



BUDDHIST ESTABLISHMENTS IN EARLY ANDHRA: A STUDY OF SOURCES

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism occupied an important place in the religious, cultural and economic history of early Andhra. From the centuries preceding the Common Era to the period of the Ikṣvākus in the third and fourth centuries CE, the lower Krishna valley and adjoining regions developed into one of the major Buddhist landscapes of peninsular India. Buddhist establishments such as stupas, chaityas, viharas, relic shrines and monastic complexes emerged at Amaravati, Jaggayyapeta, Bhattiprolu, Ghantasala, Guntupalli and Nagarjunakonda. These establishments were not isolated religious institutions. They were connected with merchants, artisans, rulers, royal women, monks, nuns and wider networks of trade and pilgrimage.

The present study examines the nature and development of Buddhist establishments in early Andhra through archaeological remains, inscriptions, sculptures, coins and literary evidence. Particular attention is given to Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda because their archaeological and epigraphic records provide unusually detailed evidence for the organisation of Buddhist communities. The evidence also demonstrates the presence of different Buddhist schools and suggests that Buddhist institutions had complex relationships with political authorities and economic groups. Recent scholarship cautions against treating royal patronage as the sole explanation for the growth of Buddhism: Buddhist communities and political institutions could remain institutionally distinct while being economically and culturally interconnected.

Keywords: Early Andhra, Buddhism, Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda, Satavahanas, Ikṣvakus, stupas, viharas, inscriptions, Buddhist archaeology.

INTRODUCTION

The history of early Andhra is closely associated with the development of Buddhism in the eastern Deccan. The region lying along the Krishna and Godavari River systems contained a remarkable concentration of Buddhist monuments. Among these, Amaravati, Nagarjunakonda and Jaggayyapeta are particularly significant because they preserve evidence for the



development of Buddhist architecture, sculpture, monastic organisation and religious patronage over several centuries.

The importance of Andhra Buddhism is visible not merely in the survival of monumental stupas but also in the inscriptions associated with them. These inscriptions record donations by rulers, members of royal families, merchants, artisans, monks, nuns and lay devotees. Nagarjunakonda is especially valuable because its inscriptions identify particular Buddhist schools and describe a variety of religious buildings and donations. Archaeological excavations at Nagarjunakonda revealed more than thirty Buddhist establishments dating mainly to the third and fourth centuries CE, demonstrating the scale and diversity of Buddhist institutional life in the region.

The Buddhist establishments of Andhra should therefore be studied as religious, social, economic and cultural institutions simultaneously. Their construction required considerable resources, while their continued functioning depended upon donations, trade networks, agricultural resources and organised monastic communities. The magnificent sculptural tradition of Amaravati also indicates that Buddhist establishments functioned as important centres of artistic production.

GEOGRAPHICAL SETTING OF EARLY ANDHRA

The geographical environment played an important role in the development of Buddhism in Andhra. The Krishna valley in particular contained fertile agricultural zones, riverine communication routes and connections to the eastern coast. Buddhist establishments developed in areas that were also connected with settlements and commercial routes.

Ancient Buddhist sites extended across considerable portions of present-day Andhra Pradesh. Archaeological records include sites such as Amaravati, Jaggayyapeta, Ghantasala, Guntupalli, Bhattiprolu, Goli, Gunturu and Nagarjunakonda, in addition to numerous smaller establishments. An older archaeological survey described a broad distribution of Buddhist remains stretching from the northern coastal region to the Krishna-Guntur zone and westward into the Deccan.

The location of Buddhist establishments near rivers and routes is significant. Buddhist monks depended upon interaction with lay society for food and material support, while merchants and travellers could benefit from monasteries as places of religious interaction and, in some circumstances, accommodation. This does not mean that every monastery was established



specifically as a commercial institution. Rather, Buddhist establishments formed part of a larger landscape of settlements, roads, markets and pilgrimage.

The importance of the Krishna valley became particularly pronounced during the Satavahana and Ikṣvāku periods. Later archaeological evidence at Nagarjunakonda demonstrates the existence of a substantial urban centre, Vijayapuri, alongside numerous Buddhist and Brahmanical establishments.

SOURCES FOR THE STUDY OF ANDHRA BUDDHISM

The history of Buddhist establishments in early Andhra cannot be reconstructed from a single category of evidence. Four principal groups of sources are particularly important.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOURCES

Excavated monuments constitute the most visible evidence. These include:

- Stupas;
- Mahāchaityas;
- Smaller votive stupas;
- Viharas;
- Chaitya halls;
- Apsidal structures;
- Ayaka platforms and pillars;
- Monastic cells;
- Relic chambers;
- Water installations;
- Gateways and railings.

The excavations at Nagarjunakonda are especially important. Early twentieth-century excavations revealed monasteries, apsidal temples, stupas, inscriptions, coins, relics, pottery and numerous sculptural remains.

Epigraphic Sources



Inscriptions are among the most valuable sources for reconstructing Buddhist society. They preserve the names of donors, religious teachers, monasteries, sectarian affiliations and architectural constructions.

The Nagarjunakonda inscriptions, for example, provide information concerning the Buddhist establishments of the Ikṣvāku period. They also demonstrate that women participated significantly in religious patronage. An inscription associated with the donor Bodhisiri records a series of religious constructions, including chaitya halls, a Bodhi-tree shrine, cells, halls and other structures at several Buddhist centres.

Sculptural Evidence

The sculptural remains of Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda are crucial for understanding Buddhist religious expression. Narrative reliefs depict episodes from the life of the Buddha and Jātaka traditions, while other sculptures represent symbols, devotees, architectural elements and sacred objects.

The Amaravati artistic tradition developed into one of the most important Buddhist sculptural traditions of ancient South Asia. Nagarjunakonda subsequently produced an important later phase of the lower Krishna valley artistic tradition. The National Portal and Digital Repository describes Nagarjunakonda sculpture as a later development of the artistic tradition that emerged at Amaravati and Jaggayyapeta.

Literary Sources

Buddhist texts and later travel accounts provide additional information, although they must be used critically. Literary traditions concerning Andhra Buddhism sometimes associate the region with important Buddhist teachers and doctrinal developments. Later Chinese Buddhist pilgrims also preserve information concerning Buddhist places in the Deccan.

Literary evidence, however, often reflects the concerns of the period in which a text was composed or transmitted. Consequently, archaeological and epigraphic evidence should be used alongside literary traditions rather than assuming that later narratives directly describe earlier conditions.

EARLY BEGINNINGS OF BUDDHISM IN ANDHRA



The chronology of the earliest Buddhism in Andhra remains an important subject of scholarly discussion. Buddhist remains at sites such as Amaravati and Bhattiprolu demonstrate the antiquity of Buddhist activity in the lower Krishna region.

Amaravati is particularly significant. The great stupa developed over several phases, with later enlargements, architectural additions and sculptural embellishment. Archaeological teaching material from the Archaeological Survey tradition identifies multiple construction phases at Amaravati, extending from the early period through the Satavahana and later periods.

The early development of Buddhism in Andhra should not be understood simply as the result of a single royal initiative. The archaeological record points towards long-term participation by local communities, donors and religious specialists.

The spread of Buddhism was also facilitated by the mobility of monks. The lower Krishna valley was connected with other regions of the Deccan and with coastal trade networks. These connections permitted the circulation of religious ideas, artistic forms and people.

AMARAVATI AND DHANYAKATAKA: AMARAVATI AS A MAJOR BUDDHIST CENTRE

Amaravati is arguably the most famous Buddhist archaeological site in Andhra. The site is associated with the ancient settlement of Dhanyakataka and became one of the great centres of Buddhist architecture and art. The Great Stupa, or Mahāchaitya, was the central monument. Its architectural history involved repeated enlargement and embellishment. The original monument was subsequently surrounded and transformed through the addition of railings, sculptured slabs, ayaka pillars and other architectural elements. The Amaravati inscriptions indicate that important additions were made to the monument during the early centuries CE. Evidence suggests that the stone casing, ayaka pillars and railing formed part of later stages in the development of the stupa.

ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Amaravati stupa illustrates the changing nature of Buddhist sacred architecture. The stupa was not simply a burial monument. It served as a focus for circumambulation, worship, offerings and the display of sacred narratives. The development of elaborate stone sculpture



transformed the stupa into an enormous visual programme. Devotees encountered narrative scenes, symbolic representations and decorative motifs while moving around the monument.

AMARAVATI SCULPTURE

The Amaravati school is distinguished by sophisticated relief sculpture. Scenes from the Buddha's life and Jātaka stories were represented in dynamic compositions. The artistic language of Amaravati later influenced Buddhist sculpture in other parts of South and Southeast Asia. Nagarjunakonda represents a later phase of the artistic tradition associated with the lower Krishna valley.

JAGGAYYAPETA AND OTHER EARLY CENTRES

Jaggayyapeta is another important Buddhist centre in the Krishna valley. Its remains help establish the geographical spread of Buddhism beyond Amaravati. Other Buddhist establishments existed at sites including Bhattiprolu, Ghantasala, Guntupalli, Goli and related locations. The concentration of sites demonstrates that Buddhism was not restricted to one urban centre. The distribution of monuments also suggests that Buddhist institutions existed in different social and economic environments. Some were associated with major monumental stupas, while others were smaller establishments serving local communities. This diversity is important because it prevents us from treating "Andhra Buddhism" as a uniform institution. Buddhist establishments varied in size, architecture, sectarian affiliation and patronage.

BHATTIPROLU

Bhattiprolu is particularly important for the early history of Buddhism and writing in the Andhra region. Its relic stupa and inscriptions provide evidence for Buddhist activity during the early centuries BCE. The inscriptions discovered at Bhattiprolu have attracted considerable scholarly attention because of their script and language. They are important for the study of the development of regional Brahmi writing and the early Buddhist community. The presence of relics also illustrates one of the fundamental functions of the stupa. The stupa created a permanent sacred focus associated with the physical remains of revered Buddhist figures. Thus, Bhattiprolu contributes to the history of Andhra Buddhism not merely through architecture but through evidence for relic worship, inscriptional practice and the early formation of Buddhist communities.



NAGARJUNAKONDA AND VIJAYAPURI: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Nagarjunakonda represents the most extensive archaeological evidence for Buddhist institutional development in early Andhra. The ancient city at the site is generally identified with Vijayapuri, the capital of the Ikṣvākus. Modern scholarship dates the Ikṣvāku political centre approximately to the third and early fourth centuries CE. The archaeological landscape included secular urban structures, Buddhist monasteries and Brahmanical religious establishments. This coexistence is significant because it demonstrates that the religious history of Vijayapuri cannot be reduced to Buddhism alone.

SCALE OF BUDDHIST ESTABLISHMENTS

Excavations at Nagarjunakonda exposed a large number of Buddhist complexes. One major study identifies more than thirty establishments, principally dating from the third and fourth centuries CE. Another recent study discusses approximately forty excavated Buddhist complexes and examines their different layouts and school affiliations. The monuments included:

- Large stupas;
- Votive stupas;
- Viharas;
- Apsidal chaitya structures;
- Monastic cells;
- Assembly spaces;
- Ayaka pillars;
- Relic monuments;
- Water facilities.

The scale of the remains indicates that Nagarjunakonda was not simply a pilgrimage shrine. It was a complex institutional and residential Buddhist environment.

BUDDHIST MONASTERIES AND THEIR ORGANISATION



The vihara was one of the principal institutional forms of Buddhism. It provided accommodation for monks and served as a setting for religious activity. The archaeological remains at Nagarjunakonda reveal different monastic layouts. Some complexes contained rows of cells arranged around courtyards. Other establishments combined residential structures with stupas and apsidal religious buildings. A recent study of Nagarjunakonda observes that some complexes had a stupa located outside a U-shaped arrangement of monks' cells, accompanied by two apsidal temples facing one another. Such architectural variations are valuable evidence for the organisation and ritual practices of different Buddhist communities. The monastery therefore consisted of more than sleeping quarters. It was an institutional environment containing sacred, residential and communal spaces. The presence of water tanks, halls and other facilities further indicates the practical requirements of permanent or semi-permanent monastic communities.

BUDDHIST SECTS AND DOCTRINAL DIVERSITY

One of the most significant features of Andhra Buddhism is its sectarian diversity. The inscriptions of Nagarjunakonda mention several Buddhist groups. Recent scholarship identifies, among others, Theravādins, Mahīśāsakas, Bahuśrutīyas and Aparamahāvīnaśailas. This evidence demonstrates that Buddhist establishments were not organised according to a single doctrinal system. Different monastic communities could possess their own monasteries and ritual practices. Architectural and sculptural differences may sometimes be associated with these institutional identities. The presence of multiple schools also indicates the importance of Andhra as a centre of Buddhist intellectual and institutional exchange. The region connected different parts of the Deccan and eastern coast and therefore provided opportunities for the circulation of monks and ideas.

THE SATAVAHANAS AND BUDDHIST ESTABLISHMENTS

The relationship between the Satavahanas and Buddhism has traditionally been presented in terms of royal patronage. Satavahana political authority expanded across large parts of the Deccan during the centuries when Buddhism was developing into a major institutional religion. However, recent scholarship encourages a more nuanced interpretation. Andrew Ollett's study of Satavahana religion argues that the Buddhist monastic community and the Satavahana state were distinct institutions, despite being closely interconnected through economic, administrative, juridical and cultural relationships. The available evidence does not establish



that the Satavahana royal family as a whole was Buddhist. This distinction is important. The growth of Buddhism cannot be explained exclusively through royal conversion or direct state control. Buddhist institutions had their own internal organisation and depended heavily upon donations from lay society. At the same time, political stability, urban development and trade could create conditions favourable to monastic institutions.

MERCHANTS AND LAY PATRONAGE

Lay patronage was fundamental to the development of Buddhist establishments. Inscriptions throughout Buddhist India frequently record donations from merchants, guilds, artisans, householders and women. Andhra provides similar evidence. The relationship between commerce and Buddhism has sometimes been overstated, but the geographical location of many Andhra Buddhist centres makes commercial connections historically significant. The Krishna valley was connected to coastal routes and wider Indian Ocean networks. Archaeological evidence from the Ikṣvāku capital indicates connections with long-distance exchange networks, while Buddhist communities flourished alongside these urban and commercial developments. The important point is not that “merchants created Buddhism,” but that commercial and urban expansion supplied networks through which Buddhist institutions could receive material support.

WOMEN AND BUDDHIST PATRONAGE

Women were important patrons of Buddhist establishments. This is particularly clear in the epigraphic record of Nagarjunakonda. Royal women and laywomen appear among donors, and inscriptions record substantial religious foundations. The Bodhisiri inscription is especially significant. Her donations included religious buildings and facilities at several Buddhist establishments, including caitya halls, a Bodhi-tree shrine, cells, a mandapa and other constructions. Such evidence challenges the idea that Buddhist religious patronage was exclusively a male activity. Women could participate as:

Literary sources

- donors;
- members of royal families;
- lay devotees;
- religious patrons;



- supporters of monastic communities.

Their donations also indicate that religious patronage could provide women with a visible role in the public religious landscape.

STUPAS, RELICS AND RITUAL PRACTICE

The stupa was the central architectural symbol of Buddhist religious life. A stupa could contain relics, commemorate an important person or serve as a sacred focus for worship. Devotees could circumambulate the monument and make offerings. The architectural evidence from Nagarjunakonda and Amaravati demonstrates the importance of ritual movement around the stupa. Railings enclosed the sacred area, while gateways provided controlled points of entry. Ayaka pillars were another characteristic feature of the Andhra stupa tradition. At Nagarjunakonda and Amaravati they became important architectural and commemorative elements. The archaeological evidence indicates that ayaka pillars were often associated with later phases of construction and donor activity. Votive stupas also formed part of the Buddhist sacred landscape. Smaller monuments could be constructed by devotees in association with larger sacred establishments.

CHAITYAS AND APSIDAL TEMPLES

The Buddhist establishments of Nagarjunakonda included apsidal structures traditionally interpreted as chaitya halls. The apsidal plan has a long history in Buddhist architecture. It normally incorporated a sacred object or stupa at the rounded end, with space for devotees to circumambulate. At Nagarjunakonda, apsidal structures existed alongside monasteries and stupas. This suggests that ritual architecture formed an integrated part of the monastic complex. Inscriptions are especially useful because they sometimes identify specific buildings and their donors. The evidence therefore allows archaeologists to connect architectural remains with historical individuals and religious communities.

ART AND RELIGIOUS COMMUNICATION

The sculptural programmes of Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda performed several functions. First, they beautified sacred architecture. Second, they provided visual representations of Buddhist narratives and teachings. Third, they commemorated donors and sacred events. The transition from aniconic representations toward anthropomorphic Buddha images is



particularly important for understanding the development of Buddhist art in Andhra. Recent research on Nagarjunakonda places the appearance of independent Buddha images within the third-century CE context, although the chronology and interpretation of early images remain subjects of scholarly discussion. The sculptures should therefore not be treated simply as works of art. They were components of religious environments. Narrative reliefs could communicate Buddhist stories to devotees, while representations of stupas, trees, relics and other sacred symbols reinforced Buddhist ritual culture.

NAGARJUNAKONDA AS A MULTIRELIGIOUS CENTRE

Although Nagarjunakonda is famous for its Buddhist monuments, the ancient city contained evidence of more than one religious' tradition. Archaeological studies identify Buddhist monasteries alongside Brahmanical temples and ritual sites. This is historically significant. The Ikṣvāku period should not be characterised simply as a Buddhist age. Instead, different religious traditions coexisted within the same political and urban environment. The Ikṣvāku rulers and members of the royal family participated in Brahmanical religious practices while Buddhist establishments also received substantial patronage. This pattern illustrates the plural religious environment of early South India.

TRADE, URBANISATION AND BUDDHISM

Economic conditions were an important factor in the expansion of Buddhist institutions. The major Buddhist sites of Andhra were often connected to settlements, rivers and communication routes. The Krishna valley provided access to inland regions, while coastal centres connected the area to maritime networks. The archaeological evidence for Vijayapuri indicates a substantial urban environment. The Ikṣvāku capital contained fortifications, residential areas and religious structures. Evidence from coins and other archaeological materials also indicates participation in wider exchange networks.

Buddhist monasteries benefited from these networks in several ways:

- donors could contribute wealth;
- monks could travel between centres;
- religious ideas could circulate;
- pilgrimage could expand;



- artistic techniques could spread;
- monasteries could maintain relationships with urban communities.

Nevertheless, economic prosperity should be regarded as a facilitating condition rather than a complete explanation for Buddhist expansion.

DECLINE AND TRANSFORMATION

The decline of particular Buddhist establishments in Andhra should not be interpreted as a sudden disappearance of Buddhism. Several factors may have contributed to changes in Buddhist institutional life:

- changing political centres;
- changes in patterns of trade;
- transformations in religious patronage;
- growth of Brahmanical institutions;
- changes in Buddhist sectarian organisation;
- changing patterns of settlement.

A stupa could contain relics, commemorate an important person or serve as a sacred focus for worship. Devotees could circumambulate the monument and make offerings. The architectural evidence from Nagarjunakonda and Amaravati demonstrates the importance of ritual movement around the stupa. Railings enclosed the sacred area, while gateways provided controlled points of entry. Some Buddhist sites continued to receive patronage for centuries after their initial establishment. Amaravati, for example, remained an important religious centre beyond the early historical period. Thus, the history of Andhra Buddhism is better understood as a process of transformation rather than simple rise and fall.

CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE SOURCES

The sources used for studying early Andhra Buddhism have both strengths and limitations. Archaeology provides direct evidence for buildings, sculptures and settlement patterns. However, monuments are often difficult to date precisely without inscriptions or stratigraphic evidence. Inscriptions provide names and dates and can identify donors and religious communities. Yet inscriptions are selective. They normally commemorate particular donations rather than describing everyday monastic life. Sculpture provides evidence for religious



narratives and artistic developments, but its interpretation requires caution because symbolic representations can have several meanings. Literary sources preserve important religious traditions but may have been composed or transmitted much later than the events they describe.

Consequently, the strongest historical reconstruction comes from combining archaeological, epigraphic, artistic and literary evidence.

CONCLUSION

The Buddhist establishments of early Andhra emerged as important religious, social, and economic institutions from the early centuries BCE and developed considerably during the Śātavāhana and subsequent periods. Sites such as Amarāvātī, Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, Jaggayyapeta, Bhattiprolu, Ghantasala, and Salihundam reveal the wide geographical spread and institutional diversity of Buddhism in the region. Archaeological remains, inscriptions, sculptures, coins, and literary sources indicate that these establishments were not merely places of worship but also centres of monastic residence, education, artistic production, and interaction with surrounding settlements. Inscriptions are particularly significant because they record donations by rulers, merchants, monks, nuns, artisans, women, and other sections of society, demonstrating the broad social foundations of Buddhist institutions. The evidence also suggests that their growth was closely connected with agricultural expansion, craft production, inland communication routes, and maritime trade along the eastern coast.

A critical study of the available sources, however, shows that the history of Buddhist establishments in early Andhra cannot be reconstructed from religious texts alone. Archaeology and epigraphy provide essential evidence for understanding institutional organization, patronage patterns, economic resources, and regional networks, while art-historical evidence reveals the changing visual and doctrinal expressions of Buddhism. At the same time, the uneven survival of archaeological remains and inscriptions requires careful interpretation, since surviving evidence may not represent the entire Buddhist population or its social environment. Taken together, the sources demonstrate that Buddhist establishments constituted dynamic institutions deeply integrated into the social, economic, and cultural life of early Andhra. Their remains therefore provide valuable evidence not only for the history of Buddhism but also for understanding the formation of urban centres, networks of exchange, patronage, and social interaction in early South India.



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