

Buddhist Hero Stones of India and Ceylon (600 C.E.-1300 C.E.): A Historical Study

K. Mahesh Nayak¹

Introduction

Hero Stones (*Viragallu*) are memorials erected to commemorate heroes who laid down their lives for noble causes. They lost their lives defending cattle raiding, protecting the Village, preserving territorial boundaries, safeguarding religious institutions, securing their kings and masters, community, women's chastity, and for self-immolated heroes died due to various socio religious causes. The tripartite architectural structure of the hero stones was the lower panel manifesting the earthly action as the cause of death, the middle panel revealing the journey towards heaven, with the celestial (Apsarasa) bodies, and the upper panel symbolising reaching heaven. Different vernacular terms used for the hero stones, such as Virakkal in Tamil, Viragallu in Kannada, Virakallu in Telugu, Viragal in Marathi, and from different parts of the country, also known as Khambha and Paliya. These memorials were preserved as a form social memory through the erection and continued worship with the local practices. In ancient times, heroes were highly associated with cattle raiding and skirmishes. In early medieval times, the protection of religion, boundaries, and master-oriented causes was common.

Buddhist hero stones are found in the places like Chakreshwartirtha at Sopara, Mandhatne located in India and Velana-Damana, which is now most important and highly preserved at the archaeological museum at Anuradhapura (Ceylon). The hero stones from these places shared similar iconographic features, depicting the war between two or more parties. The Buddha is seated in Bhumisparsha-mudra (earth-touching gesture). The deceased heroes' gods were portrayed on the hero stones, like Shiva Linga, Nandi, Sudarsanacakra, and Garuda, which were inscribed to show the hero, goes to his respective heaven; equally, the Buddhist warrior heroes erect an image of Buddha as their ultimate goal after death.

Objectives

The aim of research paper is focusing on the Socio-religious significance in early and medieval India as well as Ceylon (Sri Lanka). It is also examining in

¹ Ph.D. Research Scholar, Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi - 110067, India. kmaheshnayak64@gmail.com

the concept of Buddhist philosophy in the early and medieval period regarding warrior tradition and its spread in local level. The present research area is also focusing and connecting the archaeological and literary evidence to support the notion of martial tradition. To examines changes in Buddhist philosophy during the early medieval period toward the defensive warrior tradition in the protection of the region and the religion welfare. Connect archaeological and literary evidence to support the notion of martial tradition. Highlight few iconographical features of the Buddhist memorial and the inner meaning of each symbol.

Methodology

This paper used a mixed-method approach based on primary and secondary sources. 1. More inclines towards a qualitative analysis of the emergence, spread, and impact of Buddhist hero stones in India and Ceylon. 2. Spatial and iconographic analysis examines the photographic, drawing and published descriptions of hero stones, observed symbols, posters, Buddhist motifs, the sitting positions of Buddha, weapons used by heroes, and narrative scenes. 3. Comparative analysis of Buddhist memorials similarities and differences between regions, periods, and social significance in India and Ceylon followed in this paper. 4. Analyses study of belief and cultural practice within the society followed by interdisciplinary approach by combining insights from history, archaeology, religious, philosophy, and hero stones to comprehensively examine.

Results

There are few of the places founded the Buddhist hero stones in India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka). Though, the most important place is *Chakreshwartirtha* at Sopara identified in India. Generally, the upper portion of the stone shows a Stupa structure but the middle panel of the hero stone depicts two seated women, both identified as the Buddhist deities, Tara, and a female supplicant. The lower panel was erected with the burners, receptacle, and stupa. Another at *Mandhatne* village in the Konkan region of India and the Buddha is seated in the Bhumisparsa-mudra. The time period of this hero stone is around the 11th century A.D.

The well-preserved Buddhist hero stone in the Archaeological Museum at Anuradhapura was found in *Velana Damana* is more noteworthy. This Buddhist hero stone divided into two panels. Lower panel depicts a fierce battle scene among the warriors, some are dead fallen on earth and others are still fight with wounded bodies. The upper panel features the Buddha in the Bhumisparsa-mudra with two celestial bodies on two sides with a kind of fly-whisk objects. A similar memorial was found in *Polonnaruwa*, *Wijayasundararama* located in the Ceylon.

Although the *Mahavamsa* states that the killing as considered as sins, an obstacle to the attainment of Moksha. Dutthagamani's war was glorified for the consolidation of the Buddha Sasana, and he was said to ascend to heaven. The Jetavana pillar inscription of Mahinda IV records that the king's responsibility is to protect the Bowl and the Robe, which means protecting Buddhist sites and teaching, such heroes are believed to be reborn as the chief disciple of the future Buddha Maitreya, like the King Dutthagamani. The memorials from Velana Damana, Polonnaruwa, Wijayasundararama, etc., reflect the development of this belief. Though Buddhist followed the philosophy of Ahimsa (non-violence), it adopted a defensive method of warrior culture. It adopted this notion due to socio-political changes, including the emergence of new regional dynasties, and feudalism in India and Ceylon. Persistent warfare and instability encouraged the protection of the boundaries and religion.

The spatial distribution of Buddhist memorials in India and Ceylon enable to know the Buddhist landscape and interaction with local settlement. Buddhism is followed only by some section within the society is challenged on the basis of Buddhist hero stones at root level because the memorial erection is practice is followed more by tribes, pastoral community and village society more than royal and mainstream society. The Buddhist cultural landscape is spread more in early medieval period, but the intensity declined in latter periods in India. Trade routes are major landscape of Buddhism, but in case of Buddhist hero stones they were observed random distribution rather than any pattern in its spatial distribution in India and Ceylon.

Buddhist hero stones purely support of defensive activities. The available historical text, inscriptions, and archaeological evidences do not indicate that these Buddhist memorials were associated with any kind of cult practice such as self-immolation or decapitation practices. Most of the Buddhist hero stones are non-living memorial stones unlike hero stones in south India region. Their significance lay in preserving the memory of heroic deeds rather than cult practices. Analytical observation of the hero stone sculpture deepened society's understanding. Buddhist memorial art is an expression of the thoughts, notions, and beliefs of contemporary society. Sculptures serve as a basis for studying a society's beliefs and values.

Conclusion

Although, Buddhism never encourages the violent or war-like activities, it followed a defensive warrior tradition to protect its region and religion. Buddhism is popular among the lower levels of society and among warriors because the hero stones are non-royal. Buddhist hero stones offer deeper insights

into the social, religious, and political landscape of the early medieval period and the complex relationship between Buddhism, Kingship, warfare, and memorial practice correlation. These memorials need to be preserved very carefully to safeguard the cultural, religious, and historical heritage in India and Ceylon.

Keywords- Buddhism, Ceylon, Culture, Hero-stones, India

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