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## UNIT 3 BUDDHIST AND JAINA TRADITIONS\*

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### 3.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this Unit, you will learn about:

- constructions of the past other than the Puranic,
- Jaina Prakrit version of *Ramayana*, called the *Paumacariyam*, which shows how Jaina constructions of the past can be studied through this text,
- Buddhist texts which exhibit historical consciousness, and
- role of the *sangha* as the chief protagonist of Buddhism's construction of the past.

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### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

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In the earlier Unit, we studied Puranic constructions of the past. There are other traditions which are completely different from the Puranic constructions of the past, for example. Buddhist and Jaina. For one thing, the Buddhist and Jaina traditions exhibit a clear concern with an acceptable chronology and 'a well-defined ideological purpose in the historical account'. Thus they present an alternative to the Puranic traditions. The Jaina narratives belong to the first millennium CE. They present the events and persons differently even when the genre is similar. We will be discussing the Jaina *Paumacariyam*, the Jaina text of Vimalasuri, to

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understand the Jaina historical tradition. Subsequently we will proceed to discuss the Buddhist tradition in detail.

### 3.2 THE JAINA PAUMACARIYAM

The Jaina text of *Paumacariyam* is in Prakrit. It is a version of *Ramayana*. Vimalasuri, the author of *Paumacariyam*, dates the text 530 years after the death of Mahavira. Some scholars date it slightly later to the early centuries CE. One of the earliest of Jaina versions, *Paumacariyam*, among others was used to propagate Jaina ethics. It takes the form of a counter-epic, narrating the story of Rama. The story as claimed by Vimalasuri is the same one as told by Mahavira to Indrabhuti, which was then narrated by the latter to his disciples. The fact that the initial narration was by a deity or an important person emphasises the importance of the text. The story is also called *Raghavacarita* and it is sometimes also called *puranam akhyanam*. Thus the genre is similar to the Brahmanical one. However the narrative and the intention are different.

Vimalasuri contends that the stories which were current at the time were nothing but silly tales and lies. They were contrary to reason and belief. Hence he wrote this version of the story which was intended to give true facts of what had happened. He uses the earlier writing as source. However he questions and contradicts the same versions which he uses as the source.

*Paumacariyam* is written in Prakrit and not Sanskrit. It thus had a wider reach. It contains the early background to Jaina tradition such as cosmology, creations legends and myths. Just as was the case with the *Puranas*, here too we find the history of the universe, the cycles of time and the biographies of the *tirthankaras*. What follows is an account of the major families and their genealogies. Romila Thapar believes that this is what makes it at the intersection of the epic and the Puranic genres.

The story of Rama begins with the region of Magadha with its capital at Rajagrha. The ruling king is Srenika or Bimbisara. Since Bimbisara was a contemporary of the Buddha and he is included in the Puranic dynastic lists, this points to his historicity. Bimbisara doubting the authenticity of the existing versions of Rama's story asks for a correct version from a disciple of Mahavira. Few interesting points emerge from his discussion. First, there is an attempt to point out that though there was some historical basis to the story, the existing versions deliberately falsified it. This is spurred by the fact that king Srenika casts doubts on the way *rakshasas* are portrayed, particularly Ravana. He also questions other aspects of the story. Romila Thapar believes that the notion of historicity is open and central and not embedded. Such is common with the attitude the Sramanic sects had towards the past.

The *Paumacariyam* though is sympathetic in its treatment of the *rakshasas*, it still cannot be treated as a perspective of the 'other side', i.e. the *rakshasas*. Nevertheless it attempts to present a compassionate narrative of the *rakshasas* of Valmiki. The text clarifies that the *rakshasas* are not demons but protectors as is clear from the root '*raks*' which means 'to protect'. In an attempt to rewrite the existing versions of the story, there is a conscious attempt to portray Ravana as neither ten-headed nor meat eating. The *rakshasas* are also projected as what they truly were before being demonised. *Paumacariyam* claims to be historically authentic.

The narrative begins with the description of the land of the *Vidyadharas*. They were literally, the bearers of knowledge. Both the *rakshasas* and the *vanaras* were *Vidyadharas*. The early chapters discuss the genealogies of these two groups. The focus is on the Vindhyan region with extensions towards the Godavari river. All the characters are devout Jainas. They avoid violence, though the heroes, kings and princes show their valour in battle.

In the genealogical section, four descent groups are discussed: Ikkhaga/Ikshvaku, Somavamsa, Vijjharana/Vidyadhara, and Harivamsa. Among the four, the Vidyadharas are the most important. One of the main characters among the *Vidyadharas* is Meghavahana. He flees to Lanka due to certain complications where he establishes the *Rakshasavamsa*. Another segment of the *Vidyadharas* was the *Vanaravamsa* which is founded by a *Vidhyadhara* prince who is exiled to Vanaradvipa. He establishes a kingdom at Kiskindha. Since they have a monkey emblem for the standard it is called *Vanaravamsa*. The two segments of the Vidyadharas not only periodically confront each other but also share matrimonial and political alliances. Dasaratha belongs to the Adityavamsa or the Ikshvakus. The story describes Ravana as an *ardhacakravartin*, i.e. an almost universal monarch. He is supposed to have conquered large areas of Bharatavarsa. He is portrayed as a pious Jaina and is the protector of Jaina shrines. His relationship with Rama is inherently antagonistic which follows Jaina belief. Rama is the eighth Vasudeva and Ravana, the eighth Prativasudeva. Not only is Ravana single-headed, but he can fly as well. As compared to the Valmiki's Ramayana, here, Ravana's relationship with Sita is of a more sensitive nature and not full of terrifying overtures. Dasaratha impressed by Jaina teachings decides to renounce the world. His wife Kaikeyi demands that her son should ascend the throne. As compared to Valmiki's Ramayana, Kaikeyi just wants her son to get the throne and not force Rama into exile. In exile, Rama spends much time at courts and not in austere circumstances. The norm of kingship appears to be common to both the Ikshvakus and *rakshasas*. *Paumacariyam* describes brahmanas as undisciplined, killers of animal life in their sacrifices and preachers of false doctrines. Obviously the epic did not feel the need to uphold the status of the brahmanas or *varnasrama-dharma*. In the end, both Dasaratha and Rama renounce the world and Sita becomes a nun. The Jaina ethic thus is seen triumphing over the kshatriya ethic.

The epic focuses on chiefships who are competing with each other over territory, status and rights. The story is reformulated on occasions of major historical change such as the emergence of the state in the form of a kingdom or when states require ideologies that mark out the king as having divine elements. Such reformulations required validation from the past and the story was recast to provide this. The fights between clans are mentioned in the *Jatakas*, the *Mahabharata* and later in the *Puranas*. Such references contain a kernel of historicity.

Clans which descended from Yadu were associated with attacks on Ayodhya. Ravana belongs to the Meghavahana who may have been a Chedi. The Cedis are of the Yadu descent and are highly thought of in the Buddhist sources. According to the Puranic legends, Haihayas were associated with the Chedis. The Chedis, in turn, were linked to the Meghavahana, who attacked Ayodhya and were eventually defeated. The *Paumacariyam* is not so much concerned with the historicity of Rama but with the representing of a more significant event, namely the confrontation between the clans where the descendants of Ikshvaku were seeking

revenge on the Yadus for the latter's raids into their territory. The Chedis are demonised but they are a recognisable human group with rights over a specific geographical area, governed by the institution of kingship. They are not described as just some 'lurid creatures of imagination' as was the case in Valmiki's *Ramayana* or as goblins and magical beings as in the *Jatakas*. *Paumacariyam* considers them as equals and this difference in the depiction would have required a change in the story and the subsequent rewriting of the story. The rewriting coincides with the time when erstwhile *gana-sanghas* were transforming into kingships.

The *Paumacariyam* vehemently denounces the known versions of *Ramayana* and sets out to present a different version. Obviously there was a historical need for such a treatment. Probably the *Paumacariyam* was trying to legitimise the Vidyadhara lineage. Additionally those kingdoms which were emerging around the early Common era were in need for validation. Most of these kingdoms were for example Traikutaka in western India; the Bodhi in Bundelkhand and Tripuri; the Bhoja and the Vakataka in Vidarbha; Daksina Kosala and the Chedi in Kalinga. The Chedi connection was shared by them all. Jainism was becoming popular in this region during the beginning of the Common era. They were seeking royal patronage. Many dynasties were seeking genealogical links with the more established kshatriya lineages. Those dynasties which were claiming Haihaya origins would have been opposed to the Bhargava versions of the tradition (Valmiki's *Ramayana*). The Jaina version would have been welcomed by those who were claiming Chedi and Meghavahana connections.

The regions of Magadha, Kalinga, Mathura, Vidisa and areas in Bundelkhand and Rewa had deep Jaina associations. The Jaina context of *Paumacariyam* was therefore familiar in north India.

The Jaina version claims historicity because of the fact that it associates the text with Bimbisara who was a historical king. Further the *Paumacariyam* denounces the other versions as fabrications. Since it attempts to present the only authentic historical account '...the endorsements which it suggests are significant from the point of view of a perspective on the past. The claim of historicity for this story connotes a new concern with the past' (Thapar 2017: 262).

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### 3.3 THE BUDDHIST CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE PAST

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The Buddhist records are generally historically reliable. In its earliest narratives, the Buddhist constructions of the past have elements of the *itihasa-purana* tradition. Subsequently, there is a noticeable change in the record of the history of Buddhism and its constituents. The persons and the events highlighted in the Buddhist tradition are different from those in the *Puranas* because of the fact that the nature of royal power, the nature of social ethic propagated and the perceived relationship between Buddhist ideology and political and social authority was significantly different. The texts that constituted Buddhist historical tradition are as follows:

- 1) The Buddhist Canon in Pali
- 2) Chronicles of Sri Lanka with their later commentaries
- 3) Biographies of the Buddha
- 4) Chronicles from Tibet and Ladakh dating to the second millennium CE

The historical perspective is derived from Buddhist religious concerns, though its connections with the political authority and reflections on society form more important connections. An interface with history is suggested in not only what record is cited but also how legitimation is sought. The claims to factual information is introduced to bolster sectarian authority. This became a characteristic of many monastic chronicles. A historical perspective is suggested in various ways:

- 1) In narrating the activities of the Buddha which are believed to be factual.
- 2) In how the *Sangha* came into existence.
- 3) In listing the various sects that emerged from the original organisation.
- 4) In narrating the relationship between the *Sangha* and the ruler.

But first let us familiarise ourselves with the texts of the Buddhist Canon.

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### 3.4 THE BUDDHIST TEXTS

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The Buddhist texts were composed by learned monks. They were about the history of the teaching and of the *Sangha*. They were intended both for the monks and the lay community. They were to be copied and kept in the monasteries for consultation.

It is important to realise the fact that the founder of Buddhism was a historical person. His teachings in the beginning were scattered and derived from what his followers remembered. When the following grew to large proportions, a need was felt to organise them into Canonical texts. Those followers who were devoted to Buddhist teachings in a maximal way were instituted into an order – the *Sangha*. Since this was a new development, not common to other renunciatory sects, it had to be recorded. This meant making statements on the veracity and validity of the historical Buddha, along with some biographical information as proof. Monks met periodically to discuss and debate the teachings of the Buddha. This led to sectarian splits. The ensuing result was the recording by each group of its version of history.

On the political scene, in the mid-first millennium BCE, when Buddhism emerged as a prominent sect, northern India was a home to *gana-sanghas* (oligarchies/chiefships) and *rajyas* (kingdoms). The ruling kings of Magadha and Kosala in the middle Ganges plain and the *gana-sanghas* are mentioned by the Buddhist texts from the late first millennium BCE to the early centuries CE. These had some association with the Buddha. The kings – Bimbisara and his son, Ajatshatru ruling in Magadha, and Prasenjit from Kosala were the contemporaries of the Buddha. Mahavira belonged to the well-known Jnatrika clan, one of the eight clans that constituted the Vrijji confederacy of Vaishali. Gradually the chiefships got transformed into kingdoms. Among the kings, Ashoka, the ruler of Magadha was a great patron and king according to the Buddhist tradition.

Buddhism grew in an urban context. Discussions about the new ideas were held in parks on the edge of the towns. The *Upanishads* inform us that many of the new ideas were a subject of debate and discussion at the courts of the rajas. The Vedic texts were not encouraged to be recited in the towns lest they were reviled. The competition for patronage and followers was intense among the **heterodox** sects. Therefore it was felt that the ideologies needed to be distinctive. This required that the teachings, especially of travelling teachers, be recorded.

How and why the *Sangha* originated and its growing relationship with the society provided a history to the foundation of the sect. Two developments

were important in defining the relationship between the *Sangha* and the society. One was the fact that women were now permitted to join the *Sangha*. Convents came into existence where previously, none were known. Women were not even permitted to leave home and take to renunciation. The second development was the acceptance of gifts from lay followers. Such gifts helped in the establishment of places of worship. The donations had to be recorded and such was the case with Buddhist and Jaina early votive inscriptions. These aspects make the Buddhist and Jaina tradition different from the Puranic with the latter's inclusion of list of lineages, heroes and royal pedigrees. The Buddhist record of donations from the royal family and heads of clans not only added to the authority of the *Sangha* but also provided a more reliable record and a semblance of a more historical form.

The Buddhist Canon consists of a number and variety of texts. They constitute the base for the emergence of the historical tradition. Originally, the teachings of the Buddha constituted an oral tradition. It was gradually organised in Pali language and is referred to as the Pali Buddhist Canon. The Buddha used Ardha-Magadhi rather than Sanskrit to instruct his followers. After the death of the Buddha, it was felt that to prevent the growth of indiscipline in the *Sangha*, and to preserve his teachings, it was important to record these as also the regulations governing the functioning of the *Sangha*.

The Theravadins (Elder monks) maintained that the Pali Canon recorded the original teachings of the Buddha. The Pali Canon was assembled from the mid-first millennium BCE and was put to writing later. It contains the three *Pitakas* (baskets) of teachings:

- 1) The *Vinaya Pitaka*: Contains the rules governing discipline and monastic regulations.
- 2) The *Sutta Pitaka*: Contains the five *nikayas* (collections) which developed on the essential teachings of the Buddha. It constitutes the following:
  - a) *Digha-nikaya*; b) *Majjhima-nikaya*; c) *Samyutta-nikaya*; d) *Anguttara-nikaya*; e) *Khuddaka-nikaya* (includes *Dhammapada* and the *Sutta-nipata*);The previous lives of the Buddha are recorded in the *Jatakas*, and the *Buddhavamsa* contains the legend of the Buddha and the Buddhahood.
- 3) *Abhidhamma Pitaka*: elaborates on and organises the teaching.

The determination of the original Canon is problematic. Problems regarding dates of the changes introduced and their chronology makes the dating equally problematic. Information on politics, territories, societies which are found scattered in these texts have been used to reconstruct the history of the times.

In addition to the above, there exist commentaries which are in the nature of clarifications, rectifications, all looking back on past events. The need for commentaries arose when the accepted interpretations of the original were questioned by dissidents within the Sramanic tradition, or when the historical contexts had changed, or when new explanations in tune with the current times were sought. The link between the text and the commentary are of a historical nature even if it is not actually history. The commentaries are in Sinhala/Sihala, the language of the early Canon. They were systematically collected and translated into Pali by the mid-first millennium CE. The commentaries acquire significance because of the fact that they are explanations and elaborations in looking back at past events that went into the making of the historical tradition.

The post-Canonical texts of the *Theravadins* are primarily Chronicles of the Mahavihara monastery in Sri Lanka. These are the *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa*, dating to the mid-first millennium CE and therefore are later than the Canonical texts. The *Chulavamsa* is a continuation of the narrative of *Mahavamsa* and covers to a large extent the subsequent history of Sri Lanka. It also focusses on monastic history. These are also referred to as the Ceylon Chronicles.

The post-Canonical texts of the Northern Buddhist tradition include the biographies of the Buddha written in the early first millennium CE. They are contemporary in time to the narratives that went in the making of the Ceylon Chronicles. However the places they are rooted in are distant from each other. They use *Gandhari Prakrit* and Sanskrit instead of Pali. The biographies are about the Buddha which also include some biographical vignettes of the patrons of the *Sangha*. The *Buddhacharita* of Ashvaghosa initiated the biographic form as an aspect of the past. Same was taken up in *Lalitavistara*, *Divyavadana* (*Asokavadana* sections narrate the glorious deeds of Asoka). The biographies are not common in the Sri Lankan Buddhist literature and Chronicles are relatively absent in Northern Buddhism. Romila Thapar opines that the biographical form becomes a common form of teaching from the early centuries CE. The Buddhist Canon attempted to systemise the teachings of the Buddha. In doing so, they related the history of the *Sangha*, the Elders, well-known lay followers, discourses of the Buddha with kings and monks, some chronology of events and parts of the Buddha's biography.

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### 3.5 THE AUTHORS

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The monks are credited with the preservation of the oral recitation. The Theravada branch maintained their record in Pali since it was the language favoured by the Buddha. The early Sri Lankan texts draw on the Sinhala oral tradition. Sanskrit texts were translated into Sogdian, Khotanese, Chinese and Tibetan pointing to the regions where Buddhism had travelled to.

Unlike the *itihasa-purana* tradition, the monks or learned lay followers and not the bards or the brahmanas were the authors. These monks resided in monastic establishments. The perspective therefore was not of the court or the monarchy but of the monastery and the *Sangha*. The relationship with the urban milieu, interaction with the townspeople, householders and merchants defined this perspective. The politics of the capital was not excluded but came filtered through monastic concerns. The monastery, the sect and the *Sangha* are more central than the political authority. Literacy was prevalent and that made it imperative for the Canon, commentaries and the Chronicles to be copied at regular intervals to ensure their preservation. The updating of the narrative was done through interpolations, or by rewriting the text, or by writing a fresh text, and using the existing ones as sources.

In Buddhism the premium was on debate and discussion and in the early stages on logical thinking. Divine revelation had no part to play. The oral tradition existed and what accounted for the teachings of the Buddha were his face-to-face interactions with the lay followers. The spoken word was respected but debated. Records were required when after the death of the Buddha the *Sangha* became concerned with preserving the veracity of his teachings.

**Check Your Progress-1**

1) Discuss how Vimalasuri’s *Paumacariyam*, a version of Ramayana, is a statement from a historical perspective?

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2) What are the broad categories of Buddhists texts which can be used to reconstruct Buddhist historical tradition?

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**3.6 THE BUDDHIST HISTORICAL TRADITION**

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The earliest roots of the Buddhist historical tradition can be traced back to *itihasa-samvada*. These were dialogue stories which were counterpart to the dialogue hymns and narratives – the *akhyanas* – of the *Vedas*. These are formulated in a Buddhist form and are to be found in the *Nikayas* and *Sutta Pitaka*. These form a part of the narration of explanations about the beginning of social institutions or Buddhist doctrine. The dialogues centre on an event in the life of the Buddha or a famous disciple in the context of Buddhist teaching. In the Buddhist tradition, the origin myths about utopian beginnings and descent of clans tell us about the social assumptions of the society. The primary myth explains the origin of the family, private ownership of land, status and political authority. The past is utopian which undergoes a change, from an egalitarian society to a hierarchical society, which resulted in the formation of a government and the dominant status of the kshatriya. The past evolved in an evolutionary way. The origin of private ownership of land gradually replaced common ownership. The resultant disputes led to the investing of authority into someone who would enforce laws and protect property. This led to the merging of the kshatriya (called so because he was the lord of the fields [*khetta*]) and the *raja* (called so because he charmed everyone). The kshatriya or the *raja* had two interests – landownership and the exercise of political authority. The entire process of the transition from clan society into more complex ones is treated in a seemingly historical manner in Buddhist tradition. The whole process is untouched by divine intervention and ‘explanation is based on causality and logic, conducive to viewing the past historically’.

The origin myths of the kshatriya clans include the genealogies of the Sakyas, Koliyas, etc. The genealogical mode of historical thinking, which was also used in the epics and the *Puranas*, is also evident in the Buddhist tradition, though the lists of descent differ. The Sakyas descended from the lineage of Okkala (Sanskrit Iksvaku) whose offspring from the first wife founded the city of Kapilavastu. Through intermarriages within the clan, descended the Sakyas. The insistence on intermarriages within the clan was necessary to ensure the purity of the lineage, tracing it back to those with identical blood. The origin myth has many versions. The myths in each case explain the origin of the clan, the city associated with its *janapada* (territory). Many are not present in the Puranic descent lists. The Buddhists’ insistence on the kshatriya status of the clan being from an established royal family is very clearly stated. The origin myths in the Buddhist historical

tradition are used in more than one instance in order to differentiate them from the Brahmanical forms thus pointing to an alternative view of the past.

In the *Buddhavamsa*, the material is narrated along the same lines but focusses on Gautama Buddha in a succession of earlier Buddhas. Since it terminates with the historical Buddha, we will now proceed to the next step i.e. the teaching of the Buddha and the *Sangha*.

### 3.6.1 Early History of the *Sangha*

The Buddhist perception of the past moves from origin myths to events claimed as historical and essential to the history of the *Sangha*. In describing the formation of the Buddhist community, the *Vinaya Pitaka* treats the events in a chronological fashion. The *Vinaya Pitaka* narrates the history of the various Councils. In the First Council of the *Sangha*, held at Rajagrha soon after the death of the Buddha, the doctrine was recorded for the first time. Ananda and Upali were the two disciples who recited the *Pitakas* which were then recorded. The Second Council took place a century later at Vaishali. Differences had arisen on the crucial question of whether monks could accept donations of money. The Vaishali monks were in favour of monastic donations whereas the monks from western monasteries (Kausambi and Mathura) were opposed to it. The decision that was taken was to make monetary donations unacceptable. According to the Theravada tradition, the Third Council was held at Pataliputra, the capital of the Mauryan empire, 136 years later. The Theravadins claimed that they represented the orthodox core of the discipline, which was unacceptable to other sects. King Ashoka in his famous Schism Edict calls for the expulsion of dissident monks and thus confirms dissidence. The Council recognised the schism. The majority section was called *Mahasanghikas* and the minority, apparently the Elders, *sthaviravadins/Theravada*. The Fourth Council was held at Kashmir as late as the first century CE during the reign of Kanishka or Kusanas. There is an attempt to give historicity to the councils and their decisions through the process of recording the decisions by the Councils in accordance with the perspectives of particular *Sangha*. Romila Thapar feels that in contrast to the Buddhist tradition, the Puranic sects not only lacked any institutional base at this time but also were not as concerned with the issues of historicity as the Buddhists were.

In an attempt to control the sectarian fissions, Buddhism as an overarching religion bifurcated finally into the *Hinayana* or Lesser Vehicle (of which *Theravadins* were a part) and the *Mahayana* or Greater Vehicle (included *Sarvastivadins* and other sects). Romila Thapar believes that a historical record of the schisms was necessary to justify the existence of those claiming to be the inheritors.

### 3.6.2 The Concept of Time

The shape and accounting of time is essential to history. The Buddhist concept of time is not identical with the concept of time in the Puranic thinking. There was an intersection and separation of cyclic and linear time. The central point of departure is provided by the *Mahaparinirvana* as a focal point to calculate chronology and the genealogies of the Elders. This conforms to Linear time. The cosmological time is viewed as a cycle, similar to in the Puranic tradition. 'Cosmological time, generational time and linear time all exist but function in contexts different from the Puranic'. Amongst these the linear time is least ambiguous. The single, central date is provided by the *mahaparinirvana* from which all events are calculated.

This is finite time and has no cyclical recurrence. This both reinforced and was reinforced by the appeal to history.

### 3.6.3 Traces of Historical Thinking

The texts that suggest a Buddhist historiography are partly ecclesiastical and partly secular. They are concerned with the history of the Buddha, with the Buddhist *Sangha*, its multiple sects and their historical associations. The Buddha is treated as a historical figure. All these aspects are related to the wider society. There is a continued interaction with the political authority on the one hand and with a community of lay followers on the other. The votive inscriptions recording donations by the lay community indicates this closeness. The history of the *Sangha* was also a part of wider history.

In the political realm there was dynastic succession. Its parallels in the religious realm was the succession of the Elders. History includes biography since the lives of both kings and *Theras* affect the *Sangha*. The Buddhists' attitudes to history was governed by the Buddha's disapproval of popular chatter about historical subjects like the kings, ministers, wars, etc., and furthermore by the Buddhist concept of the impermanence of time. This should not have contributed favourably to creating a historical tradition. However, Romila Thapar believes that the Pali Canon has something of an underlying historical logic. The origins of being a Buddha is a mix of mythology and a degree of logical reconstruction; the history of Buddhist activities; the establishment of the *Sangha*; the history of the Councils and the schisms, all point to the fact that the narration is presented in a chronological order with a concern for rational explanations though interspersed with mythology. She further adds that, '... the Buddha's fundamental teaching of *pratitya-samutpada* (dependent origination) underlines *hetu* (cause) as essential to understanding the past' (Thapar 2017: 412). The events are presented in an orderly fashion and the notion of historical change is axiomatic to Buddhist thinking keeping in mind that the universe is impermanent and changing. Constituents of a historical tradition are evident in the evolution of the teachings of the Buddha. For instance Enlightenment is not viewed as a divine moment but an enquiry based on analytical reasoning and causation. The *Sangha* plays the part of the main protagonist in the historical tradition which emerges as the most important institution after the death of the Buddha with which the history of Buddhism begins. The relationship of the *Sangha* with the kings like Ashoka or Pushyamitra Sunga underline the historicity of the *Sangha*.

### 3.6.4 The Pali Chronicles from Sri Lanka

The main Chronicles are the *Dipavamsa*, the *Mahavamsa* and later the *Culavamsa*. The first two Chronicles are about the history of the Mahavihara, the Theravada monastery in Sri Lanka located at Anuradhapura, and the early history of the kingdom. *Dipavamsa* and *Mahavamsa* are of the mid-first millennium CE; they reveal early history by 'drawing on the history of India associated with the coming of the Buddhism to Sri Lanka, in which Ashoka is made to play a major role' (Thapar 2017: 63). All three Chronicles present the history of the middle Ganga plains from a Theravada perspective. Events in India are treated as background. The Chronicles and the Commentaries on them reveal the fact that the emergence of confrontations in established religions need to be explained through the writing of commentaries in order to convince the new converts.

The Chronicles present recognisably distinct historical tradition. There is a systematic narrative which follows a chronology and purpose, i.e. upholding the *Sangha*. The Chronicles are about sectarian activities but also include narratives about the influential patrons of the *Sangha*. The connection with the royal authority is evident. Kings are projected as significant patrons, for example, Ashoka. He is the patron par-excellence which indicates the use of history for sectarian purposes. Though Ashoka is celebrated as a Buddhist and his decisions led to the establishment of Theravada in Sri Lanka, he, himself has little to say on such connections. It is quite possible that the connections are exaggerated and the attempt to resorting to history is apparently evident. The Chronicles and the Commentaries are essentially a history of the Theravada in Sri Lanka. Other aspects of history mentioned are the historical processes of change, transforming of the chiefdoms into kingdoms and later into State systems. The narrative goes back briefly to origins in north India.

What is evident from all that is contained in the Chronicles is the need to buttress Buddhism by historical tradition. This was for various reasons. Buddhism had to contend with various non-Buddhist sects and non-Buddhist neighbours. The historical tradition was being formalised and prised out of the floating oral traditions around the time when king lists from Devanampiya Tissa (Ashoka) of the third century CE to Mahasena of the fourth Century CE were being recorded. There was a need to establish the status of the *Sangha* as a pre-eminent religious institution. The monasteries were attracting patronage in the form of grants of land. A historical tradition was needed to explain its political power. The *Sangha* had to be avoided being labelled as any other avaricious institution, and for this purpose it became necessary to emphasise the morality and piety of its actions which had brought the *Sangha* wealth. Besides this, the emergence of Sectarian rifts and loyalties required a record of the patriarchs and the Elders of the *Sangha*. Romila Thapar believes that in the case of the rivalry between the ascendant Theravada at the Mahavihara and the Abhayagiri monastery, the former's Theravada interpretations of the doctrine and its version of Buddhism in Sri Lanka from the mid-first millennium CE became dominant. She believes that this was an instance where a hegemonic religious institution was consolidating its authority by using historical narrative to its advantage. There just might have been where, 'the history of a religious institution as a disguised defense of political power is not in effect also a project of writing history' (Thapar 2017: 436-37).

### **3.6.5 Buddhist Biographies**

The Buddhist view of the past was narrated through another kind of texts which were the biographies of the Buddha. These could also function as personalised narratives underlining his ideas. Partial biographies were those of persons important to the history of Buddhism, for example, Ashoka. According to Romila Thapar the biographical genre required the subject to be presented in a historical form for the narrative to be viable. The biographies were popular in the Northern tradition. This could have been because of the fact that in north-western India, Buddhism did not have a very close relationship with royalty, nor were there other Buddhist sects competing for status. By the turn of the Common Era and the early centuries CE the writing of such biographies become current.

The biography of the Buddha came to be composed and encouraged by the fact that Buddha was a historical person. Not only the Canonical literature was

concerned with the biography of the Buddha but towards the turn of the Common Era, non-canonical literature came to be developed around these themes. We have *avadanas* which celebrate the great deeds and stories of the Buddha and the *bodhisattvas* or other important persons and present them as part of the past. The *Buddhavadana* is the earliest kind of this literature. It narrates the glory of the historical Buddha, the *paccekabuddhas* or those who were enlightened but did not proclaim the doctrine, important *Theras* and *Theris* (monks and nuns). The *avadana* follow a defined format. They begin with an adoration of a previous Buddha by a past devotee. The Buddha prophesises the rebirth of the devotee and the discovery of the Buddha by the devotee. The *avadanas* had elements of biography but differed from *caritas* (biographies).

### **The *Buddhacarita***

The *Buddhacarita* of Ashvagosha is dated to the first century CE or soon after. It depicts the way biography was used as a form of history. It was referred to by the Chinese Buddhist monks of the seventh-eighth centuries as being a very popular reading. It has seventeen chapters, of which only the first thirteen are considered to be the work of Ashvagosha. The latter four are ascribed to a later author. The original text covered the life of the Buddha but the existing Sanskrit text stops at the Enlightenment. A Chinese translation has the later chapters. The text is characterised by high quality Sanskrit courtly poetry. The *Buddhacarita* presents the Buddha's Enlightenment as the high point in the text. The Buddha's kshatriya antecedents, the mention of Bimbisara, all point to the centrality of the Buddha being a historical figure. In a still later Tibetan biography, the genealogy of the Sakyas; references to the kingdoms of Kosala, Magadha, Avanti, Kausambi and the confederacy of the Vrijjis as being contemporary with the life of the Buddha; the honouring of the Buddha as a *chakravartin* on his death; the decline of the *Sangha* with the passing away of the leading monks; the founding of another sect in Kashmir; schisms and origin of different sects, are narrated.

### **The *Mahavastu* and the *Lalitavistara***

The *Mahavastu* belongs to the *Mahasanghika* sect and is dated to around 3rd century CE. It is composed partly in Hybrid Sanskrit and partly in Prakrit. It gives the stories of the previous Buddhas followed by that of Gautama Buddha. The origin of the Sakyas and Koliyas is followed by the events from the life of the Buddha – his birth, renunciation, enlightenment, teaching, followers, conversion of people to his doctrine and the final passing away. This narrative is interspersed with *Jataka* type moral stories.

The life of the Buddha is treated in *Lalitavistara*. The Buddha is shown as having descended from the Tusita heaven. His life story follows that of *Nidana-katha*.

Gradually, around this time, the biographies were changing into hagiographies. The historical Buddha was less enhanced and he came to be embodied as *dharma*. It began to be argued that he was immortal and his *nirvana* did not take place.

### ***Divyavadana***

Activities of Emperor Ashoka as the patron par-excellence of the *Sangha* are included in certain sections of the composition, *Divyavadana*, which appears to be veering towards a historical tradition. The sections include the biographical episodes relating to the lives of Ashoka Maurya, his son Kunala, and younger brother Vitashoka. These sections are called *Ashokavadana*, the *Kunalavadana*

and the *Vitasokavadana* respectively. The date is about the third century CE but seem to have drawn from earlier oral and written compositions.

The *Ashokavadana* narrates the history of the Mauryan dynasty, legends about Ashoka and his son, Kunala; interspersed with the history of the Elders of the Buddhist *Sangha* in northern India from the time of the Buddha. Ashoka is presented as an ideal king and a *Chakravartin*. The text was composed when Buddhism was changing from being a local sect into a well-established religion. It had an impressive following in the Ganges plain and central India. The Northern Buddhism's expansion into north-western India and Central and East Asia followed soon after. Romila Thapar believes that there was a need to create a tradition to preserve the important events in the history of Buddhism, hence narrative vignettes about the Councils and the Elders were introduced. By associating the narrative with an important political personality like king Ashoka, the tradition stood greater chances of being taken more seriously.

As Buddhism was spreading to new territories and attracting converts, the biographical mode became important. The *carita* form was used not only to establish the historicity of the Buddha, which in any case was already established, but to establish the veracity of the events related to the *Sangha*. The Buddha is central to the discourse but a long line of preceding ones are also given ample space in an attempt to give antiquity and legitimacy to the teachings. However a concern for authentication is evident in how carefully the sources are mentioned. Besides certain aspects of the Buddhist doctrine such as the notion of dependent origination – *pratitasamutpada* – helped in understanding historical explanations. Since it was the law of nature, of causality, the intervention of a divine being was not required. The chain of cause and effect through actions is also an explanation of the how and the why of past events.

The biographies are important in the Buddhist tradition since it is a new genre which reiterates the fact that the founder of Buddhism is a historical personage and thus evokes history. The biography contains origin myths, genealogies with a new focus on the individual. Both the texts – chronicles and the biographies – significantly create the identity of a community and that identity draws from the way in which history is presented.

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### 3.7 SOME FURTHER THOUGHTS

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Two elements are important in the Buddhist historical tradition. Apart from the fact that it is infused with a more pronounced sense of history as compared to the alternative traditions, its authority is derived from the fact that it is the teaching of the Buddha and the propagation of the same through the *Sangha* which is central to any discourse. The Pali Canon maintains the record of the organisation of the *Sangha*. Here it moves from an oral account to texts which were determined by the various Councils. Sects are given legitimacy through the Councils. The authority of the *Sangha* becomes supreme by associating it with a political authority – Ajatshatru, Ashoka, Kanishka. The split between the *Hinayana* and *Mahayana* Buddhism is an important development. In *Mahayana* Buddhism or Northern Buddhism, the history of Buddhism is articulated as biographies of the Buddha and important patrons and Elders. Romila Thapar believes that in areas where the teaching was obstructed by competing rival sects and the *Sangha* was not very powerful, biographies were used to establish the authority of Buddhism, thereby

using history in a way. Gradually the biographies turned into hagiographies emphasised by the increasing importance of the concept of *Bodhisattva*. The Puranic religions imitated the hetrodox religious traditions in setting up their *mathas* and seminaries, thus resorting to a similar use of history.

**Check Your Progress-2**

1) Elaborate on the Buddhist constructions of the past with reference to the Pali Chronicles from Sri Lanka.

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2) Discuss how Buddhist biographies narrate the Buddhist view of the past?

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**3.8 SUMMARY**

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There were three kinds of historical traditions in early India. The predominant tradition was the *itihasa-purana* tradition. It was attributed to brahmana authors writing about the rulers. The second kind of historical tradition was the compositions of the bards. Their compositions were believed to have been overwritten by brahmana authors thus making the process of retrieving the original difficult. The third tradition was that which belonged to the *Sramanas*. In this the rulers were linked with the teaching of the Buddhist and Jaina *Sanghas*. In this Unit, we discussed the latter in great detail. The Sramanic tradition was situated in a more urban milieu and concerned itself with the evolution of Buddhism and its patrons. Much before the composition of the *Puranas*, the Sramanic religions already had their sects, sent missions, were holders of property, enjoyed royal patronage and were compiling histories of the teaching and the *Sangha*. The Pali Canon recording the history of various Councils; the royal links between the *Sangha* and the royal personage (Ajatshatru, Ashoka, Kanishka); the history of the monastery, the Mahavihara of Sri Lanka; the biographies of the Buddha which articulated the history in the Northern tradition, all of these and much more have been dealt with in this Unit, which together constituted the Sramanic historical tradition.

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**3.9 KEYWORDS**

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<b><i>Sramana</i></b>	The term ‘ <i>sramana</i> ’ is derived from <i>sram</i> , ‘to labour’, points to the requirement for attaining liberation from rebirth – <i>moksa</i> . Jainism and Buddhism were Sramanic religions
<b><i>Upanishads</i></b>	The <i>Upanishads</i> are treatises on <i>Brahman-knowledge</i> i.e. knowledge of the Ultimate Reality
<b>Heterodox</b>	In relation to religious life, orthodoxy means correct or sound belief according to an authoritative norm; heterodoxy refers to belief in a doctrine differing from the norm

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## 3.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress-1

- 1) See Section 3.2
- 2) See Section 3.4

### Check Your Progress-2

- 1) See Sub-section 3.6.4
- 2) See Sub-section 3.6.5

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## 3.11 SUGGESTED READING

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Thapar, Romila, (2017) *The Past Before Us: Historical Traditions of Early North India* (New Delhi: Permanent Black).

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## 3.12 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

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### Discovering Sacred Texts: Buddhism

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jex4R3-qJn8>

### What are Buddhism's Key Texts?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dYNWDFOBtQg>

### Sanskritisation and the diction of early Buddhist texts | SOAS University of London

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DINt32Yelgg>

### What Is the Pali Canon of Buddhism?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YIcnCqOALPs&t=89s>

### Buddhacarita murals at the monastery Sudharmarama in Colombo (Sri Lanka)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g7ujWzPKxmY>

### Borobudur Temple - First Gallery - Lalitavistara - Episode 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGdFue2wLJw>

### Rebirth Narratives in Buddhist Literature, Images, and Landscapes | SOAS University of London

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uK3iCmJYbYo>