“Re-Examining the Period of Nāgārjuna:

Western India, A.D. 50–150”

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In a recent examination and attempted search for more precise dates of Nāgārjuna, D. Ruegg wraps up the matter in terms of a consensus that the active life of Nāgārjuna may best be placed in A.D. 150–200.¹⁾ This general assumption is not to be accepted without challenge, however. Along with S. Vidyabhusana, Chr. Lintner believes that Nāgārjuna may be placed in close proximity to the times of the *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*.²⁾ The earliest dates ever postulated for the times of Nāgārjuna were proposed by Prof. H. Ui as A.D. 113 and 213.³⁾ In addition to the problem of dates, there has remained unresolved an issue regarding Nāgārjuna’s traditional background, specifically as to whether the dialectician who wrote the definitive Madhyamaka treatises was one and the same as to the great commentator of the *Prajñāpāramitopadeśaśāstra*. In the prewar Era, É. Lamotte voiced the theory that there might have been two Nāgārjunas, one being of the Ābhidharmika training, with the other being a spearheaded Mahāyāna theoretician.⁴⁾ In the post-war era, it was A.K. Warder who, in 1952, first expressed doubt as to whether Nāgārjuna was a Mahāyānist, regarding him rather as an Ābhidharmika. Following in his view, very recently D.J. Kalupahana seems to have amplified the doubt in question.⁵⁾ In any case, from the foregoing state of affairs, it is apparent that the dates of Nāgārjuna and his tradition have a need for re-examination.

The purpose of this paper is to present a new hypothesis, challenging the hitherto accepted consensus by proposing that times of Nāgārjuna were as much as half a century prior to Prof. Ui’s calculation, placing them at A. D. 50–150. Secondly, in challenge to the traditional acceptance of Nāgārjuna as a product of South India, this paper proposes that his origination was in the border region between Middle India and the south, and

that his active life was clearly attuned to the historical, cultural and religious context of Western India during the proposed period.

In substantiating the foregoing hypotheses, I ought initially to refer to a very important but enigmatic passage that appears in Hsiang-tsang's records, *Hsi-yu-chi*, to the effect that Nāgārjuna was a contemporary of Aśvaghoṣa, and was himself renowned in Western India.⁶⁾ If one should attempt to approximate the dates of Nāgārjuna in conjunction with two hypotheses, i.e. that he shared a period in his earlier life with Kaniṣka for whom Aśvaghoṣa was one of the confidants, and also that he shared a period of his later life with one or more of the Śātavāhana kings, two fairly persuasive conditions should become demonstrably clear: (1) that there should be some time-span between the period of Kaniṣka's suzerainty and that of the political and military rivalry which took place between the Śātavāhana kings and the Śaka Satraps of Western India, both periods nonetheless falling within the range of the possible human life-span, i.e. 70-100 years of age; (2) that while those two political and military contenders are found in the epigraphical records in Western India, especially in those rock-cut temples of the Śaka-Pahlava period, if Nāgārjuna happened to be associated with a Śātavāhana king, Gautamiputra Śātakaṇi (ca A.D. 100-130) or his successor Vāsiṣṭhiputra Pulumāyi (130-159) and wrote the *Suḥṛllekha* for either Śātavāhana king, it is indeed possible to hypothesize that Nāgārjuna may also have associated with the great Satrap of Ujjayinī, Rūdradāman (A.D. 130-155), and may have written for him an exhortation on Buddhist doctrines and the principles of governance, the *Ratnāvali*.

I am of the opinion that the very conception, hitherto taken for granted, of linking Nāgārjuna with South India on account of his association with a Śātavāhana king ought to be changed. Nāgārjuna's native land, as explicated by Hsiang-tsang as well as in the Tibetan tradition, was Vidarbha (Vedali in *Laṅkāvatārasūtra*), a place located in the border-region between Middle India and the south, i.e. the area irrigated by the river Tāpti, 120 miles south from Ujjayinī and 200 miles northeast of Bombay. Likewise, Southern Kauśala, capital city of the Śātavāhana kings, was only a little

south of the border-region identified as ancient Pratiṣṭhāna and present day Paithan on the upper Godāvali, which the *Geography of Ptolemy* also notes as Baithana (VII, 1, 82), designating it as the royal town of Siriptolemaius (i.e. Śrī Pulumāyi).⁷⁾ The locality is only 150 miles east of Bombay. Indeed, it was West India which was the arena of military contests between the Śaka Satraps and the Śātavāhana kings and also the arena of encounter-cum-fusion between the Śaka-Pahlava and Brāhmaṇic cultures.

Since the determination of Nāgārjuna's dates has hitherto been influenced by the dates of Kaniṣka, the period of the latter ought reasonably to be placed in the latter half of the first century in order to coincide with the beginning of the Śaka Era, A.D. 78. On this matter, I refer to A. Basham's most persuasive demonstration in his two related articles.⁸⁾ He strongly asserts that the period of Kaniṣka and that of Rudradāman cannot be considered contemporaneous, because both were characters of such high caliber that peaceful co-existence would have been well nigh impossible, and that Kaniṣka's political and military accomplishment ought to be identified with the beginning of the Śaka Era, because Rudradāman's Sanskrit panegyric found in Girnar, Kāthiāwār, the locality known to us for Aśoka's inscription, was identified to have been carved in A.D. 150 in reference to the Śaka Era 72 (or A.D. 150). According to Basham, therefore, the two other datings, A.D. 128 by S. Konow and A.D. 144 by R. Ghirshman cannot be supported, partly for the above reason, and partly because the only occurrence of the Roman title "Caesar" in India, as adopted by Kaniṣka II in Śaka Era 41 (i.e. A.D. 119) in Ara inscription, can only be meaningfully understood in reference to the Romans' victorious conquest over Parthia and so forth under Trajan, which took place in the years of A.D. 113-117.

The dates of Rudradāman as the mid-2nd century A.D. cannot be moved, not only because the Śātavāhana king Vāsiṣṭhiputra Pulumāyi (130-159) is recorded in the *Geography of Ptolemy* (VII, 1, 82) as a king Ptolemaius, ruler of the Deccan in the middle 2nd century A.D., but also because his queen was Rudradāman's daughter.⁹⁾ Gautamīputra Śātakarṇi is known to have been a great conquerer, of the Brahmanic culture, asserting the social

system of Varnas, conducting the rite of Aśvamedha, and his early panegyric does not reflect a Buddhist affiliation at all. In the course of military conflict between the Śaka Satraps and this Śātavāhana king over the coastal region, Rudradāman of Ujjayinī made peace with him through a matrimonial alliance by sending his daughter to be the queen to his successor Vāsiṣṭhiputra Pulumāyi, whereas the other Śaka ruler Nahapāna, of the House of Kṣaharāta, in the regions of Mahārāṣṭra and Saurāṣṭra was destroyed by the same king, Gautamīputra Śātakarṇi, in A.D. 124. It was only after this time that Gautamīputra Śātakarṇi's Prākṛit inscriptions began to appear in the Buddhist rock-cut temples, recording donations, etc.

If Rudradāman of Ujjayinī, great Śaka Satrap, was indeed the ruler for whom Nāgārjuna wrote the *Ratnāvalī*, then the active times of Nāgārjuna may be identified once and for all, in conjunction with the presence of the Śātavāhana kings, to have been in the first half of the 2nd century in the region of Western India. Rudradāman, however, left no words describing himself as a supporter of Buddhism, perhaps due to the fact that the House of Caṣṭana had been of the Jaina tradition for generations; it is noteworthy that he remained silent about his religious affiliation, including the Jaina. A Sanskrit inscription found in one of the Kāṇheri rock-cut temples [north of Bombay (Lüders, No. 994)], however, implicates Rudradāman's daughter, queen of Vāsiṣṭhiputra Śātakarṇi, as a supporter of the Buddhist community. Despite the fact that the House of Śātavāhana relied on Prākṛit for all inscriptions, the queen's record in Sanskrit reflects upon the probable cultural background of Rudradāman's household.

Having determined the times of the two Śātavāhana kings and the great Satrap of Ujjayinī as having been in the mid-2nd century based upon Ptolemy's text, and accepting Basham's theory that Kaniṣka's rule began in A.D. 78, we have a satisfactory chronology for an individual living through those seven or eight decades. The problem still remains two-fold: (1) Why should the earlier life of Nāgārjuna be assumed as contemporaneous with Kaniṣka, the Buddhist poet Aśvaghōṣa, and Caraka, compiler of the *Caraka-saṃhitā*? (2) How might it be substantiated that Nāgārjuna associated

with the Śātavāhana kings as well as the Śaka Satrap Rudradāman, recipients of the *Suḥṛllekha* and the *Ratnāvalī*, respectively?

Starting with the second question, I ought to point to the doctrinal differences which the respective texts bear in content, and hence the different types of personalities to whom these texts were addressed. According to its content, the *Suḥṛllekha* is addressed to a person befitting to the Hinayāna (Śrāvakayāna) orientation, whereas the *Ratnāvalī* is addressed to a person befitting to the Mahāyāna (Bodhisattvayāna) orientation. Doctrinally, the *Suḥṛllekha* can hardly be said to comprise Mahāyāna philosophy, nor even Ābhidharmika philosophy. The contents are anything but abstract or intellectual, being rather very concrete with realistic depictions of the temporary and impermanent nature of life. The doctrines of Skandha, non-self, twelve chains of causation, four noble truths, and eight noble paths are all there, but far more elaborate are the descriptions of the fateful Saṃsāric cycles of life. In striking contrast, all this description is totally absent in the *Ratnāvalī*, and such discussion is replaced by the depiction of the ideal monarch imbued with the quality of the path-finder of Mahāyāna Buddhism and with that of the mythological Cakravartin. Instead of promoting an awareness of Saṃsāric vision as a crucial moment of conversion, the *Ratnāvalī* fosters the insight of Śūnyatā as a crucial moment of conversion. This is the hallmark of the *Ratnāvalī*.

The Girnar inscription, a panegyric of Rudradāman himself (Lüders, 965), carved in Sanskrit on the famous rock of Junāgaḍha, refers to his victorious battles against the Śātavāhana, saying that he twice defeated Śātakarṇi (his son-in-law Śrī Pulumāyi), but on account of the closeness of their relationship, he did not destroy him. The main purpose of his panegyric, however, was to record his deed in restoring Lake Sudarśana, located in Girinagara, bearing the cost of the project from his own treasury. The lake was originally constructed at the time of Candragupta of the Maurya as part of an irrigation system, and was subsequently adorned with conduits by the Yavana (Greek) king, Tuṣāspa, for Aśoka of the Maurya, although it was then destroyed by a flood. As Lamotte puts it, the panegyric is an

excellent product from the point of view of “the amplitude of its phrasing, the length of its compounds and its figures of style, attaining the level of a *kāvya*, a literary composition of a learned nature.” (*ibid.*, p.583) Only to such a learned scholar and magnanimous ruler could *Ratnāvalī*’s analogy of grammatical science have been meaningful as an explication of the importance of Mahāyāna doctrine over that of Hinayāna.¹⁰⁾ Pāṇini’s system of grammar ought to be learned, beginning with the lists of verbal roots (*dhātupāṭha*) and nominal bases (*ganapāṭha*), followed by the rules of grammar (*pratyāhārasūtras*). In parallel with this Vaiyākaraṇa curriculum, the *Ratnāvalī* depicts the Mahāyāna body of teachings as comprising Hinayāna teachings within itself as preliminary subjects of study; the latter, not, however, comprising the former. This kind of analogy would certainly not be applied to the Śātavāhana kings who adhered to the use of Prākṛit.

The proposed hypothesis, i.e. to correlate the contents of the *Ratnāvalī* and *Suṣṛīlekha* respectively with the personality of Rudradāman and that of a Śātavāhana king, is a bold attempt. But insofar as the contents of the two texts bear neither outright contradiction between them, nor comprise any of the post-Nāgārjuna doctrines, there should be no serious obstacle to regarding both texts as having been written by Nāgārjuna. The Buddhist Saṅgha in Western India during the Śaka-Pahlava period stood in a somewhat precarious position, situated between the two powerful political contenders. The period was complex. It was a time of confrontation between the Śaka-Pahlava culture imbued with Buddhist religion and the Brahmanic culture which had undergone the process of revitalization through the Epic period. According to Vidyabhusana, the region of Vidarbha was the Brāhmaṇic center of culture; it was there that the Purāṇa and Sūtra literatures were compiled, and the pre-Classical *Nyāyāsūtra* assembled, as were the other pre-Classical Hindu philosophical texts. It was a difficult time for the Buddhist world in different ways from that of the post-Mauryan dark-age. In this context, a Buddhist theoretician, trained as an Abhidhamist and faithful to that system of thought, nonetheless gradually developed a new innovative method of propagation through Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Prof. Ui determined that the *Upāyakaśālyahṛdayaśāstra* ascribed to Nāgārjuna is not correct in light of his adeptness in the use of logic and knowledge demonstrated in the *Madhyamakakārikā*, *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, and so forth, suggesting that it may be attributed to some Ābhidharmika coming after the *Carakasamhitā*. I am inclined to agree with Vidyabhusana, however, in that the text in question can be attributed to Nāgārjuna. Logical understanding may require some length of time. In his earlier days Nāgārjuna began to master the science of logic on the basis of the logical system compiled in the *Samhitā*. His innovative dialectical method may have been the product of long, arduous search and contemplation. Although the subject matter is beyond this paper, I refer to the insight of Vidyabhusana as well as A. Kunst,¹¹⁾ such that Buddhist logicians revealed an indisputable, common inclination toward the effort of eliminating verbal elements from the syllogistic formula so as to precipitate the purely logical process of the mind, and, that this began with Nāgārjuna's logical and dialectical insight. The text in question seems to bear a hint of that tendency.

- 1) "Toward Chronology of the Madhyamaka School," *Indological and Buddhist Studies* (2nd ed.), Canberra: 1984, p. 507.
- 2) Cf. *Nagarjnniana, Studies in the Writings and Philosophy of Nāgārjuna*. Delhi: 1982, p. 17, n. 46; p. 122, n. 149. Vidyabhusana's postulation as A. D. 250-320.
- 3) *Vaiśeṣika Philosophy* (R A Smonograph), London: 1918. p. 43.
- 4) Lamotte's French translation *Ta-chih-tu-lun*, 1970. introduction, 3rd Vol.
- 5) *Nāgārjuna, The Philos. of the Middle Way*, SUNY Press, 1986, p. 7
- 6) Cf. *Si-yu-ki, Buddhist Record of The Western World*, tr. from the Chinese of Hiuen Tsiang, Delhi: 1981 (originally London, 1884) vol 2, pp. 302-303.
- 7) Lamotte: *History of Indian Buddhism from the Origins to the Śākā Era* tr. by Sara Webb-Boin from French, Louvain, 1988; p. 479.
- 8) "A New Study of Śāka-Kuṣāṇa Period," *BSOAS*, XV (1953), 80-97; "The Succession of the Line of Kaniṣka", *ibid.*, XX (1959), 77-88.
- 9) H. Luders: *List of Brahmi Inscriptions from the Earliest Times about A. D. 400 with the Exception of Those of Aśoka*, Varanasi: 1973: p. 103, No. 994.
- 10) *Pao-hsing-chêng-lun* (ch 4): Taisho. vol. 32. No. 1656; p. 502b (16-19).
- 11) Kunst: "The two Membered Syllogism," *RO* XV (1939-40), p. 76

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