

Monastic Orders and Religious Networks in Early Medieval Uttar Pradesh: Institutions, Patronage and Cultural Transformation, 600–1200 CE

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Abstract- *The period between approximately 600 and 1200 CE witnessed major transformations in the religious, political, economic, and cultural institutions of northern India. In the region corresponding broadly to present-day Uttar Pradesh, Buddhist monasteries, Jain religious establishments, and emerging Brahmanical and Hindu institutional centres participated in networks of patronage, education, ritual, landholding, and cultural transmission. This article examines monastic institutions not merely as centres of religious activity but as social and economic institutions embedded within wider regional networks. Focusing particularly on Sarnath, Kaushambi, and Kushinagar, it explores the relationship between monastic communities, political authority, economic resources, education, and changing patterns of religious patronage. The study employs an interdisciplinary historical approach combining archaeological, epigraphic, and textual evidence. It argues that the transformation of monastic institutions during the early medieval period cannot be explained simply as a linear decline of Buddhism and the rise of Brahmanical Hinduism. Rather, the period witnessed institutional adaptation, changing patterns of patronage, competition and interaction among religious communities, and the gradual reorganisation of sacred and economic landscapes. The article therefore places Uttar Pradesh within the wider history of early medieval Indian religious networks while emphasizing regional variation and institutional continuity.*

Index Terms—*Buddhist monasteries, Early Medieval India, Jainism, Religious networks, Uttar Pradesh.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The centuries between 600 and 1200 CE constitute a formative period in the making of early medieval Indian society. Political authority was reorganised across regional kingdoms, agrarian expansion altered patterns of settlement and resource control, and religious institutions increasingly became important participants in systems of patronage and cultural production. The proposed research on which this

article is based identifies Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu monastic institutions in Uttar Pradesh as important centres of education, economic management, social organisation, and religious life.[1] The proposal also emphasizes the need to combine archaeological, epigraphic, and textual evidence rather than treating religious history exclusively through doctrinal sources.[1] Uttar Pradesh provides a particularly productive geographical framework for examining these processes.

The region contains sites associated with some of the most important developments in the history of Buddhism, including Sarnath and Kushinagar, while Kaushambi connects religious history with urban and commercial networks. These locations were not isolated sacred spaces. They were situated within settlements, routes of movement, agrarian landscapes, political territories, and systems of patronage. Modern scholarship has increasingly challenged interpretations that portray early medieval India simply as a period of decline following the classical age. Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, for example, interprets the early medieval centuries through processes of regional transformation, political change, agrarian expansion, and the reorganisation of social and economic structures.[4] Upinder Singh similarly emphasizes the complexity of political, economic, and religious developments between the early historic and early medieval periods. [10] Such approaches make it possible to understand religious institutions as participants in broader processes of social transformation.

This article argues that monasteries and religious establishments should be understood as networked institutions. Their survival depended upon relationships with rulers, merchants, landholders, artisans, pilgrims, teachers, students, and lay

communities. At the same time, religious institutions helped create networks of their own by attracting people, circulating texts and ideas, organising ritual activity, and maintaining connections between different settlements.

II. HISTORIOGRAPHICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Older approaches to Indian religious history frequently relied heavily upon normative religious texts. While such texts remain indispensable, they cannot by themselves provide a complete picture of institutional life. Buddhist Vinaya literature, for instance, establishes rules governing monastic conduct and organisation, but archaeological and epigraphic evidence can reveal dimensions of institutional activity that normative texts do not fully describe. Gregory Schopen's influential archaeological and epigraphic studies have demonstrated the importance of moving beyond an idealised image of the Buddhist monk as detached from economic and social affairs. [9] Monks and monasteries could participate in donation, ritual, property management, and relationships with lay communities. Sukumar Dutt's earlier comprehensive study of Buddhist monks and monasteries similarly drew attention to the institutional development of the sangha and its contribution to Indian intellectual and cultural history. [7] More recent work has placed greater emphasis on the material and economic dimensions of monastic life.

Himanshu Prabha Ray's study of monastery-guild relationships, although focused principally on western India, provides a useful comparative framework for understanding how monasteries could become embedded in commercial and social networks. [8] Uma Chakravarti's analysis of early Buddhism is particularly useful for understanding the relationship between religious institutions and their surrounding society. Her study connects the sangha with political authority, economic activity, social stratification, householders, and systems of patronage. [3] Such approaches suggest that the institutional history of religion cannot be separated from the history of society and economy. For Jainism, Paul Dundas and John E. Cort demonstrate the importance of examining Jain religious communities through their social

organisation, sectarian traditions, patronage systems, and relationships with lay society. [5], [6] Their work cautions against treating Jainism merely as a philosophical tradition and instead highlights the institutional structures through which Jain communities reproduced themselves.

The study of Hindu institutions also requires attention to material and institutional evidence. Michael Willis's archaeological study of Hindu ritual demonstrates how temples, land, ritual, and political authority could become interconnected.[11] This does not mean that every Hindu religious establishment should be equated with a Buddhist monastery. Rather, it suggests that the early medieval religious landscape was characterised by multiple forms of institutional organisation.

III. MONASTIC INSTITUTIONS AND REGIONAL NETWORKS

A central feature of early medieval monasticism was its dependence upon networks extending beyond the physical boundaries of the monastery. Religious establishments required food, clothing, buildings, ritual objects, manuscripts, labour, and financial or landed resources. Such requirements necessarily brought monks and religious specialists into contact with lay communities and political authorities. Schopen's work is particularly important here because it challenges the assumption that Buddhist monastic communities existed outside ordinary economic life.[9] Evidence from inscriptions and archaeological remains indicates that monasteries could possess or administer resources and could participate in systems of donation. This does not mean that all monasteries functioned as large economic corporations, but it does establish that institutional Buddhism had material foundations.

The same analytical principle can be extended to Uttar Pradesh. Sarnath, Kaushambi, and Kushinagar should be examined not simply as individual archaeological sites but as nodes within wider networks. The research proposal specifically identifies these sites as important locations for studying monastic institutions and their relationship with political, economic, and cultural processes.[1] Kaushambi is particularly significant because of its long history as an urban centre. Its location within the middle Ganga region connected

religious activity with movement, exchange, and settlement. A network perspective therefore allows the historian to ask not only what existed inside a monastery but also who connected the monastery to the surrounding world. Sarnath offers a different institutional profile. Its importance derived primarily from its association with the Buddha's first sermon and the establishment of the Buddhist monastic community.

Frederick M. Asher's critical history of Sarnath emphasizes that excavations revealed temples, monastic dwellings, stupas, sculptures, and other material remains.[2] The archaeological landscape consequently provides evidence for the institutionalisation of a sacred site over a long period. The significance of Sarnath therefore cannot be reduced to its symbolic association with the Buddha. Its historical importance lay partly in its continuing ability to function as a centre of pilgrimage, ritual, artistic production, and monastic activity. Archaeological evidence also demonstrates that institutional landscapes changed over time rather than remaining fixed. Kushinagar provides another important case. Its association with the Buddha's parinirvana gave it exceptional sacred significance. Yet the historical study of Kushinagar must distinguish between the symbolic importance of the site and the changing institutional arrangements through which that importance was maintained.

The existence of sacred monuments did not automatically imply uninterrupted monastic prosperity. Instead, institutional continuity depended upon political conditions, patronage, pilgrimage, and the maintenance of religious communities.

IV. PATRONAGE, LAND AND POLITICAL AUTHORITY

Patronage formed one of the most important connections between religious institutions and political society. Kings and other elites could support religious establishments through donations, construction, grants, protection, and ceremonial recognition. Religious institutions, in turn, could contribute to political legitimacy by providing sacred authority, ritual services, learning, and ideological resources. The relationship should not, however, be

understood as a simple exchange between a powerful king and a passive religious institution. Religious communities possessed their own institutional interests, traditions, and networks. Chakravarti's analysis of the relationship between kingship and the Buddhist sangha illustrates the complexity of royal patronage: political authority and religious authority interacted without necessarily becoming identical.[3] The early medieval expansion of land grants further transformed the institutional landscape.

Land endowments could provide religious establishments with relatively stable sources of income and could integrate them into agrarian society. At the same time, such grants could alter relationships between cultivators, local elites, religious beneficiaries, and political authorities. The historiography of early medieval India has long debated the relationship between land grants and social transformation. Chattopadhyaya's work is particularly useful because it emphasises regional processes rather than assuming that one uniform model applied across India.[4] The implications for Uttar Pradesh are important: the changing fortunes of monasteries should be investigated in relation to local political and agrarian conditions rather than attributed automatically to a single religious cause.

V. EDUCATION AND CULTURAL TRANSMISSION

Religious institutions were also centres of knowledge. Monasteries provided spaces in which monks, teachers, students, scribes, and visiting scholars could interact. Buddhist institutions preserved and transmitted doctrinal literature, ritual knowledge, philosophical debates, languages, and artistic traditions. The educational role of monasteries therefore extended beyond formal religious instruction. The proposal underlying this article explicitly identifies education and cultural functions as a major research theme.[1] This dimension is significant because institutional decline cannot be measured solely through the construction or destruction of buildings. A monastery could lose political prominence while elements of its intellectual or ritual traditions continued elsewhere. Buddhist monasteries were particularly important in the

circulation of texts and ideas across regional boundaries.

Dutt's history of Buddhist monasticism demonstrates the importance of monastic communities as centres of learning and cultural production.[7] Schopen's archaeological approach complements this by demonstrating that intellectual and ritual activities were embedded within material institutions.[9] Religious institutions also contributed to artistic production. Sarnath became renowned for sculpture, particularly Buddhist images associated with the Gupta and post-Gupta periods. The combination of sacred geography, patronage, artistic workshops, and pilgrimage created an environment in which religious art could flourish. Asher's study of Sarnath shows why the site's archaeological remains must be considered together with its religious history.[2]

VI. JAIN AND HINDU INSTITUTIONAL NETWORKS

Although Buddhism receives considerable attention because of the importance of Sarnath and Kushinagar, the religious landscape of early medieval Uttar Pradesh was not exclusively Buddhist. Jain communities also participated in regional networks of monks, lay followers, merchants, patrons, and sacred places. Jain religious organisation depended upon relationships between ascetic communities and lay society. Cort's study demonstrates how Jain religious identity was maintained through institutional structures and relationships between ascetics and householders.[5] Dundas similarly stresses the historical development of Jain sects, scriptures, ritual systems, and community structures.[6] The growing visibility of Brahmanical and Hindu institutions should likewise not be interpreted simply as the disappearance of other religious traditions. The development of temples and other religious establishments involved processes of patronage, ritual innovation, landholding, and the localisation of religious authority.

Willis's study of Hindu ritual demonstrates the close relationship between temples, land, political authority, and the establishment of deities.[11] The early medieval religious landscape should therefore be understood as one of competition, coexistence,

adaptation, and institutional transformation. Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu establishments could occupy overlapping social and economic environments. Their histories were connected to changes in political authority, patronage, settlement patterns, and cultural practices.

VII. DECLINE, TRANSFORMATION AND CONTINUITY

One of the most difficult questions is the decline of Buddhism in northern India. Older narratives sometimes present this as a straightforward transition from Buddhist dominance to Brahmanical or Hindu dominance. Such an interpretation is increasingly inadequate. The archaeological record suggests variation across sites and periods. A major sacred centre could experience institutional contraction while retaining ritual significance. Conversely, religious traditions could survive by moving into new institutional or geographical contexts. The existence of decline at one location therefore cannot automatically demonstrate the disappearance of an entire religious tradition. The research proposal appropriately frames the issue in terms of "continuity and decline." [1] This formulation is preferable because it allows both processes to be examined simultaneously.

Several factors may have influenced Buddhist institutional decline: changing political patronage, alterations in trade and settlement patterns, transformations in agrarian organisation, competition among religious institutions, and changes in the distribution of resources. It would nevertheless be methodologically unsound to attribute decline to a single cause without site-specific evidence. The same principle applies to the rise of Hindu institutions. The growth of temples and mathas should not be interpreted solely as the result of an ideological replacement of Buddhism. Institutional forms could borrow, adapt, compete, and coexist. The religious landscape was therefore characterised by historical restructuring rather than simple substitution.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The history of monastic orders in early medieval Uttar Pradesh demonstrates that religious institutions were deeply embedded in the social, economic, political,

and cultural structures of their time. Buddhist monasteries, Jain establishments, and Hindu religious institutions were not isolated centres of worship. They formed relationships with rulers, merchants, landholders, artisans, pilgrims, teachers, and local communities. Sarnath, Kaushambi, and Kushinagar provide particularly valuable regional case studies. Sarnath illustrates the long-term development of a Buddhist sacred and monastic landscape; Kaushambi demonstrates the importance of urban and economic networks; and Kushinagar highlights the relationship between sacred memory, pilgrimage, and institutional continuity. Their histories also reveal why regional analysis is necessary. Religious institutions did not develop according to a single all-India pattern.

The evidence further suggests that the transformation of Buddhism between 600 and 1200 CE should not be described simply as a linear decline followed by Hindu replacement. Rather, the period witnessed changing patterns of patronage, institutional adaptation, economic reorganisation, sectarian interaction, and the redistribution of religious authority. Jain and Hindu institutions also developed within these changing environments and established their own networks of patronage, ritual, education, and cultural production. A multidisciplinary approach combining archaeology, epigraphy, and textual analysis is therefore essential. The proposal's emphasis on cross-verifying these categories of evidence is particularly appropriate because normative texts, inscriptions, and archaeological remains illuminate different aspects of institutional history.[1] Ultimately, the study of monastic orders in Uttar Pradesh contributes to a broader understanding of early medieval Indian society.

Religious institutions were simultaneously spiritual communities, centres of knowledge, participants in economic systems, custodians of cultural memory, and nodes within regional networks. Their transformation reveals not merely the changing fortunes of individual religions but the restructuring of society itself between the seventh and twelfth centuries.

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