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Buddhist sangha's social outlook in relation to landed property

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Abstract

This paper proposes that gahapatis and seṭṭhis had always been interested in landed property; and when Buddhist monasteries began to emerge as the land owning institution by the early centuries of Christian era, the cordial relationship between the gahapatis and seṭṭhis and Buddhist monasteries seem to crumble down. The gahapatis disappeared by the mid first millennium AD, the seṭṭhis appear to have taken up administrative positions in order to secure their trading interests at the same time. Hence, the relationship between the gahapatis and seṭṭhis and Buddhist monastery is the main focus of this paper. The paper problematizes this relationship and simultaneously aims to answer the following questions: first, what type of changes took place in the social position of gahapatis and seṭṭhis in relation to land, office (state administration) and trade between *circa* 100 to 800 AD?; Second, what type of changes took place in Buddhist sangha's social outlook in relation to landed property?; And, third, what was the impact of these changes upon the relations of gahapatis and seṭṭhis with the Buddhist sangha?

Introduction

It is a well established fact that inspite of the economic prosperity of the gahapatis and seṭṭhis they were assigned a lower position in Brahmanical literature. And in a sharp contrast they figure prominently in Buddhist and Jain texts as donors and patrons to the Buddhist and Jaina establishments [Gokhale 1977: 125-130]. The overseas trade and usury was despised as well as prohibited by the brahmanas law givers. Baudhāyana not only condemned the sea voyages (samudra-saṃyāna) but also called it a sinful act. In a similar way, Āpastamba directs the brahmanas not to take 'the food from a person who charges interest (vārdhuṣikaḥ), and of those who live on the labour of persons held as mortgage, presumably in return for interest on the loan' [Sharma 2007: 155-156]. On the other hand, the Buddhist sangha as being an unproductive institution was depending upon the laity for material support and in return it provided much needed ideological and psychological support to laity particularly merchants to take up trade, money-lending and agriculture as means of livelihood [Sharma 2007: 147-167].

In this way it was an institution based on the participation of the people coming from various social backgrounds: both monks and lay devotee. The Pali canonical texts recognize agriculture (kasi/kṛshi), cattle-keeping (go-rakkhā), and trade (vāṇijja) as excellent professions (ukkaṭṭha-kamma), to be fit to be taken up by people of excellent pedigree (ukkaṭṭha-kula) which included kshatriyas, brahmanas and gahapatis. However, social concerns played a decisive role in the formation of Buddhist rules and regulations for monks/nuns. For example, stories in Pali Vinaya clearly depict the Buddha as barring the entry of criminals and royal servants into the sangha due to the objections raised by the lay devotees [Rhys Davids & Oldenberg 1991: 195-196]. It appears that there was present a certain pre-conceived picture regarding the acts of the monks/nuns in the minds of the lay devotees. Accordingly monks/nuns were expected to act. Hence, any sort of a deviation from such a pre-conceived picture was subjected to a bitter criticism and to which, sangha was always ready to avoid as long as it was depending upon the laity for sustenance. This relationship between the gahapatis and seṭṭhis and Buddhist monastery is the main focus of this paper. The paper problematizes this relationship and simultaneously aims to answer the following questions: first, what type of changes took place in the social position of gahapatis and seṭṭhis in relation to land, office (state administration) and trade between *circa* 100 to 800 AD? Second, what type of changes took place in Buddhist sangha's social outlook in relation to landed property?

Discussion

In the Ṛgveda, later Vedic literature, and Pāṇini's Astādhyāyī the term gṛhapati (equivalent to Pali term gahapati) has been used in a sense of master of the house or householder [Chakravarti 1996: 65]. The definition of gahapati in Pali texts is somewhat similar and it refers to a person with complete ownership rights as well as responsibility of the household [Wagle 1995: 185]. Comprising mainly the heads of household, gahapati as a group did not exclusively either belong to the Buddhist or the Brahmanic order. As an individual a gahapati represented 'the whole household in its relationship to the other group' [Wagle 1995: 74]. In this way gahapati was not a caste but a class or social rank [Fick 1920: 253-256]. In Pali texts the term gahapati has a different meaning from that of gṛhi/gṛhastha, and kuṭumbin/kuṭumbika who also were the householders. Though term gahapati appears to be similar in meaning with gṛhi/gṛhastha and kuṭumbin/kuṭumbika, but in Pali text this term is hardly used in the sense of a simple householder or a peasant householder. Unlike others, gahapati appears to have been used, according to Ranabir Chakravarti, as an 'exalted epithet fit to be assumed by a man of vast wealth and social pre-eminence' [1996: 183-184]. The term gṛihi/gṛihastha where simply refers to any householder, the term kuṭumbin/kuṭumbika on the other hand refers to a peasant householder with or without considerable amount of wealth and landed property [Chakravarti 1996: 185]

It appears that well before the beginning of the Mauryan Period gahapati had emerged as an extremely wealthy section of the society with vast landed properties requiring the labour of the dāsa-kammakaras to cultivate it.[1] The increasing concentration of wealth in the hands of gahapatis and their involvement in trade and commerce led to the emergence of seṭṭhi-gahapatis or seṭṭhis as investors/financiers [Fisher 2001: 166-198]. The gahapati in a narrower sense is a term of description that stands for someone primarily based on land while the term seṭṭhi-gahapati is used for a person engaged in agriculture as well as trading activities [Chakravarti 2006: 73-4; Rhys Davids & Oldenberg 1991b: 225-226]. Though seṭṭhis were big merchants, investors and financiers of trade, but it does not mean that they were never interested in landed property. In fact it appears from Jātaka stories that seṭṭhi not only owned cultivable fields but also paid taxes out of agricultural produces. Likewise, a Jātaka story mentions about a seṭṭhi from Takhashila in Gandhāra, who is called a 'seṭṭhi whose wealth is in cattle' (govittakaseṭṭhi) [Fisher 2001: 171]. It implies that he was a rich and successful cattle-dealer. On the other hand, a Buddhist relic casket inscription (from the north-western frontier regions) dated circa AD 19 mentions

about the donor of the casket as being a salt dealer (loṇagahapati, i.e., lavaṇa gahapati). It becomes clear from this inscription that gahapatis in some cases were also taking up trade besides being involved in agriculture [Mukherjee 1997: 141-44].

An inscription from Ghantasala (13 miles west of Masulipatnam, in Andhra Pradesh) of first century AD records a donation of an entrance pavilion to the Buddhist monastery. The donor is a wife of a master mariner (mahānāvika) who is mentioned as the son of a gahapati. It is noticeable that the Andhra coast had become crucially important during the early centuries of Christian era due to overseas trade with south-east Asia [Ghosh 2006: 65-8].

It suggests that due to the availability of lucrative trading opportunities a son of a gahapati possibly decided to take up the profession of a mariner and used the wealth earned from agriculture to invest in his trading expeditions.

The epigraphist, G. Bűhler, on the basis of his study of the votive inscriptions from Sanchi (circa 200 BC-AD 100), argues that the highest number of donations were made by the monks and nuns. Besides them there were gahapatis, seṭṭhis, vaṇiks, various artisans and craftsmen who made donations [Bűhler 1894: 87-116, and 366-408; Parashar-Sen 2007: 47-90]. Similar was the case with the donations at Bhahraut [Hultzsch 1892: 225-242]. The Kalawan copper plate inscription (circa 1st century AD) records the establishment of the relics of the Buddha in a stūpa, by a female worshipper who belonged to the family of gahapatis [Konow 1931-32: 251-259]. In some cases rulers or members of royal family or royal officials have also made donations. And, almost all the inscriptions belonging to the period i.e. *circa* 200 BC-AD 200 either mention the gift of images or parasol or groves or assembly hall or caves or tank or well or pillar or vessels or stone-slabs or gateway and so forth [Iyer 1973: 119-20; Iyer 1974: 168-9; Iyer 1974a: 171-2; Srinivasan 1971: 123-125; Chakravarti 1955-6: 167-86; Hultzsch 1885: 138-9]. Besides gardens and caves, the earliest inscriptions recording the donations of cultivable land to Buddhist monasteries come from north-westernDeccan.

Inscriptions from Buddhist religious centre Kanheri refer to the gifts of caves, reservoirs, agricultural fields and money to the monastic establishments by merchants [Ray 1986: 82]. For example: one inscription from Kanheri records the dedication of a cave by a merchant of Chemuliya. Another inscription from the same place 'records the construction of a reservoir by Seṭṭhi Puṇaka' [Gokhale 2008: 22-23]. Another inscription from Kanheri mentions about a donation of a cave (lēṇa), a cistern (pōḍhī) and a field in a village (gāma) Saphāű, by a merchant (nēgama), Isipāla (Ṛshipāla) son of a merchant Gōlaṇaka inhabitant of Kalyana to Buddhist monks. Inscription from Kanheri mentions about a lay devotee Aparēṇu, son of Aṇada, a merchant (nēgama) residing at Kalyana.

He gifted a cave, hall, money and the field of a half-paṇa-owner (ādhapaṇakhetiya) in a village to Buddhist monks. An inscription from Mahad records a gift of a cave and a field to Buddhist monks by Vādasirī wife of the son of a gahapati-seṭṭhi Saṁgharakshita [Lűders 1912: 104, 108 & 114].[2] One of the interesting inscription from Junar records, an investment of the income of fields, for planting karañja trees and banyan trees with the reed makers guild (koṇāchika-srēṇi) by a lay-worshipper [Lűders 1912: 132]. It indicates the fact that merchants (i.e. Seṭhi, gahapati-seṭṭhi, nēgama) owned landed property and considerable resources as they were able to grant agricultural fields, reservoir, caves etc to Buddhistmonks.

Though in many cases gardens and cultivable fields were donated to sanghas, inscriptions nowhere provide details about the ownership rights over these fields. So in order to understand the "ownership" question we will have to rely upon the information coming from other sources. For example: the story in Cullavagga mentions about Anātha Pindika, a gahapati, who bought a garden named Jetāvanna to build a

monastery for Buddhist monks after making a payment in gold [Rhys-Davids and Oldenberg 1991b: 187-8]. This story indicates that land had become a marketable commodity in pre-Mauryan times and continued to be so in subsequent centuries. It is further corroborated by the Nasik inscription of Ushavadāta (*circa* 2nd century AD), son-in-law of Kshatrapa king Nahapāna. The inscription records that a field was purchased by Ushavadāta at the price of 4000 kāhāpaṇas, situated near to a town, from a brahmana in order to donate it to a Buddhist sangha [Senart 1905-6: 78-9]. Now if we accept the point that land was a marketable entity then it would mean that whenever land, whether garden or cultivable field (kheta) was donated to sangha it was most likely either owned or purchased by the donor. Moreover, such gifts of land to sangha indicate their growing tendency of sedentarization as these all were immoveable entities. All the items of donation e.g. cave shelters, wells, and tanks in fact were essential for any full-fledged settlement. If not for permanent settlement, at least for vassavasa (shelter for rainy season) these places were used by the monks. Most of these places which received donations were located on trading routes [Heitzman 1984: 121-137] and so were beneficial to both monks as well as merchants. Constant movement of merchants through such locations helped the monks to establish themselves there as getting donation was easy. At the same time merchants and artisans used these places as halting points in night or in rain or in other emergencies during their long journeys for business purposes.[3]

Several Nasik cave inscriptions of early centuries of the Christian era have recorded the donation of cultivable land to Buddhist monastery or ascetics. Inscription of Gotamīputra Śātakarṇi (*circa* 124 AD) mentions a donation of a field in a village to Tekirasi ascetics dwelling in a cave earlier donated by the royal house, with all the immunities [Senart 1905-6: 72]. But the field was later taken back as it remained un-inhabited and uncultivated. In its place a field from a royal village, situated near to a town, was donated to the same ascetic community [Senart 1905-6: 74]. Another inscription mentions that Sātavāhana king Vāsishṭhīputra Pulumāyi (*circa* 152 AD) donated a village, named Sāmalipada in place of the village, named Sudasaṇa donated earlier, to Buddhist monks residing in queen's cave (or a cave donated by the queen). Another inscription mentions that the village was donated along with judicial and fiscal rights; and from the village, levies or taxes were to be collected and used for the maintenance of the cave inhabited by the monks [Senart 1905-6: 67]. The Nasik inscription of Nahapāna (*circa* 119-124 AD) mentions about Usabhadāta who had made an investment of money in two different weavers' guilds. The interest of the money was to be provided to the monks living in the donated caves for clothes and other expenses [Senart 1905-6: 82-83]. From above it becomes clear that both merchants and royal authorities were donating cultivable lands to the monasteries for the upkeep of the monks or ascetics; and as a result particularly due to royal land grants in subsequent centuries monasteries began to emerge as the big land-owners. Furthermore, Gregory Schopen's [1994: 527-554; 2001: 99-148] study of the Buddhist text, Mūlasarvāstivāda-vinaya shows that in the early centuries of Christian era monks had begun to own private property, incur debts, and lend money on interest, and were engaged in trade as were subjected to tollsandroadtaxes.

The purpose of the donation of land (fields/villages or fallow tracts/uninhabited spaces) on the part of the ruling authorities was to instrumentalize the sangha for the expansion of agriculture.[4] Once the land was given to monastery it was expected to be populated by the people as they were exempted from royal taxes. Now people inhabiting these donated fields or villages were required to provide dues for the maintenance of the monks which in fact was a meritorious act. When the ascetics failed to attract settlers the royal authorities did not hesitate to take the field back and replace it with some other perhaps already settled field or village. It also appears that the monastery only had the rights to enjoy revenue; and could not sell or mortgage the donated land. As noticed above the earliest land grants were specifically made for those monks residing in certain specific geographical locations like caves donated by some queen or royal personality. These grants were not for any specific individual monk. Possibly it was because asceticism particularly in Buddhism preached non-possession and non-sedentary life for monks. So, making a

donation to a monk ideologically made no sense if he was required to keep on moving. Therefore, in such a situation, establishing sacred spaces whether a cave or monastery possibly became a tool to attract monks, peasants as well as merchants. The rulers wanted to create specific sacred geographical spaces within their realm to expand agriculture thereby increase state's income. On the other hand, it also became necessary for monks to sacralise such geographical spaces as they enjoyed regular incomes. The divinization of Buddha in relation to the geographical location helped the monks to sacralise it and at the same time provided a reason to attain a sedentary life style.

Where earlier inscriptions nowhere mentioned the donation for the worship of Buddha, inscriptions from about mid first millennium AD began to record donations specifically for defraying the charges of the material required for Buddha's worship. For example: a Valabhi Inscription of Maitraka ruler Dharasēna-I (saṁvat 269 i.e. 588-89 AD) records a donation of two villages to a Buddhist monastery to defray the cost of Buddha's worship. The income from villages was also intended to provide clothes, food, and medicine to the monks and to repair the monastery [Bühler 1877: 10]. As already pointed out that since individual monk was ideologically not allowed to own landed property, the land donations were made to the sangha or monastery. The owner of land was the community of the monks who owned it in the name of Lord Buddha. Hence, it is possibly an instance of institutional ownership of land distinct from individual and group ownership of land.

Most likely is associated with this development was the gradual emergence of the belief in Buddha's continuous presence in the monasteries as shown by Gregory Schopen [1997: 258-289] on the basis of his epigraphical, archaeological and textual studies. Not only this he further shows that by now Buddha had also emerged as the owner of private property. Hence, as the monasteries became the land owning institutions the land holdings of the erstwhile land owners such as gahapatis and seṭṭhis most likely were cramped. And, if monasteries owned land in the name of Buddha then the competition for landed property appears to have been between the laity (including gahapatis and seṭṭhis) and the Buddha. Therefore, the ideology and ethics which once supported the gahapatis and seṭṭhis in their material endeavours, now gradually became obsolete.

By the 'the Gupta period the holdings of most of the peasants were small and were usually cultivated by the owner and his family' [Maity 1970: 100]. In fact, prior to 6th century AD the peasant was synonymous to gahapati, kuṭumbin, mahattara etc suggesting the peasant ownership of land; but in post 6th century period these epithets gradually disappeared and epithets like halakara, hālika, karshaka etc became popular. These new epithets refer to a ploughman or a tenant- a person without any ownership right over land [Chakravarti 2013: 318; Sahu 2004: 35].[5] It suggests disappearance of gahapatis by the mid-first millennium AD onwards precisely at the time that witnessed the beginning of vast scale land donations to temples, brahmanas, and sāmantas, besides sanghas. Or in other words, gahapatis who owned vast agricultural landed property in early historical period disappeared from the scene most likely as they increasingly lost control over the land to the new players.

It is noticeable that gahapatis, who represented the rich peasant proprietors, paid taxes directly to the state-treasury [Chakravarti 2006a: 108]. Unlike them sanghas, temples, brahmanas, and sāmantas represented the group of intermediaries between the state and the peasantry. They were granted land in the form of cultivable fields and entire villages with several tax exemptions and with fiscal-administrative rights. 'Owning permanent property and enjoying constant patronage from royal families' in Xinru Liu's [1988: 132] view, 'relieved Buddhist monasteries of their dependence on steady donations both to maintain buildings and to supply provisions for the sanghas'. Likewise, I-Tsing (present in India AD 673-695) mentions that 'produce of the farms, and gardens, and the profit arising from trees and fruits are distributed annually in shares to cover the cost of clothing' in Indian monasteries. It also appears from his

travel accounts that monasteries in India possessed great wealth, granaries, male and female servants, and treasures of various kinds [Takakusu 1966: 193-194]. Now Buddhist monks were in a condition to stay back in the monastery and enjoy the revenue and dues earned from land.

This new situation directly hampered the interests of the seṭṭhis and gahapatis who had vested interest in landed property. Therefore, once the Buddhist monasteries received vital resources in the form of land, and emerged as competitors to seṭṭhis and gahapatis, the cordial relations between the two seem to crumble down.

It is noticeable that though gahapatis disappeared, but in several cases seṭṭhis and other types of merchants continued to own land in the early medieval period. It appears for example that they either invested their money in land by buying it, or were associated with land management by the rulers for various purposes. Indore plates of Pravarasēna II (*circa* 500 AD) records a grant of half of a village to brahmanas by a merchant (vaṇika) named Chandra after purchasing it from the royal authorities [Mirashi 1963: 38-42]. Likewise, a later date inscription (dated 1059 AD) records the purchase of a village named Kuddam or Kudda from the king by Mallaya-śreṣṭhin who belonged to a vaiśya community. The inscription mentions that Mallaya-śreṣṭhin donated major part of the purchased village to a large number of brahmanas as an agrahāra, while kept a part of the same village with him. The part of the village kept by Mallaya-śreṣṭhin comprised 'a house-site, a garden-site, and an area of cultivable land producing one hundred Murās of paddy (or grain) [per year]' [Sircar 1959-60: 142-143]. On the other hand, Anjaneri plates' inscription (710-11 AD) shows the association of merchants with the management of temple's various functions, and its landed property.

R. S. Sharma has argued on the basis of this inscription that by issuing this charter the king 'tied down the merchants to the management of villages', and therefore, 'they could not give their sole attention to their trade and commerce.' Hence according to Sharma it indicates to 'the feudalization of the merchants by turning them into some kind of landed intermediaries' [1980: 57-58].

Contrary to Sharma's conclusion, a perusal study of the same inscription provides completely a different picture. The Anjaneri plates inscription records a donation of eight villages by the Chālukya king Bhōgaśakti, to the god Viṣṇu installed as Bhōgēśvara in the city of Jaypura. In addition to the dues collected from the villages it was instructed that a rūpaka for each cart of the caravan entering or leaving the city of Jayapura at the time of the yātrā festival was also to be paid to the same deity. Furthermore, merchants (vaṇik) residing in Jayapura city were directed by the king to 'celebrate the yātrā festival of the god Vishnu for a whole fortnight in the month of Margaśīsha.' According to this inscription the management of this temple was entrusted to the merchants of Jayapura; and therefore they were required to manage not only the various services but also the landed property of the temple. In return the merchants residing in Jayapura were exempted from the octroi duty, and from providing boarding to royal officials. The inscription further records that some Tējavarman deposited hundred rūpaka with the merchants of Jayapura city (jayapuravaṇiḍanagarasya) in order to purchase land for the deity. The merchants were further instructed to pay the interest on the deposited money to purchase bdellium so that it could be use to worship the deity year after year [Mirashi 1955: 146-154]. This inscription clearly shows that though merchants managed the various services as well as landed property of the temple, but such association with the temple management indeed helped these merchants to secure a duty free trade thereby more profit. It is also noticeable that the merchants coming from other regions (those who were not the resident of Jayapura) had to pay one rūpaka on each cart to the deity, at the time of the yātrā festival, in addition to other cesses. In this way association with the Viṣṇu temple also provided a dominating position in the local markets to the merchants of Jayapura. At the same time such

association with temple management most likely would have extended a much higher social status to them- something for which they were depended upon Buddhist sanghas earlier.

Seṭṭhis appear in Buddhist literature more frequently in a closer association with the king and royal court. The Kalyāṇa-Dhamma-Jātaka[6] talks about a Bodhisattva, who was born as a son of a seṭṭhi in the city of Banaras; and inherited seṭṭhiṭṭāna after his father's death, and became a seṭṭhi (Atīte Bārāṇasiyaṁ…Bodhisatto seṭṭhikule nibbattitvā vayappatto pitu accayena seṭṭhiṭṭānaṁ pāpuṇi). He is also mentioned as mahāseṭṭhi; and according to the story this seṭṭhi renounced the world with the permission of the king [Cowell and Rouse 1895: 44-45; Fausbøll and Rhys Davids 1963: 63-65]. Ivo Fisher points out that the term mahāseṭṭhi generally was used in Jātaka stories for a seṭṭhi present at the king's court as 'a respectful form of address than an expression designating the office of Lord High Treasurer…' He further adds that the term seṭṭhiṭṭāna (i.e. 'position of a seṭṭhi') has been used for the seṭṭhis residing in cities or towns and providing important private services to the king in financial matters particularly.

It also appears that the king could appoint anyone to the seṭṭhiṭṭāna usually on the basis of person's wealth. In this way, financial 'services rendered to the king gave the position of seṭṭhi the significance of an office, and this was probably the original sense of the term seṭṭhiṭṭāna' [Fisher 2001: 180-183]. It does not make a seṭṭhi a salaried official of the king and seṭṭhiṭṭāna a state-administrative office, rather suggests a closer association of a seṭṭhi with the royal court as kings depended upon these for financial services and help. In fact, in Pali canonical texts and Jātakas '…the seṭṭhi, as the leader of the mercantile community, appears as one of the closest friends and associates of the king, but does not figure in the list of rājabhoggas, i.e. king's paid officers'[Chakravarti2002:102].

The same story again appears in the seventh century AD Buddhist text Jātakamāla (*circa* 700 AD) under the title: Seṭṭhi-Jātaka or Śreṣṭhi-Jātaka with significant changes in the narrative. This story mentions that once a Boddhisattva was rājña-śreṣthi (rāja- śreṣṭhi) who was famous for his learning, knowledge, huge wealth and charity. Besides this he was also honoured with the status or title of a gahapatirattna/gṛhapatirattna. In this story also the seṭṭhi is mentioned as going to the king for taking permission to renounce the world. But, in this story contrary to the earlier version, when the seṭṭhi met the king and expressed his desire to renounce the world, the king first became alarmed and then with affectionate words persuaded the seṭṭhi not to renounce.

The king said: 'What ails you that, while I am living, who love you more than yours friends and kinsmen, you should want to withdraw to the forest, as if I were unable to relieve you from the pain either by my wealth or my policy or my great power?' The seṭṭhi replied that: 'You are accustomed to show your attachment and gratitude to your loyal servants (bhṛtyajanah[7]), as becomes you, I know; yet what to a homeless mendicant would be the use of money…' Finally the seṭṭhi successfully convinced the king and became a mendicant [Speyer 1971: 164-172; Mishra,2006:191-200].[8]

In the Śreṣṭhi-Jātaka of Jātakamāla contrary to the original story the seṭṭhi is now mentioned as a rāja- śreṣṭhi, and gahapatirattna. Interestingly he is also mentioned as a loyal servant (bhṛtyah) of the king. The term rāja- śreṣṭhi as pointed out by Ranabir Chakravarti refers to a royal merchant whose presence became 'more numerous and regular in the early medieval times, particularly in the Deccan and south India…They occasionally acted as suppliers/procurers of luxury items and war animals for rulers…[and in some cases] they enjoyed certain administrative rights as Paṭṭanasvāmī and could also

impose forced labour' [Chakravarti 2002: 110]. In this story the seṭṭhi is mentioned as a gahapatirattna[9] most likely to show his importance for the king as a source of wealth and other resources. This change in the position of a seṭṭhi as indicated by the Śreṣṭhi-Jātaka of Jātakamāla suggests their increasing association with royal administration by the mid first millennium AD onwards. This point is further supported by the Mṛichhakaṭika (The Little Clay Cart, *circa* 3rd to 5th century AD) of Sūdraka. This text shows the participation of śreṣṭhi/seṭṭhi (as a guild president) and kāyastha (scribe) in the royal judiciary. In this text they are mentioned as assisting the Judge (adhikarṇika) during the trial of a caravan trader (sārthavāha), named Cārudatta, who was also a brahmana (dvipra) [Ryder 1905: 133; Mishra 2011: 411-470]. In a similar way a story in Vasudevahiṇḍi (circa 600 AD) mentions about a dispute regarding a deceased merchant's property between his pregnant wife and her brother-in-laws, who wanted to occupy the property of their deceased brother. Though the matter was reported in the king's court, it was transferred to a seṭṭhi, named Taraga as it involved merchants. The seṭṭhi entitled the lady as the owner of the property if a boy would bear to her [Jain, 1977: 396]. It indicates that perhaps seṭṭhis were increasingly appointed particularly to look into the legal matters pertaining to the merchant community by the kings as they were the representatives of merchant community in the royal court. In a similar way the five copper plates inscriptions from Damodarpur mention about the chief merchant of the city (nagara-śreṣṭhin), the leader of the caravan traders (sārthavāha), chief artisan (prathma-kulika), and chief-scribe (prathma-kāyastha) as being associated with the district authority (viśayapati) of the local-administration of Kōṭivarsha viśaya. One of the important points noticeable here is that these five inscriptions covered a period of almost hundred years (from AD 443-44 to 533-34), which means the continuous functioning of nagara-śreṣṭhin, sārthavāha and prathma-kulika, as a member of the local level administration in northern Bengal (Puṇḍravardhana) [Basak 1919-20: 113-145].

The Anjaneri plates inscription (*circa* 8th century AD) also shows the importance of the merchants for the king who required their support for the development of the re-established city Samagiripaṭṭana along with Chandrapurī and four villages (pallikās) which were previously destroyed. The reason of their destruction is not clearly mentioned in the inscription. In this inscription the king Bhōgaśakti addressed the Ela śreṣṭhin and Karapura śreṣṭhin who were the chief representatives of the merchants (vaṇik) residing in Samagiripaṭṭana. They were instructed that the merchant-inhabitants of this city were exempted perpetually from the octroi duty in the entire kingdom of the Chālukyas. In addition to it, Bhōgaśakti declared not to confiscate the property of a sonless (aputtra) diseased merchant residing in this city. Furthermore they were exempted from the tax collected to lodge and board a royal servant. Though the merchant residing in Samagiripaṭṭana were exempted from several taxes and duties but for different crimes like adultery, violent offence against an unmarried girl and against labour-women, injury to the head or ear etc punishments as well as fines were also instituted by the king through this inscription. But the final decision regarding the punishment or fines in the city of Jayapura was remained in the hands of eight or sixteen Mahallakas who were the respectable elders of the same town [Mirashi 1955: 154-159].

It shows that to make the re-established town and villages economically viable the king needed the support of the merchants and their representatives; hence provided several exemptions to them as far as trade was concerned. It is possible that elder merchants of the town constituted the group (council?) of eight or sixteen Mahallakas; and therefore, according to D. C. Sircar [1974: 278-279] such 'reference to the fixation of the fines by the city elders probably suggests that the merchants were empowered to realise the prescribed fines' by the king.

Conclusion

It appears from above that control over vast landed property enabled the gahapatis to invest in trade particularly in agricultural products. And as a result there emerged a class of seṭṭhis-gahapatis, seṭṭhis, and other types of merchants which in several cases continued to control land in spite of trade becoming their main profession. It shows that the merchants always had vested interests in landed property as it was a source of greater wealth and prestige. As cities depended upon countryside for food and related items, trade in agricultural products always remained a crucial part of trading patterns in ancient India (It is also true in case of present times). Control over land in such a scenario would have ensured constant supply of trading items (agricultural products) or in other words greater control over trade of merchants particularly of gahapatis and seṭṭhis.

No doubt trade in luxurious items also constituted a greater part of ancient trading system but so is true with the agricultural items. This wealth earned from landed property as well as trading endeavours enabled the merchants to make huge donations to Buddhist sanghas which provided an ideological support to their business activities and a higher social status as it was not available to them in Vedic brahmanical system. In fact, both were depending upon each other for a long time.

Buddhist monasteries located in different parts of the subcontinent worked as a halting station, safe and peaceful, for travelling merchants and artisans. At the same time donations to sanghas made possible for the monks to continue pursuing the path of salvation set up by the Lord Buddha. During the earlier phase of Buddhism it was not the worship and performance of rituals, rather was a help to monks in their pursuit of salvation which was propagated as a means to accrue merit. Hence all the inscriptions recording donations were aimed to provide food, shelter, medicine and clothes to monks. The sangha was never a competitor of merchants. Though land was donated to sangha but it was in almost all cases in the form of gardens or cultivable fields.

The situation began to change in the early centuries of Christian era with the donations of cultivable landed property as well as villages to sanghas, and soon also, to temples and individual brahmanas by the ruling authorities. No doubt merchants did make donations of cultivable land to sanghas but it no where appeared to be a donation with complete rights–judicial or administrative–over the property. It was most likely the income from the agricultural fields in the form of various dues that was to be used for the upkeepofthemonks.

Once the landed property began to be given by the rulers, with various administrative-and-judicial rights over the land or village, it gradually transformed the sangha into a landed magnate and ended its dependency upon the laity (gahapatis, seṭṭhis and others). As a result sangha or in technical terms Buddha emerged as a competitor of erstwhile big landowners. Increasing land grants to sanghas, temples, brahmanas and sāmantas hampered the control of gahapatis and seṭṭhis over land.

Though gahapatis disappeared but merchants including seṭṭhis continued to function and in some cases they also remained associated with landed property. From this it seems that by mid first millennium AD with the emergence of sanghas, temples, brahmanas and sāmantas as the big landowners, the erstwhile rich peasant proprietors, who could be assigned the epithet of gahapati, disappeared. And with them disappeared the use of gahapati epithet. At the same time, transformation of sanghas into landed magnates severed their relationship with the merchant community including seṭṭhis.

Therefore, it becomes more logical on the basis of above discussion to argue that it was not merely the revival of Brahmanism during the first millennium AD which affected the popularity of Buddhism; rather it appears that it was the emergence of sangha or Buddha as landed elite, which made it a competitor of erstwhile land owners, who in fact were among the biggest patrons of the sangha itself so far. It also appears from above discussion that though seṭṭhis maintained a closer association with the kings and royal courts in the early historic period, but by the mid first millennium AD onwards we frequently find their active participation in state administration in various capacities. Where some of the seṭṭhis extended their services in judicial matters, some others participated in the functions of the local administrative units; and likewise some of them also assumed the position of rāja-śreṣṭhi. But it does not mean that seṭṭhis gave up trading activities; in fact it appears that they took up these administrative positions to further secure their material interests.[10]

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