

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Maitreya is a unique figure among the Buddhist pantheon who combines the nature of both Buddha and Bodhisattva. He is supposed to be passing the life of a Bodhisattva in Tushita realm in preparation for his descent on the earth in human form in distant future(1). He is regarded as a Buddhist messiah and all Buddhists in a theoretical sense look forward to his coming. Unlike other Bodhisattvas of Mahāyāna Buddhism, Maitreya is the only one who is worshiped by both Hīnayāna and Mahāyāna Buddhist. In other words, he is the only Mānushi Bodhisattva whose origin differs from the Dhyāni Bodhisattvas. In the Northern Buddhist countries especially in China, Korea and Japan, Maitreya seems to have been revered more than the Śākyamuni Buddha himself. In the Hīnayāna countries, like Ceylon, Burma and Siam, too, Maitreya is worshipped and his image is found accompanying the Śākyamuni Buddha(2).

Various literary references indicate that the cult of Maitreya first began in India among the Hīnayāna circle, for his name is found in Hīnayāna scriptures. It has been generally believed that Maitreya cult began in India around the second century B.C. with the influence of Iranian Zoroastrianism(3). The images of Maitreya are found from

the very beginning of Mathura and Gandhara school of Buddhist art, and continued right up to the end of the Pala-Sena period when Buddhism disappeared from major parts of India(4).

Despite the importance of Maitreya, whose cultic relevance persisted throughout the Buddhist period of Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna and Tantrayana, which is testified by a large number of Maitreya images, the study of Maitreya cult and art seems to have received very little attention from scholars of Buddhist religion and art.

So far, the information available on this subject is rather fragmentary. Foucher, Waddel, Grunwedel, B. Bhattacharyya, Getty, Gordon and Bhattasali are some of important scholars who considered the Maitreya cult and iconography in certain detail. None of them, however, made the study of Maitreya a single independent subject, but have treated it as part of the iconographical study concerning all the Buddhist deities of the late Tantric period. These studies can be seen as based mainly on two factors, firstly on the basis of the textual descriptions found in Tantric texts, and secondly on the sculptural evidences which have inscriptions indicating the identity of the deity. Such instances largely hail from China(5). Nearly a century ago, A. Foucher studied Buddhist art of India and made an iconographic study of the Buddhist pantheon by bringing to light a good number of sādhanas(6), and Waddel contributed a great deal in elucidating Buddhist iconography(7). B.

Bhattacharyya made a comprehensive study of Buddhist pantheon in his book *Indian Buddhist Iconography*, based on the Sāddhanāmālā and Nishpanna-yogāvalī. Bhattasali demonstrated how to apply such textual description in order to justify the identification of sculptural works(8).

The works of Grunwedel, Getty and Gordon contain a lot of useful information for the student of Buddhist iconography, since their studies are based on sculptural materials. The limitations, however, are apparent considering the limited material available during their time, and hence some of their view points no longer hold valid. Grunwedel deals only with limited sculptural material deriving mainly from the region of Gandhara(9). while Getty's work is almost entirely based on materials collected in the Northern Buddhist countries(10), and Gordon deals with materials from Tibet(11). Besides these there are scholars, like A. Soper(12), Conze(13) and Rosenfield(13), who have contributed to the study of the cult of Maitreya, and there are still more scholars who have studied the individual images of Maitreya.

The article 'Ikönographie des Chinesischen Maitreya' by Max Wagner, published in 1929 may be the first study totally devoted to the iconography of Maitreya. The work is depended upon the inscribed image of Maitreya from China, but little concerned about the Maitreya images from India. His views, despite serious drawbacks, particularly from the Indian perspective, seems to have considerably influenced

the later scholars, in the identification of Maitreya images not only of China but also those of Indian origin.

Another attempt in the study of Maitreya in China was made by Yu-min Lee in her research on 'The Maitreya Cult and its Art in Early China'. Understandably, in this work Lee gives a brief note on the Maitreya images of India based on the well known examples of Maitreya images from the Kushana period.

Apart from the two works mentioned above which deal with the Chinese images of Maitreya, until now no work has been undertaken with regard to the study of the cult and art of Maitreya exclusively in the Indian context; while other deities such as Avalokitesvara and Mañjuśrī have been studied intensively by de Mallmann(15). The necessity and relevance of the study of Maitreya cult and iconography become obvious since the achievements of previous scholarship in the area concerned by no means are exhaustive. The problems confronted by the researcher while setting out to study Maitreya cult and iconography are many. First and foremost is the question related to the origin of the concept of Maitreya.

Right at the outset one may still question the theory that proposes the B.C. second century ^{to be the} origin of Maitreya cult and as derived from the Avestan ideal of the Sashayant(16). The supposedly important concept of the paradise in Maitreya cult itself require to be reinterpreted strictly in Buddhist terms. Such theories lead us to

extraordinary complex issues and one often ends up rather hypothetically at a number of unsolved historical and theological premises. However, an attempt is made herewith to tackle such problematics.

The iconographical features of Maitreya proposed by the previous scholars particularly need to be reexamined in the light of the increased archaeological finds. It has been realized that often it becomes difficult to read the iconography of Maitreya within the defined boundaries proposed by the previous scholars. Overwhelming number of mis-identified or unidentified images of Maitreya in various museums as well as in situ further complicate any extensive study of Maitreya iconography while taking into consideration all the relevant data.

According to previous scholarship the notable cognizances of Maitreya are: the stūpa in his headdress; the hair arrangements in the 'Two-looped' style, jaṭāmukuta or kiriṭāmukuta, and long hair falling on the shoulders; the Bodhisattva garments with the scarf worn along the waist and tied on the left side of the hip with ends falling till the feet; the attributes like the kamaṇḍalu (water vase)(17) or nāgakesara flower in the left hand; and the mudrās of all types in right hand. Considering the diverse sculptural representation of Maitreya, one may wonder how far those facile descriptions can be of help in actual identification of images. There are also a few specific attitudes that have been particularly related to the Maitreya images; i.e.,

the so called 'contemplating attitude', the 'cross-ankled attitude', the 'pralambapādāsana with dharmacakra pravartana mudrā', and the 'crowned Buddha'.

We must, however, be cautious while generalizing too hastily, since the identification of Maitreya is by no means so simple and the representational features of Maitreya differ from one to the other, depending on the time and the place of their origin. Often, it is extremely difficult to distinguish Maitreya from other Bodhisattvas, since the above iconographical traits are also associated with other Buddhist divinities. Many of them do not necessarily indicate the image being Maitreya. For instance, the stūpa which is supposed to be on the forehead of the Maitreya images is not found in the Gandharan examples and is also an iconographical indication of other Bodhisattvas such as Vajrapani, Mahasthamaprabhata, and Padmapani Avalokiteśvara in other regions(18). The kamāṇḍalu which is considered to be one of the most characteristic attributes of Maitreya is neither fully reserved for Maitreya alone, nor appeared constantly as part of the Maitreya's iconographic programme. It is also held by Avalokiteśvara image in Western Indian cave temples and Lokeshvara-Avalokiteśvara images of Pala-Sena period. The Maitreya of Yogacara period invariably carries a nāgakesara flower instead of the kamāṇḍalu. He may wear ajina (antelope skin) on the left shoulder, while Avalokiteśvara image also has it in the Western Deccan(19). The scarf is not only worn by Maitreya alone, but is also

seen attributed to all other Bodhisattva image of Gandhara school. At the same time, Maitreya images of Mathura school and many of later schools do not exemplify this feature.

Another major problem in the iconographical study of the Bodhisattva Maitreya is the fact of insufficient textual sources. Available information from texts fails to explain the iconographical complexity of many images, especially those belonging to the early period. Confusion arises on account of the fact that the descriptions available in the text do not always tally with the iconographical details found in the images. The difficulties become further complicated due to the frequent variations of iconographical details that are described in the texts. Many of the different texts in fact gave altogether different versions of the iconography. For example, the iconographic forms of Maitreya is described in the Durgatiparisodhana-maṇḍala of the Nispanayogāvalī, thus: "Maitreya is yellow in colour. He holds in his right hand the flower of nāgakesara and with the left the mendicant bowl"(20). But in the Sādanāmālā he is described as, "Maitreya is yellow in colour and shows the naga flower and the varada mudrā"(21). At times, even the same text gives altogether different description for the same deity, for example the Nispanayogāvalī, from which we quoted one sādhana above, describes again: " Maitreya is of golden colour. With the two principal hands he displays the dharma-cakra pravartana mudrā. The other two hands show the varada mudrā in the right and the twig of a nāgakesara with

flower in the left"(22). We get here two different descriptions for the left hand of Maitreya: one holding the mendicant bowl and the other in varada mudrā. The third problem arises due to the common use of particular iconographical feature for different deities. The commonly seen mudrās like abhaya, varada etc. are shared by other Bodhisattvas too. The fourth problem is that there are hardly any images of Maitreya in India with inscription that indicate his identification.

Apart from the above problems, the stylistic variations that occur in the visual representation is a more serious one. The stūpa design seen on Maitreya's forehead, for example, exemplifies distinct variations in the sculptural representation. Quite often it is difficult to distinguish the stūpa design from other similar decorative motifs found on the crown. In the images of pre-Pala period, Maitreya's nāgakesara flower looks like lotus flower, which itself has many different varieties. In such circumstances the identification of different Bodhisattva images is very puzzling since they closely resemble one another. As a result the identification of Maitreya from among Bodhisattvas had not been always satisfactory.

The main aim of the present study is to bring out the evolutionary history of Maitreya cult and to emphasize the different phases of its iconographical evolution with due consideration to the specific geographical and historical context. Further, the study pursues the following

questions: What is the source of the origin of Maitreya concept? What was the nature of the Maitreya cult in early India? What was the role of the Maitreya cult in Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna and Yogācāra Buddhism? What are the meanings of the iconographic program of Maitreya in Indian art in relation to other Bodhisattvas? How should Maitreya image be understood iconographically? What are the different types of Maitreya iconography and what are the reasons for such variations?

This study follows the methodology of 'direct analysis' so as to overcome the insufficient literary evidence in explaining the various types of Maitreya. The different types of Bodhisattva images are grouped together by examining and differentiating the iconographic characteristics noted in the visual representation. The iconographical features of Maitreya is formulated by the positive discrimination; a method which employs a known counter-evidence to throw light upon a problematic identification. Such identifications are further confirmed by the established iconography of Maitreya images and the relevant literary evidence. This system proves to be more scientific and useful rather than depending upon confused Sādhanas that are obtained in Buddhist literature.

Further, the present study discards the preconceived notion that the iconography of the deity remained unchanged over the ages, and the forms and attributes have been invariably fixed at a particular point of time, as found in

the descriptions of the Buddhist texts. The sculptural evidence go much beyond the textual descriptions and help us^{in a} better understanding of the evolutionary nature of iconographical features. The study of the process of changes that occur in time and space possibly inform us of the differing socio-religious meanings as evolved at different centres of art.

In accordance with the specific purpose of this study, the whole Buddhist art tradition of India is divided into three phases: the early phase, consisting of Mathura and Gandhara schools, the mature phase consisting^{of} roughly three centuries, from the fifth to the eighth centuries A.D., and the later phase equivalent to the Tantric period, from the eight to the twelfth centuries A.D. Generally Indian art is divided into stylistic phases based on dynastic denominations, viz., Mauryan art, Kushana art, Gupta art, and so on. It implies that styles begin and end precipitously, which in reality represent phases in a continuous evolution. In the present work the chapters are made with main consideration of different phases of iconographic programme of Maitreya observed in the Buddhist art of India. The diversion, however, is by no means absolute but tentative. The early phase is constituted of the Mathura and Gandhara regions and does not follow the chronological limit of Kushana dynasty, but includes the sculpture even of the later date if it follows the stylistic and iconographical tradition of the Kushana schools. The

mature phase includes mainly Western Indian cave temples of Mahayana period from the middle of the fifth century to the end of the eighth century A.D. and Gupta Sarnath and other related sites. The later phase includes all the important Tantric Buddhist sites of Eastern India, Kashmir, and Tamilnadu.

In the second chapter, the origin and nature of Maitreya cult is studied within the context of available literary evidence. An attempt is made here to analyse the possible existence of the Maitreya concept at the time of the Buddha, which is much before the accepted date of his cult, i.e., the second century B.C. The supposedly valid relationship between the 'Maitri' of Indian and the 'Mitra' of Iranian deity is examined in detail. The nature of Maitreya cult is discussed and the myths related to Maitreya is summarized in this chapter.

The third chapter deals with the evolution of the Maitreya images at Kushana Mathura school. The main task of this chapter is to understand the basic nature of the Maitreya image making tradition that emerged in Mathura and the discussion inevitably revolves around the question of the origin of the specific iconographic elements of Maitreya and their symbolic meanings. The various technical issues regarding the identification of Maitreya images from among other Buddhist divinities are dealt within this chapter. The preference for Mathura school before that of Gandhara school is because of the observation that Mathura tradition shows a

rather natural development of Maitreya iconography, that goes back to the iconography of Yaksha of pre-Kushan period, compared to that of Gandhara.

The fourth chapter concerns itself with the Gandharan versions of Maitreya images. Various interpretations made by previous scholars on the iconography of Maitreya are studied in detail and further inquiries into the possibility of relevant alternative identification are attempted. The origin of Maitreya iconography, from the God Brahma, has been strongly questioned in this chapter and a new direction has been suggested. A special emphasis has been given to the most confusing distinction in identification that exists between Bodhisattva Siddhartha and Maitreya.

The fifth chapter discusses the mature phase of Maitreya cult and art that emerged during the fifth to eighth centuries A.D. There are number of variations in the Maitreya iconography during this time, which might have developed due to the modifications that were attempted upon the earlier traditions. The chapter concentrates upon the images which come down to us from Sarnath and all the Māhāyana Buddhist cave temples in Western Deccan. The artistic connection between the Gupta Sarnath and the early Western Deccan has been studied extensively to re-evaluate the origin of the so-called 'ascetic Bodhisattvas', Maitreya and Avalokitesvara. The socio-religious connection between one art centre to another is examined on the basis of the similarities in the iconographic features. In the same way

the chronology of each school has been considered with the help of stylistic comparison.

The sixth chapter deals with the Maitreya iconography during Yogacara period, from the seventh to the end of twelfth centuries A.D. The later phase of Bodhisattva iconography at Ellora is compared with the development in Eastern India, especially Orissa, and goes into a possible genealogical interpretation of new iconography of Tantric nature. Other major places included in this discussion are Kashmir, Bihar (Nalanda and Bodhgaya), Bengal, Orissa (Udayagiri, Ratnagiri and Lalitgiri), and Tamilnadu.

The seventh chapter focuses upon the specific theological, cultic, and iconographic attitudes that have been frequently regarded as specific to that of Maitreya. They are; the so-called 'contemplating Bodhisattva', 'crossed-ankled Bodhisattva', the Buddha in the pralamba-pādāsana with dharmacakra pravartana mudrā, and the so-called 'crowned Buddha'.

It is not out of place to mention here that the present study, however, does not claim to be exhaustive. Neither all the textual information of Maitreya have been collected nor every sculpture of Maitreya has been discussed.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 B. Bhattacharyya(1968), p. 80.; A. Getty(1914, 1928), p. 80.
- 2 A. Getty(1928), p. 22.
- 3 This matter is further discussed so as to seek the possibility of an earlier date for the origin of Maitreya cult, see Chapter II, pp. 17-27.
- 4 The period considered here is not absolute. The bronze images of Maitreya from Nagapattinam, Tamilnadu, datable from 13th to 15th century A.D., give us the evidence of the existence of Maitreya cult even after the proposed period. see V. Dehejia (1988), pp. 54-74.
- 5 Most of the Indian works of art do not have inscriptions to indicate the identification of deity or to date of work specifically. If dated, the crucial digit is often found missing; or possess some other obstacle in their interpretation, such as references to an unknown King or an era. Therefore, much attention has been paid to the Chinese source by scholars where the tradition of maintaining systematic records survived from the very early times.
- 6 The most important work of Foucher is his 'Etude sur l'Iconographie Bouddique de l'Inde', Paris, 1900-1905.
- 7 L.A. Wadell published Evolution of the Buddhist Cult; its Gods, Images and Art, and The Dharani Cult in Buddhism, its Origin, Deified Literature and Images, in 1912.
- 8 Bhattacharya studied both Buddhist and Brahmanical sculptures mainly from east Bengal presently in Bangladesh in his work Iconography

- of Buddhist and B̄rahmanical Sculptures in the Decca Museum, published in 1929.
- 9 Grunewadel published his well known book, Buddhistische Kunst in Indian, in 1900, and later on it has been translated to English by A. Gibson and revised by J. Burgess.
 - 10 Getty's works The Gods of Northern Buddhism first appeared in 1914 and a revised version was published in 1928.
 - 11 The Iconography of Tibetan Lamaism, 1939.
 - 12 Alexander Soper discussed cults and iconographic features of Buddhist deities in early China based on the legendary records from China. His work Literary Evidence for Early Buddhist Art in China was published in 1959, and the paper with the same title but specified to 'pseudo-foreign images' was published in 1953.
 - 13 Conze devoted a chapter on the detailed description of Maitreya's life in his Buddhist Scripture. pp. 238-242.
 - 14 Rosenfield's work, The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans, published in 1967 devotes a significant part to the study of Maitreya cult in early India.
 - 15 Mario-Therese de Mallmann; in her two voluminous publications Introduction a l'etude d' Avalokitesvara (1948), and Etude Iconographique sur Mañjuśrī (1964) has embodied the result of an intensive study on two of the Bodhisattvas, on the basis of texts and visual representations.
 - 16 The generally accepted theory of Maitreya cult is summarized by the words of Rosenfield, to cite here; "It may be correct to say that the Bodhisattva Maitreya was an adaptation of the Avestan ideal of the Saoshayant and his cult suffered with Mithraic

elements, but Indian images of the Bodhisattva made him an ornate Brahman-and this the Kushans accepted." Rosenfield(1965), p. 244

- 17 Sanskrit term for the water vase of Maitreya has been used variously, such as, Kalasa, Kuṇḍika and Kamaṇḍalu. Through out the present work, the kamaṇḍalu is used for the 'water vase' of Maitreya.

- 18 Grunewadel(1901), p. 185.

- 19 Gordon(1939), p. 60.

- 20 Nispaṇḍayogāvalī, ed. by B. Bhattacharyya, p. 66; and also his (1974), p. 94.

- 21 B. Bhattacharyya(1924), p. 94.

- 22 Ibid. p. 94.