

## The Year of Commencement of the Buddha Era

THE year of commencement of the Buddha Era (Buddha-varṣa) is still a disputed question as much of the history of Ceylon as of that of India. The question has been recently reopened by Dr. Paranavitana who stands for the correctness of the Buddhist traditional date of the Buddha's demise suggesting 544-43 B.C. as the year of commencement of the Buddha Era.<sup>1</sup> The issue raised is combated by Dr. Mendis who argues alike against the era which started in 544-43 B.C. and that which started in 483.<sup>2</sup>

The general impression which is gaining ground in India is that Dr. Paranavitana is just a spokesman of the new-born national spirit or patriotic motive guiding the opinion of the modern Buddhist scholars of Ceylon. As against Dr. Mendis, it may be pointed out that he has neither availed himself of certain relevant data of chronology furnished by scholars other than those cited by him nor considered the question along with its certain side-issues deserving special attention. The position taken up by him is that the date of the Buddha's demise is neither 544-43 B.C. nor 483 B.C., there being "even better evidence for placing the *Parimibhāna* about 365 B.C., a 100 years before the consecration of Aśoka."<sup>3</sup> And if he were to choose between the first two dates, he would prefer the second to the first.

Dr. Mendis is apparently out to upset the views hitherto accepted as authoritative on the new scriptural authority of Dr. E. J. Thomas in whose opinion "it is a mere euphemism to call it (proposed date) a working hypothesis."<sup>4</sup> Any of the other dates would be equally workable as long as there are no other contemporary dates to contradict them.<sup>5</sup>

With all that as his background, Dr. Mendis does not play well the part of a good reasoner or sound judge. It is one thing to say that it is not possible to begin the chronology of Ceylon from 544-43 B.C., nor can it be started from 483 B.C., each of them regarded as a traditional date for the *Parimibhāna*, and it is another thing to say that there is even better evidence for placing the *Parimibhāna* about 365 B.C., a century prior to Aśoka's consecration. He does not seem to realise that he begs all along the question or that the whole of his argument moves in a vicious circle.

1. *A New History of the Indian People*, Vol. VI, p. 262.

2. *The Chronology of the Early Pali Chronicles in University of Ceylon Review*, Vol V,

No. 1, p. 39.

3. Mendis, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

4. This is directed against Max Müller to whom we owe the expression 'best working hypothesis in connection with the initial date, A. D. 477, suggested by him for the reign of Candragupta of the Imperial Gupta dynasty.

5. Theravādin and Sarvāstivādin dates of the Nirvāṇa, *B. C. Law Volume*, Part I, p. 18.

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The two main assumptions on which Dr. Mendis proceeds are :

1. "The Greek historians began their dates from the first recorded Olympic Games and the Romans from the foundation of their city. The Christian chroniclers started from the birth of Christ and the Buddhist writers of Ceylon from the *Parimibhāna* of the Buddha. But the construction of the chronologies was attempted very much later. In Ceylon dates appear to have been first fixed about the time of Vaṭṭagāmani Abhaya, when the Sinhalese commentaries on the Pāli Canon were written down. Thus as in ancient Greece and Rome, a long gap in the earliest period had to be filled in from insufficient data, and, therefore, there can be no certainty with regard to the early dates."

2. "The most complete account of the Magadha kings is given in the *Mahāvamsa*. The only difference in the *Samantapāsādikā* list is that it begins with Ajātasattu and not with Bimbisāra. The *Dīpavamsa* contains a number of lists, but not one is complete . . . There are also lists of Magadha kings in the Brahmanic *Purānas*, the Northern Buddhist *Divyāvadāna* and the Jaina *Parīṣiṣṭaparvan*, but these show marked differences in the order of the kings as well as their regnal years . . . It is possible that these lists are not authentic traditions but later compilations."

If such be the credibility of traditional chronologies, how can Dr. Mendis be certain about the contemporaneity of Devānampiya Tissa with Devānampiya Asoka? How does he prefer one tradition to another and what makes him say that there is "even better evidence" to fix 365 B.C. as the date of the Buddha's demise? Where is the authentic evidence for the statement that the commentaries on the Pāli Canon were "written down" in the time of Vaṭṭagāmani Abhaya? The contemporaneity of Devānampiya Asoka and Devānampiya Tissa cannot be used as a sheet-anchor of Indo-Ceylonese chronology unless it be regarded as a working hypothesis. By "better evidence" in favour of placing the Buddha's *Parimibhāna* about a century before the consecration of Aśoka, Dr. Mendis means the Sarvāstivāda tradition which is discussed by Dr. Thomas and the prophecy in the *Dīpavamsa* regarding the time of the third Orthodox Buddhist Council and that of the rise of the Thera Moggaliputta Tissa into prominence which are advantageously cited by him.

Let us examine the cogency of the two before we proceed with our real task. As for the prophecy, it is evidently out of its context. That there is a gap between the prophecy regarding the time of the First Council and that regarding the date of the Third<sup>6</sup> is already pointed out by a Pālist of no mean

6. *Dīpavamsa*, I, 24-25.

authority than Oldenberg.<sup>7</sup> Immediately after the prophecy about the First Council and before that about the Third it is legitimate to expect a second prophecy about the Second Council, particularly in view of the fact that the *Dīpaṃsa* tradition contains the account of the first two Councils and definitely places the date of the Second Council a century after the Buddha's demise.

The prophecy does not stand by itself. It has its place not only in the context of a chapter or its section but in that of the text as a whole. It is known to all *bona fide* students of Pali literature that a text claiming a methodical treatment of its subject-matters is presented through three stages, technically known as *uddesa* or bare statement of the theses, *middesa* or specification of their meaning, and *paṭimiddesa* or elaborate treatment of the topics. In the *uddesa* stage we get just the conspectus of the whole thing (*saṅgahavāra*), while in the next two we reach the treatment of the proposed subject-matters in progressive forms of elucidation or elaboration (*vibhāgavāra*).<sup>8</sup> This textual methodology is clearly followed in the *Dīpaṃsa*. The *uddesa* section is introduced with the verse stating the main subject-matters as consisting in—

*Dīpāgamanaṃ Buddhassa Dhātu ca Bodhiyāgamanaṃ  
Saṅgah-Ācariyavādāṇ ca Dīpaṃhi Sāsamaṅgamaṃ.*

The list of topics definitely includes the Councils (*Saṅgahas*) and the Rise of the Buddhist Sects (*Ācariyavādāṇ*). The prophecy cited by Dr. Mendis occurs in the *middesa* section leading in its turn to the *paṭimiddesa*. That which is elaborately dealt with in the third section or stage is expected to be specified in the second. Now in the third stage we get a similar prophecy, but definitely after a statement concerning the Second Council and not immediately after that concerning the First. I need not cite here other verses or statements referring the time of the Second Council to a century from or after the Buddha's demise. It is sufficient for our immediate purpose to cite the verse concerning the rise of the sects as a sequel to the Second Council and the prophetic verse occurring almost immediately after it ;

*Paṭhame vassasate n'atthi, dutiye vassasatantare  
bhinnā sattarasa vādā uppannā jina-sāsane (V. 53).  
Anāgate vassasate vassān atthārasāni ca  
upajissati so bhikkhu samano paṭivāpako (V. 55).*

This decides once for all that the prophecy about the time of the Pāṭali-putra Council cited by Dr. Mendis from the *middesa* section of the *Dīpaṃsa* is no evidence at all in support of the Sarvāstivāda tradition placing Aśoka a century after the Buddha's demise.

Now, as for the Sarvāstivāda tradition itself, it is obvious that Dhammāsoka (Aśoka the Pious) is confounded with Kālāsoka (Aśoka the Black) and *vice versa*, or that Aśoka I and Aśoka II are confusedly merged in a single individual.<sup>9</sup> Kākavarṇa or Kākavarṇī (Crow-black), as suggested by Professor Raychaudhuri, is the descriptive Paurāṇic or *Divyāvādāna* (*i.e.*, Sarvāstivāda) name for king Kākāsoka of the Pali Chronicles.

All the later Buddhist traditions, whether Theravāda or Sarvāstivāda, refer to the reign of an Aśoka as a chronological landmark of the early history of Buddhism and place it a century from the Buddha's demise. In the Pali Chronicles the tenth year of his reign is equated with 100 B.E. In them, he is distinguished from Aśoka, the son and successor of Bindusāra, as Kālāsoka from Dhammāsoka. In the *rāja-parampara* section of the *Samantapāsādikā*, he is distinguished also as the earlier Aśoka, *i.e.*, Aśoka I, from the later Aśoka, *i.e.*, Aśoka II.<sup>10</sup> The confusion of the two and their merging in one personality led to the representation of Aśoka as a man of ugly appearance and cruel nature.—a veritable Caṇḍāsoka prior to his transformation into Dharmāsoka through his conversion to the Buddhist faith. Thus the Buddhist theologian tried to derive a huge capital out of this business of royal conversion. Happily this Sarvāstivāda way of describing the fact of the change of faith on the part of Devānampiya Aśoka has its vestige in the later Pali chronicle *Mahāvamsa*<sup>11</sup> but is conspicuous by its absence in the earlier chronicle *Dīpaṃsa* and the earlier representation of the Sinhalese *Atthakathā Mahāvamsa* in the general introduction to the *Samantapāsādikā*. How the Sphinx of the legend-making art created the mystery in Aśoka's complete transformation through conversion by weaving the stories of two Aśokas in the thread of a single narrative is too patent to need any further explanation. The only fact of historical worth to be gleaned out of the legends and traditions is that 100 B.E. formed a chronological landmark of the early history of Buddhism, the earlier landmark associated with the reign of Aśoka the Black or ugly Aśoka, while 218 or 236 B.E. formed the later landmark associated with the reign of Aśoka the Pious, the Beloved of the Gods.

9. Barua, *Aśoka and His Inscriptions*, Part I, pp. 23 ff.

10. *Samantapāsādikā* : I, pp. 72 : *Parinibbute ca Pama Sambuddhe Ajātasattu catuvisati-vassāni rajjam kāresi ; Udayabhaddoccolasa. Anuvadhō ca Muṇḍo ca atthārasa, Nāgādāsako catuvisati, Suśumāga atthārasa, tass'eva putto Aśoko atthāvāsati. Aśokassa puttā dasabhātuka-rājāno duvīsati-vassāni rajjam kāresum. Tesam paachato nana-Nandā duvīsatiṃ eva, Caṇḍagutto ca catuvisati, Bindusāro atthāvāsati, tassāvādāne Aśoko rajjam pāpam. Tassa pure abhisekā cattāri vassāni, abhisekato atthārasame vasse imasmim dīpe Mahindat-thero patitthito.*

11. *Divyāvādāna*, p. 382 :

*Caṇḍāsokatoṃ prāpya pūrvam pṛthivyām.*

*Dharmāsokatoṃ karmajā tena lebhe.*

*Mahāvamsa* V. 189 :

*Caṇḍāsoko ti nāyitha pure pāpema kammunā.*

*Dhammāsoko ti nāyitha pacchā puññena kammunā.*

7. *Ibid.*, p. 15. Please note that some of the MSS. used by Oldenberg read *duvassasatān atthārasāni ca*.

8. *Netti*, pp. 1 ff.

The hundredth year landmark is suggested in the Pali *Vinaya* account of the Second Buddhist Council, the Vesālī Council dated in 100 B.E. (*vassasata-parivibbute Bhagavati*).<sup>12</sup> There occurs a definite statement in the *Serissakavathu* placing its time of composition a century from the death of the chieftain Pāyāsi which took place not long after the Buddha's demise :

*mānussakam vassasatam atītam  
yadagge kāyamhi idhāpāpāmmo.*<sup>13</sup>

It goes without saying that the *Callavagga* account was the canonical authority behind the later descriptions of the Second Council in the Pali chronicles, the *Samanta-phaṣāṭṭhā*, and other works. The literary background of the Serissaka story lay in the *Dīgha* Dialogue called *Pāyāsi Suttanta* giving as it does an account of the controversy which took place between the chieftain Pāyāsi and the 'flower-talker' Thera Kumāra Kassapa shortly after the Buddha's demise.

Amongst other important chronological data afforded by the Pali canonical texts, I may mention (1) the statement concerning the Buddha's renunciation in the 29th year of his life<sup>14</sup> and during the reign of Bimbisāra;<sup>15</sup> (2) the contemporaneity of the Buddha and the six Tittihyas and the seniority of the latter;<sup>16</sup> (3) the demise of Niṅaṅṭha Nātaputta (Mahāvīra) in the Buddha's life-time;<sup>17</sup> (4) the interest evinced by Niṅaṅṭha Nātaputta in Devadatta;<sup>18</sup> (5) Devadatta's plotting with Ajātasattu against the Buddha;<sup>19</sup> (6) Ajātasattu as the king of Magadha after the killing of his father;<sup>20</sup> (7) the contemporaneity of king Pasenadi of Kosala and the Buddha and their mortal existence up till their 80th year;<sup>21</sup> (8) a prolonged war between Pasenadi as king of Kosala and Ajātasattu as the king of Magadha, better, of Aṅga-Magadha;<sup>22</sup> (9) Ajātasattu's previous grudge against the Vajjis of Vesālī<sup>23</sup> and the fortification of Pāṭaligāma as the first step to the fulfilment of his grim resolve to utterly destroy them;<sup>24</sup> (10) the convening of the First Buddhist Council in 1 B.E.;<sup>25</sup> (11) the prophecy regarding the destruction of the city of Pāṭaliputta by fire, water or internal enmity;<sup>26</sup> (12) the indication of the lineal

12. *Vinaya*, ii, p. 294.

13. *Vimānavatthu*, p. 81; cited by Law, *A History of Pali Literature*, Vol. I, p. 36.

14. *Dīgha*, ii, p. 151.

15. *Sutta-nipāta*, VV, 408-9.

16. *Sutta-nipāta*, pp. 92 f.; Barua, *A History of Pre-Buddhist Indian Philosophy*,

p. 277.

17. *Dīgha*, iii, p. 117; *Majjhima*, ii, p. 243.

18. *Majjhima*, i, p. 393.

19. *Vinaya*, ii, p. 190.

20. *Dīgha*, i, p. 86.

21. *Dīgha*, ii, p. 100; *Majjhima*, ii, p. 124.

22. *Kosala-samyutta* in *Samyutta*, i.

23, 24. *Dīgha*, ii, pp. 72, 86.

25. *Vinaya*, ii, p. 285.

26. *Dīgha*, ii, p. 88.

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succession of the four kings of Magadha from Bimbisāra to Muṅḍa;<sup>27</sup> and (13) the line of the Vinaya teachers in India from Upāli to Moggaliputta marking three stages<sup>28</sup> connected in the Pali Chronicles with the first three orthodox Buddhist Councils.

It is important also to note that the Jaina traditional date for the demise of Mahāvīra is 527 B.C. If he had predeceased the Buddha, it becomes difficult to reconcile the two dates, the Buddhist traditional date 543 B.C. for the *Parinirvāṇa* of the Buddha and the Jaina traditional date 527 for the *Nirvāṇa* of Mahāvīra. In order to reconcile the reign of Aśoka with those of his five Greek contemporaries, the date of his consecration (*abhisheka*) must have to be placed in 269 or 270 B.C.<sup>29</sup> Dr. Mendis has rightly argued that accepting 544-43 B.C. as the year of the Buddha's demise, we cannot place Aśoka's consecration 218 years after it.

As for the probable year of Mahāvīra's demise, it may be observed that Mahāvīra's demise took place when Kūṅṅika, son of Bhimbhasāra, was yet the viceroy of Aṅga and not the king of Aṅga-Magadha.<sup>30</sup> The Jaina canonical tradition is unaware of Kūṅṅika-Ajātasattu's position as the king of Aṅga-Magadha. But it is certainly aware of the fratricidal war between the two sons of Bhimbhasāra (Bimbhasāra of the *Lalita-vistara*) for their father's throne.<sup>31</sup> This tradition refers to the existence of an alliance among the Licchavis, the Mallas, and the kings of Kāśī-Kosala operating against the ambition of Kūṅṅika. Squaring up these traditional facts with those in the Pali Canon, we cannot but conclude that the demise of Mahāvīra took place before Ajātasattu ascended the throne of Magadha and after Devadatta had started his inimical action against the Buddha. The question of the date of the Buddha's demise cannot be discussed apart from that of Mahāvīra's. Mahāvīra's demise must be dated at least seventeen years before that of the Buddha, since Mahāvīra's teaching career covered a period of thirty years, while that of the Buddha extended over a period of forty-five years. If such be the traditional position of the two events, it is impossible to reconcile the two dates, 543 and 527 B.C.

Apart from other considerations, just a century as an interval between the Buddha's demise and Aśoka's consecration is too short a period for the gradual development of the kingdom of Magadha into a full-fledged empire, remembering that Magadha started its imperial career with the annexation of Aṅga by Bimbisāra. That it stood as a powerful empire under the Nandas, to the east

27. *Dīgha*, i, pp. 47, 85. *Aṅguttara*, iii, p. 62.

28. *Vinaya*, v, p. 2.

29. Barua, *Aśoka and His Inscriptions*—Part I, p. 7.

30. *Kalpa-sūtra*, ed. by H. Jacobi. Leipzig, p. 65.

31. Barua, *The Ajivikas*, p. 28.

of the Punjab at the time of Alexander's invasion is amply borne out by the classical writers including Megasthenes. The *Purāṇas* set the formation of Magadha as a pretty large empire to the credit of Mahāpadma Nanda. The very name Dhanananda, as known to the Buddhists, speaks of the immense prosperity of the Magadhan ruler. The Buddhist traditional interval of 218 years is not only a probable and workable period but a very reasonable one. It fits in well with the year of commencement of the Buddha Era, 486 B.C. (975-489) as may be determined from the Chinese "dotted record" kept up in Canton up till A.D. 489.<sup>32</sup> Dr. Mendis has not considered at all this fact.

Deducting 218 years from 487-6, we get 269 or 268 B.C. as the year of Aśoka's consecration. We obtain the same result by deducting 215 years from 483,<sup>33</sup> the difference of one or two years on this or that side being immaterial.

The *Purāṇas* assign to nine or ten Maurya rulers altogether 137 years of sovereignty, 89 years to the first three rulers and just 48 to the rest. But the total of 89 cannot be made up by adding up the lengths of reigns, 24, 25 and 36 years, assigned by the *Purāṇas* to the first three rulers. This can be obtained from the addition of 24, 28 and 37 years assigned by the Pali Chronicles. The *Purāṇas* have nothing to say about the three years of Aśoka's accession previous to his consecration. In Aśoka's inscriptions, too, the length of his reign is counted from the year of his consecration. If there be any truth in the Ceylon tradition about the period of accession, the disparity can be got rid of by assigning a reign of 28 years to Bindusāra and including in it the 3 years of Aśoka's accession.<sup>34</sup>

I do not quite understand why the Buddhists of Ceylon should be so keen about 544-3 B.C. as the date of the Buddha's demise. If they press for it, the Buddhists of India can contend alike for 638 B.C., the date suggested in the inscriptions of Aśokavalla, king of Sapadālakṣa.<sup>35</sup>

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*P. S.*—If 483 B.C. be counted as the date of Buddha's *Parinibbāna*, 544-43 B.C. may rightly be regarded, as suggested by Dr. H. C. Rayachandhuri, as the date of Bimbisara's accession.

32. Takakusu, *J. R. A. S.*, 1905, p. 51.

33. As shown by Wickremasinghe and Geiger, the Buddha Era current in earlier times in Ceylon commenced in 483 B.C. This is the date suggested by Cunningham, *Philisa Topes*, pp. 74-75; Max Müller, *Dhammapada* in S. B. E., Vol. X, Introd., pp. xxxv ff; Bühler in *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. VI, p. 149.

34. Barua, *Asoka and His Inscriptions*, Part I, p. 58.

35. Cunningham, *Mahābodhi*, p. 78; Bhagawanlal Indraji in *Indian Antiquary*, Vol. X, p. 34.