

A CRITICAL STUDY OF SUVARṆABHŪMI IN PĀLI LITERATURE



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ABSTRACT

Interestingly, among the Indian scriptures, most of the information on Suvarṇabhūmi are available in the Buddhist ones, in particular the Tipiṭaka. The Buddha himself mentioned 16 mahājanapadas (great states) in Jambudīpa that were named : 1) Anga, 2) Magadha, 3) Kāśi, 4) Kosala, 5) Vajjī, 6) Malla, 7) Ceti, 8) Vamśa, 9) Kuru, 10) Pañcāla, 11) Maccha, 12) Surasena, 13) Assaka, 14) Avantī, 15) Gandhāra, and 16) Kamboja.²

The land's name is of the two forms : Suvarṇabhūmi in Sanskrit and Suvaṇṇa bhūmi in Pāli. In Thai society, as the former is more popular than the latter, the former will be investigated in this work.

¹A.I.71.267.

SUARNABHŪMI IN THE TĪPIṬAKA

The Buddha mentioned Suvarṇabhūmi only aiming at showing the geological circumstances related to political government and administration in his life time. The text has nothing to relate to Suvarṇabhūmi, but I want to show its contemporary great states and their status, because these were all contemporary with Suvarṇabhūmi and others, listed below.

Later on, Ven. Sāriputta touched 24 states in his lecture, the Mahāniddeśa, naming 1) Tigumba, 2) Takkola, 3) Takkasilā, 4) Kālamukha, 5) Purapūra, 6) Vesunga, 7) Verāpatha, 8) Java, 9) Tamali, 10) Vanga, 11) Elabandhana, 12) Suvaṇṇakūṭa, 13) Suvaṇṇabhūmi, 14) Tambapāṇi, 15) Suppāḍaka,² 16) Bherukaccha,³ 17) Surattṭha, 18) Bhāṅgaloka, 19) Bhāṅgaṇa, 20) Paramabhaṅgaṇa, 21) Yona,⁴ 22) Pīṇa,⁵ 23) Vinaka,⁶ and 24) Marukantāra.⁷

In the text, the Buddha uttered: “...athāpi methune yutto mando’va parikissati - on the other hand, one, who is trapped in sexual desire, is drawn (by it) just as a weak man (is drawn by a strong man).”⁸

Ven. Sāriputta, his foremost disciple, won permission by the Buddha to clear the words “methune yutto - trapped in sexual desire”, deliberately interpreting and explaining that the trapped is one who is “driven away by kāmatañhā or craving for sensual pleasures”.⁹ To reveal a force of kāmatañhā, he furthered lecturing : “One, who is driven by craving for sensual pleasures, sails in a great ocean to hunt for treasures, in spite of being hampered by physical sufferings and natural disasters threatening him...”

A reason why he touched these was that he extended the Buddha’s verse in form of prose and for clear view and easy understanding described in his lecture the people’s voyages to the states, most of which, except Takkasilā, Yona and Marukantāra, were believed to be on the coastal areas and the trading centers.

²Supāraka, maybe.

³Bhārukaccha, maybe.

⁴Yonaka, maybe.

⁵Parapayona, maybe.

⁶Vallasanda, maybe.

⁷**Khu.Mahā.** 29.55.129.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹A phrase “...sails in a great ocean” comes from “mahāsamuddam pakkhandati.

On the other hand, it suggests that Ven. Sāriputta was very good at knowing the sub states, both inside and outside his mother land, including Suvarṇabhūmi; the information and news of those from Suvarṇabhūmi had long been introduced into the main land, possibly before and after the Buddha's time.

CRITICAL STUDY

16 mahājanapadas or great states were independent and powerful and located in the majjhimadesa or the central land of Jambudīpa. The term “mahā” or “great” in mahājanapadas means, not only a vast area, but political and economic stability, as well. Actually, except Vajjī and Malla, ruled by the bureaucracy, the rest were under the absolute monarchy. As for the 24 sub-state, they were located both inside and outside Jambudīpa. Suvannabhūmi, and Tambapāṇi were clearly the outside sub-states of Jambudīpa, but the rest, the inside ones.

The term “sub-states”, in the author's view, covers both a dependent state under a great state and an independent state being far away from and perhaps outside Jambudīpa. Suvarṇabhūmi seemed to be a sample for the sub-state of this kind, in comparison to the 16 great states.

There is familiarity with some of these sub-states - Takkaṣilā, Vanga, Suppādaka, Bherukaccha, Surattṭha, and Tamali. All except Takkaṣilā, were possibly the old sub-states within Jambudīpa. Among those, Vanga was on the east coast and was later known as Bangala or Bengal and then believed to belong to Anga ; Suppādaka, Bherukaccha, and Surattṭha were all on the west coast, then belonging to Avantī or maybe Assaka ; Tamali, if it was Tamalitti¹⁰ or Tambalitti, was on the east coast bordering to Vanga. As for Tīgumba, Kālamukha, Purapūra, Vesunga, Verāpatha, Elabandhana, and Suvannakūṭa, the Tipiṭaka does not go into detail.

Of Takkaṣilā, Yona, and Marukantāra, the first, if it was the former capital city of Gandhāra, was, surely due to its developments, later upgraded as a sub-state belonging to the same state. However, as for Yona and Marukantāra to far northwest, the latter was a desert state, where a going-northwestwards caravan of traders had to take a visit and an overnight stay. Marukantāra , possibly far from that, was a former settlement of Ionian - born Greeks, who once invaded and settled down in some part of northwest Jambudīpa and at last left their race's name as the modern name of the place.

¹⁰ Paramtthadipani, p.35.

There remained another three interesting sub-states : Takkola, Java and Suvannabhūmi. It is presumed that: Takkola was the original form of Takua Pa (ตะกั่วป่า) in modern southern Thailand ; Java was identical with the Java island in modern Indonesia ; Suvannabhūmi was a fertile land, focusing on the coastal areas and covering lower Myanmar, the entire west of Chao Phraya valley and the southwest & south coasts, in Modern Thailand.

LEGENDS AND THE COMMENTARIES

In the Legends of the Dīpavaṃsa and the Mahāvāṃsa, authored by Sihalese commentators, there was mention of Suvannabhūmi as a country that was, after the third council estimated to be held in 326 B.E., visited by the two elder monks Soṇa and Uttara, in order to convert it to Buddhism. G.P. Malalasekera concluded the story as follows:

“....At that time a female deity of the sea was in the habit of eating every heir born to the king. The arrival the theas coincided with the birth of a prince. At first the people misunderstood that the monks were the friends of the demon. But later the monks, being told of the incident, drove away the demon by their iddhi-power and erected a bulwark around the country by reciting the Brahmajāla Sutta (the Discourse on the Brahma’s Nets). Sixty thousand people embraced the new faith, while three thousand and five hundred young men and fifteen hundred girls of noble family entered the Order. Thenceforth all princes born into the royal family were called Soṇuttara”¹¹

In the Samantapāsādikā – the Commentary of the Vinaya Piṭaka Suvannabhūmi was known as a dīpa or an island according to the following information:

“As soon as the two elder monks arrived, they were opposed by people, who misunderstood them as the rakkhasas’ friends and with weapons in hands came to kill them. They proclaimed themselves the ‘Samaṇa’, who refrained from killing, stealing, sexual conduct, telling lie and drinking intoxicants, and lived an ascetic life – having a meal per day and an unmarried life, and living in morality concentration

¹¹ G.P.Malalasekera, **Dictionary of Pāli Proper Names, Vol.II.**, (London : Luzac & Company, 1960), pp. 1262-1263.

and wisdom. Then, one rakkhasī (demonness), with her retinue, came to the royal court from the sea in order to eat a prince, who is just born on that day. Seeing her, people were astonished and cried for help. Suddenly, Ven. Soṇa showed a miracle, creating out of his original body bodies two times bigger than rakkhasas' bodies and surrounding with these the demonness and her retinue. By power of the monk's miracle, rakkhasas feared and fled rapidly, and soon after that, the monk kept the protection established around the island. He continued preaching the Brahmajāla Sutta and converted faithful islanders to Buddhism, establishing them in the Triple Gem and Five Precepts.”¹²

In the Dhammapadaṭṭhakathā – the Commentary of the Dhammapada Suvaṇṇabhūmi was mentioned as a city, or it may be interpreted as a port city, due to being “one” of a woman's birth places, most of which were ports such as Suppāraka port, and Gāvira port etc. Among those, Suppāraka port was on the west coast, while Gāvira port, on the south coast, of Jambudīpa.¹³ The former played an important role as a trading center at or perhaps before the Buddha's time, the latter was well known at the time of Ven. Buddhaghosa (around 900 BE.), because he himself said in his own commentary that he had for a long time stayed overnight at Gāvira port to complete a series of commentaries called the Monorathapūraṇī.

In the Monorathapūraṇī - the Commentary of the Aṅguttara Nikāya Suvaṇṇabhūmi was a port city, described by the author that Suvaṇṇabhūmi was 700 yojanas far away from Jambudīpa and reachable within seven days and seven nights under a suitable support of seasonal winds.¹⁴ And he continued repeating it in the Paramatthadīpanī, saying that in a previous life, our Bodhisattva, who wanted to sail to Suvaṇṇabhūmi across the great sea, went towards the port of the Tāmalitti.¹⁵

¹² **Vinaya.A.I**, 345.

¹³ **Khu.DhA**. 8. (Bangkok : Mahamakut Press, 2549), p.13.

Romila Thapar describes the Gāvira port or modern Kāverapattanam as the city of cargoes (see a history of India, p.114), but Suppāraka is now Sopāra near the mouth of the Kṛṣṇā river.

¹⁴ **AA. I**.322.433.

¹⁵ **Cariyā A**. p.35.

Suvarṇabhūmi in the Suyonandi Jātaka, is described in other commentaries, was a port city, where traders of Kurukaccha got to by a boat.¹⁶ The term “Kurukaccha” is, in my view, is perhaps a corrupted word of “Bhārukaccha”, which was then a port city locating in the west of Jambudīpa bordering to the east coast of modern Arabian sea. If so, it was evident that Jambudīpa or modern India had friendly relations with Suvarṇabhūmi through trading; Jambudīpan traders sailed across the great sea, risking life amid disasters in the sea. On this point, Bhārukaccha was a bridging point between Jambudīpa and Suvarṇabhūmi.

Moreover, in the Sankha Jātaka, Suvarṇabhūmi, apart from a port city, was also a rich land, creating hopes to traders from far lands, in particular Jambudīpan traders, most of whom went there to hunt for a huge money. Brahmin named “Saṅkha” was a good sample. He was a good businessman, rich and generous-minded. One day, he decided to sail to Suvarṇabhūmi for trading, reasoning that he wanted to hunt for money and take it back to his homeland.¹⁷ More interestingly, the text describes that he prepared himself well, having a sailboat fully loaded with goods at the port of “Paṭṭanagāma”; he went there to get on his sailboat and on due course sailed out with his retinue.

CONCLUSION

The term “Paṭṭanagāma”,¹⁸ means the “Port Village” and is described that the area of the port was on a coast, initially furnished with houses, markets and stores and finally developed into a village for trading when having contacts with foreign traders. In my view, the description is very helpful to make clearer the archeological picture of Suvarṇabhūmi, because another important academic evidence, available in the commentary of the Kurudhamma Jātaka, confirms Suvarṇabhūmi as the “fertile land.” In the text, the term “Suvarṇa” means, not only gold, but also all kinds of treasures, including silver and grain etc.¹⁹

¹⁶ **Khu.Jā A. IV.404.**

¹⁷ **Khu.JāA. V. 385.**

¹⁸ Pattana is a corrupted word of Patana – Falling of goods (for trading).

¹⁹ **Khu.JāA. IV.104. (Kurudhamma Jātaka).**

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