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THE ORIGIN OF THE NANDAS

A great controversy has raged round the question of the origin of Nanda dynasty which ruled in Magadha when Alexander invaded the frontiers of India. According to the *Purāṇas Mahāpadma*, the founder of the Nanda dynasty, was a son of Mahānandin, grandson of Udāyin, by a *Śūdra* woman. The Jain *Parīśiṣṭaparvan*, on the other hand, represents Nanda as the son of a courtesan by a barber. The classical writers also represent the father of Nanda to have been a barber. Curtius has given a story explaining how Nanda, though son of a barber, became a powerful ruler.

The question naturally arises which of the two versions is true and how the wrong version originated. For a thorough scrutiny of this question we have to peep into the period preceding the rise of the Nanda dynasty.

The Nanda dynasty was preceded by the dynasties of Śiśunāga and Bimbisāra. Udāyin was a famous king of the dynasty of Bimbisāra according to all the authorities, Hindu, Buddhist and Jain. Udāyin's successors according to the *Purāṇas* were Nandivardhana and Mahānandin. On the other hand the Buddhist *Mahāvamsa* of Ceylon mentions Anuruddha, Muṇḍa and Nāgadāsaka as the successors of Udāyin. Since Nāgadāsaka is unknown to the entire Indian literature, Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist, we may reasonably conclude that he never ruled and his inclusion among the successors of Udāyin by the author of *Mahāvamsa* is based on wrong information. Thus Muṇḍa, who is mentioned in the *Anguttara Nikāya* and the *Divyāvadāna*, also, may be regarded as the last king of the dynasty of Bimbisāra. He and his father Anuruddha must be identified with the Purāṇic Mahānandin and Nandivardhana respectively because according to both the accounts they were the successors of Udāyin.

The Buddhist account of *Mahāvamsa* makes it clear that the last king of the dynasty of Bimbisāra was overthrown by a person named

Susunāga who usurped the throne of Magadha. In the lists of the *Purāṇas* Śiśunāga and his son Kākavarṇa precede the kings of the dynasty of Bimbisāra but the fact that Śiśunāga is said to have overthrown the Pradyota dynasty of Avantī makes it clear that some later editor has put the two lists in wrong sequence and that according to the original and correct version of the *Purāṇas* also Śiśunāga came to the throne after overthrowing the dynasty of Bimbisāra. This therefore means that Mahāpadma Nanda had to wait for long years before he could kill Kākavarṇa, the son of the usurper Śiśunāga, and assert his claim to the throne of Magadha as the son of the last king of the dynasty of Bimbisāra. According to Bāṇa Kākavarṇa had a dagger thrust into his throat in the vicinity of his city and the murderer was no doubt Nanda or a person appointed by him.

There is thus nothing suspicious or incredible in the *Purāṇic* account according to which Mahāpadma Nanda was an illegitimate son of Mahānandin, the last descendent of Bimbisāra. The question, however, still remains that if Mahāpadma was the son of Mahānandin, the last descendent of Bimbisāra, how he has been represented as the son of a barber by the classical and Jain writers.

We have already said that king Mahānandin of the *Purāṇas* must be identified with king Muṇḍa of the Buddhist accounts. It is quite likely that this king had two names, but of the two, the name Muṇḍa was better known and more popular. The word Muṇḍa in Sanskrit means a barber. It is quite within the range of probability that in distant Punjab some people thought that Mahāpadma's father Muṇḍa was really a barber and on the basis of the information given by them the Greek writers have called the king of Pāṭaliputra as the son of a barber. When once a story, however wrong, gains currency, it is repeated by later writers and that is how the Jain *Parīśiṣṭaparvan* also calls Nanda as the son of a barber. That such a mistake was quite possible can be proved from another instance. According to Bhāsa's *Svapnavāsavadattam* Pradyota had two sons named Gopāla, and Pālaka, and Āryaka, the last but one king of the Pradyota dynasty according to the *Purāṇas*, was apparently a son of Pradyota's son Gopāla. The famous play *Mr̥cchakaṭīkam* has, however, turned Āryaka into a cowherd boy because the author of this play misunderstood the name Gopāla as meaning a cowherd. It is quite clear that if the name Gopāla can be misunderstood as meaning a cowherd, the name Muṇḍa can also be misunderstood as meaning a barber. The barber ancestry of Mahāpadma is thus proved to be a myth, and no doubt whatever remains that Mahāpadma Nanda was really a son of Mahānandin-Muṇḍa and ascended the throne of Magadha after assassinating Kākavarṇa, the son of the usurper Śiśunāga.