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**The Role of Early Buddhism in the Economic and Social History of Ancient India**

Ph. D. Thesis

**SUMMARY**

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In the earliest works regarding the Buddha and Buddhism the scholars - based on the processing and thorough analysis of the Buddhist literature in Pali language and the traditional Buddha-dating - visioned a real Buddhist India. This vision was embraced by several generations of historians. In the known big historical synthetic works the economic life and society of the time period between 600-325 B.C. – which, regarding political history was marked by the rise and golden age of Magadha, the Shishunaga and Nanda Dynasties – was shown as having vigorously “Buddhist” characteristics.

This traditional image needs definite supervision based on later philological researches, predominantly on the modern translations of the Pali Canon and on the researches of the Pali and Prakrit languages. Several research developments indicate that the economic-social realignments of the era should be seen as a long and lingered process in space and time, rather than a sequence of “big jumps”. From these developments I would like to emphasize the debates regarding the reliability of the Puranic Chronology, the new potentials of the historical results from the last decades regarding the temporal definition of urban developments, the productive and still outstanding debates regarding the Buddha-dating, and last but not least, the change in the point of view among scholars who increasingly accepted the dating of the Buddha somewhat later than the traditional one. The mentioned economic-social changes started sometime around the birth of the Buddha and were vigorously present in the Indian society until the first centuries A.D., especially among the urban civilisation, in trade and the cultural mission connected to it.

The main objective of the present thesis is to offer a new, alternative reading of the economic and social changes in India in the middle of the first millennium B.C. In order to reach this objective, instead of discussing the social image and economic relations of Buddhist India, I put the emphasize on the role fulfilled by Buddhism in the Indian society from 6-5 century B.C. to the first centuries A.D. Due to the long range of historical and archeological problems regarding the examined period and subject matter, unfortunately it was impossible to discuss and cover all the related questions and issues in the present thesis. Regarding the bigger theme clusters – like the economic and societal history or the urban development – I concentrated on the analysis and presentation of the information strained from the primary and secondary sources, on the issues not yet permanently solved and on drawing in new perspectives and aspects. The aim was to generate a synopsis type work by discussing the above mentioned issues and by synthesizing the new results, which can assure a firm basis for further research.

The present work is a sort of synopsis of the macro- and microhistorical examinations. Due to the main objective, I considered necessary to present on a macro level and analyse the social and economic characteristics of the rise of the early Buddhism. Nevertheless, I use the microhistorical examination during the discussion of the main issues regarding each bigger topic.

During the 6-5 century B.C. there were important economic and social changes going on in India, in which Buddhism had a major role. Regarding the economic and social changes in the life of Kosala and Magadha, numerous scholars consider the extensive spread of iron tools as authoritative among the civilization settled in the Ganges Basin from the middle of the first millennium B.C. On the other hand, other scholars do not attach a great deal of importance to this.

The biggest difficulty of this question is that the exact age of the references made to iron, plough-iron and other agricultural iron tools in the Pali Canon, is very hard to define. Consequently, the temporal placement of our knowledge about the frequency and the spread of iron usage, respectively the quality changes of the iron tools, is not possible.

It means further difficulty that the terms placed from sources which refer to the agricultural iron tools and their usage, cannot be completely justified and affirmed by archeological artifacts. The small amount of archeological artifacts is explained by scholars with climate factors. Accordingly, the humid, alluvial soil of the Middle Ganges region led to the fast corrode of the iron tools. Then again, it is important to highlight that there are a few concrete artifacts which are dated definitely and clearly from the 6-5 century B.C. Nevertheless, there is no agreement if the theory of the cultural changes going on in India in the 6-5 century B.C. can be based on these few iron artifacts, which are in a relatively bad condition.

The question can be raised whether there is a connection between the growth of technical and technological competency, in this particular case between the metallurgy and the economic growth and wealth? How is it possible that the megalith cultures have an abundance of iron objects, the iron was used also in India in very early times, and yet no sort of economic prosperity developed and a long time was needed for the start up of the urbanisation, too. On the other hand, it is known that the urbanisation is possible without the usage of iron, considering the Egyptian culture for example, where granite was cut without using iron and fortified cities were built. The Indian Harappan civilization was also creating magnificent cities without using iron.

A more complex approach might be more adequate in this regard. The metallurgy, due to its process complexity, develops very slowly. The development of metallurgy reached the level when iron was utilized in the era of the Northern Black Polished Ware. The better and higher quality of iron manufacture was strongly connected to productivity. In order to reach a higher agricultural yield, the need of the society for better quality appliances and tools was also growing. The spread of the plough agronomy resulted in widespread agricultural activity. The iron tools had a considerable role in the settling down of the civilization and the growth of the settlements in the Ganges Basin.

It can be assumed that without the existence of enough amount of economic surplus, the establishment of Buddhist nuns and monks would not have been possible. The monks and the nuns did not wander during the Monsoon periods, but stayed in bigger towns or outskirts. The existence of these bigger towns was enabled by the agricultural surplus grown in their surrounding. However, the surplus production was only possible in places where bigger fieldlands and forest lands were tilled. This would have not been possible without using iron made agricultural tools.

However, it can be surely stated that in the centre of the economic changes in the 6-5 century B.C. was the economic surplus. The existence of it enabled the emergence and development of trade and the start of urbanisation.

In the Buddhist sources there are several references to caravans, communities of merchants, markets and trading routes. Based on the frequency of these references, it can be assumed that trade was a significant part of economic life. Besides the reference to oversea trade, the picture from the sources reflects a greater significance to overland trade. The merchant travelling with his caravans is a typical picture of the Buddhist Birth-stories. The big trade routes netted the whole India. The most common name of the merchants in the Pali Canon is *satthavāha* (caravanleader) and *vāṇija* (merchant / trader). These merchants most probably got to the very far northwestern area of *Gandhāra* already in very early times and presumably crossed over the desert, too.

The Pali sources do not disclose too much about the products of the early trade. It can be assumed, that both the overland and oversea trade was mainly about trading with luxury items. The ordinary, everyday products were purchased at smaller local markets by the average Indian people. A lot more is known about the products from the expansive oversea trade between the Roman Empire and India.

Besides information about the overland trades, a lot can be found in the Pali Canon collection about oversea trades, seatrips and destinations, ships, shipwrecks and harbours.

However, these mainly ambiguous and unclear indications are not enough on the whole to get a realistic picture about the condition and wideness of the oversea trade. The problem with the sources is that they are not from the period in question, however, it is indisputable that the information from the narrations, teachings and stories are oftentimes from a much older age, but this is very difficult to determine.

According to the sources it can be assumed that the merchants were primarily sailing along the shores. The exact knowledge of the parameters of the Monsoon wind was a basic sailing and naval condition of the widespread oversea trade development between India and the West. Several scholars believe that the Indian and Arab merchants had very early knowledge about the sea currents, the winds of the sea, so probably about the Monsoon, too. There is also information about this in the Pali Canon. In several Buddhist Birth-stories connected to sea journeys we can read about criss-cross blowing, fast seawinds and devastating, strong winds, unusual to the season, due to which the sea ventures often had catastrophic endings. Generally, it can be stated that in the Buddhist Birth-stories connected to oversea trade, shipwreck stories are recurrent and common. This refers to the fact that the contemporary sailors, shipmen and merchants observed and examined the sea, however they did not dispose of extended and substantial knowledge about the frequent winds of the sea and the influential currents. It can also be read in the sources that sailors got their orientation on the sea with the help of compasses and direction indicators, but also with the help of birds which were searching and monitoring the shores. Most probably the shipmen very rarely dared to go out to the open sea.

Among the possible sea routes, it can be found the one between India and the Babylonian Empire and its evidence is in the Pali Canon collection, namely the *Bāveru-Jātaka*. The *Jātaka* is also interesting because it gives an account of a possible frequent trade relation between India and *Bāveru* country, even before the Ashoka's reign. This suggests that the Indian merchants made sea trips to the shores of the Persian-Gulf already in the 5th century B.C. but it is also likely that already in the 6th century B.C. Among further seatriade destinations was *Tambapaṇṇi*, Sri Lanka of today, and the Golden Land *Suvaṇṇabhūmi*, namely Cambodia, and probably Myanmar, the former Burma.

The number of reference to specific harbours is rather few in the Pali Canon. It can be assumed that the early merchants used the western shore harbours of India, primarily *Bhārukaccha* (Barygaza, Bharuch of today) and possibly *Suppāraka* (Nala Sopara of today, in Thana district, north of Mumbai). From these the previous is the only harbour which is

specifically mentioned in the Pali sources, therefore it can be assumed that it existed already in the very early times.

Although a lot of references to the Indian oversea trade can be found in the Pali Canon, we still have rather little specific knowledge about its early stage. We cannot find any specific information in the sources about descriptions of ships, or of ship-building. The descriptions about the size of ships and the number of passengers are also ambiguous, in most cases they might be strong exaggerations.

The first ship depictions on seals and terracottas are definitely the ones from Harappa, and the earliest relief depictions are the ones on the Sanchi Stupa from the 2nd century B.C. Three ship stories can be found among the ship depictions in the Ajanta Caves. The first ship depictions on coins are to be found on the *Sātavāhana* coins from the 2-3 century A.D. These depict ships with two masted sailing vessels, which clearly suggests that these were big sized and huge weight seagoing ships.

According to the Pali Canon the existence of the oversea trade in the very early times can be assumed, however, it is hard to answer how far they got by these ships, what kind of knowledge they disposed about far-away countries and how intense the trade was with the lands outside India. It is plausible to draw the inference that if there was frequent trade between India and other countries, e.g. the Babylonian Empire, we should know from the sources about the inhabitants, customs and products of these countries. But the references to these are very rare, succinct and rather ambiguous. However, based on these it is conceivable that they knew countries and lands outside India, as they gave specific names to them, moreover it is likely that the Indian merchants travelled there and back to these distant countries several times. This ambiguous information got in to the *Jātaka* tales as some miraculous and mystical stories.

The references in the Pali Canon not only give an insight to the emerging macroeconomy, but also report about the Buddhist religious orders and the headway of Buddhism. The early Buddhism had a strong connection with the spread of trade and commercial centres. Consequently, these texts give account of a prosperous economy, having agriculture, live-stock farming, trade and the more and more developing and spreading money-economy as its basis. However, important statistical data is missing which would enable us to have a clearer picture of the economic relations. The descriptions regarding the economy and trade are mostly idealized and are based on sources which were written throughout centuries and were revised several times.

On the other hand, the sources report that in the times of the historical Buddha the ongoing urbanisation generated a great transformation of the existing social order and was encouraging the development of new religious tendencies. The old closed society became in some sense more opened. One of the signs for this is that in this period new social classes appeared and the already existing ones showed up in new roles.

The frequent expressions in the Buddhist sources like *gahapati* (master of the house, housholder) or *seṭṭhi* (merchant, the head of the guilds) are the evidence that the Buddha and Buddhism was in continuous and intense relation with the representatives of these “new” social classes. The early success of Buddhism was also due to the fact that it offered the most suitable ethics and teachings to the “new” social classes and also to the merchants. Buddhism supported the trade and money-economy, which was an important part of the developing and invigorating consumer culture, in a society where the societal status was more and more based on wealth and the power and status was achievable through wealth, and not birth.

The Buddhist ethics and teachings about the karma assured the wealthy laics, supporting the order, that if they did benefits in the past, then in their next life they can calmly enjoy the acquired fortune before they stepped on the way of salvation. The Buddhist community prohibited to its members the usage of money, acquisition and possessing fortune. However, the Buddha gave practical pieces of advice to the laymen about managing wealth and fortune.

The Buddha, during his wanderings, most probably also addressed the farmers living in the Middle Ganges region. However, Buddhism could not meet the needs of the rural inhabitants in such measures as the needs of the urban population. It cannot be stated certainly that Buddhism was appealing to the wealthy merchants only, nevertheless, it is important to draw attention to the significance of this social class, because by its activity not only the livelihood of the local monks was assured, but also the fast widespreading of Buddhism was enabled.

It is also known from the sources that the Buddha had good relations with the kings and rulers, therefore Buddhism had the support of the ruling classes. Without the well-intentioned religious tolerance policy of the king, it would have been scarcely possible to establish monasteries on the periphery of urban centres. The newest researches confirmed the assumptions that in the royal court and royal governance the presence of members of Buddhist *saṅgha* was strong, also as royal advisors. It is also thought-provoking that behind the Buddhist supporting politics of the *Bimbisāra*, the king of Magadha, was not only religious interest and sympathy, but most probably also serious trade policy interest.

If we examine this from a political point of view, it is visible, that the autocratic rulers of the newly established and developing monarchies most probably supported the heterodox schools, therefore Buddhism too, to get rid of the tutelage of the *brāhmaṇas*. Most of all because the ritual tools used by the *brāhmaṇas* were outdated and inadequate for solving the societal and economic issues. To maintain the institutions and administration of the new territorial states it was necessary to purposefully apply military and economic tools, namely a sort of scientific *Arthasāstra*, which was competitive with the rites and traditions connected to dharma represented by *brāhmaṇas*. In this situation it was necessary to have a religious movement which was based on scientific recognition and knowledge, and not on traditions, and which was capable to relieve the ruler of moral qualms.

The Buddhism was not primarily the religion of the lower classes, therefore it was easy to draw the attention of the ruler social classes. The Buddha himself was born in an aristocratic family, therefore he definitely knew how to attract the upper-classes, the representatives of *khattiyas* and *brāhmaṇas*. Regarding the social compound of the so called Buddhist elite, on the first place were the *brāhmaṇas*, followed by the *gahapatis* and the *vessa*, then the representatives of the *khattiya* class, and the rest was originating from the *sudda* and from classes outside society. The powerful presence of the *brāhmaṇas* was not incidental.

The Buddhism, and mainly its teachings is often characterized as a sort of counter-*brāhmaṇa* movement. The Buddha did not stand against the *brāhmaṇas* as social class, but more against the thought of clerical superiority, which originated from the concept that the *brāhmaṇas*, as the legatees of the spiritual and intellectual power heritage, were entitled to the privileges of the elite groups. The Buddha acknowledged this social reality and the ones being part of the *brāhmaṇa* class could become the elite members of Buddhism. Due to their intellectual abilities, these *brāhmaṇas* gave prestige to the Buddhist order and meant help against the counter-move to clerical privileges.

The intense relationship with Buddhism of the *khattiyas* and among them primarily the upper-classes of the oligarchic tribes, can be explained with the fact that the Buddha himself descended from such an oligarchical republic. On the other hand, with the fact that the oligarchical tribes were in general crisis at the time of the Buddha, being continuously in conflict with the ever expanding monarchies.

From the secular supporters, the great number of the ones from wealthy and affluent *setṭhi* families, shows the great support of Buddhism among the merchant class. Nevertheless, we can read a lot of stories in the sources presenting individual destinies which embodied the



typical characteristics of the newly developing society. These are examples of economic and material power based on scientific experiences, and of the acquisition and possession of land through self-effort.

The use of Buddhist morality for political aims cannot be directly associated with the emergence of Buddhism. Regarding the problem of the Buddha-dating it is difficult to answer how Buddhism existed for centuries without following the Buddhist teachings among the rulers and royal circles. At the beginning of the reign of the Mauryas not even Megasthenes made special mention of the Buddhist. The Buddhist thoughts first appear in the political views of Ashoka, the third emperor of the Mauryan dynasty.

The powerful presence of Buddhism in the Indian society is traceable also in the period after the Mauryas. Due to commerce, in this period Buddhism became a widespread and solid religion in Northwestern India and the western and eastern parts of Deccan. In these regions the Buddhist centres developed along trading routes and in cities and settlements strongly connected to trade. Beyond that, it seems that Buddhism kept its powerful presence even in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., mainly among the Indian urban population, in trade and in cultural missions strongly connected to it.

Due to the present thesis, the characteristic economic and social impacts and lineaments of Buddhism might have a new reading. The central thought of this new interpretation is that the characteristics of the economic and social background of the forming, developing and spreading Buddhism, are worth to be viewed and interpreted in a several centuries perspective. These changes can be described more like a process which appeared around the birth of the Buddha and was strongly present in the Indian society until the first centuries A.D.

The word of process is included in the Buddhist sources. The Pali Canon collection even exist when it was not written down, together with the *Jātaka* tales, which are based on ancient Indian tales and so they are timeless. It is more appropriate to speak instead of Buddhist India about Greater Magadha, including the specific religious views, social, economic and political structure of Buddhist society until the first centuries A.D.

### **My publications directly connected to the topic of the thesis**

Újabb kérdések a buddhizmus kutatásában. [Further Questions in Buddhist Studies]. In: *ΣΙΡΥΤΗΝΑΙΙ. A Collegium Hungaricum Societatis Europaeae Studiosorum Philologiae Classicae II. országos konferenciáján elhangzott előadások.* [Lectures at the 2nd National Conference of Collegium Hungaricum Societatis Europaeae Studiosorum Philologiae Classicae]. Eds. Tamás, Mészáros – Péter, Jutai. Budapest 2007, 47-51.

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