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“Our Buddha” in an Aśokan Inscription

by A. K. Narain

A new version of the Minor Rock Edict I was discovered at Ahrāurā village in the Mirzapur District of Uttar Pradesh in 1961. The discovery was announced in a daily newspaper report of 11th November 1961¹ and a critical edition of the inscription was published by me in *Bhārati, Research Bulletin of the College of Indology*, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi.² Later other editions of this epigraph were also published.³ It is inscribed on the upper surface of a boulder, about a hundred yards from a temple of the goddess Bhāndaṛīdevī situated on the same hill. The inscription is engraved in a roughly rectangular space measuring 3' 10" x 2' 9", and it consists of eleven lines containing 25 to 27 letters each. The writing is in a fairly satisfactory state of preservation. The first six lines have been damaged and are only partly extant but the last five lines are complete. The characters of the inscription are early Brāhmī as found in the Aśokan edicts. Its language is the Māgadhi form of Prakrit, close to Pali. More than a dozen versions of this Minor Rock Edict of Aśoka have been found from various parts of India. The significance of this Ahrāura version lies in the fact that it begins and ends differently from the other known versions and because of a reference to the Buddha. The text of the epigraph as edited by me and my translation are given below:

TEXT

1.ya [ja] ta
2. dhikā . . .
3.[na] cha bādham palakamte
4. cha palakamte [1] etena
5. am̐tala misam̐ devā kaṭā [1]
6. palakama [sa] tvana va sakya papotave khudakena pi
7. palakamamīnenā vipule pi sv̐g [sa] kye ālādh̐etave [I]
eṭāye athāye
8. iyam̐ sāvane [I] khudakā cha [or ya] uḍālā cha palaka-
mamtu [I] am̐tā pi cha jānam̐tū [I]
9. chūla ṭhīṭike cha palakame hotū [I] iyam̐ cha athe vadhi-
sati vipulam̐ pi cha
10. vadhisatī [I] diyadhiyam̐ [a] valadhiyā vadhisatī [I] esa
sāvane vivuthena [I]
11. duve sapam̐nā lāti sati am̐mam̐ (mham̐) [? cha] Budhasa
salīle ālodhe [ti]

TRANSLATION⁴

1. (Thus says the king, the Beloved of Gods—
2. For more than two and a half years I have been a lay dis-
ciple;)
3. (but I have not indeed) made any exertion greatly (i.e.
have not led the religious life vigorously).
4. (It is only for about more than a year that I have entered
the order and) have led the religious life vigorously.
5. During this period (in Jambudipa the gods, who were un-
favourable to men) have been made favourable.
6. (This is indeed the result) of leading a truly vigorous reli-
gious life. Nor is this to be attained only by great (or rich) men
but even by the humble (or lowly).
7. The great heaven can be obtained by leading a truly vigor-
ous religious life. For this purpose
8. is this proclamation. May (therefore) both the humble and
the great (or rich) lead a truly vigorous religious life. Let those
dwelling on the outskirts also know this.
9. And may the truly vigorous religious life be enduring. (I
am sure) this object will grow, will indeed immensely

10. grow (and, what is more,) the initiative energy will grow one and a half fold. (Now) this proclamation (is made) publicly (or openly).

11. Two (hundred and) fifty-six nights (days) after having enshrined the relics of our Buddha or Two hundred and fifty-six nights (i.e. days) are over since the relics of our Buddha were enshrined (by me).

Later editors of this epigraph have differed from me in some of their readings and interpretations. Mostly these differences are of a minor nature and may be ignored. But some are of vital linguistic and historical importance.⁵ I am taking up only one of them here, i.e. the reading and meaning of the words *aṃmam* (*mham*) (? *cha*) *Budhasa salīle*.

All agree on the reading *Budhasa*. But there is a disagreement on the reading, and/or the meaning, of the preceding two or three letters. V. V. Mirashi read it as *saṃvamsam*, and prefixing it with *Budhasa* found in it a reference to the *Samyaksambuddha*.⁶ S. Sankaranarayanan read it no doubt as *aṃmam* but took it as standing for Skt. *āśmam*, and interpreted *āśmam Budhasa salīle* to mean Buddha's image in stone.⁷ D. C. Sircar read the words as *aṃ mam*-[*ch*]e *Buddhasa salīle* and translated the relevant part of the sentence as "since the relics of the Buddha ascended (i.e. were caused to be installed by me on) the platform (for worship)."⁸

In the case of Mirashi's reading, while his interpretation makes it clear that the inscription does refer to the Samyak Sambuddha i.e. Gautama Buddha, and that there is no word or letter like *aṃ* to mean "since", his reading of *sa* in place of *a* is unacceptable on paleographical grounds. Sankaranarayanan's reading of the initial letter *a* as *ā* in *aṃmam*, also is unwarranted paleographically; and his derived meaning of the word, if accepted, will take the origin and history of the Buddha image back to the time of Aśoka for which there is hardly any evidence. D. C. Sircar's reading, though palaeographically correct, unnecessarily takes recourse to the breaking of *aṃ* from the word *aṃmam* and joining *mam* to the following *che*, which is not at all distinct, in order to have two separate word formations as *aṃ mamche*. D. C. Sircar, who is fond of Sanskritising a Māgadhī-Pali or Prakrit text of an inscription before interpreting it, does so in this case also, and Sanskritises his reading of the 11th line of the inscription as: *etat śravaṇaṃ vyu-*

shītena [mayā śrāvītam] dve śhatpañchāśadrātri-śate yat (=yataḥ) mañchaṃ Buddhasya śarīraṃ [=deh-avaśeshah] āruḍhamīti, and translates the whole sentence as “this declaration is (made by me as I am) away (on a tour of pilgrimage) for 256 nights *since* the relics of the Buddha rose to (i.e. were caused by me to be installed on) the platform.”⁹ He argues that the use of the word *am* for Skt. *yat* in the sense of “since” is “often met with in Aśokan records,” but gives only one example from Sahasrām version of MRE I:¹⁰ *am upāsake sumi* “(Skt. *yat (aham) upāsakah asmi*), ‘since I am (have been) a lay follower (of the Buddha).’” The *am* of Sahasrām version of MRE I is in lieu of *yam* of other versions. Obviously Sircar has been tempted to take the *am* of the 11th line of Ahaurā in the same sense as the *am* of the 1st line of Sahasrām. Geographically, also, Ahaurā and Sahasrām seem to belong to the same linguistic zone. But we must note the difference in both the content and the context of these two widely separated lines of the two versions of the MRE I. We must also not forget that the Ahaurā version makes a very significant departure from other versions in its 11th line, just as Māsī and Gujarrā versions do in making a reference to the personal name of Aśoka. I do not see any necessity of using the Sahasrām example. The syntax of one need not be applied to another. Moreover, I do not read *satā* but *sati* in the Ahaurā version (for hundred) and interpret it accordingly. In Ahaurā the medial *i* in *sati* is very clear and, in my opinion, it can be so read also in Sahasrām. *Duve Sapaṃnā* (= two fifty-six) is a self-contained colloquial expression for “two (hundred and) fifty six.” *Sati*, if it must be read as *satā* for which I do not see any justification, coming as it does after *lāti*, is not rightly placed for usual construction in the sense of ‘hundred.’

If Sircar’s *am* is syntactically irrelevant, and his reading *satā* for *sati* is unusually placed, his desired meaning, the reading of *mañcha*, is also semantically problematic. The word *mañcha* is not very common in Pali or Prakrit, and, moreover, it means generally ‘bed’ or ‘couch,’¹² and not ‘platform.’ It is only in Sanskrit that it means a ‘platform’, and its usage in the required sense is hardly ever attested.¹³ Also, the whole idea, and the expression of it in the manner of D.C. Sircar’s translation, that the relics of the Buddha ‘rose to’ or ‘ascended’ a platform seem rather peculiar. The relics, to the best of our knowledge, were ‘enshrined’ in a stupa, and only in some cases later they could be ‘kept’ for wor-

ship in a Chaitya, or perhaps even in a Vihāra. The idea of having relics on or in (?) a 'platform' is strange to say the least. This is why, perhaps, D.C. Sircar has also some difficulty in explaining it when he refers to the Buddhist tradition according to which, as he quotes, "Aśoka built the Aśokārāma at Pāṭaliputra and no less than 84,000 Buddhist *monasteries* [italics mine]¹⁴ in various cities within his empire. It is, of course, difficult to say whether the relics of the Buddha stated to have been installed by Aśoka in the edict under study were enshrined in the Aśokārāma; but the *possibility* [italics mine] is there."¹⁵ In the same context later, Sircar notes about Hsüan Tsang's reference to Aśoka's daily practice of offering worship at the stone bearing the Buddha's footprints installed at Pāṭaliputra, and remarks "whether this was enshrined in the Aśokārāma cannot be determined. It is also difficult to say whether it is the same stone which has been referred to in the edict under study as the *mañcha*, on which the relics of the Buddha were installed for worship."¹⁶ Sircar has given an incorrect reference here, and makes an unnecessary *tour de force* in his use of Hsüan Tsang's information.

We are now left with "Our Buddha," my reading *aṃmam cha Budhasa*. I find in this a reference to "our Buddha," i.e. the Sākya-muni Gotama Buddha, as distinguished from any other Buddha known in Aśoka's time, e.g. Konagamana, one of the previous Buddhas, mentioned in the Niglisagar inscription of Aśoka.¹⁷

In criticising me, Sircar has noted that "it is extremely doubtful whether a devotee of the Buddha would refer to the object of his veneration in an endearing fashion as 'our Buddha' in the age of Aśoka when he was being worshipped as a great divinity."¹⁸ S. Sankaranarayanan remarks that "to distinguish Gautama Buddha from the other Buddhas, like Buddha Kanakama (sic) of the Nigali Sagar pillar inscription Aśoka uses, as far as we know, either *Sakya-muni* or *Bhagavat* as epithets of the former. We have yet to know the use of *amham* in the Aśokan inscriptions for the above purpose."¹⁹

I had already noted in my original article that *aṃmam* = *amham* (Pali) is a form of the pronoun of the first person, *asmad* (Skt.) *amha* (Pali), in the genitive plural; the other form is *amhākaṃ*. In support of these forms I have quoted a rule from the grammar of Moggalāna.²⁰ There is no justification for splitting the word and regrouping the letters as Sircar has done. Sankaranarayanan does

not do that, and there is no difference between his reading and mine so far as the word formation is concerned; he only adds a non-existing medial stroke and reads *ā* instead of *a*. It seems the problem for them has not been so much related to palaeography, orthography or grammar as to the usage of the phrase 'our Buddha,' which I thought was known to Pali.²¹ It is true that the Buddha was most commonly referred to as *amhākaṃ Bhagvā* in early Pali,²² but it is significant that it is precisely in the *Sarīradhātuvibhajanam* section of the *Mahāparinibbānasuttam* of the *Dīghanikāya* that Gotama Buddha is referred to as *amhākaṃ Buddhō*. Intervening in the struggle for the distribution of the relics of the Buddha, Doṇa, the Brahman, said: *Sunantu bhonto mama eka-vāccham, amhākaṃ Buddhō ahu khantivādo. Na hi sādhu yaṃ uttampuggalassa, sarīrabhāge siyā sampahāro.*²³ What better reference and what better context are needed in support of the expression 'our Buddha' (in the Aśokan inscription at Ahaurā)? On such special occasions a possessive expression denoting at once a feeling of endearment and respect is certainly not out of place. In the case of Aśoka's use of the expression there is, in fact, the additional justification that he was obliged to make a distinction between the previous Buddha Konagamana, whose stupa was enlarged by him, and Gotama Buddha, in whom he had taken refuge, and all of whose sayings he considered as "well said" (*subhāsīte*).²⁴ Stupas were historical markers as well as objects of worship, and relic enshrinement was an occasion when Aśoka could not have helped being personal and emotional. He was generally reluctant in mentioning the Buddha, as he was in giving his own personal name, in his epigraphs, but he made exceptions to the rule when he wanted to or when he felt it necessary.²⁵

NOTES

1. *The Leader*, Allahabad, 11th November, 1961.

2. No. 5, Part I, 1961-62, pp. 1-9.

3. V.V. Mirashi, *Bhāratī*, No. 5, Part I, 1961-62, pp. 135-40; S.

Sankaranarayanan, *Indian Historical Quarterly*, vol. XXXVI, pp. 239 ff.

4. This includes also a translation of the first 6 lines of the inscription, which are damaged, based on the readings from the other versions of the MRE I.

5. e.g. the words *palakama*, *avaladhiyā*, *vivuthena* etc.
6. Mirashi, op. cit.
7. Sankaranarayanan, op. cit., pp. 220-221.
8. Sircar, op. cit., pp. 248, earlier on page 244 instead of 'ascended' he uses the expression 'rose to.'
9. Sircar, op. cit., p. 244.
10. Sircar op. cit., for the text of Sahasram version of MRE I see E. Hultzsch, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. 1, *Inscription of Asoka* (Delhi/Varanasi, Reprint, 1969), pp. 169 ff.
11. It is interesting to note B.M. Barua's remark in his *Asoka and his Inscriptions*, pt 11, 96 (Calcutta, 1968). "In many an instance the system of spelling and grammatical forms have been determined by the law of Rhythm and Cadences or the law of Euphony governing the construction of sentences."
12. T.W. Rhys Davids and William Stede, ed. *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*, (London, PTS, 1921) p. 139. q. v. *mañca*. Earliest use of the word is in *Vinaya Piṭaka*, (PTS) IV.39.40 where four kinds of bed are mentioned. *Pali Sadda Mahāṇṇavo*.
13. Monier Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*.
14. Tradition does not know about construction of 84,000 *monasteries*. The reference as given by Sircar in his fn. 2 of p. 245 does not mention *monasteries* but 'topes.' I do not know of any other source of his information.
15. Sircar, op. cit., p. 245. There is no evidence for this 'possibility,' imagined by Sircar. The source he has cited does not give any indication to it.
16. According to Hsüan Tsang the stone was near the relic tope (i.e. one of the 84,000 stupas) not far south from the Prison of Aśoka, and this was not part of the Aśokārāma which was situated in a different part of Pāṭaliputra, and so the question of relics, mentioned in our inscription, being enshrined in Aśokārāma does not arise.
17. E. Hultzsch, op. cit., p. 165.
18. Sircar, op. cit., p. 241.
19. Sankaranarayanan, op. cit., p. 220.
20. Narain, op. cit., p. 6. According to the rule *ṅa ṅā kaṁ namhi*, of *Moggalāna*, 2.232. See Bhikshu Jagadish Kasyap, *Pāli Mahāvīyākaraṇa* (Delhi/Varanasi, Motilal Banarasi Das, 2nd edn. 1963) pp. 55-56.
21. Narain, op. cit., p. 6, fn. 1. At the time of the editing of the inscription I had collected some references for the expression *amhākaṁ Buddha* in the *Tipiṭaka* and the *Aṭṭhakathā*. When I took up writing the present paper I thought my relevant notes were here but I found later that they had been left behind in India. Instead of further postponing doing this note I wrote to Miss I. B. Horner if she remembered some references off hand. I am very grateful to her that she, in consultation with Dr. W. Rahula, even though I gave her very short notice, sent me one of the most important references I had. My thanks are due both to her and to Dr. Rahula for their kindness and prompt help. I am sure there are other references but to which I can return only later in a supplementary paper after my notes are retrieved.
22. Miss Horner has rightly pointed out in her letter dated 1st June 1978 that "it was more usual to speak about *amhākaṁ bhagavat*, as at *Dīgha*, vol.

III, p. 211, top line. I don't think Gotame was often spoken of as Buddha by his contemporaries."

23. Bhikkhu J. Kashyap (ed), *The Dīghanikāya*, (Nālandā-Devanāgarī-Pāli series, Pāli Publication Board, Bihar Govt. 1958), II p. 127.

24. Hultsch, op. cit., p. 172.

25. I am glad to acknowledge with thanks a communication from Prof. K.R. Norman, dated 22nd June, which reached me after this short paper was done. It was very kind of Miss Horner to refer my enquiry to Prof. Norman also. I am now informed of two more references to *amhākaṃ Buddha*, one in *Buddhavaṃsa-Aṭṭhakathā*, 252, and another in *Theragāthā-Aṭṭhakathā*, I p. 166-7. Prof. Norman has also drawn my attention to one more edition of Ahaurā inscription by Janert (*Abstände und Schlussyokalverzeichnungen*----, pp. 267 ff), who also reads like me *amam=ca=budhasa=salīle=aloḍhe*, but he does not give a translation. I have not been able to see Janert's article. Prof. Norman has also made some useful comments on other issues to which I will refer hopefully in a later article.