

Prince Jīmūtavāhana As An Embodiment Of The Bodhisattva Ideal: A Study Of The Nāgānanda Play

Nguyen Thanh Ngan

Abstract

This research is based on the 2nd-century collection of legends mentioned in a work called *Vrihat Kathā*, which further inspired the well-known Sanskrit texts such as *Śrī Harṣa's Nāgānanda*, *Somadeva's Kathāsaritsāgara*, and *Kṣemendra's Brhatkathāmañjarī*. If *Śrī Harṣa's Nāgānanda* describes the sacrifice of *Jīmūtavāhana* to save *Śaṅkhacūḍa* from the eagle king *Garuda*, *Somadeva's Kathāsaritsāgara* praises the moral example to highlight the Bodhisattva ideals. Another 11th Century text from Kashmir named *Brhatkathāmañjarī* by *Kṣemendra* deals with the story of *Jīmūtavāhana*, emphasizing the philosophical and ethical dimensions as well as the karmic consequences of altruistic actions. By analyzing the understanding based on these related texts, this study shows that the story of *Jīmūtavāhana* is an embodiment of the Bodhisattva ideal of altruism and self-sacrifice that permeates the Buddhist ideal which was later incorporated in Hindu ethical framework. Based on the method of analyzing the story of *Jīmūtavāhana's* sacrifice, it reveals the core teachings of *Mahāyāna* while reflecting the cultural and philosophical values of altruism. By examining the Buddhist messages embedded within these works this research is aimed at exploring the overlapping values underlying the popular stories common in the Buddhist and Hindu traditions. This research also draws on insights from the ancient literature of drama and Indian cultural history to reveal the deeper implications of altruistic dimensions in Indic religious traditions.

Keywords: *Jīmūtavāhana*, *Bodhisattva Ideal*, *Self-Sacrifice*, *Altruistic Dimensions*, *Nāgānanda*, the core teachings of *Mahāyāna*, *Related Texts*.

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I. Introduction

In ancient Indian literature, the genre of drama influenced profound Buddhism. It is the famous work “*Nāgānanda*” or “*Joy of the Serpents*” written by Sankrit and Prakit in the seventh century CE and attributed to the King Harsha, who ruled the great kingdom. It told the story of Prince *Jīmūtavāhana*, who sacrificed his own life to save the snakes that became object of food for the king of birds, *Garuḍa*. This implies a great loving-kindness of a Bodhisattva.

King Harsha built the character *Jīmūtavāhana* with the idea of a Bodhisattva who wishes to bring happiness to others. Regarding the content of the play, the Bodhisattva idea of *Jīmūtavāhana* is depicted according to essential points: servicing to his parents, cultivation of spiritual life; non-violence towards the enemy; loving-kindness, and perfection of giving or the sacrifice of his own life to the welfare of others. This perfection of giving is similar to the story of the *Gautama Buddha*, Previous Life Stories in narratives of *Jātaka* when he saw a tigress emaciated and exhausted after giving birth, and due to immeasurable compassion, he gave his own life to feed the tiger. “He decides to offer himself as food for the tigress so that she wouldn't have to eat her own children. The tigress sniffs at his body but makes no move to harm him even though she is starving.” This is common ground for the writer to decide to choose this topic for the paper.

II. Content

Author

According to N. Aiyaswami Sastri, King *Śrīhaṣa Harsa* is credited with having composed three well-known dramas of which the *Nāgānanda* ranks very high among.

In the article of author *Shankar Goyal* also refers *Nāgānanda* as authored by a King Harsha of the *Pushyabhūti* dynasty ruled a large empire in North India from 606 CE to 647 CE. He wrote three plays, *Ratnāvali*, *Prānivadharkraurya*, and *Nāgānanda*.¹

According to Preface by *Edward Byles Cowell*, the *Nāgānanda*, the sister-play to the *Ratnāvali*, was edited in Calcutta in 1864, by an old student at the Sanskrit College, *Mādhava Chandra Ghosha*.²

¹ *Shankar Goyal*, "The Authenticity of the Plays Ascribed to Harsha," *Journal of the Oriental Institute* (or relevant publication), p. 90.

There is also the reliable testimony of the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang, who visited India during 629-643 AD. The inscriptions of Harsadeva and his contemporaries also throw considerable light on the history of the time.

Buddhist Play

According to Shankar Go: In the article the Authenticity of the plays ascribed to Harsha of Shankar Go The Nāgānanda of Harsha has been used by scholars for a different intent. It is cited as an argument in favor of the theory that Harsha had become a Buddhist in his later years. Its hero Vidyādhara prince Jīmūtavāhana in the last two Acts behaves like a Bodhisattva. It has been argued that the play clearly advocates the ideal of peace and principle of non-violence. In the Nāndī ślokas of the Nāgānanda a respectful reference is also made to Munīndra (Buddha), Bodhi and dhyāna (contemplation). R.S. Tripathi has described it as 'an almost Buddhistic play', an opinion with which a number of other scholars including Dasharatha Sharma, L. M. Joshi, D. Devahuti and B. N. Sharma agree.

What is Nāgānanda?

The term Nāgānanda is derived from two Sanskrit words:

Nāga: Refers to serpents or divine serpent-like beings in Indian mythology and Buddhist traditions.

Nāgas are often considered protectors of water bodies and treasures and are symbolic of wisdom and spiritual energy.

Ānanda: Means "joy," "bliss," or "happiness."

Nāgānanda translates to "The Joy of the Nāgas" or "The Bliss of the Serpents."

III. Jīmūtavāhana Practices The Bodhisattva Ideal

The practice Ideal of Bodhisattva is a characteristic of Mahāyāna Buddhism. The term "Bodhisattva" literally means a "being" who determine to become a Buddha. According to Mahāyāna tradition, a Bodhisattva, instead of dwelling in Nirvāna, courses innumerable lifetimes toward enlightenment and leads living beings going on the path of enlightenment.

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Servicing to the parents

Jīmūtavāhana is the successor of a great kingdom, possessing much wealth, but he is willing to abandon everything to care for his parents on Malaya Mountain. He knows the youth is temporary, and passion is the abode of the youth. Thus, he desires to take good care of his parents:

"I understand that the youth is abode of passion; my conviction is indeed not perishable. Who again on the earth that does not know averse to the consideration of what should be done and what should not be done? This youth is blamable in this way being under the control of senses. It would be to delight, if it passed in the same manner while I am devoted servicing my parents"

Servicing parents is the highest purpose to perfect morality. According to the Sigalovada Sutta in Dīgha Nikāya, Buddha taught that the householder's son pays homage to six directions; the East denotes mother and father:

"In five ways, young householder, a child should minister to his parents as the East:

- (i) Having supported me I shall support them,
- (ii) I shall do their duties,
- (iii) I shall keep the family tradition,
- (iv) I shall make myself worthy of my inheritance,
- (v) Furthermore, I shall offer alms in honor of my departed relatives.⁵

² Harsha, Nāgānanda, translated by Palmer Boyd (Publisher: Location, 1872)

³ Shankar Goyal, "The Authenticity of the Plays Ascribed to Harsha," Journal of the Oriental Institute (or relevant publication), pp. 88.

⁴ R.S. Tripathi, History of Kanauj (Banaras: Publisher Name, Year), pp. 193.

⁵ Bhikkhu Bodhi (ed.). In the Buddha's Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pali Canon. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005

Thus, servicing parents is to show gratitude to his parents and it also foundation for spiritual development.

Non-violence to enemy

From the beginning, one of the reasons causing wars in the world is greed, anger, and delusion. The spirit of Buddhism is non-violence, known as Ahimsa, and non-Buddhist scriptures show any article supporting violence. Non-violence is a way to solve conflict. Non-violence is a prominent feature of compassion and the basis of Buddhism. Similarly, in the third scene of “Nāgānanda”, a report from Mitravasu related to Matanga who has overrun his kingdom, Mitravasu asked Jīmūtavāhana for this instruction

“In fact, I don’t feel that anything is my enemy other than mental defilement. If you want to be dear to me, then feel sympathy for the person who is tortured by being enslaved to the defilements.”

The above paragraph expresses that King Harsha used the doctrine of Non-violence to rule his kingdom. He understood that the greatest enemy was defilement in his mind. In this play, Jīmūtavāhana is a symbol of tolerance and sympathy for those who are tortured in the defilements. This states a deep significance to the spirit of non-violence in Buddhism and makes the play beautiful.

Perfection of giving

Offering act to save Śankhacūḍa becomes the major theme of the play. In Buddhism, the perfection of giving means that there are three kinds of giving: “gift of material goods,” “gift of fearlessness,” and “gift of dharma”

The motivation for giving is as vital as objects are given. Giving leads to ending defilement and attaining liberation. By this way, receiving a pair of garments at the right time, Hero felt delighted as an excellent opportunity from himself to relieve misery for the benefit of others.

“Nāyaka: The pair of red garments that have come to me at the right time. Makes me greatly happy as I surrender my body to help another.”

Thus, the value of the play is the sacrifice of the character Jīmūtavāhana for the snake’s welfare. Additionally, the other significant fact, Garuḍa stopped harming Nāgas. This act brought endless joy to all serpents. This implies that the custom of such a worshiped tradition is one of the reasons causing fear and distress for all living beings. This custom tradition should abandon. Therefore, the character Jīmūtavāhana with great loving-kindness and compassion, symbolizes a noble ideal, converting not only unwholesome but also changing a deep custom that has existed for a long time. This scene touch to the heart of the audience. It is a subtle combination to convey the Bodhisattva ideal in the real life of people.

IV. Conclusion

The Nāgānanda drama sincerely represents the implication of the Bodhisattva ideal by practicing the perfection of ethics and giving. Although the work Nāgānanda only praise the Lord of Buddha with the first two verses Nāndī, the spirit of the play Nāgānanda depicted through the main character, Jīmūtavāhana indicates a profound humanity in a literature work. Loving-kindness and sympathy is one of the remedies for converted a Buddhist follower, the author used skillful means to combine the Vedic tradition and the idea of Bodhisattva in Mahāyāna. This combination implies that the ideal of Bodhisattva denotes a way of life wholesome and cultivates spiritual development in a multi-religious social context.

The ideal of Bodhisattva’s path in the Play of Nāgānanda can be applied in the present context. Although there is reason; taking care of parents is basic morality to build a sustainable development society; looking after all animals and protecting the earth is to minimize the polluted environment, disasters as well as diseases for expressing loving-kindness and responsibility to all living beings; using non-violence is as a remedy to avoid conflict wars; applying sympathy o loving-kindness with all living beings as a therapeutic method is to transform defilement in their mind. Those makes the difference for the play of Nāgānanda with the two previous plays: Ratnāvalī (pearl necklace) and Priyadarśika (gracious lady) of the King Harsha. The play’s core is to convey messages of the King Harsha to make a better world and emphasize spiritual development towards the ideal of Bodhisattva for the welfare of oneself and sentient beings.

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