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Research Paper

Economic Role of Sea Trade Routes as Depicted in Buddhist Sources

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ABSTRACT: This paper will be focused on the economic role of sea trade routes as reflected in Buddhist sources. The economic activities generated surplus money throughout the contemporary period. The existence of sea routes of commerce (vanikpatha) had been well-recognized in India from early times. The sea trade routes were a crucial factor in commerce. All trade long distances were carried sea trade routes. Which were mentioned in various literary sources of Buddhism. Jatakas were one of the important sources from them. Samudda Vanija-Jataka, Valahassa-Jataka, Mahajanaka-Jataka, Baveru-Jataka, and Ghanata-Jataka are some important Jatakas depicted sea trade routes. Other Buddhist sources such as Divyavadana, Milinda-Panho, Fa-Hian's book Fwo-Wo-Ki, and Yuan-Chwang's book Si-Yu-Ki, are also mentioned sea trade routes.

KEYWORDS: Economic, Jatakas, Trade Routes, Sea

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I. INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to ascertain the time taken in the evolution of trade routes in this country, though ages must have passed in their evolution and innumerable tribes must have participated in giving them their distinctive character. The nomadic tribes in search of fodder for their flocks must have got themselves gradually acquainted with the natural routes of the country, but even before them, the primitive hunters in search of their prey must have traded on the natural routes which later on assumed the character of highways. This search for natural passage must have continued for ages, and in course of time, the whole country got covered with a network of trade routes.

1

The sea routes have been well-recognized in India since the early ancient period. The two trade routes, one by water and another by land, the former were better, mainly because it was less expensive but productive of a large profit. He also further dilates, in pursuance of these principles, the actual routes to be taken in the sea for commercial purposes. Water routes, he continues, were along the shore in the rivers and mid-ocean. The route along the shore and close to the shore, he preferred, as it touched many trading port towns. He also held that river navigation was preferable to ocean traffic as the former was uninterrupted and was of avoidable or endurable dangers. There were specific periods of the year during which sea voyages could be undertaken, either from India to ports in the east or west or from those regions to India and the Far East. Villages on seashores or banks of rivers and lakes had to pay a fixed amount of tax (*Klrptam*). Foreign merchants, who had often been visiting the country as well as those who were known to local merchants, were to be allowed to land in port towns. The navigation of large boats was entrusted to train naval personnel.

The sailing seasons are mentioned. Vessels carrying merchandise spoiled by water could be either exempted from the payment of toll or their toll reduced to half and allowed to sail when the time for setting sail approached. The rainy seasons were not considered suitable for sailing large boats and small boats were to be launched in those small rivers which overflowed during the rainy seasons. Many rivers crossed the routes on which there were ferries.

The *Jatakas* throw considerable light on the sea trade routes during the period with which they deal. We may now turn to the localities mentioned in the north-western region of the country, namely, Gujarat and Sind. However, much of the commerce of Banaras was carried by boats plying in the Ganga. From Banaras boats sailed to Prayag and there sailing in the Yamuna they reached Indraprastha.²

AIM OF STUDY

To find out the economic role of sea trade routes in the economic foundation of Buddhism as depicted in Buddhist literary sources. The sea trade routes were important in the growth of Buddhism in the early period. This is the fact that without any economic support no one religion can exist and spread. The sea trade routes were the crucial factors in surplus money.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Moti Chandra's book *Trade and trade routes in ancient India* provides information about trade and different trade routes in ancient Indian times. The author has studied twenty-five years back to Jain and Buddhist literature intending to find out such material bearing on certain aspects of Indian social institutions about which the Sanskrit literature is almost silent. The book does not provide about the relation between sea trade and trade routes in Buddhism.³ Rajaram Narayan Saletore's book *Early Indian economic history* object has been to trace the economic history of India from the earliest recorded times to the end of the seventh century AD. The book is organized topically: the geo-economic background, early external commercial contacts, imports, exports, sea routes, land routes, market prices and state control, land and agricultural problems, corporation and guilds, currency and banking. All available sources from the literary, epigraphic, numismatic, archaeological and traditional angles have been utilized and, as far as practicable corroboration of the evidence cited has been attempted. The author had not given reference to the sea trade routes in the context of the economic role of Buddhism.

SEA ROUTES AS DEPICTED IN BUDDHIST LITERARY SOURCES

There can be little doubt that in the period represented in the *Jatakas*, namely, in the 6th century BC., there must have been considerable maritime activity despite the oft-repeated dangers of the sea. We often come across the warning to adventurous ocean traders as, for instance, in the *Catu-Dvara-Jataka*, that the sea is full of danger. A mother warns her son not to take to the sea as "the sea has few chances of success and many dangers".⁴

Nevertheless, we often find this urge to seek fortune across the seas braving all dangers. In the *Samudda Vanija-Jataka* appears this call of the ocean among the carpenters: "Let us go to some foreign land" said they and cut down some trees and built a mighty ship and launched it into the river Ganges. From this, it would be unfair to infer that shipwrights in those times could manufacture some kind of large boats to sail only in rivers like the Ganges and that they never ventured out into the open oceanic waters. That they could do so can be seen from some examples of oceanic travel. Sea spirits cry "Any passengers for India?" and a lay brother replies "yes" appears to have been only an adaptation of a usual inquiry and reply made during such voyages.

That such ships must have taken hundreds of passengers on board on long voyages can be seen from the Valahassa-Jataka⁷ which refers to a voyage between Ceylon and Nagadvipa, which must be placed between Nagapattana and Simhala (Ceylon) instead of being identified with the Nicobar Islands and certainly never with Elephanta as has been suggested. In such a voyage mention is made of 500 ship-wrecked traders. That ships must have certainly travelled overseas can be seen from the Mahajanaka-Jataka which mentions a large ship bound from Kalacampa to Suvarnabhumi with seven caravans and their beasts on board. 8 If on the analogy of some examples in other Jatakas, each caravan consisted of 500 carts and persons, then this ship must have been large enough to have on board 3,500 merchants, their beasts of burden and merchandise. If this is considered a mere exaggeration, the figure of seven caravans with their merchandise would at least indicate that large enough ships were no doubt manufactured for long sea voyages. That several ships were constructed can be made out from Mahaummagga-Jataka which relates how 300 shipwrights built 300 ships and freighted them with loads of articles for sailing up and down the Ganges. 9 If such ships took large or heavy cargoes they sank as can be seen from the simile which relates that, as the ship of the merchants, heavy through taking too large a cargo sank over-laden into the sea. 10 Such long voyages were undertaken with the sole object of making a fortune. In the Catasposathika-Jataka a certain Brahman says that, while his wealth was still unexhausted, he would sail for the Gold Country (Suvarnabhumi) whence he would bring back much wealth. 11

In the indo-Babylonian route in the *Baveru-Jataka*, we obtain a faint enough glimpse of the sea route from India to Baveru or Babylonia in the 6th century BC. It has recorded the well-known event of certain merchants leaving India with "a foreign crow" among other commodities which, of course, are not mentioned. They sold that crow for a hundred pieces of some unidentified metal. They seem to have returned home and again made a second voyage to Baveru taking with them a royal peacock, which was trained to scream at the snapping of fingers and to dance at the clapping of hands. This bird was also sold for a thousand pieces. ¹² We are not told from which ports these voyages commenced or where the ships touched until they reached Baveru but the important fact is that Indian merchant men sailed during that period to Babylon and returned evidently in their ships, taking with them their goods.

A *Jataka* tells us the story of foolish boatmen who after ferrying passengers asked them for their fare which he never got. The *Boddhisattva* advised him to charge his fare before he ferried passengers across the river because those who crossed the river had one mood on one side and quite another after they had crossed the river. The *Jatakas* do not mention bridges on the rivers but in the shallow waters people crossed the rivers by dykes and for deep waters, small boats (*ekadoni*) were used. Kings often travelled with a flotilla of boats. In one place it is mentioned that the king of Kasi crossed the Ganga with his flotilla (*bahunavasanghata*).

In the *Ghanata-Jataka* mention is made of the kingdom of Dvaravati¹⁶ the capital of which had the sea on one side and a mountain on the other.¹⁷ This region has been identified with the south of the peninsula of Gujarat wherein lays Prabhasa or Somnath and to its west was Dvaravati better known as Dwaraka also known as Abdinagari and Kusasthali once the capital of Anarta.¹⁸ In this region must be mentioned the great commercial cities of Bharukaccha (Broach) and Supparaka (Sopara),¹⁹ already noted earlier. They were the most prominent among the embarking stations on the west coast.

The *Divyavadana* informs us that on the route from Rajagriha to Sravasti Ajatasatru had built a boat bridge (*nausankramana*).²⁰In the territory of the Lichchhavis as well there was a bridge on the Gandak river. The *Jatakas* also tell us that on the western sea coast Bharukachchha,²¹ Supparaka²² and Sovira²³ were chief ports and on the eastern sea coast Karambiya,²⁴Gambhira²⁵and Seriva.²⁶ These ports were connected by internal trade routes to important cities. These ports also carried on trade among themselves. There was active commerce between India and the western countries. *Valahasysa-Jataka* ²⁷ mentions our trade with Sri Lanka. Varanasi²⁸Champa²⁹and Bharukachha³⁰ routes had commercial relations with Suvarnabhumi and the *Baveru-Jataka* ³¹ informs us that there were commercial relations between India and Babylonia.

Bharukaccha was a seaport. The voyages from India to outside countries must have been undertaken during the *Jataka* period from certain important ports. One of such main ports was Bharukaccha, the Baryagaza of the Romans and Broach of later times. In the *Sussondi-Jataka* we are told how certain merchants from Banaras went to Bharukaccha where at that time some other traders from their town, were sailing for Suvarnabhumi.³² The voyage mentioned in the *Baveru-Jataka* must have, in all Rajagaha (Rajagrha) or Mithila, as we shall see later, from where merchants came to Bharukaccha to sail either to eastern regions like Suvarnbhumi or first to Neucratis or Memphis and subsequently to Alexandria in the West, as it was then the most important sea-port in western India or later to Ctesiphon, Rome, Antioch or Constantinople. That such long voyages were hazardous has often been hinted at in the *Jatakas*. 500 merchants from Banaras, sailing no doubt from Bharukaccha, on the seventh day when they were in sight of land, were unfortunately wrecked in midocean and all except one became food for fishes. That single person, in favour of the wind, reached the port of Karambia (Khambayat?). Such voyages were no doubt undertaken in ships which sometimes had three masts, sails, anchor (*lankara*) riggings (*yettani*) and other contrivances like cordage, large sails and oars. There were ships 600 cubits in length.

Roruva was also a seaport. Besides Bharukaccha there existed another port from which voyages were made to outside countries. In the *Aditta-Jataka* mention is made of Roruva, the capital of the kingdom of Sovira (*Soviraratthe Roruvanagare*) ³⁶ this is the Roruka, whose king, Rudravana, was killed by his son Sikhandin. ³⁷Supparaka was another current time seaport. Though Supparaka is not explicitly mentioned by name in the *Jataka* its existence can be traced in the name of Supparaka Kumara, ³⁸ who was born in Bharukaccha (Broach) which for a long time was very prominent on the west coast as a port? On the east coast, among other ports is the Kaveripattana which is placed in the *Akita-Jataka* within the Damila kingdom (Tamilnadu) (*Damilarattham patva Kavira pattana sample*). ³⁹ An important port referred to in *Jataka* is Dantapura. According to the *Kuruddhamma-Jataka* it lay in the kingdom of Kalinga and, according to the *Cullakalinga-Jataka*, ⁴¹ it was the capital of Kalinga.

The Chinese monk(Fa-Hian) relates how, starting from Varanasi (Banaras), he set sail in a ship and following the course of the Ganges and descending east-wards for 18 *yojanas*, he found on the southern bank the great kingdom of Campa (probably Champanagar, there miles west of Bhagalpur). Continuing his journey east for nearly 50 *yojanas* he came to the country of Tamrapilti the capital of which was a sea-port (modern Tamluk) near the mouth of the Hooghly. From that port, he embarked on a large merchant vessel and went moving down the sea to the southwest. It was the beginning of winter and the wind was favourable, after 14 days, sailing day and night, he came to the country of Singhala (Simhala-Ceylon). He heard from the people that it was about 700 *yojanas* distant from Tamralipti (Tamluk). 42

So from the east, a traveller could leave the Gupta capital of Pataliputra where no doubt Fa-Hian had lived for some time, proceed to Banaras whence by boat he could reach Campa and then going forward arrive at Tamluk, the port of embarkation for voyages to the near and far east. Whereas from Ocelis to Musiris, the voyage took 40 days, from Tamluk to Ceylon the time taken was only 14 days. This port of Tamluk continued to be the port of embarkation even in the seventh century as can be seen from the experience of I-Tsing, (AD.671-95) who observed that that was the place where they embarked when "returning to China."

The higher up in the Orissa country, which Yuan-Chwang calls U-cha or Udra (Odra), the most prominent ports of call were Dantapura and another which he called Charitra. He has located it "on the borders of the ocean" and he names it Che-li-ta-lo (Caritra). He is confusing it with its namesake further south two days' sail from Ceylon. He states. "Here it is that merchants depart for distant countries and strangers come and go and stop here on the way". Probably the Caritra of Yuan-Chwang may be identified with the modern Chatrapur, 13 miles northeast of Berhampur, headquarters of the Ganjam district and "prettily situated near the sea".

There were some other important ports of call on the east coast and among them may be mentioned the following two places. In connection with Mount Po-ta-lo-kie (Potalaka) going north-east Yuan-Chwang refers to a town which he does not name ⁴⁶ but states that people started for "the southern sea and the country of Sang-kia-lo (Ceylon)" which was reached by sailors going south-east about 3000 *li*. Probably this port was no other than the Nagavadana of I-Tsing which has been identified with Nagapattana, as was suggested by Beal long ago. I-Tsing stated that going west from Quedah (Queddah-Kataha) for 30 days, "merchants used to arrive at Nagavadana (Nagavardhana) whence after two days they reach Ceylon." The identification of this port with Nagapattana appears tenable. Lastly, as we have seen already, the most important port from Bengal was Tamralipti, the modern Tamluk. From there ships could sail, as I-Tsing found from his own experiences, ⁴⁸ directly to China.

Sea-Route to Suvarnabhumi: From the days of the Jatakas, not only the existence of Suvarnabhumi but also the routes to that region appear to have been known. Unless that sea route was well-known, even during the Jataka period, which those stories are considered to represent, it is difficult to understand what some of the persons referred to therein could have meant by stating sometimes that they would go to Suvarnabhumi to trade and return home with wealth. On the other hand, western writers were not aware of its existence until we come to the times of Pliny in the first century AD. When he refers to a place called Chryse, obviously Suvarnabhumi, about whose geographical position he was not at all quite definite.

From the *Mahajanaka-Jataka* we find that an adventurous person could go to Suvarnabhumi for trading purposes and return home with a profit. How much an adventure was undertaken can be seen from the following details. A son asks his mother: "Have you any money in had? If not, I will carry on trade and make money and seize my father's kingdom". From Mithila in Videha, selling a part of the store of pearls, jewels and diamonds, he bought his stock in trade, "he put it on board a ship with some merchants bound for Suvarnabhumi". His mother tried to dissuade him saying that the sea had "few chances of success and many dangers", but still he embarked on a ship which carried seven caravans with their beasts and commodities. After travelling for 700 leagues, his ship was wrecked. From this incident, it may be seen how, despite the grave dangers of the ocean, merchants sailed long distances with heavy cargoes on board ships which, to accommodate so many persons, must have been sufficiently large and well-built to stand such long voyages. Not only from Mithila or Banaras but also from Bharukaccha (Broach) in Gujarat, as the Sussondi-Jataka reveals, they could set out for the Golden Land (Suvarnabhumi). There seems to have been yet another point of contact between Suvarnabhumi and India and that was the Tamil country. The Milinda-Panho, for example, explicitly relates how sea-faring merchants used to sail, by crossing the high seas, to ports like Colapattanam and Suvarnabhumi.

Sea-Route to Sri Vijya: The next important port in Sumatra was Sri Vijaya (Palembang), which was one of the destinations of the Chinese traveller, I-Tsing. It has been variously called Sri Bhoja, Shih-li-fo-shih, Sarbaza and San-bo-tsai by the Chinese and Arabs. This was the first port of call on the river Bhoja, before reaching Kwang-tung, I-Tsing (AD 671-695) tells us how at that place he made an appointment with the owner of a Persian ship, indicating how merchants from Persia during that century were trading with Malaya, to depart for the south and then he went to Kang-chow in the Province of Kwang-Tung. At that time the first monsoon began to blow when the ship of the Persian merchant proceeded towards the Red South "with ropes of a hundred cubits long suspended above two by two."53 Before 20 days had elapsed, they reached Bhoja, the capital of Sri Bhoja where he stayed for two months and then embarked on a ship for Tamralipti. Proceeding north-ward towards Eastern India from Ka-cha, after more than three days'sail, they reached the country of the Nakked People (Insulae Naderum)⁵⁴ and, in about half a month's voyage from there, in a north-westerly direction, they arrived at Tamralipti. 55 From these details, it would appear as if there was in the 6th century a kind of regular service of private merchant vessels especially Persian, between Sri Vijaya and Eastern India at one of its main ports, Tamraipti. The actual time taken for the voyages from the land of the Nakked People to Tamralipti appears to have been about a fortnight. From that island to Ka-cha it took three days. Ka-cha had once been identified with some place on the Achin Coast,⁵⁶ but its identification with Nicobar Island, which Marco Polo called "Necuveran or Necouran", appears more credible.

Besides Tamralipti, there was yet another town in the south called at by ships from Sri Vijaya. From I-Tsing also learn that Wu-Hing, after staying as the "King's guest" for some time left for the country of Malayu (modern Jambi), reached there after sailing for 15 days. At the end of the winter, he changed ship and sailed to the west. After 30 days he arrived at Nagapattana⁵⁷(Nagapatam) which I-Tsing called Nagavadana from where

ships used to leave in the 6th century and probably in earlier times also for Ceylon. Sri Vijaya was well-known to the Chinese and the Arab sailors. In the *History of Sung* (AD960-1279), it is mentioned as San-bo tsai whose products were rattan, red kine, lignum-aloes, areca nuts (*ping-lung*) and cocoanuts.⁵⁸

Sea routes to Java: Chinese sailors, the case is different for we get a fairly good idea of the sea route they had traversed. In the 4th century AD, Fa-Hian relates how he left Ceylon by Sea and, after sailing continuously east-wards for 90 days, reached Javadvipa.⁵⁹

Yuan-Chwang, in the seventh century, had probably some idea of a sea route to Campa and Java but he was not quite definite of either their geographical position or the route he had in mind. This must have been because he admits having recorded it from mere hearsay. He relates how "Further on to the south-east, on the borders of the ocean, we come to the country of Kamalanka (*Kia-molang-kia*) (Pegu); still to the east is the kingdom of Dwaravati (*To-lo-pa-ti*) (Siam); still to the east is the country of Isanapura; still to the east is the country of Maha-Champa which is the same as Lin-i. Next to the southwest is the country called Yamana-dvipa." From this statement, we find that Java, according to Yuan-Chwang, lay in the southwest, after descending from the region of Siam but this gives no clear idea of the route taken because he had recorded from hearsay and this is clear from his own words. He states that "These six countries are so hemmed in by so many mountains and rivers that they are inaccessible but their limits and "the characters of the people and country could be learned only by inquiry".⁶⁰

Contacts between India and Cambodia: The contacts between India and Cambodia may be traced from the second century AD to the present, although the primary connection between them must have commenced from must earlier times. It was one of the seven kingdoms mentioned in the Ramayana, which was adorned by the better-known Java, although it is not specifically mentioned by name. The Jatakas allude to a Cambodia where, according to the Campeyya-Jataka, mules, probably of a good variety, were available. It must also have been noted for fine steeds and expert grooms for the Kunala-Jataka tells us that a groom could in that country catch the fiercest steed utilizing herbs. ⁶¹ Concerning the commercial sea route and halts, we may see how far this statement may be said to be justified. In the 4th century AD, Fa-Hian sailed from Campa in Vanga (West Bengal) in a merchant's vessel, carrying more than 200 persons, in a south-westerly direction from Tamralipti port and, after 14 days of continuous sailing, first reached Ceylon and then after 90 days arrived at Java. ⁶² I-Tsing appears to have followed the same route, ⁶³ but neither of them mentions Cambodia or even southern Cambodia as one of their halting stations en route to China. In the 7th century I-Tsing, after leaving Nagapattana (Nagapatnam), first halted at Ceylon and then reached Malayu (Jambi) in Sumatra. None of these specifies that Cambodia or its southern region formed at any time a halting station during the voyage from any port in India to any port in China or even to any of the intervening islands or their ports of call.

Sea-route to Campa (Annam): The last but one stage in the voyage to China was Campa, a name applied to more than one place. Campa was the original name of the district of Bhaalpur whose capital was situated on the Ganges 23 to 25 miles to the west of a rocky hill surrounded by a river. Yuan-Chwang also points to the same city as Chen-po. The Campa of Anga (West Bengal) is incidentally referred to as the Kala-Campa in the Vidhura Pandita-Jataka. It may now be seen that from Tamralipti (Tamluk) to proceed to Campa (Annam) there were practically two or three intermediate stages of a halt during the voyage. The first stop was at Kacha (Nicobar Island), the second at Sri Bhoja, viz. Sri Vijaya was later called Kalempong, and the third stage was at Campa (Annam).

Sea route to China: We shall now try to trace the sea route taken from India to reach China. For this purpose, no better guide could be taken than the Chinese travellers, who visited India which they left by sea for their home. Probably the best Chinese description is that oft-quoted and familiar account of Fa-Hian, who tells us how he left Tamralipti (Tamluk) for Ch'ang-Kwang. Sailing down to Simhala (Ceylon) with a favourable wind, he embarked on board a ship which had more than 200 merchants and it had a trailer boat which was smaller and tied to the larger vessel to serve as a lifeboat in cases of emergency. With a favourable wind, they sailed westwards for three days and then encountered a great wind. In their consternation, they first feared that the rope, binding the smaller vessel, would break if too many of the crew from the larger ship got into the smaller one. The tempest continued and on the 13th day, they reached an island, which has not been named. There they repaired the leak that had sprung and resumed the voyage. Fa-Hian was sailing from Ceylon to Java then China.

III. CONCLUSION

Jatakas and Buddhist literary sources mentioned the sea trade routes. The Sea trade routes were the cheapest mode of transport of goods and were far away from every corner of the country and outside the country. These routes provided vast economic activities for merchants and various goods for exchange among them. The increase variety of goods generated a bulk of money which played an economic role in the growth of Buddhism. Buddhism was an urban religion and depended on supporting merchant classes.

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⁶⁵ Jataka, VI, no. 545, p. 127.

⁶⁶ I-Tsing, op.cit., pp. XXXIIIII.

⁶⁷ Fa-Hien, op.cit., pp. 111-12.