

Exploring Sacred Landscapes: The Insights of Faxian on Geography and Buddhism across South Asia

MD. HABIBULLAH

Lecturer, Department of History, University of Dhaka

Abstract: The profound reverence and love for the birthplace of Buddha and Buddhism has resulted in the advent of several pilgrimages from China to the Indian Subcontinent. They were mainly devoted to tracing the original sources of their faith in the forms of visiting Buddhist *vihāras* or transcribing sacred religious scriptures. Faxian, also known as Fa-Hien, a famous Chinese Buddhist monk, eventually came to the subcontinent in 399 CE and remained here for 14 years, gathering Buddhist *Vinaya* texts and visiting sacred sites across the subcontinent. He is celebrated and held in esteem for his travelogue, *Foguoji*: “A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms,” which makes available his observations vis-à-vis the geography, culture and religious practices of India and the Malay Archipelago. This research looks beyond the surface to understand the observations and interpretations of Faxian, exploring the geographical and environmental contexts, as well as the Buddha and Buddhism of 5th century South Asia. The present research employs both a thematic approach and a geographical lens to bring together scattered pieces of information relating to South Asian geography and the religious landscape as reflected in the account of Faxian. This effort on Faxian allows a further understanding of history and fosters thoughtful discourse on a number of issues relating to geography and religions of the early centuries CE.

Key Words: Faxian, Buddhism, Geography, Sacred Spaces, South Asia.

Introduction:

Much of what is known about the ancient and early medieval past of the Indian Subcontinent and the Indian Ocean world comes in significant portion from Chinese travelogues. The pilgrim travellers mostly visited the subcontinent in search of an even closer connection to the divine, collecting holy scriptures and comprehending Buddha and Buddhism by visiting the sites of their origins. From Faxian in the 5th century to Fei Xin in the 15th century, academics have valued the travelogues that have survived to the present day for their accuracy and clarity as well as a rich repository of historical

information. Despite their central theme on Buddhism and Buddha, these accounts vividly depict various historical-geographical regions, natural environments, trade routes, political systems, cultural rhythms and societal dynamics. The approaches and trends in Indian historiography for the last two centuries have predominantly focused on politics rather than culture. There are only a handful of projects on the historical geography/environmental history of early periods, and almost no efforts have been made on the mutual interplay of geographical factors and sacred spaces. The historiography of the 21st century demands a broader, more inclusive approach that addresses complex global issues, interdisciplinary perspectives and diverse narratives, driving historians to look over the borders to seek how ideas, events and movements transcended and connected the various corners of the world. The dissemination of Buddhist philosophies from India to China resulted in an infusion of cross-cultural interactions that had an immense impact on Asian and global history dating back to the first century CE. This study represents one such attempt to reconstruct the geographical contexts of early South Asia in relation to Buddhist sacred spaces with the perspectives of East Asian accounts. Faxian, at the age of sixty, perhaps was the first traveller from China to start his pilgrimage trip to India from present-day Xi'an in Shaanxi province in 399 CE. He crossed the Gobi Desert and journeyed northwest along the Silk Road through Dunhuang and Khotan, the regions that fall under present-day China. This traveller and his companions crossed the towering Pamir Mountains, also known as the roof of the world, to reach the first city within the generally accepted natural-geographical territory of South Asia, the Gandhara. He visited and stayed in the sacred Buddhist sites namely Takshashila (present-day Pakistan), Mathura, Kapilavastu, Bodh Gaya, Pataliputra, Tamluk (present-day India), Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) and Java-dvipa (present-day Indonesia) until his return to the region of Guangzhou, China. His experiences in the journey across India have been documented in the famous book named *Foguoji*: "Record of Buddhist Kingdoms", which contains significant facts and figures, not found elsewhere regarding the state of Buddhism in India during the early centuries CE. The narrative of Faxian's travel in "A Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms" is written in the third person, implying that it had been written by someone to whom the pilgrim traveller presented his

experiences. This travelogue holds the experiences of this pilgrim traveller on Buddhism and Buddha as well as the geography, people and customs of India providing a rich historical and cultural record of the sacred sites and learning centres he traversed.

A rigorous investigation of *Foguoji* can yield some significant insights into the geographical landscape, natural resources and Buddhism in India though not beyond doubt or criticism. Therefore, the present research is aimed at figuring out how a foreign pilgrim traveller experiences India, a place that, as Tansen Sen (2006) has written, the Chinese have seen as a 'sacred' or even 'utopian' realm, or a mystical place occupied by 'civilised' and 'sophisticated' people. The research questions thereby stand: Can the *Foguoji* appear as an important repository of data that sheds light on aspects of the geographical context of 5th century India? What information about sacred spaces related to Buddha and Buddhism does the account reflect?

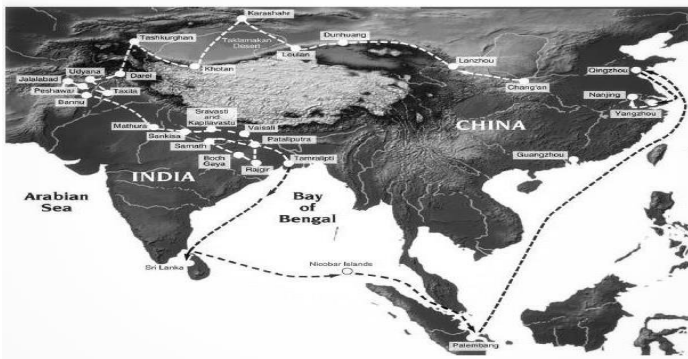
Materials and Methods:

This research adopted a thematic approach, focusing on geographical and environmental contexts to manifest and analyse the insights of Faxian on the issues of Buddhism and sacred landscapes across South Asia. Following a textual analysis of the translated works on Faxian's *Foguoji: A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms* by Samuel Beal (1869), James Legge (1886) and H.A. Giles (1923), relevant data on the topic in question have been gathered. Supplementary materials on this travelogue and explanations of the vague terms and descriptions have also been gathered from secondary sources. The findings from the travelogue are cross-referenced with secondary materials and contemporary historical records to authenticate his interpretations and observations. The narrative styles and content of *Foguoji* have thoroughly been examined to comprehend the author's perspectives, biases and intentions. Transparency and integrity in this research have been maintained by properly acknowledging all sources and showing due respect for the religious/historical figures and cultures featured in the travelogue.

Findings and Discussions:

The Route that Brought Faxian to Indian Subcontinent

In 399 CE, Faxian and his fellow travellers started their journey from Chang'an (modern-day Xi'an), the capital of the Jin dynasty, intending to visit the holy Buddhist places in India and acquire the sacred scriptures of Buddhist monastic discipline (*Vinaya* texts). This traveller had passed through the life-threatening Taklaman Desert (Western China) and travelled through Central Asia, visiting regions like Shanshan, Khotan, Kashgar, Tashkurgan, Termez and Bactria (Balkh) before making his way to the Indian Subcontinent.



Map 1: The Route of Faxian (Courtesy: Tansen Sen, 2006, p. 25)

Faxian in India, Birthplace of the Buddha & Buddhism

Faxian, like later pilgrims from China, mentions the Pamir Mountains which he encountered before entering Northwestern India. The Pamir Mountains, bordering the subcontinent, has always stood out as a landmark geographic feature and physical barrier dividing regions. The Pamirs were a very significant part of the ancient Silk Road network connecting China to Central Asia, the Indian Subcontinent, and beyond. In the travelogue of Faxian, it is referred to as the Congling/Onion Mountains. The Pamirs are known for their extreme altitude and rough terrain which likely led the traveller to name them Onion. J. W. M'Crindle believed that the naming was either due to the abundance of onions in the region or the round boulders that cover the mountains.¹ Travellers from China had to pass through these mountains to access the Indian Subcontinent. Alongside Faxian, the

records of Xuanzang and other pilgrims portrayed the Pamir Range vividly and its role as a major barrier in communicating with India. He trekked westward for around a month over this range, where snow persists year-round. Faxian was successful in crossing this dangerous terrain and entered into the areas of northern India. He reached a small kingdom named T'o-leih² in the border zone of the mountains where he saw a large number of monks who were followers of the Buddhist path of Hinayana. He then crossed the Indus and reached a kingdom named Woo-Chang (the beautiful Swat Valley) which he has stressed as located within North India and particularly famous as a flourishing centre of the law of Buddha. Faxian stated that the people of India typically referred to the residence of the monks as *Saighārāmas*. He shared a legend involving Buddha, indicating that Buddha once visited this sacred land and left an imprint of his foot which had remained intact. Alongside the rock on which Buddha desiccated his attire and the place where he converted the wicked dragon were also visited by the pilgrim traveller. He provided the measurement of this rock which is fourteen cubits in height and almost twenty cubits in breadth, having a smooth surface. Hwuy-king, Hway-tah and Táo-ching, three of his companions, marched to Na-kie³ in search of the land containing the Buddha's shadows. Faxian stayed in Woo-chang and when the summer rest ended, he along with his companions moved southward to a kingdom named Soo-ho-to.⁴ As reported by Faxian, the faith of Buddhism enjoyed success in this country as well. This is the place where Buddha himself reported to his fellows that he had released the dove with a portion of his flesh. The inhabitants of Soo-ho-to knew the context and, in response, built a tope in this place.

Faxian, taking a south-eastward course for five days from this place, reached Gāndhāra⁵, an ancient country where he saw that most of the people were followers of Hinayana.⁶ A big tope had been raised at a location in this country where Buddha donated his eyes to another man. The kingdom next to Gāndhāra was Takṣaśilā, which was a seven-day eastward journey. The word 'Takṣaśilā'⁷ means 'the severed head' and this ancient Buddhist sacred place got its name when Buddha

sacrificed his head to another in this place. They continued eastward for two days till they reached the site where the Bodhisattva left his corpse to provide food for a tigress that was starving. Big topes have also been erected in these two locations.

The traveller left Gāndhāra for Puruṣapura (Peshawar), journeying southward for four days to arrive at the destination. Faxian reported that, during Buddha's visit to this kingdom with his fellows, he dictated to Ananda⁸; "After my *nirvāṇa*, there will be a king in this country called Ka-ni-ka (Kanishka), who on this spot will raise a Pagoda."⁹ Kanishka, a ruler who was born in later times, assumed the throne and constructed a tope over this spot.

Faxian then travelled to the west for sixteen yojanas¹⁰ towards the boundary line of Nāgarahāra and arrived in the city He-lo (present-day Jallalabad). His account reveals that the flat bone of the skull of Buddha was placed in a *vihāra* in this city. Going farther north for a yojana, he reached the heart of Nāgarahāra, the site where the Bodhisattva, in one of his previous incarnations, bought five stalks of flowers as an offering to the Dipankara Buddha.¹¹ Faxian reported three *vihāras* in the city and suburbs associated with the Buddha.

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Vihāras

- 1 The first *vihāra* was built over the relic of the tooth of Buddha inside the urban landscape.
- 2 The second *vihāra* was built in the entrance of a valley where Faxian had seen the pewter staff of Buddha, a yojana to the northeast of the city.
- 3 The third *vihāra* was built at the valley's mouth to the west, where Faxian discovered Buddha's *Sanghali* (a part of his attire). The residents used to gather in large numbers for offerings and veneration to *Sanghali*. He added that a torrential downpour falls there immediately.

The traveller described a miracle that shows the presence of the divine inside the core of the natural world.

Half a yojana to the south of the capital of Nāgarahāra there is a cave. It is on the south-west face of the Po Mountain. Buddha left his shadow on the rock inside. Looking at it from a distance of ten paces or so, it is like Buddha's actual self, with his golden complexion, his thirty-two greater and

eighty lesser characteristic marks, all brightly visible. The nearer one goes, the more indistinct it becomes, appearing as if it were really he.¹²

Faxian and his fellow travellers stayed in the capital of Nāgarahāra for several months and afterwards proceeded south through an all-year snowy mountain.¹³ After successfully traversing the range all along the south, they finally made it to Lo-e¹⁴, another sacred land of Buddhism. Here he saw almost three thousand monks and disciples of both sects of Buddhism. The next kingdom the traveller arrived in was Poh-na¹⁵, a kingdom located ten days' journey south from Lo-e. This was another kingdom where he also saw more than three thousand monks who were followers of the Hinayana. The traveller again crossed the Indus and arrived in a country that was low and flat. The name of this country was Pe-too (a corruption of Panchanada or Panjab), another sacred territory where Buddhism also flourished, and the monks of this place were the disciples of both the Mahayana and the Hinayana.

From Pe-too, Faxian travelled towards the southeast, crossing a series of *vihāras*, and reached a kingdom named Ma-teou-lo¹⁶, where he saw a multitude of monks and referred to as a vibrant Buddhist kingdom. Faxian reported that he had seen at least twenty monasteries on both banks of the river P'oo-na.¹⁷ The pilgrim traveller referred to Western India, the kingdoms located beyond the sandy deserts, and Madya Desa (the Middle Kingdom)¹⁸, encompassing all regions south of the river P'oo-na. The earlier region saw a revival of the Buddha's law while a large number of people lived happily in the latter. He continued that the middle country had a temperate climate, devoid of hoarse frost and snow. When Buddha attained *pari-nirvana*, the monarchs of the neighbouring kingdoms and the chiefs of the *vaiśyas* (resident scholars) erected *vihāras* for the monks and donated to them residences, crop fields, gardens, orchards, cattle, etc. Faxian reported that there were no big mountains or valleys except rivers in the large territory lying between the Indus and the Southern Sea.

From the river Sin-to (Indus) to south India, where it borders on the southern sea, a distance of forty or fifty thousand li¹⁹,

the land is all plain and level. There are no great mountains or valleys, but still there are rivers.²⁰

After leaving this place, the traveller and his companions continued southeast for 18 yojanas till they arrived at a kingdom called Saṅkāśya (present-day Farrukhabad), a place (according to Buddhist legend) where Buddha descended from Trāyastriṃśa heaven. Faxian reported that King Asoka constructed a *vihāra* above the steps where Buddha descended, featuring a standing image that measured sixteen cubits in height, placed in mid-flight. This king also built a pillar made of stone, approximately fifty cubits in height, and crowned a lion on the top at the end of the *vihāra*. Buddha's three-month stay in heaven and the consumption of the heavenly meal continued emitting a heavenly fragrance since his ascension, not like that of a common man. He rushed right away and bathed. Subsequently, a bathhouse was built in the same place which according to Faxian was still in situ during his journey. Faxian stated that when Buddha was on earth, stupas were constructed where he cut his hair and nails and the images of Buddha were instilled in the places where he sat and walked. He had seen topes built in all of these places when he visited this kingdom. At the meeting place where Sakra, Deva and Brahma greeted Buddha upon his descent from heaven, a tope was erected by them at this place. There may have been a thousand priests at this place all of whom obtained their meals from the shared store and engaged in their studies, with the majority belonging to the Mahayana and others to the Hinayana sects. In the place where they lived, a white-eared dragon served as the *dānapati* for them, ensuring plentiful yields and heavy rains for the land. There were no calamities and plagues in the kingdom that made the life of the monks easy and comfortable. Indicating to the natural phenomenon of the country, Faxian emphasized that:

The country is very productive, and the people are prosperous, and happy beyond comparison. When people of other countries come to it, they are exceedingly attentive to them all, and supply them with what they need.²¹

Faxian stated another *vihāra* known as 'the great heap', located fifty yojanas away from the earlier mentioned *vihāra*. A malevolent demon known as the great heap was converted

by Buddha. A *vihāra* was later constructed in this location. Along with hundred other smaller topes, this place also contained a tope devoted to the Buddha, where a spirit of kindness cleaned it and watered it without the need of human assistance. This place had a monastery, approximated by Faxian to house at least 600 or 700 monks. It was in this monastery that a Pratyeka Buddha consumed the fruit of *nirvana*.²² Despite the presence of vegetation in the surrounding area, the traveller reported that there was no inhabitant in this particular location.

Faxian stayed in the Dragon *Vihāra* until the end of the summer rest, and thereafter travelled south-east for seven *yojanas*, reaching Kanyākubja (Kanauj), a city on the bank of the Ganges.²³ The traveller reported that there were two monasteries in this place and the inmates of which were learners of the Hinayana. Then he headed six or seven *li* towards the west to another city located on the northern bank of the Ganges, a sacred place where Buddha preached the law among his disciples. He stated about a tope that was erected at this spot and it was there when they had visited the place.

After crossing the Ganges River, the pilgrim traveller headed southward for three *yojanas* and reached a village (forest?)²⁴, A-le. The landscape of this village includes locations where Buddha preached the law, sat and walked, all of which had topes erected over them. Faxian advanced from A-le to the lower east for three *yojanas* and arrived at a sacred kingdom, Sha-che (Kasi). He recounted a miraculous story about the Buddha. In this story, the Buddha chewed a willow branch and attached it in the soil. Immediately, the branch rose seven cubits, an altitude it persisted at, neither growing nor decreasing. The Brahmans were enraged and envious due to their opposing beliefs. No matter what they did, cutting down the tree or picking it up and throwing it away, the tree always came back in the same spot.

Faxian moved south for eight *yojanas* and arrived at a city named She-wei (Śrāvastī) in the kingdom of Kośala²⁵, in which the density rate was very low. The traveller described a *vihāra* that Sudatta, the leader of the local *vaṛṣya*, had built

to the city gate in the south. He provided a vivid depiction of the scenic natural landscape embedded with the *vihāra*.

When the door was open, on each side of it there was a stone pillar, with the figure of a wheel on the top of that on the left and the figure of an ox on the top of that on the right. On the left and right of the building, the ponds of water clear and pure, the thickets of trees always luxuriant, and the numerous flowers of various hues constituted a lovely scene, the whole forming what is called the Jetavana *Vihāra*.²⁶

The pilgrim traveller reported that Jetavāna *Vihāra* was initially a structure of 7 stories. The monarchs and inhabitants of the kingdoms nearby competed with each other in their offerings, sprinkling flowers, burning incense, lighting lamps and hanging silken streamers and canopies around it to turn the night-time as sunny as the day. According to Faxian, a rat caused the collapse of the entire seven-storied structure of this magnificent *vihāra*. The reconstruction of this *vihāra* was made possible by the king, his officials and the people who lived there. Upon arriving at the Jetāvana Monastery, Fa-xian and Tao-ching had painful thoughts in their minds about how Buddha had been there for twenty-five years.

The pilgrim traveller reported another *vihāra* that was located six or seven li north-east from the Jetāvana, constructed by a female disciple of Buddha named Vaiśākha. After approaching fifty li to the west, Faxian reached a city named Too-wei (Sahet Mahet of the Terai region in Uttar Pradesh). Kāśyapa Buddha was born here. He travelled southeast for twelve yojanas from the city of Śrāvastī to the city of Na-pei-ked²⁷, where Krakuchanda Buddha was born. Around a yojana journey from here to the north, they arrived at a city where Kanakamuni Buddha was born. In these places, where they met with their fathers, and at the place where they attained *pari-nirvana*, *vihāras* were built.

The travellers then journeyed towards the east for around a yojana and arrived at the town of Kapilavastu²⁸, the most sacred landscape of Buddhism in India, which he described as in a state of desolation and mounds. The traveller reported that it had no king and very few inhabitants. Faxian provided a brief description of the father (King Shuddodana) and

mother of the Sakyamani, and his coming to the womb of the latter. He mentioned Lumbini, a garden located fifty li east of the city, where Sakyamani's mother, the queen, bathed in a pond. The traveller described how Buddha was born.

Having come forth from the pond on the northern bank, after walking twenty paces, she lifted her hand, laid hold of a branch of a tree (Sala), and, with her face to the east, gave birth to the heir-apparent.²⁹

The traveller continued that when the Buddha descended on the earth, he marched seven steps. Two dragon kings arrived and cleaned the body of the infant Buddha. At the place where they did the act, a well was immediately built, and the monks bathed and sipped the water from the well as well as from the tank where the mother of Sakyamani bathed. Faxian reported four places that were universally determined for them in the history of all Buddhas.

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Places

- 1** The place for attaining supreme wisdom;
- 2** The place for turning the wheel of the law;
- 3** The place for reasoning and refuting non-Buddhists views;
- 4** The place of return from the Trāyastriṃśa heaven to explain the law to their mothers;

The pilgrim traveller has concluded his depiction of the sacred city of Kapilavastu, including its natural landscape and the dangers posed by some wild animals.

The country of Kapilavastu is now a great desert, you seldom meet any people on the roads, for they are much in dread of the white elephants and the lions (which frequent the neighbourhood), and render it impossible to travel negligently.³⁰

The next kingdom the traveller visited from the birthplace of Buddha was Lan-mo (Rāmagrāma), which is located around five yojonas east from Kapilavastu. Faxian reported that the local monarch constructed a stupa named 'Rama' with a portion of the Buddha's relics that he obtained.³¹ He also mentioned that King Asoka intended to demolish the eight topes erected over the relics and instead wished for the construction of 84,000 topes. When he had demolished the

seven and intended to break the remaining one, at that time the dragon revealed itself. The King changed his mind and decided not to destroy it. The surrounding field became overgrown with vegetation and a group of elephants arrived regularly bringing water with their trunks to irrigate the field.

After travelling east for around sixteen yojanas, they arrived at Kuśinagara, a town with very low density. On the bank of the Hiranyavati River³², just north of town, between two trees, was the spot where Buddha died with his head facing north and attained *pari-nirvana*. From this city, he and his fellow companions arrived in the kingdom of Vaiśālī³³ after travelling around ten yojanas. In the north of the city, he stated, was a vast forest containing the double-galleried *vihāra*, the dwelling place of the Buddha. According to Faxian, Buddha may have lived as well in the garden that Ambapali gave him three li south of the city. As Buddha was leaving the city through the west gate on his way to *pari-nirvana*, he turned back and addressed the people on his right side, “In this place I have performed the last religious act of my earthly career.” Thereafter, the inhabitants constructed a tope at the same location.

Faxian approached towards the east for four yojanas from this place and arrived at the confluence of five rivers. The traveller narrated that while Ananda journeyed to Vaiśālī from Magadha, he desired his *pari-nirvana* to happen at this place. King Ajatasatru and the Lichchhavis of Vaiśālī were involved in a conflict over *pari-nirvana* of Ananda. The latter burned his body in the middle of the river and divided it into two and left half on each side of the river so that each claimant monarch could take one moiety as a sacred relic and build a tope over it in his capital.

The pilgrim traveller crossed the river and headed south for a yojana till they reached a town named Pa-lin-fou (Patna) in the kingdom of Magadha, where Ashoka was the ruler. According to Faxian, there was a younger brother of the King who lived on Gridhrakūta hill and became an *Arhat*. Ashoka invited him to return and offered to care for his every need so that he could enjoy solitude and quiet. Ashoka urged his brother, “Accept my invitation, and I will make a hill for you

inside the city.” Faxian reported a very interesting story about the construction of that hill.

Accordingly, he provided the materials of a feast, called to him the spirits, and announced to them, tomorrow you will all receive my invitation; but as there are no mats for you to sit on, let each one bring (his own seat). Next day the spirits came, each one bringing with him a great rock, (like) a wall, four or five paces square, (for a seat). When their sitting was over, the king made them form a hill with the large stones piled on one another.³⁴

Moreover, the pilgrim traveller has portrayed this city as the paramount of all in the Madhya Desa (Middle Kingdom). He concluded his descriptions of Ashoka and Pāṭaliputra with an overview of a sacred place associated with Buddha. As mentioned earlier, he destroyed seven to erect eighty-four thousand topes. The earliest was located almost three kilometres south of this city. In front of this, a *vihāra* was built by him on Buddha’s footprint. Some 309 or 400 paces north from the tope, King Ashoka built a city named Ne-le³⁵. The pilgrims journeyed southeast from Ne-le for nine yojanas and reached a tiny, isolated rock-strewn hill, the site where Buddha meditated. A yojana from this location led him to the Nala (Nalanda) and another yojana to the west led the pilgrim travellers to New Rājagṛha, another city constructed by King Ajātāśatru. The King erected a gigantic stupa over part of the relics of the Buddha that he obtained from the west gate of this city. Faxian described that departing from the city by the southern gate and travelling south for four li leads to a valley that features a circular area surrounded by five hills. The ancient city of King Bimbisāra was located here. It measured approximately five or six li from east to west and seven or eight li from north to south.

Faxian entered the valley and proceeded over the south-eastern slopes for 15 li until he reached Mount Gridhrakuta, adjacent to the city of Rājagṛha. He stated that a cavern existed in the rocks 3 li, before the summit. It was the location where all four Buddhas meditated. There was another place, thirty steps to the north-west, where Ananda meditated. Taking the posture of a big vulture, the Deva Mara Pisuna seized the entrance of the cave and frightened the

devotees of the Buddha. Then, exercising his supernatural powers, Buddha carved a cleft in the rock. The footprints of the bird and the cleft left by Buddha's hand were still visible to Faxian, the hill thus known to all as "the hill of the vulture cavern." Among the five hills, this one stands highest, with a green and beautiful summit. He stated; "I, Fa-hien, was born when I could not meet with Buddha, and now I only see the footprints which he has left and the place where he lived, and nothing more."

Leaving the ancient city and approaching for around 300 paces, the pilgrim traveller found the Kalanda Bamboo Garden, where the Kalandavenouvana *Vihāra*³⁶ was then in situ with a number of monks who kept the earth cleaned and watered. Faxian, along with his fellows, trekked along the mountain towards the south for 300 paces and encountered a residence in the hills titled 'the Pippala Cave', a sacred place in Buddhism where Buddha sat regularly for meditation. Continuing westward for five or six li, they discovered the Srataparma Cavern located in the shade to the north of the hill. There were several rock-cut compartments around the hillside where the different Arhats used to sit and meditate.

Faxian reported arriving in Gayā³⁷ after journeying west for four yojanas. He described the inside of the city as empty and desolate. They continued south for another twenty li till they reached the spot where the Bodhisattva had lived during his six years of self-imposed austerities. The natural setting was a dense and vastly forested territory. Three leagues west from here, he arrived at a site where Buddha bathed, and a deva helped Buddha exit the pool by bending a tree branch. Four li further north, Buddha sat on a rock under a big tree and ate gruel. There, Faxian saw both the tree and rock. The traveller commented on the balanced cold and heat, as well as the longevity of the trees. "In Central India, the cold and heat are so equally tempered that trees will live in it for several thousand and even for ten thousand years."

From here, Faxian arrived at Gurupada, a mountain where Mahakaśyapa meditated, located in present-day Bihar. He stated that this mountainous area had many hazel trees and ferocious animals. He forbade the people from travelling

carelessly lest they become the prey of lions, tigers, and wolves. Faxian afterward returned to Pāṭaliputra, taking a westward journey along the Ganges. He reached a *vihāra* called ‘the wilderness’ which was the dwelling place of Buddha. Continuing along the same route westward, he reached the city of Vārāṇasī (Po-lo-nai) in Kasi after travelling twelve *yojanas*. Faxian narrates that thirteen *yojanas* north-west from this *vihāra* and ten *li* away from the city of Vārāṇasī, there is a kingdom named Kauśāmbī (present-day Uttar Pradesh). In this kingdom, there is a *vihāra* named Ghochiravaṇa (the garden of Gochira), a place where Buddha formerly dwelt. The next kingdom the traveller visited after travelling 200 *yojanas* south was Ta-Thsin (Dakshina-Deccan) which was carved out from an enormous hill of rock. The traveller visited the famous pigeon monastery in this country and categorised it into five levels, corresponding to the names of a few animals: elephant, lion, horse, ox and pigeon. He described the landscape of this country as a territory of unploughed hillocks, having no residents. A long way from the hill, there were villages full of people with incorrect doctrines. Faxian provided a cautious message regarding the pilgrimage to the kingdom of Dakshina which, according to him, could be arduous and risky.

The pilgrim traveller returned east to Pataliputra. He intended to collect copies of *Vinaya*. His failure to retrieve any written copy from the various kingdoms of North India forced him to travel further to Central India. Here he was successful in obtaining several copies of Buddhist texts as follows.

1. A manuscript on *vinaya*, containing the *Mahasanghika* rules written while Buddha was alive in the Mahayana Monastery. The original copy was handed down in the Jetavana *vihāra*.
2. A transcript of the rules contained in six or seven thousand *gāthās*, specifically the *sarvāstivāda* rules.
3. The *Samyuktābhi-dharma-hrīdaya* (*śāstra*) contains around six or seven thousand *gāthās*.
4. A Sutra of 2500 *gāthās*, a chapter of the *Parinir-vana-vaipulya Sutra* with around 5000 *gāthās*, and the *Mahasanghikah Abhidharma*.

As a result of his success in the acquisition of such rare and historically significant religious texts, Faxian decided to reside here for another three years, studying Sanskrit texts and language while reproducing the *Vinaya* rules. Journeying along the course of the Ganges and proceeding eastward for eighteen *yojanas*, he reached the famous kingdom of Champā³⁸ on the southern shore. Several *topes* were erected around the *vihāra* where Buddha sat with his three predecessors and walked in meditation. Faxian further continued his travel towards the east for fifty *yojanas* and arrived at a seaport in the country of Tāmraliptī.³⁹ He mentioned that there were twenty-two monasteries in this country and he had seen monks reside in each of them. The pilgrim observed that the law of Buddha thrived in this region of the eastern frontier. He resided in Tāmraliptī for two years; during which time he authored his *sutras* and drew pictures of images.

Faxian then boarded a big merchant vessel and approached towards south-west across the sea. He stated that his sea voyage happened at the beginning of winter, a time when winds remained favorable. In fourteen days, they arrived in Singhala, sailing day and night. This kingdom was approximately 700 *yojanas* away from Tāmraliptī. The kingdom covered a large island, measuring fifty *yojanas* from east to west and thirty *yojanas* from north to south. To the left and right, there existed around 100 tiny islands separated by distances of ten, twenty, or even two hundred *li*; yet, all inhabitants dwelt on the single huge island.

A Land of Devout Buddhists: Faxian in Ceylon

The traveller reported that the climate of Ceylon was temperate and attractive, having no difference in summer and winter. The vegetation was abundant, and inhabitants could do cultivation at their discretion, as there were no set seasons for it. Unlike his previous experiences, the towns, people, mountains, valleys, plants and trees he had seen in this region were different. Buddha arrived in this country intending to incorporate supernatural powers to transform the wicked *nagas*. The monarch built an elaborately decorated huge stupa of 400 cubits in height over the imprint of Buddha in the northern part of the city. He also constructed a

monastery named Abhayagiri⁴⁰, located adjacent to the tope. According to the travellers' account, the tooth of the Buddha was enshrined in the city of Anurādhapura (ancient capital), where the said monastery was located. The relic was housed in the monastery and worshipped as a sacred object of immense sanctity and veneration. Every year, the king and the inhabitants of the city held a grand festival to honour the relic, illustrating its religious importance. Again, Faxian reported the presence of another *vihāra*, Chaitya, in the hilly region of the country of Ceylon. It was located approximately forty li to the east of the Abhayagiri *Vihāra* where he observed roughly 2000 monks. The last *vihāra* Faxian mentioned was the *Maha-vihāra* located seven li away from the city in the South. Faxian lived in the country for two years and was successful in accumulating several copies of sacred texts of Buddhism. He compiled copies of the *Vinaya-pitaka* of the *Mahisasakah* (school); the *Dirghagama* and *Samyuktagama* (*Sutras*); and also the *Samyukta-sanchaya-pitaka*.

Disastrous Passage to Java: Faxian in Southeast Asia

Faxian sailed towards the east along with 200 other men on a huge merchant vessel, accompanied by the Sanskrit texts that he gathered from South Asia. The description of Faxian's trip to China and Southeast Asia covers nearly every facet of the dangers he had encountered. The vessel leaked and the water started to pour inside the boat. The merchants felt that they were in imminent danger of dying and they started throwing their bulky items into the ocean to lessen the weight of the vessel. Faxian prayed, worried that the traders would throw his books and pictures overboard; "I have travelled far in search of our law. Let me, by your dread and supernatural power, return from my wanderings and reach my resting place!"

They continued on this route for almost 90 days till they reached Java-dvīpa, an area where Brahmanism and all kinds of unlawful practices were very popular but Buddhism was completely non-existent. Residing there for five months, Faxian boarded another huge merchantman in pursuit of Kwang-chow (present-day China).

Conclusion:

A definitive conclusion can be drawn based on the findings that *Foguoji*, as an authentic and unparalleled travelogue, sheds light on the several unknown and speculative pasts of early South Asia. Faxian's erudite and scholarly perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of historical-geographical units, overland and maritime connectivity within the subcontinent and beyond, as well as the mountains, rivers, floras and faunas of 5th century South Asia. Besides, it serves as an invaluable record of Buddha and Buddhism. He had traveled to almost all of the major sacred sites related to Buddha and Buddhism and accentuated the profound spiritual significance of these sites. This research reflected, through his pilgrimage journey, on the monastic communities, the *vihāras* and the sacred spaces that constituted the pillar of Buddhist life and rituals. The account of this celebrated Buddhist monk, owing to its merit, continues to be an invaluable resource for the history of Buddhism as well as the broader cultural and environmental history of South Asia. Although Faxian is neither a historian nor does his story follow historical methods, historians could find this source to be exemplary, despite the differences in translations of *Foguoji*. The author admits that this study has some limitations in methodology and that there may still be some wrong interpretations. Nevertheless, there is ample scope for a comparative in-depth investigation of the issues described by Faxian and other contemporary and later-day Chinese pilgrims.

Notes and References

- 1 J. W. M'Crindle, "Fā-Hien's Travels in India," *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, 3, no. 1 (1887), pp. 25-26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702548708554975>.
- 2 Eitel and others refers to Darada, the region near Dardus. Ernest John Eitel, *Handbook of Chinese Buddhism being Sanskrit-Chinese Dictionary: with Vocabularies of Buddhist Terms in Pali, Singhalese, Siamese, Burmese, Tibetan, Mongolian and Japanese*, (London: Trübner & Co., 1992); Alexander Cunningham, *The Ancient Geography of India*, (London: Trübner & Co., 1871), p. 18.

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- 3 An ancient kingdom and city on the southern bank of the Cabul River, close to Jallalabad also mentioned by Xuang Zang as Na-kie-lo-ho-lo. Samuel Beal, *Travels of Fah-Hian and Sung-Yun, Buddhist pilgrims: from China to India (400 AD and 518 AD)*, (London: Trübner & Co., 1869), p. 28.
 - 4 Soo-ho-to has not been distinctly identified. Beal thinks that it must have been situated between the river Indus and the Swat. S. Beal, p. 26; Legge suggests that it was what we now refer to as Swastene. James Legge, *A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms being an Account by the Chinese Monk Fa-Hien of His Travels in India and Ceylon (AD 399-414)*, (Delhi: Oriental Publishers, 1886), p.30.
 - 5 Alexander Cunningham identified it to be located at the site of Arrian's Taxila, in the upper Punjab, between the Indus and Jhelum. Alexander Cunningham, p. 9. On the contrary Legge referred to it as the city of Takshasila on the western bank of Indus. James Legge, p. 29.
 - 6 Sarita Khettry, "History of Buddhism in Gandhāra: A Relook at Material Remains," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 70 (2009), p. 78.
 - 7 Cunningham identified it near Shah-deri, 12 miles southeast from Hassan-Abdal. Alexander Cunningham, pp. 104-110.
 - 8 Nephew of Buddha.
 - 9 Samuel Beal, p. 34.
 - 10 Legge is uncertain about the exact length of a *yojana*, an Indian unit of measurement. He estimates the length ranges from four and a half to seven miles or more. James Legge, p. 36.
 - 11 Gosh, B. "Buddha Dipankara Twenty fourth Predecessor of Gautama." *Bulletin of Tibetology*, 2 (1987), pp. 33-38.
 - 12 H. A. Giles, *The Travels of Fa-hsien (399-414 AD), or Record of the Buddhistic Kingdoms*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1923), pp. 17-18.
 - 13 Most likely, the Safeid Koh is on its way to the Kohat fias.
 - 14 This term refers to a part of Afghanistan. James Legge, p. 41.
 - 15 Alexander Cunningham identified it with the Banagara of Ptolemy, which he places in the extreme north of Indo-Scythia and to the south-east of Nagara, or Jalâlâbâd. Alexander Cunningham, p. 86.
 - 16 Beal emphasized Mathoura, near Delhi. Samuel Beal, p. 53.
 - 17 Jamuna/Yamuna, tributary of the Ganges.
 - 18 Anne Cheng. "Central India Is What Is Called the Middle Kingdom." in *Records, Recoveries, Remnants and Inter-Asian Interconnections: Decoding Cultural Heritage*, ed by Anjana Sharma, (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2018), pp. 141-159. <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789814786423-009>.
 - 19 1 mile is equivalent to 6 *li*.
 - 20 Samuel Beal, p. 61.
 - 21 James Legge, p. 52.

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- 22 Samuel Beal, p. 69.
 - 23 This historical city was famous for being the capital of several empires based on North India. The name itself is stated to be a corruption of Kanya Kubja or the humped-backed maiden. S. Beal, p. 71.
 - 24 Beal interprets it as a forest, while Legge as a village.
 - 25 It was evidently the capital of Kosala, part of present-day Lucknow. A venerated city in Buddhism where Sakyamuni spent many years of his life after he became Buddha. James Legge, p. 55.
 - 26 James Legge, p. 56.
 - 27 Identification uncertain.
 - 28 The birthplace of Buddha, located on the bank of river Rohini few KM away from Gorakhpur. K.M. Srivastava, "Kapilavastu and Its Precise Location." *East and West*, 29, no. 1/4 (1979), pp. 61–74.
 - 29 James Legge, p. 67; J. Duncan M. Derrett, "Homer in India: The Birth of the Buddha," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 2, no. 1 (1992), pp. 47–57.
 - 30 Samuel Beal, p. 88
 - 31 The relics of Buddha after his cremation were divided into eight parts, and one part given to each of the eight claimants. S. Beal, p. 90.
 - 32 Identical with the little Gandak River. S. Beal, p. 94.
 - 33 Alexander Cunningham identified this famous city as located north of Patna, Besarh in Bihar. Alexander Cunningham, p. 192.
 - 34 James Legge, p. 78.
 - 35 Identification uncertain.
 - 36 Located near Rajgir (ancient Rājagṛha) in the kingdom of Magadha.
 - 37 The sacred town of Gaya popularly known as Buddha Gaya, located on the west of River Phalgou. Samuel Beal, p. 121.
 - 38 Champa (Tehen-po) was the ancient capital of Angadesa. It corresponds with present-day Bhagalpura. Samuel Beal, p. 147.
 - 39 Present-day Tamluk, close to the mouth of the Hoogly River. Tansen Sen, "The Travel Records of Chinese Pilgrims Faxian, Xuanzang, and Yijing; Sources for Cross-cultural Encounters between Ancient China and Ancient India," *Education about Asia*, 11, 3, (2006), p. 26.
 - 40 This convent was built by King Welagambahu in 89 CE. George Turnour, *An Epitome of the History of Ceylon, Compiled from Native Annals: and the First Twenty Chapters of the Mahawanso*, (Oxford: Cotta Church Mission Press, 1836), p. 19.