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Early Trans-Oceanic Trade In South and Southeast Asia

Dr. Himanshu Prabha Ray

Early Transoceanic Contacts Between South and Southeast Asia

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Recent archaeological excavations in parts of Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand and Indonesia, have yielded objects of Indian origin such as carnelian and glass beads, inscribed carnelian and terracotta seals, ivory objects and pottery. The paper presented at the Silk Roads Seminar in Madras argued that these were not prestige objects obtained through irregular or occasional exchanges, but that certain regions of mainland and peninsular Southeast Asia were actively involved in the organized trade networks dated between the 2nd century B.C. and the 4th century A.D. There are many lacunae in our understanding of this maritime network and much more research, both archaeological and analytical, is required on the subject. One aspect of these early trading systems that I would like to discuss here is the role of the religion especially Buddhism. Understandably, for a topic of this nature the bulk of this evidence comes from the Indian subcontinent, mainly because of the availability of inscriptional and literary data for the Early Historical Period. A paucity of early written records in Southeast Asia is a major handicap in the reconstruction of the history of Buddhism in the region. The other problem is that a majority of the objects of Buddhist association are surface finds and are hence not only insufficiently dated, but nothing is known of their context.

The question of the spread of religion- both Buddhism and Brahmanism to Southeast Asia is not new and has been discussed by several scholars. A point that is often stressed is that Buddhism, by *rejecting brahmanical ideas of racial purity and the ensuing fear of pollution through contact with mleccha, did much to dispel the Indian repugnance to travel* (Wheatley, 1983:272). But the role of Buddhism was not limited to its comparatively liberal attitude towards social intermixing. Instead the evidence from the Indian subcontinent indicates its importance as a pioneer in agrarian expansion and the close interaction between Buddhist monastic establishments and trading groups. Perhaps what is much more important are the resultant changes in Buddhist ideology in the early centuries of the Christian era.

The basic difference between the Buddhist and Brahmanical ethos lay in their varied trajectories of evolution. While Brahmanical norms evolved at a time of agrarian expansion in the Ganga valley, Buddhism developed in a milieu of growing trade networks and the

emergence of a complex economic system. As a result, early Pali texts reveal the use of two different schemes of social stratification. On the one hand, the existing Brahmanical divisions of society into a four-fold caste or *varna* hierarchy was accepted. On the other, early Buddhist literature emphasized the occupational divisions among the people and the distinction between the higher and the lower occupations. Listed among the higher occupations were agriculture, trade and cattle keeping (*Chakravarti, 1987:102*). Another aspect of Buddhism was its emphasis on the investment and multiplication of wealth and its approval of usury and the earning of interest. A crucial development in the nature of Buddhism was the growth of the monastic system and a shift in the way of life of the monks from that of homeless wanderers to one of monastic habitude. Already during the time of the Buddha there are indications of the gift of gardens and *viharas* or monasteries where monks could retreat to during the rainy season. By the beginning of the Christian era, not only were elaborately ornamented monasteries gifted to the Buddhist Sangha, but land and villages were also donated. The earliest land-grants in the Indian subcontinent were made by the *Satavanhas* to the Buddhist monastic establishments in the Deccan.

The development of the monastic system and proximity to the lay devotees had far-reaching implications for the nature of interaction between the Sangha and the lay worshippers. The ideal of the monk was no longer his salvation; he was now meant to provide spiritual guidance to the lay devotees in return for material gifts or *dana*. It is interesting that the concept of *dana* itself underwent a change in the early Buddhist texts. The earliest items that could be gifted to monks included only four categories: Robes; food given as alms; place for rest and medicine. By the 2nd-3rd centuries B.C. the list had expanded to include 14 items, some of the additions being clothing, vehicles, garlands, pastes and oil for lamps. From the time of the Mauryan emperor Asoka, the worship of relics and their enshrinement in stupas gained prominence among Buddhist activities. Interestingly, in the early centuries of the Christian era, texts like the *Mahavastu* prescribe the worship of Buddhist images by offering pearls, coral, lapis lazuli, silk and other precious commodities. There were also important items of trade in the early historical period in the Indian subcontinent (*Liu, 1988:93*).

The early Pali canon had few tangible rewards to offer to the layman in return for material gifts or *dana*. Large donations to the Sangha granted social status to the traders and this was sufficient incentive. It was in the non-canonical literature, especially the *Milindapanha* where gift-giving was attributed tangible benefits. Answering the 41 Dilemma, Nagasena states that those who make such donations *shall be delivered from rebirth, old age and death*. With the

divinization of the Buddha and the development of the Mahasanghika doctrine, the scope of *dana* changed considerably. In return for the construction and decoration of the stupas, lay devotees were now promised material benefits like wealth, status of the gods and so on. (*Mahavastu II 363-397*). This process reached its culmination in the 4th - 5th century A.D. text the *Saddharmapundarika*, where supernatural and magical powers were also included in the list of benefits.

The question now *is*: to what extent were these ideological precepts put into practice and what is the evidence for the supportive role of Buddhism vis-a-vis trading groups?

The first point to be emphasized here is the location of Buddhist monastic establishments along the trade-routes in the early historical period. The major highway of the north connected Bactria and Taxila in the north- west to Mathura and further along the Ganga valley to centers on the Bengal coast. Buddhist monastic sites are known from all the major centers along this route. *Sanchi* and *Bharhut* were two prominent Buddhist monastic establishments in central India which linked the cities of the north to the ports of the Deccan. But perhaps the correspondence is nowhere closer than in the Deccan. On account of its undulating terrain, the Deccan is characterized by well-defined passes in the hill ranges and it is through these that the major routes traverse the region. Nearly 800 Buddhist rock-cut caves were excavated in the hills of the Deccan between the 2nd century B.C. and the 5th - 6th centuries A.D. and these are located overlooking almost every strategic pass in the region. Similarly the west coast of India has no natural harbors and almost every creek and bay provided safe anchorage for incoming ships. The prosperity of the ports then depended on the resources of their hinterland and their access to the network of the routes. A series of ports along the west coast are referred to in the 1st century A.D. *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* and what is significant is that Buddhist caves overlooked almost every major port in the Deccan (*Ray 1986*). This proximity of Buddhist monasteries to ports and urban centers is true of Andhra as well which shows a conglomeration of monastic establishments in the lower Krishna valley – a region which formed the nucleus of early historical trade along the east coast. However two areas about the religious affiliation of which we know little are south India and Bengal. About 55 early inscriptions were found in the area around Madurai on the river Vaigai and these refer to the cutting of caves for the Jaina monks. These caves are, however, natural caverns with little or no ornamentation, and so far no structural relics have been found. In Bengal, on the other hand, terracotta plaques depicting scenes from the *Jataka* occur at several early historical sites, but here again no monumental architecture has survived.

Another feature of early Buddhist monasteries in the Indian subcontinent are the short donatory inscriptions recording the name and occupation of the donor and the nature of the gift. An analysis of these epigraphs shows that the donors can be divided into three broad categories: the *first* being the ruling classes such as the *Kusanas* in the north and the *Satavahanas* in the Deccan. The *second* category includes a cross-section of occupational groups, prominent among them being traders, caravaneers, financiers and guilds. The last classification covers monks and nuns (*Ray, 1989:437-458*).

I shall come back to the third category of donors a little later, but before that I would like to emphasize two points.

One is that, in my cases, the place of residence of the donors is mentioned and this indicates the mobility of the occupational groups as well as the extensiveness of the trade networks. The other point worth mentioning is the prosperity of certain categories of donors such as gardeners, fishermen, blacksmiths etc. But perhaps the most intriguing category of donors are the Buddhist monks and nuns themselves. Gifts of money, land, images etc. are recorded particularly in the Buddhist caves of the Deccan. This was against the Vinaya rules which do not allow the use of gold and silver by the Buddhist monks.

How then is this dichotomy to be explained? The *Jatakas* offer two possible explanations for this - one is that the monks and nuns continued to retain worldly treasures, even after joining the Sangha. The second is that some amount of trade and reinvestment of wealth was carried on in the monastic establishments themselves. But perhaps a more pragmatic solution lies in the growing economic power of the monasteries from the beginning of the Christian era onwards. Grants of land and other prosperity to the monasteries required a body of regular officials for their administration. Money was invested with guilds by lay devotees and this brought in a regular income to the monasteries. The monasteries were also major consumers of cloth, incense oil and other trade commodities. The increasing economic status of the Buddhist Sangha, particularly of sects like those of the Mahasanghikas and Caityakas in the Deccan and the Kusana north is thus understandable.

At this stage it would be pertinent to discuss the extensiveness of the Buddhist trade diaspora in early historical India. We have seen the growing allegiance of traders, merchants and other occupational groups to Buddhist monasteries as evident from inscriptions. Corroboration of this comes from archeological data, such as the use of Buddhist symbols like the *triratna*, *srivatsa* and *svastika* on pottery, coins and terracotta sealings. The use of symbols and

legends on pottery was very widespread between the 2nd Century B.C. and the 3rd Century A.D. and inscribed sherds both in Brahmi and Kharoshthi have been found at a large number of archaeological sites in the Indian subcontinent. In most cases the inscribed sherds contained names of owners and occur on a variety of vessels such as dishes, bowls, miniature pots, globular vessels and large storage jars. It does seem that in some cases pots containing oil were inscribed and sherds from the monastic site of Kasrawad in central India indicate that the oil was donated for lighting lamps at the monastery (*Diskalkar, 1949:1-18*). In other instances, the pots may have contained wine and at Nevasa symbols such as the *triratana* and svastika occur on amphorae sherds. The *svastika*, *srivatsa* and *triratna* symbols have been found on sherds from Arikamedu as well (*Wheeler, 1946, pl.XXXI No.A; sherds in the Pondicherry Museum*) even though, so far, no Buddhist monastic structure has been unearthed in the excavations at Arikamedu. Another symbol that may be unmistakably associated with the Buddhist diaspora is one that resembles a rough plan of a monastery. Sherds inscribed with this symbol have been found at the sites of Kasrawad, Sailhundam, Nasik and Nagarjunakonda in the Deccan. A unique sealing comes from Kumrahar near Patna and is dated Between A.D. 100 and 300. In the upper left half it shows a plan of a building, while the legend in the lower half reads *Saghasa* or *of the Sangha* (*Altekar, 1959:103*). Two rock-crystal intaglios from the north-western part of India depict a seated monk and a legend in the Kharoshthi of the 'Kusana period indicating that the seal (*mudra*) belonged to the Sangha (*Schlingloff, 1969:69-70*).

Before I go on to discuss the evidence for early Buddhist presence in Southeast Asia it would be relevant to trace the inter-relationship between Buddhism and Brahmanism in the Indian subcontinent. Inscriptional evidence indicates that in addition to donations to Buddhist monasteries, members of the ruling elite especially the Satavahanas and the Kusanas also performed Vedic sacrifices and donated generously to the *brahmanas*. These instances are, however, limited to the ruling dynasties. But perhaps more important is the fact that the temple was yet to develop as a nucleus of social and economic activity. Though the earliest extant Brahmanical temples date to the 3rd-2nd centuries B.C., these were modest brick and timber structures and it was only from the 4th-5th centuries A.D onwards that land grants were made to temples and the temple grew both in structural dimensions and economic power. Hence in early centuries of the Christian era Brahmanism was still competing on somewhat unequal terms with the organizational and economic strength of Buddhist monastic establishments. A third factor adding to the complexity was the influence of the Jainas,

particularly in certain pockets such as the region around Mathura and in the vicinity of Bhubaneswar.

To isolate the different strands of influence that spread to Southeast Asia from within this complex network of religious ideologies is no easy task, and this is reflected in the nature of sources as well. An oft quoted example is the Chinese text *Liang-Shu* which refers to Tun-Sun in a schedule of territories incorporated in the Kingdom of Funan in the 3rd century A. D. Here more than a thousand brahmanas lived and *devoted themselves with fragrant flowers and practiced **tapas** by day and night* (Wheatley, 1983:299). At the same time images of Buddhist affiliation are also frequently found in mainland Southeast Asia. A number of wooden images of the Buddha dug out from places in the Mekong delta have been radiocarbon dated between the 2nd and 7th centuries A.D. (Smith & Watson, 1979:259). U-Thong and Nakorn Fathom have yielded large quantities of gold jewelry similar to that from Taxila and Oc-Eo together with votives and Buddhist images embossed on heavier gold foil. (Lyons, 1979:355)

Another category of finds may also be mentioned here. These are images of the Dipankara Buddha found at Pong Tuk, Quang-nam, Bukit Seguntang and sites in eastern Java (Wheatley, 1983:272). These were originally dated to the Amaravati school of Buddhist art, but subsequent reexamination suggests that most if not all of them are of the Gupta and later periods (d'Ancona, 1952; Shuhaimi, 1979). The finds discovered so far have been found as surface collections and are somewhat tenuously dated. It is nevertheless significant that these fall within the fertile rice-growing tract extending from the middle Irrawaddy to the Chao Phraya and Mekong valleys.

The issue then is to discuss the archaeological evidence for the presence of religious structures in mainland Southeast Asia in the first half of the first millennium A.D. excavations at Beikthano in the middle Irrawaddy valley have unearthed traces of a stupa with similarities to that from Amaravati (Aung Thaw, 1972: 18-19) as well as structures described as residential quarters from the monks. Other important finds from the site include a terracotta sealing with a Brahmi legend reading Sangha Siri' pottery with stamped designs; and uninscribed silver coins with holes for stringing and with symbols such as srivatsa, svastika, twin fish etc. (Aung Thaw, 1968:64). The site is dated from the first to the 5th centuries A.D. and the nature of the finds show similarities with those from Nakorn Pathom and other sites in the Chao Phraya basin.

Recent archaeological excavations in the Chao Phraya valley have unearthed Iron Age burials at several sites, a prominent example being the site of Don Ta Phet. Don Ta Phet has also yielded objects of Indian origin indicating participation in trans-oceanic contacts through, the Three Pagoda pass. Chansen, 30 kms north of Lopburi, has, on the other hand, revealed a six phase cultural sequence. In 1st - 2nd century A.D. levels an ivory comb was found decorated with a goose, two horses and srivatsa and conch symbols (*Bronson, 1979*). The pottery shows similarities with that from early historical sites in the Indian subcontinent such as fine grey ware sprinklers. Other finds, like tin amulets, decorative bronze bells and stone bivalve moulds for casting jewellery show parallels with the material from Oc-Eo.

So far there is little evidence for structural activity in the Chao Phraya valley in the pre-Dvaravati period. Excavations at the site of Tha Muang within the precincts of the old town of U -Thong led to the recovery of numerous brick and brick-fragments in the pre-Dvaravati levels. This led the excavator to suggest that they may have been part of a religious or stupa complex as brick was not known to have been used for non-religious construction at this time (*Loofs, 1979:349*).

The evidence from Oc-Eo is somewhat similar - while the site has yielded a range of objects obtained from the Indian subcontinent including inscribed seals and sealings, there are no indications for the existence of any structure prior to the 5th century A.D. Parmentier (1927), however, suggested that the small brick sanctuaries found in the vicinity may have housed the wooden Buddha images found in the area.

The data at this point is both sparse and scattered, but certain factors are significant. First is that by the beginning of the Christian era the nucleus of the settlement shifted to the fertile tracts of the Irrawady, Chao Phraya and Mekong river valleys. These are also the centers formed a part of the trans-oceanic Buddhist trade diaspora and have yielded objects of Indian origin. It was also in these regions that centralized politics with Buddhist or Brahmanical ideological affiliation emerged in the second half of the first millennium A.D. A distinctive silver coinage developed in mainland Southeast Asia about the same time based on a single prototype- a silver conch and srivatsa model (*Wicks, 1983:15*).

Before conclude, I would like to touch upon developments in peninsular Southeast Asia in the early centuries of the Christian era. Two sites relevant to our discussion are Khuan Lukpad In Krabi province about 15-20 kms from the Andaman Sea and Kuala Selinsing on the Perak coast. Both sites have provided evidence of early Indian contacts and have also been known

for the wealth of glass and carnelian beads. Unfortunately archeological excavations have not been very successful mainly because of organised looting of the sites by treasure hunters. There are few religious relics dated to the 1st - 4th centuries of the Christian era. The earliest Buddhist remains are the votive inscriptions dated from the 4th century onwards and found in the state of Kedah (*Quaritch Wales, 1940:1-85*). Early scriptural evidence includes an image of Vishnu from Chaiya dated from the 4th century A.D. and an *ekamukhalinga* from the same site belonging to the 5th Century A.D. (*O'Connor, 1972:39*). Also dated to the 5th century is the Buddhagupta inscription which refers to the setting up of a stupa by a mariner or *navika*. In recent years a 2nd inscribed slab of roughly the same period has also been found on the west coast of Malaysia (*Allen, 1986-87:41*)

In the final analysis it does seem that the influence of Buddhism on early trading networks was far more pervasive than has hitherto been accepted. Buddhist symbols were widely adopted and used on a variety of objects such as pottery, terracotta sealings etc. Monastic establishments in the Indian subcontinent became centers of economic power with some indications that the monks and nuns also benefitted from the prosperity. It is within this overarching Buddhist trade diaspora that changes in mainland Southeast Asia need to be analyzed. An apt analogy would be the spread of Buddhism along the overland route to China. The adoption of the Buddhist ritual and construction of monasteries by the ruling elite changed the consumption patterns in the urban centers and the *northern Wei rulers, who had just come out of a nomadic background, used Buddhist values to improve their status among the sedentary subjects and to claim legitimacy for their regime.* (*Liu, 1988:182*)