatically in size and shape owing to an increasing complexity in building methods when compared to the burials of the earlier period. This development serves as a marker for assessing the amount of skills and resources that this culture had developed. In the study of other pre- and protohistoric cultures in other parts of the world, there has been quite a bit of debate among scholars about the possible spread of megalithic cultures from one region to another, even from one continent to another. Colin Renfrew, for instance, has found himself in a dilemma about whether or not to label similar types of contemporary burial structures found in different parts of Europe during megalithic period as “megalithic tombs”:²⁵

It is important, then, to recognize that it is a taxonomic decision of our own which leads us to apply the term ‘megalithic tomb’ to monuments as different as the *dysser* of Denmark and the passage graves of Almeria. And yet, at the same time, it is difficult to escape from the feeling that there *is* a certain homogeneity, both in time and in space, of the distribution of these monuments once so defined.

In Andhra, we also have a variety of “megalithic tombs” reflecting different cultural traits. But because of proximity, these Andhra cultures had undoubtedly interacted with each other and in the process had created a greater amount of homogeneity when compared to the cultures of disparate regions of Europe. All of the megalithic communities in Andhra continued the tradition of extended burial practices of the dead handed down from their predecessors but employed new techniques that they learned through interaction with other neighbors to provide more secure and elaborate abodes for their ancestors. In Europe, the relative heterogeneity of megalithic cultures sharing a common feature of building

stone monuments has generated debates among scholars about whether or not a single culture was originally responsible for the diffusion and eventual variegation of burial practices. Debating the hypotheses that European megalithic culture originally had "a single focal area" from which it spread to different parts of the world, Renfrew says this:²⁶

A widespread, Atlantic distribution in the absence of a single colonising movement of megalithic spread need not be a paradox. It requires simply that a particular set of conditions existed in the Atlantic region at this time, conditions which were not seen elsewhere in Europe, and that these favored the construction of stone monuments by the small-scale societies of the time. Such a general formulation, if it can be achieved, would explain for us the essentially independent genesis of stone monuments, no doubt of widely different forms, in several areas. It might also explain for us the essentially independent genesis of stone monuments, no doubt of widely different forms, in several areas. It might also explain the adoption of similar customs in adjacent areas, and do so in such a way as to give detailed, locally-operating reasons for such an adoption, rather than appealing to migration or diffusion as adequate explanation that is, in the traditional sense, non-diffusionist, in no way denies the mutual influence of neighbouring communities.

What Renfrew argues in relation to the European context appears to be true as far as the different streams of megalithic cultures in Andhra are concerned. While difference might be attributed to geographical and ecological factors abetting independent developments, the common features that tie these different and independent streams in Andhra had been a result of constant interaction of contemporary communities rather than an imposition of one dominant culture over others. If so, this view works against the more conventional understanding that the diffusion of religious culture from the north, be it Brahminical or Buddhist, simply established itself in the south.

As far as independent innovations are concerned, megalithic communities in Andhra adapted different building methods for their burials depending on the material available in the localities in which they lived. In the lower Krishna River Valley, these communities buried their dead in cairns, cists, pits, urns, and terracotta sarcophagi.²⁷ The origins of the sarcophagus can be traced to the neolithic communities of the Deccan,²⁸ and its further development in Andhra took place in the alluvial plains of Krishna basin at places like Agiripalli and Tenneru²⁹ where stone is

sparse for building. Stone troughs, however, were developed in hilly areas like Dongatogu in the Khammam District.³⁰ Whatever their construction methods, it is evident from these structures that not only did these communities believe in afterlife but also that they venerated their dead and spent a lot of time and energy to build structures that were far superior to their homes. Local people still refer to these structures as *rakshasa gullu*, the literal translation being the “temples of demons.”³¹ But here “demons” refer to souls who become active during the night and wander about unless they are provided with secured abodes. At the risk of being anachronistic, if this popular belief is somewhat akin to the understanding of the megalithic community, then it would seem as if they were providing more than what would be practically expected for the dead to continue on in their “afterlives.” For, it was unnecessary to expend so much effort and to employ so many skilled people to build these relatively large and well-constructed monuments unless it was really their intention to venerate or placate their dead, and not just to provide for their welfare in the afterlife. Buddhist literature gives us some clues regarding what might have been the preexisting beliefs about the dead before Buddhism took over the land. The Mūlasarvāstivāda *Vinaya*³² mentions ghosts in the context of one of its discussions on how to dispose of the dead. It mentions how the dead, if not ritually disposed of properly, can return as ghosts to their previous abodes and cause harm. If there was a similar belief among the megalithic communities of Andhra, its presence would help to explain why they built elaborate abodes for their dead. Yet, the architectural complexity and the skill involved in constructing these monuments suggest that there may have been additional motivations at work. It is well known that many tribal societies in India built special structures in specific places that they revered as sacred. This was certainly the case in early historic Andhra culture. Some of the megalithic structures in Andhra have served as precursors to Buddhist *stūpas* not only in their shape, plan, and constructional methods, but also in the manner in which we can see a deliberated selection of given natural spaces for their constructions. Buddhist literature itself refers to a long-standing tradition of enshrining the relics that predates the religion. Gregory Schopen,³³ in his essay on the cult of the monastic dead, cites archeological evidence indicating the construction of *stūpas* predating the cult of the Buddha:

Archeologically and epigraphically, the two types of *stūpa* appear now as roughly contemporary with, in some cases, some indication that *stūpas* of the local monastic dead may actually have predated those of the Buddha.

He goes on to say:³⁴

It is interesting to note, moreover, that if we look at the internal chronology or narrative time taken for granted in our Buddhist literary sources, it would appear that their redactors also considered *stūpas* for the local monastic dead to predate those of the Buddha. Both of the *stūpas* mentioned in *Udāna* and *Apadāna*, and that referred to in the Pali *Vinaya*, for example, long preceded—according to the narrative time assumed by our texts—those erected for the Buddha.

In the case of megalithic monuments, we do not know for sure that these contained the relics of any dead monks, but it is very possible that the dead in whose commemoration these monuments were built were highly respected by the community.³⁵ What we do know is that the monastic cult that Schopen is discussing was prevalent in Andhra's Krishna River Valley in places like Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda and Guntupalle where a number of small *stūpas* containing the relics of monks were set up close to other major *stūpa* constructions.³⁶ These structures may be the direct result of transformations originally derived from megalithic religious activities.

The megalithic culture in Andhra falls between the eighth and third centuries BCE, and there are, of course, overlaps with the urbanizing historical period that starts as early as the fourth century BCE. This overlap of megalithic culture with the historical period is signaled, for instance, by the continuous but very rare presence of megalithic burials into the early centuries of common era, such as those found at Muktyala³⁷ and at Galabhagutta³⁸ where Brāhmī characters are noticed. There are several examples to show the influence of these megalithic burials on Buddhist *stūpas* that started appearing in Andhra as early as the fourth to third centuries BCE, signaling the beginning of the early historic period.

Early Historic Phase (400–100 BCE)

In some ways, the transition between the megalithic culture and the early historical period might not seem so significant. The gradual technological development achieved by megalithic communities in construction, metallurgy, and agriculture is what really advanced them into the early historic phase. The catalytic urbanizing revolution that did occur was, in addition to trade, the result of a vast increase in food production made possible first by the introduction of iron tools, such as the

plough, sickle, hoe, spade, and so on, and then with the construction of reservoirs and irrigation channels.³⁹ This surplus of food, turned into a surplus of wealth through trade, is what helped to fund the patronage of skilled craftsmen and specialized labor. Not only were these developments conducive to the growth of brisk trade relations, but also to the formation of a complex form of government, a government that needed to protect the interests of various professions while providing safety and security from outside invasions by maintaining a standing army. Fear of outside invasion is what probably necessitated the building of fortified cities and more sophisticated ways of organizing defense systems. All of this occurred simultaneously with the introduction of Buddhist religious culture.

While these forces of the urbanization process gathered more momentum starting from the fourth century BCE, small cities headed by chiefs grew out of villages situated along rivers and rivulets. The *Milindapañha*, an early Buddhist text that was composed around this time in northern India, mentions an elaborate plan for building towns and cities.⁴⁰ At the same time, sculptural constellations at sites like Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda begin to reflect urban scenes. Corroborating this evidence, a number of very early cities and towns have been unearthed at Dhulikatta, Kotilingala, Budigapalle, and Dharanikota which belong to the early fourth century BCE and contain remains of fortifications, palatial buildings, subterranean sewage systems, well-laid-out roads, managed water supply systems, and metallurgy works. Several port cities that also later became famous Buddhist centers in the Krishna River Valley, such as Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Ghantasala, and Bhattiprolu also date precisely to this time.⁴¹ All were well planned with specified places for common dwellings, workshops, public structures, palaces, good roads and covered drainage systems. Some of the dwellings dating to this time were multistoried with tiled roofs.

These fortified cities and towns were ruled over by chieftains (with titles such as *Mahārathi*, *Mahātalavara*, and *rājaya*) either independently or possibly through power delegated from a political center. In either case, we know that these rulers controlled local resources and then attempted to regulate the value of trade by minting coins on their own.⁴² Many of these rulers might have been Buddhist laity or possibly even monks as two Brāhmī inscriptions found at the Satavahana level of digging at Pedda Vegi, mention the name of one Mahārāja Kākichi who is said to have been an inmate (*antevāsaka*) of a Buddhist monastery.⁴³

Almost all of the towns and cities mentioned above became well known Buddhist centers and all of them were located along ancient trade routes and hence connected to the network of land routes and

navigational channels leading to different parts of the subcontinent. The port towns and cities not only were well connected to the land routes but also carried on coastal and inland trade using the sea and river systems. There is abundant evidence to show that contacts with the north and the rest of the subcontinent increased during this time. That these trade routes linked the north and Andhra is also inferred from the presence and spread of northern black polished ware (NBPW).⁴⁴ The evidence of a limited use of a special variety of NBPW treated with copper riveting and luting produced in the Ganga-Yamuna Doab makes its specific presence in many Buddhist sites in Andhra, indicating the ongoing relations that these Buddhist institutions maintained with their northern counterparts.⁴⁵

Apart from pottery, the uniformity of punch-marked coins from the fourth century BCE found in many regions of the north as well as many places in Andhra further suggest the region's connection through trade.⁴⁶ In addition, industries like bead making from semiprecious stones at Peddabankur and terracotta figurines and a mould found at Yelesvaram also add to my argument about how these cities and towns were well positioned to supply merchandise through a distribution network.⁴⁷

Though less reliable owing to uncertainties of dating the redaction of texts, there is a variety of literary references suggesting the presence of Buddhism in Andhra at this time.⁴⁸ Further, early epigraphic evidence dating to the reign of Aśoka in the third century BCE reveals that some Andhras were already followers of the Buddha by this time.⁴⁹ This is by far the earliest epigraphic reference to the population of Andhra termed as "Andhakas."⁵⁰ Thomas identifies these Andhakas as the Mahāsāṃghikas who were said to have played a significant role in the discussions that took place at the third Great Buddhist Council convoked by Aśoka at Pataliputra.⁵¹

Given the presence of Buddhism that emerged along with increased trade and urbanization in Andhra possibly as early as the fourth century CE or even earlier, some have taken the position that the local megalithic culture of Andhra was simply replaced by a triumphant Buddhism. Others have argued that Buddhism integrated forms of practice from the indigenous traditions into its evolving religious culture. Schopen, for instance, argues how Buddhist monks when moving into foreign lands including Andhra had "to forge some links with the local land, to find a place in the local landscape."⁵² As a part of this strategy, he says that monks "sought out . . . already occupied" places by the protohistoric dead.⁵³ It is true, as is seen in the following examples that most cases, *stūpas* were built in the same spaces that were used by megalithic folk. In fact, not just the use of space, but also the form and architectural

patterns of megalithic burials were assimilated into Buddhist *stūpas*. Other popular religious symbols as I show below were also incorporated as well. Looking at the evolution of Andhra culture through its material remains, the presence of its local genius and its adaptability is unmistakable even after its Buddhist transformation. This is evident not just in how the Buddhist cult was expressed through assimilated local beliefs and traditions but also in how they shared their genius with other regions of the subcontinent and beyond.

I have already indicated how Buddhist *stūpas* in the Krishna River Valley were built in the same spaces that were used earlier for megalithic burials of the proto-*caitya* type. Examples can be cited from Yeleswaram and Amaravati where megalithic burials of different types such as cairns, cists, and urns were found immediately beneath the tier of Buddhist *stūpas*.⁵⁴ This leads us to the possibility that the community accorded a similar kind of ritualized sanctity to the *stūpa* as they had earlier accorded to the places of their own dead. In the past, archeologists have mentioned the structural similarities between megalithic burials and *stūpas* noting, as I would argue, that the *stūpa* evolved from a more primitive custom of burying the dead.⁵⁵ In fact, the etymological meaning of *stūpa* is “a pile” or “a heap.”⁵⁶ What follows are some instances that further illustrate the significant links. A burial at Chagatur has a stone pavement with four upright stones at each of its four cardinal points, the architectural feature that was seen adopted in the construction of many Buddhist *stūpas*.⁵⁷ The *stūpas* at places like Amaravati and Yeleswaram were adorned with an *āyaka* platform and pillars at the four cardinal points just like the burial at Chagatur.⁵⁸ Another popular form of apsidal plan used in building early Buddhist *stūpas* can be seen in a dolmenoid cist at Padra, where the base is built in an apsidal plan, the plan that was used to build huts since neolithic times.⁵⁹ This apsidal plan has been borrowed in building *caitya gr̥has* to house the *stūpa* or other Buddhist symbols. Early forms of *caityas* that were built in the apsidal plan are also evident at Bhatiprolu, a Buddhist site of the third century BCE⁶⁰ and Guntupalli from the second century BCE.⁶¹ One of the other forms of *stūpa* construction in Andhra is in the shape of a *svastika*. The megalithic communities often used the *svastika* pattern in the construction of multichambered cists.⁶² Examples of these are the *stūpas* at Nagarjunakonda⁶³ and Peddaganjam containing *svastika*-shaped bases.⁶⁴

While the architectural borrowings from the earlier megalithic period gave some uniqueness to Andhra Buddhist structures, the popular sculptural motifs such as tree and *nāga* (hooded serpent) as part of Buddhist symbols are well known beyond the boundaries of Andhra. Fergusson has discussed very elaborately the prevalence of the *nāga* and tree cults

among pre-Buddhist societies including Andhra and its consequent and frequent depiction in the *stūpa* decoration at Sanchi and Amaravati.⁶⁵ Especially at Amaravati, Fergusson felt that the representation of *nāga* dominated the temple, making it difficult at times to determine whether the shrine was meant for the Buddha or the *nāga* himself. While both *nāga* and tree cults received veneration independently by the common folk throughout many parts of India, their association with the cult of the goddess is universal. Particularly in the context of Andhra, it is common for the rural populations to worship goddess in the form of tree or *nāga* into the present day.⁶⁶

What is interesting however, is how this seemingly ubiquitous worship of goddess was integrated into Buddhist institutions.⁶⁷ The auspicious symbol *pūrṇakumbha*, the full pot of grains or water or vegetation, symbolizes abundance and is often taken to represent work of the mother goddess. Some of the nude mother goddess figurines were depicted with *pūrṇakumbha* as a kind of womb. This *pūrṇakumbha* is seen portrayed in bricks on the doorjambs of monk cells in Thotlakonda and Bavikonda and other Buddhist sites elsewhere.⁶⁸ The goddess Hārītī, a protective mother figure in the Buddhist pantheon who symbolizes monastic prosperity can be seen perhaps as a Buddhist adaptation of the mother goddess.⁶⁹ The extent images of Hārītī located outside of refectories among the ruins of Buddhist monasteries in Nagarjunakonda and Sankaram would seem to attest to the popularity of this goddess cult at this time. Even to this very day in Andhra, the goddess continues to be worshiped in various forms and the worship of the goddess in the form of a vessel containing water remains very popular among Andhra population.

The architectural forms, symbolism, imagery, and sentiments that were held sacred by the local population were carefully integrated into Buddhism and its establishments. The structure and function of megalithic burial reappeared with few variations in the form of Buddhist *stūpa*. The *nāga* becomes *Mucilinda nāga*, the protector of the symbols of the Buddha which in the later period was portrayed as the protector of the Buddha himself. The symbols of the goddess such as *pūrṇakumbha* have been appropriated as auspicious symbols adorning the doorjambs of monks' cells, while some of the monasteries constructed separate shrines for the goddess where monks and laity made food offerings. Thus the Buddhism that spread among Andhra folk expressed itself using the local genius and popular belief system as though the religion itself was the local creation.

Śatavāhana and Ikṣvāku Periods (100 BCE—300 CE)

I have noted how literary references seem to suggest the spread of Buddhism to Andhra possibly as early as to the life time of the master. I have also tried to show how aspects of emergent Andhra Buddhism was, in some cases, literally built on indigenous religious cults. But, the forms of cultic behavior constitutive of Andhra Buddhism did not just stay in Andhra but also seem to have created a space for themselves among the Buddhist communities of the north as well. The continuous interaction of Andhra Buddhists with the north is known from Buddhist texts such as *Mahāvāgga*, a text that refers to either monasteries or rest houses with the names Andhakavana near Shravasti and Andhakavinda at Rajagriha.⁷⁰ An Aśokan pillar inscription that was issued later speaks about the followers of *Dharma* from Andhra living in Rajavisaya. We know from these types of references that Andhras were collectively referred to as Andhakas. More details about these Andhakas come from later literature belonging to Śatavāhana period.

Two important tribes, the Nāgas and Yakṣas, are mentioned in this literature as forming the majority of the Andhra population. These tribes did not seem to live in isolation. On the contrary we see significant intermixing between these tribes, even with Brahmins from the north.⁷¹ For instance, the *Kathāsaritsāgara* written during Śatavāhana times (second century BCE to third century CE), records the story of Dipakarni in which the origin of Śatavāhanas is mentioned.⁷² According to this, the first Śatavāhana was born out of the union of a Yakṣa by name Śata and a Brahmin girl thus signaling how the dynasty perceived of its beginnings. Another text of the same period talks about Gunadhya, a minister to one of the Śatavāhana rulers who was born out of a wedlock between a Nāga prince and a Brahmin woman.⁷³ It is true that this evidence comes from later mythic sources, but it has some salience nonetheless. Given material evidence such as pottery, coins, and other sculptural representations, the frequent mention of Nāgas and Yakṣas in literature, one can deduce that the local tribes did share a lot in common with the north as early as the third century BCE.

While there are some records indicating royal support to Buddhist institutions, the majority of the evidence coming from inscriptions proves that it was common people, such as traders and craftsmen who were the main supporters of Buddhist tradition. Inscriptions found at the sites of ancient Buddhist *stūpas* reveal that Buddhism seems to have been first patronized in Andhra by traders and then gradually attracted the attention of all sections of society, including royalty. The relationship between Buddhism and trade has been legendary since the beginnings

of the religious tradition. Indeed, the literary tradition avers that the first converts of the Buddha after his enlightenment experience were not monks, but merchants who became the first lay supporters to take refuge. According to early textual accounts,⁷⁴ the Buddha first encountered two traveling merchants named Tapussa and Bhallika who, in later lore, were thought responsible for establishing the cult of the Buddha's hair relic in various Buddhist countries, including Afghanistan, Burma, and Sri Lanka.⁷⁵ While the story is more metaphoric in meaning than historical in fact, it underscores the perceived primary role played by merchants and traders in the early spread of the religion. Why Buddhism attracted the merchant class remains an interesting question to this day.

One view, probably more Buddhist apology than fact, is that it is possible that the Buddha's "casteless" ethic provided a certain appeal to those formerly dependent on brahmanical ritual and teaching for their spiritual practices and hopes. But more likely, it would appear that the cult of the *stūpa* honoring the remains of the Buddha struck a resonant cord among those with a cultural and religious penchant for honoring the dead, venerating *nāgas*, and venerating the powers of the goddess, all characteristics of proto-Andhra society that I discussed above. Moreover, the appeal of Buddhism for the artisans and traders who formed an important class of urbanizing people, can be clearly seen in the ideology of merit that serves as a conceptual underpinning for the practice of *stūpa* veneration. The cult of the *stūpa* provided a means for those who had recently acquired wealth to express their religious sentiments through material means. Donating to the *saṅgha* through the building of monasteries and by the construction of *stūpas* was a highly meritorious act that signaled positive karmic consequences in at least two ways. The doctrine of *karma* legitimates one's social and economic status. By one's actions, one benefits or suffers consequences. Being able to contribute liberally to the interests of the religion can be taken as a sign of one's success. Second, the well-known practice of merit-transference provided a means to continue assisting and honoring one's departed ancestors. It is within this context that acquiring wealth, the chief preoccupation of the trading class, made possible the making and sharing of merit, the chief form of Buddhist religious activity for the laity. These religious actions do not require the intermediary services of brahmin priests and suggest much more of an ethic of independence, self-effort and work, an ethic thoroughly congenial to the attitudes of the trading class.

The success of traders and their religious association with Buddhism was not lost on the political rulers of Andhra at this time. Inscriptions issued by political chieftains during this time at Amaravati,⁷⁶ and Bhattiprolu,⁷⁷ announce their donations and support to the Buddhist

saṅgha. At the same time, coins issued by these same rulers reflect their enthusiasm for growing trade relations.⁷⁸ It is clear that by embracing and supporting trade, they also saw it expedient to embrace and support the religion of the traders. Often the conversion of whole peoples is said to follow the conversion of their leaders. In the Andhra of this era, perhaps the reverse process occurred.

Following the conversion of political chieftains, we can also note, however, how other segments of Andhra society soon followed. We can see through further evidence of inscriptions that people of various castes belonging to agriculture and industry organized themselves into larger associations. The names of these associations and their flourishing states are known from the engraved records of donations they made to various Buddhist establishments. These include such groups who came to be known as *gāmas*⁷⁹ (village agriculturalists), *niḡamas*⁸⁰ (traders), and *ghoṣṭis*⁸¹ (professionals) at Bhattiprolu, Dhanyakataka, and Amaravati. The steadily increasing numbers of donations made collectively by people belonging to such *gāmas*, *niḡamas*, and *ghoṣṭis* indicates the sudden rise of their economic prosperity. This prosperity is also corroborated by the finding of many hoards of punch-marked coins dating to this time.⁸² In addition, some of these punch-marked coins at places like Nāsthullapur were found along with extensive hoards of Roman coins.⁸³ Foreign traders, who were residents at Amaravati, also apparently understood the connection between Buddhism and trade. Records of their donations made in support of Buddhist cave establishments are also now known.⁸⁴ By the preceding and early centuries of the Common Era, Buddhism through flourishing economic activity had proliferated into virtually all sections of Andhra society. Simultaneously, it spread to other countries as well.

Literary tradition abounds with stories of merchants from various parts of the subcontinent heading for Southeast Asian countries to amass wealth. Archaeological studies in Southeast Asia repeatedly mention the impact of Amaravati school of Buddhist art in these countries. According to Somasekhara Sarma, the script of some of the inscriptions found at Ghantasala's *stūpa* site, correspond exactly to inscriptions found in Java (Indonesia)⁸⁵ raising the possibility of established trade relations between Andhra and Java in the early centuries CE.

There is abundant archaeological evidence in Andhra as far as the trade beyond the Arabian Sea is concerned.⁸⁶ This evidence and the unearthed hoard of Roman coins in and around Buddhist establishments suggest the possibility that trade with countries beyond the Arabian Sea was conducted under the aegis of Buddhist institutions. The association of this pottery with Buddhist monastic sites may reveal the

cosmopolitan nature of *sangha* during this time. At Nagarjunakonda, the names of various monasteries suggest that there were accommodations for monks coming from different regions of the subcontinent as far as Kashmir and Gandhara regions in the north and Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean in the south. These monasteries must have had enormous resources to attract people from these far away lands. It was Kosambi⁸⁷ who first suggested that the monasteries might have facilitated the trade through trade caravans to make profits. Not many accepted Kosambi's view since some of the monasteries in question were away from towns and cities. Ray⁸⁸ talks about the Buddhist *sangha* holding a considerable amount of land and property in the early centuries of Common Era. Her argument was on the basis of the evidence for storage rooms at Nagarjunakonda, material remains of the presence of various industries and a large number of donations made by people from different walks of life. Buddhist *vihāras* at places like Bavikonda and Thotlakonda also have remains of storage houses while local and foreign coins invariably have been included in the cultural remnants of almost all of the Buddhist sites. Furthermore, coin molds and coins in *vihāras* at Nagarjunakonda show that these monasteries possessed separate mints of their own.⁸⁹ Schopen in his chapter on monks, nuns, and "vulgar" practices argues with the help of inscriptional evidence how monks and nuns constituted the majority in making donations to the image cult.⁹⁰ Obviously monks and nuns during the pre- and early centuries of Christian era were able to own property. If this was true, it would not have been difficult for them, if not on the behalf of the Buddhist monastery, to act on their own as private bankers to loan the money to traders.

Conclusion

The Buddhism that developed along with trade and urbanization in Andhra replaced the megalithic burial monuments with *stūpas*. On the one hand it can be argued that the local megalithic culture of Andhra transformed Buddhism by integrating its forms of practice into the indigenous milieu. On the other hand, it may be surmised that Buddhism became the new status quo of religious culture and grafted some of the indigenous practices into its edifice. On the basis of the analysis of the material culture, we can assert with confidence that the tradition of ancestor veneration that started in the prehistoric ages within these Andhra communities eventually culminated in the worship of the Buddhist *stūpa* reflecting the undeniable fact that there was continuity between the earlier and the newer forms of religion.

The emergent Buddhist religious culture of Andhra reveals an inclusive sensitivity to indigenous religious cults and their symbolic expression. This inclusive ethos in which Buddhist institutions incorporated popular forms of religion abetted its appeal to a broad cross-section of urbanizing society. The forms of veneration of the dead that were predominant among pre- and protohistoric societies were successfully merged into Buddhist symbols and cultic forms of veneration. Other lesser forms of religious expression in the form of goddess and snake images also found their place within the Buddhist complex thus providing a wider venue to meet a full-scale religious needs of the population as a whole.

When the population experienced a transition from a self-sufficient, agrarian society to an urban one that was ambitious in acquiring skills, wealth, and self-respect, Buddhism came to its aid. It provided a matrix of values to meet these needs. This is seen very clearly in relation to the merchant community. Buddhist establishments were often set up in strategic places that would give shelters to merchant caravans and the sea voyagers. In conclusion, I want to briefly allude to some of the reasons behind the close ties between the trading class and Buddhist establishments.

The spread and vitality of trade was directly linked to the spread and vitality of Buddhism. As a religion appealing to commoners because of its "casteless" concerns and its religious ethic of giving, it proved attractive to a wide variety of people. Traders found that in Buddhism, there were fewer barriers between them and the other classes (cultivators and artisans) with whom they came into contact with in the business of trade. Business friendship included religious friendship. Buddhist traders erected *stūpas* not only to honor the Buddha, but also to demonstrate that their material excesses were equated with spiritual success. These *stūpas* also became important landmarks, beacons and lighthouses to mariners, and the larger *vihāras* also provided shelter to itinerant traders. In this connection, it is interesting to note the role reversal that took place here: supportive laity had become those on the move in pursuit of economic success while the Buddhist monks had begun to live more of a sedentary existences. This last point does not ignore the fact that monks often accompanied traders in their far-flung voyages to regions of Southeast Asia and beyond where trade and Buddhism were also to flourish hand-in-hand.

Finally, with reference to the question of what was responsible for the relative demise of Buddhism in Andhra that I raised at the outset perhaps we can only ponder basic questions and speculate. Did the Buddhists outdo themselves in remaking the religion to make it congenial for so many of the masses? While Buddhist "inclusion" abetted its success

as it spread across the depth and breadth of Andhra by meeting the needs of the changing society that was going through the evolution from pastoral through rural and urban forms, is it possible that it became too identified with the socioeconomic regimes of those times? While it was successful for more than 600 years in Andhra, did the factor of economic decline of the society within which it had become so intertwined and identified lead to its own decline? Buddhist institutions rather suddenly found themselves without much patronage in the fourth century CE. While there is some indication that it entered into another phase of change in association with the rise of the Mahāyāna, it also seems to have lost its great popularity in Andhra at a time when the society in general had retreated economically. By the time the economy recovered, had Buddhism changed itself so much that it lost its resonance with the deeper structures of religion in Andhra? Was this why, as a transformed institution, it became a very poor competitor to other forms of religion such as Śaivism that seems to have better catered to the needs of the another wave of urbanization? And why was it not able to reconnect with the rural communities of those times as well?

However these questions are answered, it cannot be denied that Buddhism came to Andhra at a time when conditions were such that it was able to create cohesiveness and order in the society that was going through a change. Newly emerged professional groups found social respect and spiritual satisfaction by associating themselves with Buddhist institutions. The concept of “*dāna*” helped not only to boost the morality of the public but also gave a further boost to the economy. While Buddhism flourished with the traders’ patronage, it was also spread by these trading communities from the Krishna River Valley to other regions of India and across the seas to Sri Lanka, regions of Southeast Asia and beyond.

Notes

1. B. S. L. Hanumantha Rao, et al., *Buddhist Inscriptions of Andhradesa* (Secundrabad: Ananda Buddha Vihara Trust, 1998), pp. 10–12; B. S. Rajendra Babu, *Material Culture of the Deccan* (Delhi: Agam Kala Prakashan, 1999), p. 25. Babu states that an inscription of Dharmakirti dated 1344 CE mentions the repairs done to the main *stūpa* (*mahā caitya*) at Amaravati. But the existence of the Mahāstūpa until this late is controversial although there are references to the lingering Buddhist remnants in Amaravati and elsewhere. For the controversy about the Mahāstūpa see Jonathan Walters’ chapter in this volume.

2. On the basis of the unearthed hoards of Roman coins along coastal Andhra and inland, scholars and archeologists in the past assumed that Andhra