



REVIVAL OF BUDDHISM IN INDIA: AN ARCHEOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

During the British colonial period in the early 20th century, Buddhism again witnessed a comeback to its motherland, India and gained momentum by a combination of European antiquarian and philosophical interest and the dedicated activities of a few Indian devotees. In the 1890's, for example, Dammapala of Sri Lanka founded the "Mahabodhi Society of India", Bhikkhu Kirpasarn Mahaesthavir founded "Bengal Buddhist Association" in 1892, Bhadant Bodhanand Mahaesthavir founded "Bhartiya Bauddha Samiti, Lucknow" in 1919, and Ayoti Daas founded the "Buddhist Society" of South India, as well as other unrelated Buddhist activities in Bengal and other places in India. The effects of these activities were localized, never spreading widely. In the real sense Indian revival movement pickup speed, when archaeology was introduced in India by formation of 'Archaeology Survey of India' in 1861s with government sponsor.

The systematic revival of Buddhism in India began in 1891s with the arrival of Anagarika Dharmapala, a young Sinhala Buddhist who turned out to be first great missionary of modern times. Inspired by Sir Edwin Arnolds articles on Bodha Gaya. Dharmapala visited Sarnath and Bodh Gaya in January 1891s to see for himself the condition of the Buddhist shrines. He was shocked to see the horrible condition of the Buddhist shrines. At Bodh Gaya he was visibly moved as under the Mahant's charge the Maha Bodhi Temple was being shamefully neglected and desecrated. He, therefore, resolved to restore the sacred shrines to their former glory, and to make them living centers of Buddhist culture. He also resolved to regain the control of the Maha Bodhi Temple from the Saivite Mahant, whose ancestors had converted it into a Shiva temple around the close of 17th century.

Key words: Buddhism, Buddhist, Revival, archeology, Maha Bodhi Temple,

The story of Revival of Buddhism in India, the land of its origin, flourishing and highest achievements has been very aptly summed up by Dr. Kailash Nath Katju, Minister for Home Affairs and States, Government of India in the Diamond Jubilee Number of the Maha Bodhi Society, in 1952s. He says:

“Lord Buddha taught mankind on this blessed soil of India, 2500 years ago, and we Indians profited by his preaching for over 1000 years and guided ourselves by it. Those 1000 years were in many ways the grandest on our history. The name and fame of India rose to the highest peaks in those centuries and in the realms of art and literature, learning and piety, Indian achievement reached highest still unsurpassed. It was not merely a case of those who professed formally their belief in Buddhism; the noble doctrine entered and influence the lives of all, professing and non-professing Buddhists alike. That was the secret of its excellence it was so universal. The noble eightfold path invited everybody to tread on it and led everyone to peace and contentment, and freedom from fear and anxiety. How that doctrine had spread into every nook and corner of India is to be found in all parts of the country.

And then came misfortunes and calamities and the darkness of night descended upon the Indian people. Gradually they lost their freedom and independence and that was, I verily believe, hastened by their lessening attachment to the reverence for the person of Lord Buddha and his excellent doctrine. And then in the darkness of this night Indians even forget His name remembrance of how he had lived and what he had achieved. With the loss of independence was lost also contact with South-East Asia. No more came crowds of pilgrims from South-East Asian Countries, and China and Japan to our shores for paying homage to the memory of the Blessed one, and even the names and sites of places where he had lived and worked were lost to oblivion.”¹

Archeological aspect

The Revival of Buddhism began in Indian in the nineteenth century, when the British

¹ Ahir, D.C., “*Buddhism in India, Status Growth and Development*” Buddhist World Press, New Delhi, 2011, P.1-2

Civil servants started bringing to light its treasures (Buddhist Heritage) lost under the dust and debris. The Ashokan Pillars with inscriptions thereon, being on the ground and visible to the eye, were the first given attention by them. The Ashokan pillars and Rock Edicts have been founded at as many as 36 places in India.

The archaeology was introduced in India by formation of 'Archaeology Survey of India' in 1861s with government sponsor. Alexander Cunningham was the first Director General, brought Buddhism to the forefront and established its study as a separate sub-discipline. This had far-reaching implications for the demarcation and archaeological investigation of many of the monuments linked to Buddhism.

A pair of British soldiers who, were on patrol duty made a discovery of highest importance in the year 1819s. They stumbled across the Ajantā Caves that had been in disuse for more than a 1000 years, which are now well known through the world. Following the discovery of Ajantā caves some other caves were also discovered at Ellorā, Nasik, Kārle, Bhaja and Junnar etc., all in western Maharashtra.

Major James discovered the first Rock Edict in 1822s, at Girnar sacred mountain near Junagadh in Gujarat. Two years latter, the Shahbazgarhi Rock Edict (in Peshawar District, Pakistan) was discovered by M.A. Court a French officer in the service of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. By 1836s, a number of Rock and Pillar inscription had been discovered in various parts of India. In 1840s, Captain Burt discovered Bhabru Edict on the rock at Bairat Nagar Near Jaipur, which was translated by Captain Kitto. The Jaugade Rock inscription (in Ganjam Distt., Orissa) was discovered and copied out by Sir Walter Elliot in 1850s, who recognized it as another version of the Ashokan Edict discovered at Dhauli, Girbar and Shahvazzarhi. In 1860s, another Ashokan Rock inscription was discovered at Kalsi near Deharadon by Forest.²

Sir Alexander Cunningham was made an important discovery at Sānchi near Bhopal. Sir Cunningham opened this Sānchi great Stupa first time in 1851s. Stupā 3, situated near the great Stupā which was contains the body-relics of the two chief disciples of the Shākyamuni Buddha, namely Sāriputta and Mahāmoggallān. Cunningham took sacred Relics of these two disciples to London. And kept in safe custody till they were returned to India a century later, in 1949s. Sir Cunningham was appointed first Director General of Archeological survey of India by Government in 1861. Sir Cunningham's zeal and interest in the archeological

² Ramteke, Dr. D.L., "Revival of Buddhism in Modern India" Deep Publications, New Delhi,1983, p. 43-44

material opened a new vista in the study of India's past Buddhist glory. He recapitulated the glorious history of the Buddhist remains and monuments scattered all over the country. For that, he himself went round to all over the India; visited all the Buddhist ancient sites; and prepared a systematic geographical map of ancient Buddhist India. He excavated the vicinage of the sacred Mahā Bodhī Temple in the year 1870s, and Mahāstupā of Bharhut the most ancient Buddhist shrine in Central India.³

A shine of an Ashokan Rock edict was discovered at Soparā in Thana District, of Mahārastra by Dr. Bhagwan Lal Indrajī in the year 1882s. In the year 1889s, Captain Leigh was discovered the Mansera Rock Edict in Hazāra District, Pakistan. In 1890s, Lewis Rice discovered the three Mysore Minor Rock Edicts. In the year 1896s, Mr. Fuhrer was discovered the Ashokā Pillar at Rummindei (Lumbini). The inscription to this pillar added further historicity to the Shakyamuni Buddha on it inscribed as, "*The Buddha Shakyamuni was born here*". Two years later in 1898s, the owner of the estate discovered a relic casket in the Lumbini garden. The words inscribed on the casket are, "*this relic casket of the Divine Buddha is that of the Shakays.*"⁴

After the tremendous labor, Dr. D.B. Spooner of the Archeological survey of India, discovered at Shaji-ki-dheri (Kanishka Stupa) at Peshawar, an ornamented metal casket on the top of which was small image of seated Buddha in 1909s. The casket was closed with a clay-seal with figure of an elephant. In the bottom of casket implied a picture of Kanishka himself. This contained relics of the Buddha, which, according to the inscription on it, were enshrined by Kanishka. The discovery of these relics created a horripilation in the Buddhist world. These relics was beautifully replaced in a gold casket and presented to the Buddhist of Myanmar by the Government of India. Sir John Marshal at Taxila found Several Buddhist Relics in the excavation of Dharmarajik Vihar at Taxilā in between 1922s and 1916s. The Government of India expressed their willingness to present three relics would be enshrined in worthy Viharas and adequately safeguarded and provided that the shrines were constructed before the were distributed that the shrines were constructed before the relics were distributed. It was suggested to the three relics should be enshrined at Calcutta, Sarnath and Taxila respectively.⁵ According the inscription on the golden casket, these 'Relics of the Holy one were enshrined by Uraska, Section on Imatavhria, a Bactrian, resident of the town of

³ Ahir, D.C., "*Buddhism in India, Rediscovery, Revival and Development*" Buddhist World Press, New Delhi. P. 8-9

⁴ Ramteke, Dr. D.L., "*Revival of Buddhism in Modern India*" Deep Publications, New Delhi-1983, p. 43-44

⁵ Department of Education, file number-19-31, year 1931, National Archive, New Delhi. p. 11

Noacha, in the year 136 of Azes on the 15th day of the month of Asadha'. Two more caskets of the relics of Buddha were discovered from two minor Vihars near Dharmarajika Stūpa, which were presented to the Buddhists of Ceylon by the Government of India in 1917s, and were enshrined in the Temple of Tooth at Kandy.⁶ At the same time, another relic casket was found in Piprahwa in Basti District of United Provinces from brick Stupā. According to the inscription in Pre-Ashokan characters on this relic casket, the relics found in the Stupā pertain to the Buddha.⁷

In 1929s, two Ashokan Rock Edicts were discovered at Erragude in the Kurnool District of Andhra State. In 1931s, the Rock Edicts of Ashokan were discovered at Govimath and Palkigundu in the Raichur District of Andhra State. And the Relics casket was discovered at Nagarnjunkonda, Andhra State. It was decided to present them to the Maha Bodhi Society, for enshrinement at the Mulagandhakuti Vihar at Sarnath, for the reasons set forth in Secretary's note of 9 December 1932.⁸

Another discovery of the Relics casket were made by Henry Cousens in the relic chamber of a large stupa at Mirpurkhas in Sindh in the year 1909s. These relics consisted of a very minute substance about the size of a pin's head together with some dust and a small quantity of what appeared to be brown cremated ash which, seen through a magnifying glass, appeared to be a charred bone. These relics were enclosed in a tiny gold box enclosed in a cylindrical shaped case of silver, which in its turn was enclosed in a crystal bottle. Mr. Cousens surmised that the original structure on the site of the stupa in question may have been a Dharmarajika or a Stupa constructed by Ashoka and that if that assumption was correct the tiny relics mentioned above might have been part of the body relics of the Shakyamuni Buddha and of his faithful disciple Upagupta. These relics have been preserved in the Prince of Wales Museum at Bombay since their discovery along with other portable antiquities found by Mr. Cousens on this site, but in latter on it was presented to the Buddhist community of Ceylon.⁹

Sociological aspects

However, in the real sense Buddhist revival movement was started in India only in 1891 with arrival of Anagarika Dharampala in India, who turned out to be the first great

⁶Ramtake, Dr. D.L., p. 48-50

⁷ Department of Home, June-1899, file number-411 to 418, '*Disposal of the Buddhist relics discovered at Piprahwa*', National archive, New Delhi.

⁸ Department of Education, File number- 317-1/32, nos 1-10, year 1932, National Archive, New Delhi

⁹ Department of Education, Health and Lands, File No. 238/33F. Serial No. 1-2, '*subject- presentation of certain Buddhist relics discovered at Mirpurkhas, Sindh in 1909, to the Mahabodhi Society*', National Archive, New Delhi

missionary of modern times. He was visited Sarnath and Buddha Gaya in 20 January 1891. He was shocked to see the horrible condition on the most sacred shrines. He wrote in his diary, “what a pity that there is no Buddhist to look after the place and preserve them from the hands of Vandals.”¹⁰ At Buddha Gaya, he received the ‘inscription’ to affect the course of the entire history of modern Buddhism. He described, “Jan 22, how elevating: the sacred Vihara-the Lord sitting on his throne and the great solemnity which pervades all around makes the heart of the pious devotee weep. How delightful: as soon as I touched with my forehead, the Vajrasana, a sudden impulse came to my mind. It prompted me to stop there and take care of the sacred spot. I solemnly promised that I would stop here, until some Buddhist priest comes to take charge of the Place.”¹¹ He founded the Mahabodhi Society in Ceylon on 31 May 1891, after he came back to India and installed four monks from Ceylon in the Burmese Rest House constructed by King Mindon in 1875s to look after Maha Bodhi Temple.

The year 1891 is most memorable in the history of Indian Buddhism Revival. It was again in 1891 that a casket containing the relics of the Shakyamuni Buddha was found by Mr. Rea at Bhattiprolu in Andhra State. Ven. Kripasarn Mahasthvir, A Bengali Bhikkhu, established ‘The Bengal Buddhist Association’. Prof. H. Kern of Leyden brought out his first work of the Jatakamala of Āryasura (Vol.I, H.O.S., 1891). Further about the same time the first Indian monk Ven. Mahavir took up his residence at Kushinagar, the site of the Mahaparinirvana of the Buddha, which was completely in ruins.¹²

The year 1900s, was the eventful year for the revival movement. This year Mahabodhi Society of India was opened his two branches at Madras and Kushinagar. Same year Pandit Ayodhya Dasa also founded the South India Buddhist Association at Madras. Prof. P Laxmi was the second President of this association who had opened six branches of the Association in two State Mysore and Tamil Nadu for the propagating of Buddhism. He knew Anagarika Dhammapala and for a time worked with the Society in managing a School Hall at Perambur for the elementary education of ‘Dravidian Buddhist Children’¹³ also maintained a residence for Buddhist Bhikkhus. In between Prof. Narasu and Mahabodhi society some sort dispute had been occurred, therefore over management seems to have ended his connection with them. Reason for the dispute was, Prof. P. Narasu was far more

¹⁰ Sangharakhita Bhikkhu, Anagarika Dharmapala, the Maha Bodhi Diamond Jubile Souvenir, Calcutta. P.

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¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ramteke, Dr. D.L., “*Revival of Buddhism in Modern India*” Deep Publications, New Delhi-1983, p. 46-47

¹³ Dutta Nalinakaha; *Dravidian Buddhist Children*, The Maha Bodhi, Calcutta, p.85

interested in conversion in the lower caste than was the main Maha Bodhi Society.¹⁴

A first Indian who became Buddhist monk was Mahvir Swami, before became a Monk he was Hindu follower. He was very close to Kunwar sing a freedom fighter from Bihar state. After the defeat of Kunwar Singh Mahvir fled to Ceylon. There he studies Pali and Buddha Dhamma and after inspired by Venerable Indrasabha Nayaka Thera, he became a Bhikkhu in 1890s. After coming back to India, he came to Kushinagar and established Vihara in 1902s. A Myanmar layman Buddhist devotee Khee Zarhee gave him donation to build a Dharamshala in Kushnagar.¹⁵ Another Myanmar Buddhist monk Venerable U. Chandarmani Maha Thero, gave company to Mahavira in Kushinagr and after his death took over the Dharmasala work.

In the year 1902s, a Ashokan pillar was found in Rampurava in Bihar. Next year in 1903s, Venerable Kripasaran Mahasthavir founded Dharmankur Vihar at Calcutta. This Vihar was became headquarter of the Bengal Buddhist Association, which has done much to awaken the Barua Buddhist of Bengal who, though Buddhist by birth, had forgotten the essence of the Shakyamuni Buddha's Dhamma. In 1904s, the famous Ashokan Pillar, the Lion Capital of which has been adopted as National Emblem, was discovered at Sarnath.

In the year 1914s Anagarika Dharampala took trip around the world, and then he built a magnificent Sri Dharmarajika Chaitya in Calcutta, by Mahabodhi Society of India, which was opened in 1920s. In this Vihara he enshrined the sacred Buddha's relic, which was discovered during the excavation at Bhattiprolu in Andhara State. The opening ceremony of the Vihara was presided over by Lord Ronaldshy. This Vihra, being the headquarters of the Society, has over number of years a symbol of Buddhist revival movement.

In the year 1925s, Venerable Bhadant Bodhanand Mahasthviri established a beautiful Vihar at Risaldar Park, Lucknow through Bhartiya Bauddha Samiti, which was established in 1916s. Venerable Bodhanand was attracted towards Buddhism in 1896s, after meeting some Buddhist monks from Ceylon in Varanasi. He took ordination by the hands Venerable Kripasaran in 1914s. The Bhikkhus from Myanmar were performed the ceremony in a boat on the Ganges near Calcutta. Anagarik Dharmapal was present at this historic ceremony. After ordination, he came back to Lucknow and made it the center of his activities. As a result of his preaching of Venerable Bodhananda, a congenial atmosphere was created for the

¹⁴ Zellier Eleanor, Ancient Indian Discovery of Buddhism, Studies ion Pali and Buddhism (ed. A.K. Narayan) B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi 1979, p.394

¹⁵ Valisinha, Devapriya, '*Buddhist Shrines in India*', Maha Bodhi Society of Ceylon, Candy, 1948, p.118

revival of Buddhism.¹⁶

A scholar, Dharmanand Kosambi who became a Buddhist monk, at least for that time he was the super colorful figure in the Indian revival of Buddhism. He was born in Goa in 1879s. Kosambi left his home and studied Sanskrit at the age of 23. He visited Lumbini the birthplace of the Buddha and then visited Buddha Gaya the enlightenment place of the Buddha, where he met a Buddhist monk. He spent a year at Vidhyodhya Vidhalya Vihar, where he studied Buddhist literature under the guidance of Venerable Sumangalacharya, as a Samner (Novice). He took his ordination in 1902s. He spent few years in Myanmar meditating like a true yogini. His desire to teach Buddhism among his own people brought him to Maharashtra. A magnificent patron of many revival and reform movements, Maharaja Sayajirao Gaikwad brought him back to western India. He established a Pali Department at the University of Bombay with the help of Professor Bhandarkar, and then he taught Pali language at Fergusson College in Poona from 1912s to 1918s. And then he spent about four years at Harvard University, USA to get his Ph.D. Degree in 1929s. He took part in Satyagraha in 1930s, and finally spending his last days at Gandhi's Ashram in Sevagram, where he died in 1948s. He founded a Vihara in Parel a mill workers area of Bombay, with intention of destroying untouchability through Buddhist philosophy. Set Jugal Kishor Birla was donated funds for the Vihara. The name of the Vihara was Bahujan Vihar. Kosambi's commitment to Buddhism remained constant, however, and although he left the Vihara in Bombay for Sarnath, he continued writing on Buddhism and he secured from Gandhi an agreement that some student should be sent to Ceylon to study Buddhist literature and the Buddhist religion.¹⁷

Dr. Anandaro L. Nair, a medical doctor in Bombay, founded a Buddhist Society in 1922s. He built a Vihar namely Ananda Vihara on the ground of his hospital in 1931s, and published a Buddhist Journal namely 'Buddha Prabha' from 1933s onwards. There he also celebrated Vaisakha Full moon day. Later on Maha Bodhi Society took over the charge of Ananda Vihar under the society.

With the conversion of C. Krishanan, Editor of the Mitavadi the Buddhism was made significant progress in Kerala. Mr. Krishanan was elected the President of the Kerala Buddhist Association, which was established in 1925s with headquarter at Calicut. Buddhism

¹⁶ Jigyasu, Chandraka Prasad, Translated by Rajendra Ram, 'Bodhanand Mahasthvir', Bengal Buddhist Association, Kolkatta. P.9-10

¹⁷ Ramteke, Dr. D.L., "Revival of Buddhism in Modern India" Deep Publications, New Delhi-1983, p. 51-52

was primarily a lower caste phenomenon. Members of Izhava Caste, a depressed class group, dominated it. Mr. C. Krishnan was from Izhava class, became a Buddhist in 1920s. He opened the Branch of Maha Bodhi Society in 1927s. He conducted a series of campaign for the propagation of Buddhism in the year 1930s, and arranges a building for another Maha Bodhi Vihar in Calicut in 1937s. The Census for Cochin in 1931s noted 96 Buddhists; most of them educated Malayali Izahavas “disgusted with the social disabilities to which their caste is subjected within the Hindu fold”. There was considerable interest among the Izahava group in Dr. Ambedkar’s conversion announcement in 1935s. Some Izhavas maintained a myth of Buddhist origin, but the reformed Hinduism of the chief Izhava leader, Shri Narayana Guru , seems to have the main interest of the group in that group. Bhikkhu Dharmashanda, who was the first Malayali Bhikkhu, trained in Ceylon, helped Mr. Krishnan and his colleagues in taking Dhamma to the masses in the State.¹⁸

In all India Buddhist Conference was organized at the Maha Bodhi Society Hall in Calcutta under the president-ship of Shiv Charnan Lal of Lucknow, it was the first National conference of Buddhist, nearly 300 delegates attended it. One of the most important resolution passed in the Conference related to the bringing back of the relics of Sariputta and Moggallana which had been taken to London and were lying in the British Museum. The Hindi Journal ‘Dharmaduta’ which first appeared in 1935s has proved to be immense help in spreading the message of the Buddha. The Maha Bodhi Society of India opened his new center at New Delhi in 1939. The other notable Viharas build in the pre-Independence era were Desangpani Vihar, Assam (1939), Buddha Vihar, Bangalore (1940), Venuvana Vihar, Agartala (1946), and Madras Kenet line) Vihar (1947).¹⁹

Before the Arrival of Anagarika Dharmapala at Calcutta in 1891s, the Bengali Buddhist revival movement had been begun in the old Buddhist community of Chittagong. The Myanmar Bhikkhu Venerable Sangharaja Sarmedha who was pilgrimage tour to Buddha Gaya, had been stopped in Chittagong in 1856s.²⁰ Here he preached Theravada Buddhism for about two years and converted Queen Kalindi of the small Cakma Kingdom who finance the first Buddhist modern publication in Eastern Bengal. A young Bengali Buddhist knew Buddhism from Singhalese inn Calcutta and went to Sangharaja’s monastery in Akyab, Myanmar and wore robe. Bhikkhu Punnasara from Bengali community, who was ordained a

¹⁸ Dutta, N. Kerala Buddhism, the Maha Bodhi Souvenir, Calcutta, p. 103, 114-115

¹⁹Ramteke, Dr. D.L., “*Revival of Buddhism in Modern India*” Deep @ Deep Publications, New Delhi-1983, p. 53-55

²⁰ Chudhari, Sukumar, “Renaissance of Buddhism in Bengal and Tripura” The Maha Bodhi Society, Calcutta, 1979, pp.410-419

new generation of Bengali Bhikkhus. He established schools and set in motion a wide range of religious reforms. Another Bengali Bhikkhu Kripasaran Mahathera associated with Maha Bodhi Society and studied Pali in the Calcutta University. Latter on he started to participate in the modern Buddhist Revival movement. Dr. B.M. Barua, took his PG degree in Pali from Calcutta University, after his D. Litt. from London, he became Professor in the department of Pali in Calcutta. He established the Nalanda Vidyabhavan in 1935s, in Calcutta for the teaching of Pali and Buddhist Philosophy. He worked on much inscriptional and archeological material before his death in 1948s. He was an important modern Buddhist scholar, and the best-known scholar from Bengali Buddhist Community.²¹

The revival of Buddhism in the south seems more oriented to conversion than scholarship. S. Krishanaswami Aiyangar published Buddhist material and collaborated with Vincent Smith on the first edition of Ancient India in 1911s. V.R. Ramchandra Dikshitar wrote an ancient Buddhsim in Andhra State and in Tamil Literature. H.R. Rangasamy Iyengar translated Tibetan material; T.N. Ramchandran published articles on Buddhist sites; N. Aiyaswami Sastri worked Buddhist Text; and K.R. Subramanian published Buddhist Remains in Andhra and the History of Andhra. Even before this, A.S. Mudaliyar published a brief pamphlet on Buddhism in 14903. The most conspicuous figure in the revival is P. Laxmi Narsu, a Buddhist, a writer and missionary in the cause of Buddhism. Narasu was Professor of Physics and Chemistry at Madras Christian Collage. He claimed no original Pali or Sanskrit Scholarship, but published the best-known book, the Essence of Buddhism, 1907s; reprinted in 1912s with an introduction by Anagarika Dharampala; and again reprinted in 1948s with a preference by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. It is a straightforward explication of Buddhist principals, with a clear emphasis on the social aspects of Buddhism. Prof. P.L. Narasu and Pandit Ayiti Das, who was from an Untouchable community and became a Buddhist in 1897s, founded the Madras Buddhist Association. Anagarika Dhammapala was listed as Parton. Narasu clearly saw Buddhism as a religion in competition with others. He wrote, "Love and Purity are the first wisdom to the Buddhism."²²

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²¹ Ramtake, p. 55

²² Ibid, p. 57

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