Perceptions of Forest based Agriculture in Early Historic Northern India in a Buddhist Text: A Study of *Milindpañho*

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Abstract: *The Milindpañho, a text of the c. 1st century AD, is a non-canonical text related to the Pāli canon of Theravāda Buddhism. The Milindpañho is an account of the conversation between Milinda, the king of Sagala and Nāgasena. Buddhist literature provided ample knowledge of forest and animal activities. In this context, Milindpañho provides essential information about animals in different contexts of cultures. It also provides information for agricultural operations based on removing forests and bringing uncultivated regions under cultivation. As this research paper relies on the primary source, its objective primarily seeks to produce a prolegomenon for a representational pattern of the forest-based resources and creatures expressing a specific symbolism and character in the mainstream of society. This study also highlights the forest monk tradition and how it is endowed with how many qualities a monk accomplishes in arahantship. This paper also deals with how Buddhist tradition prefers the urban space.*

Keywords: *Forest, Animals, Agriculture land, Trade Route, Silk Route etc.*

Introduction

The *Milindpañho*, a text of the c.1st century AD,[1] is a non-canonical text related to the Pāli canon of Theravāda Buddhism. Basically, the *Milindpañho* is an account of the conversation between Milinda, the king of Sāgala and Nāgasena. The city of Sāgala was situated in a beautiful landscape that was beautified by mountains full of leisure gardens, beautiful rivers, and forests.[2] The city Sāgala (modern Siālkot) has been identified as a 'peaceful' place '*gaja-haya-ratha-patti*'[3] counterparts of four 'wings of an army' representing hundreds of thousands of magnificent dwellings like crests of snowy mountains: it was filled with elephants, horses, chariots and pedestrians. The *Milindpañho* is well conversant with the agricultural products, forest animals, forest-based resources and the technological behaviour of the society. From the earliest time, the forests have played an important role in establishing a civilised society as a resource-based factor. *Araṇya* and *grāma* are juxtaposed as binaries where *Araṇya* is the

refuge of exiles, *demons* and *rakṣasas* and shrines of the Buddhist monks, hermitage of *risis* are set so deep in the forest that is almost another world, standing in sharp contrast to *grāma* constituted of cultivators and traders. The hermitage serves as a transitional area, bridging the *Vana* and *Kṣetra* ecologies. Nonetheless, it may be viewed as a forerunner of what eventually grew into *Agraharas-land* concessions to Brahmanas in woods and wastelands, as well as grants of cultivated land. The habitat was never far from the forest. According to the Buddhist canon, the territory beyond the settlement and its edges is a forest. Various nomenclatures for forests are present in the various textual and epigraphic sources. The forest is referred to as *Araṇya, Vana, Aṭavi, Jaṅgala*, and *Kuriñci. Vana* and *Araṇya* are typically used to describe forests in the Buddhacharita.[4] However, *Vana* can also refer to other types of spaces. Along with *kānana and udyāna,* it is used for pleasure gardens or parks-manicured spaces with pavilions and ponds.[5] In the Amarakoṣa, for forest, the term used is *aranyāni, vipina, kānana, hgana, satra* and so on. These names suggest that forests were integral to the life of the people. The existence of the forest people is viewed as contradictory to the growth of civilisation if civilisation is understood as the activities of an established society. Subsequently, the forest, as the habitat of exiles and renouncers, has been romanticized as a sphere of peace and tranquillity providing an atmosphere of intellectuals' solitude, but forest dwellers have always been looked upon as living beyond the social pale as *āṭavikas* or *rakṣasas*.

Spirit of Enquiry

Forests, a zone of emerald wilderness, have sheltered trees, wildlife, and humankind for ages. Deforestation has been a part of India's forest history, as it has been in any other country. There are several natural causes for the degradation of significant areas of forest. But man's responsibility for the destruction of the forest is the greatest. Man was forced to rely on natural resources from the beginning of human civilisation. He had to remove the jungles and trees to make way for pastures and crops. The *Milindpañho* conceived of 'the jungles turned into open country.'[6] It further speaks of the individual making a land fit for cultivation by clearing the forest and becoming the owner (bhūmisāmiko) thereof. For communication between the villages to each other, Appropriate routes had to be constructed for their chariots and carts to pass. For this purpose, extensive forest tracts were cleared. As human settlement expanded, forest loss continued to result in additional fields and pastures. So, since the beginning of history, human civilisation has survived and thrived at the expense of forest wealth, resulting in the depletion of enormous expanses of forests over the years. Unlike the Mauryan period, we have not seen any state efforts to extend the area cultivation during this period. However, with the establishment of Mauryan Imperialism, the forest became more effectively controlled by the state. In Kautilya's Arthaśāstra[7], it is evident that the state authority fully recognized the significance of forest resources for the prosperity of the statecraft. Consequently, regulations were established to ensure their proper management and utilization. According to Kauṭilya, the land which is not used as agricultural land should be used as pastoral land, garden, elephant forest, deer forest, and *Tapovana* for the Brāhmaṇas. There is hardly any scope to deny that under the Mauryas, there were more organised efforts for the colonisation of uncultivated tracts of land. *koñcanāda,* a technical word used for an elephant's trumpeting, " in etymological play with the koñca", a word used by the elder in the next sentence meaning heron.[8] A reference to a similar experience of self-determines the presence of camel, ox and donkey, which seems identical. Plough-ox, by its branding, recognises it through its distinguishing mark.[9] The elephant craft, horsemanship, chariot craft, archery, and swordsmanship have been reflected in the text. The rhinoceros horn compared with the self-dependent, without a teacher, faring alone like the rhinoceros' horns.[10] because the plants and animals constituted the

intimate associates of ancient people in India, a spirit of enquiry very likely grew among them as the various wild animals or domestic animals were present near their dwelling places. In the *Milindpañho,* a lot of domesticated and wild animals have been listed during the conversation. The text references various biological differences among animals, highlighting the diversity in their modes of birth. Some are born from eggs, others from embryos, moisture, or through spontaneous generation;[11] It mentions the wide variety of creatures in the world, including footless beings, bipeds, quadrupeds, and those with many legs;[12] there are in the world (spirits). The text also lists numerous types of beings, such as spirits, demons, demon-men, bird-men, titans, cobras, fairy birds, deer, sheep, pigs, tigers, lions, bears, leopards, hyenas, jackals, and wild dogs. The text references various biological differences among animals, highlighting the diversity in their modes of birth-some are born from eggs, others from embryos, moisture, or through spontaneous generation. It mentions the wide variety of creatures in the world, including footless beings, bipeds, quadrupeds, and those with many legs. The text also lists numerous types of beings such as spirits, demons, demon-men, titans, bird-men, large snakes, cobras, fairy birds, and various domesticated and wild animals like oxen, buffaloes, camels, donkeys, goats, sheep, deer, pigs, lions, tigers, leopards, bears, wolves, hyenas, wild dogs, and jackals.

Additionally, it refers to an assortment of birds, precious metals, and gemstones like gold, silver, pearls, mother of pearl, quartz, corals, rubies, cat's eyes, lapis lazuli, diamonds, and crystals. The text also enumerates various materials, including iron ore, copper, bronze, linen, silk, cotton, coarse hempen cloth, canvas, and wool, along with different types of grains such as rice, paddy, barley, millet, rye, beans, wheat, kidney beans, masa beans, sesame, and vetch. The passage further discusses a wide range of scents, such as those derived from roots, hardwoods, softwoods, bark, leaves, flowers, fruits, and everything else that produces a scent. It mentions different types of vegetation like grasses, creepers, reeds, trees, and medicinal plants, which are considered the rulers of the forest, as well as natural features like rivers, mountain slopes, the sea, and marine life, including fish and turtles. In ancient times, the defence of the country heavily relied on forest resources. Hardwoods were particularly crucial, as they were stored and used to construct palisades for the protection of cities. This practice is evident from the Indica of Megasthenes. The hilts were made of rhinoceros, buffalo horns, elephant tusks, wood, and bamboo roots. A male jackal is addressed as *Jambuka*. A *cock* has been discussed in the *Milindpañho,* which represents the time. As the cock rises at the right and proper time.

Agriculture was also an important facet of the economic life of the people. The traditional methods of clearance of forests, either by burning or by tree-felling, helped in the expansion of agriculture but also displaced many *araṇyacaras* who gradually took on sedentary agriculture and were rarely accorded any dignity and honour in the *varṇa-jāti* social norms. The marginality of the forest and the forest people remained an almost perennial theme in the long-term history of the subcontinent.[13] In his article "The Other of Civilisation: Portrayals of the Forest in Early India," Ranabir Chakravarti demonstrated that the Arthaśāstra referred to communities such as *Vāgurika, Pulinda, Śabara,* and *Caṇḍāla* as forest people *(araṇyacaras)*. The *antyavasāyins*, who are evidently at the periphery of the sedentary agrarian society, are the same individuals who are referred to as such in the subsequent Dharmaśāstra texts of Manu and Yājñavalkya.[14] A reference to grain storage by the agriculturist, the householder, after ploughing and seeding, would fill his granary with all sorts of wheat, rice, paddy, barley, dry grains, oil seeds, beans, peas, and edible seeds. This is from the termination of whatever is the cause. Cultivation by the ploughing and harvesting of crops has been cited.[15] The work of harvesting barley, grabbing a handful of barley in the left hand and a sickle in the right, implies the availability of better types of equipment and implements, making it simpler to enhance agriculture and clear the forests.[16] The technique of irrigating the paddy fields through canals, fencing the field by

the embankments to keep the water inside, and bringing the rice to maturity, also finds its reference in *Milindpañho*.[17]

The *Milindpañho* suggests that *gahapati* was the owner and controller of the primary means of production in the form of land. In *Milindpañho* there is a specific reference to the *gahapati* as the sole manager and controller of the property.[18] The *gahapati* is not congruent with the Brahmanical caste theory. Sometimes the forest was handed over a gift; for instance, one of the rich *gahapati* Anāthapiḍaka made a gift of the pleasure garden *Jetavana* to Gautama Buddha.[19] As we find that the *Milindpañho* refers to the *brāhmaṇa-gahapati* seven times[20] while the *brāhmaṇa-gāma* (brahmana-village) as trice.[21] The context suggests that the term *brāhmaṇa-gahapati* refers to the *brāhmaṇa* based on the land in villages which were probably inhibited almost entirely by *brāhmaṇa*. The *brāhmaṇa-gahapati* performs similar functions in the *brāhmaṇa-gama* as the gahapati in the rural economy, and they were associated directly with agriculture as managers of agricultural operations. The *Milindpañho* refers to a *seṭṭhi* (merchant) of Pāṭaliputra who was on his way back to the city with five hundred waggons. Here the concept of *seṭṭhi-gahapati* can be noticed as the person has a huge amount of tradable items. The *Milindpañho* refers to the presence of a carpenter preserving a piece of timber to make it straight and quite clear (of twists and knots). The presence of carpenters indicates that the rural economy of various families depends upon their own specialisation in carpentry.[22] In fact, the *seṭṭhi-gahapatis were* city-based affluent householders, who owned land property in villages, which they managed as 'absentee landlords.' Frequent references to *seṭṭhi* in the *Milindpañho* indicate the crystallisation of this process.[23] The *Milindpañho* indicates the association of *gahapati* with the state as well. The two references in the text depict the gahapati as one of the seven treasures of the state or the king. It is interesting to find the word 'treasurer' here instead of the word householder (*gahapati*). Another reference indicates the gahapati as the *ratnam (gahapatiratnam)*: "O king, there are seven treasures of the kings of kings-the treasurer of the wheel, and the treasurer of the elephants, and the treasurer of the women, and the treasurer of the finance minister, and the treasurer of the advisor." The seven treasurer of the state or the kings appears to be symbols of sovereignty which imply that gahapati was regarded as being intrinsic to kingship. He was a prized and valued possession representing the economy. Without sovereignty, it would be meaningless. Thus, the association between the gahapati and the state is evident. Indeed the very structure of the inner aspect of the peasant societies is contingent on their relationship with the larger entity, in so far as the encapsulating state legitimises and enforces the property relationship on which the internal differentiation is based. It established a whole paraphernalia of law and order which regulates transactions in property and commodities and impinges on a range of relationships between individuals and groups within peasant societies as well as those between individuals and groups within peasant societies and those of the outside world. The two terms – the *gāmini* (village headman) and the *gāmasāmika-* occur in the Pali texts. It has been suggested that the *gāmini* represented the political wing of the *gahapati* category. It may be understood that the *gāmasāmika* combined the economic and political functions as the official head of the village and also provided a linkage for the gahapati with the power structure outside the village at the same time. It can also be noted that this post is not hereditary, but the tendencies to the effect are already emerging and developing. The *Milindpañho* informs us that every village had its slaves, men and women, wage-earners (*bhatakas*) and hired labourers (*kammakāras*). They were likely to have been in the service of the whole village community as well as of individual families. Patanjali speaks of a landowner supervising ploughing land by five hundred labourers, and *Manusmṛti* refers to servants of peasants. In fact, the *seṭṭhi-gahapati* were city-based affluent householders who owned the land property in the villages, as the 'absentee landlords' by letting their property on a tendency basis to those who could cultivate it on condition of giving a

share of harvest to the owner. The *Milindpañho* frequently refers to many *gahapatis who laboured, plough, sowed,* and reaped on their field. They are peasants who have their lands and work on them. Their fields are the source of their economy as they produce and sell it in the market. Usually, this type of peasant (*kassaka*) removes defects in the soil, weeds, thrones and stones – and then by ploughing and sowing and irrigating, and fencing and watching and reaping and grinding will become the owner of the much more land, which responsible for reducing their beggary and misery too. It reflects the ability of peasants to be self-skilled and self-dependent. This reference to self-possession and private ownership reflects the pattern of ownership pattern.

The reference of the punishment found in a city is directed to give punishment outside the city (i.e., in a forested area), which means that the place also provides shelter to these types of people. Apart from the agricultural produce department, another department of city buildings has city architects. When they wanted to build a city, they first looked at a district which was likely to have nearer forest areas to be clear near the other settled areas. That should be level, not high, not low-lying, free of gravel and stone, secure, irreproachable, and lovely, and if it needs to be level, after clearing the stumps of trees and thorns, he may build a city there. This reference from the texts exemplifies the clearing of the forest areas. The formation of a city is not a simple process. It is determined by a large number of technocrats and bureaucrats to develop the city finely and regularly, with deep moats and enriching walls, strong city gates, watch towers, and ramparts, numerous crossroads, squares, and junctions, and places where three or four roads meet, the main roads clean, and roads moving in-between the forested areas, adorned with a variety of deva shrines. After a while, a city may become affluent and prosperous, well-stocked with food, secure, successful, joyful, free of misfortune, accident, and packed with all types of people-there come to reside in the city many nobles warriors, brahmans, merchants, workers; mahouts, riders on the horse back, charioteers, pedestrians, archers, swordsmen, standard-bearers, camp marshals, administrators of supplies, mighty princes, storm troops, valiants like great beings, warriors wearing armour; sons of slaves, sons of respectable women, companies of wrestlers, rice-cooks, confectioners, barbers, bath attendants, smiths, garland-makers, workers in gold, workers in silver, workers in lead, workers in tin, workers in copper, workers in alloys, workers in iron, workers in jewels, weavers (*pesakāra*), potters, salt makers, tanners, cartwrights, ivory-workers, ropemakers, comb makers, cotton thread spinners, bow makers, makers of bow string, fletchers, painters, dye makers, dyers, weavers, tailors, cloth merchants, perfume-dealers, faggot-gatherers, hirelings, cake-sellers, egg-sellers, meat sellers, milk-sellers, dancers, actors, slave girls who draw water from the wells, people from Scythia, and Bactria, from China and Cilata, from Ujjain, from Bharu-kaccha, from kāsi and kosala and Aparanta, from Magadha, from Sāketa, from Surattha, from Pāvā, from kotumbara, and Madhura, from Alexandria, Kashmir and Gandhāra.[24]

Conclusion

The contextual analysis of the *Milindpañho infers* that the land had been mainly in the possession of individual peasants. As regards the extension of the area of cultivation by clearing the forested land, state efforts seem to have been replaced by individual efforts. The *Milindpañho* refers to the individual person who clears the forest and takes other steps to make the land for cultivation. But it would be wrong to think the idea of state ownership was absent. The *Milindpañho* recognises the king's ownership of all the towns, seaports, etc., which are present on the earth. This may indicate territorial sovereignty. The *Milindapañho* mentions the terms such as *Gahapati, brāhmaṇa-gahapatis, Gahapati-kassako, kuṭipurise, gāmasāmika, hālakiya, gāmini, and dāsa-kammakāras.*

Notes

1. All references of the *Milindpañho* are from the *Questions of king Milinda* (translated by) T. W Rhys Davids, Part I-II, (*Sacred Book of the East*, Vols. 35 & 36), Delhi (8th reprint, 2011). Basically, the *Milindpañho* is an account of the conversation between Milinda, the king of the Sagala and Nāgasena. (G. P. Malatasekhara, *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, Vol. II, Delhi, 2007, pp. 636-637).

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8. Horner, I.B. *Milinda's Questions, Vol. I*; p. 105.

9. *Ibid*., Vol. 1, p. 109.

10. *Ibid*., Vol. II, p. 117.

11. *Ibid*., Vol. II, p. 85.

12. *Cf. Vin.* ii 110, iii. 47; *A.* ii. 73-73.

13. *Milinda's Questions,* Vol. I; I.B. Horner, p. 57. Also see, *Milindpañho*, Part-I, IV.1.27, p. 161; Shrimali, Krishna Mohan. *History of Pañcāla to c. AD 550, Vol. 1*, New Delhi, 1983, p.181.

14. Ranabir Chakravarthi, 'The Other of Civilization: Portrayals of the Forest in Early India', *Centre for Historical Studies,* Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, 2010, p.12.

15. *Milindpañho*, part-I, II.1.8, p.51; IV.2.16, P.215; Srimali, Krishna Mohan. *History of Pañcāla to c. AD 550,* Vol.1, New Delhi, 1983, p.181.

16. *Milinda's Questions*, Vol. II; I. B. Horner, p. 44.

17. *Milindpañho*, Part-I, VII.7.7, p. 367; VII.7.8, P. 367; Srimali, Krishna Mohan. *History of Pañcāla to c. AD 550,* Vol.1, New Delhi, 1983.

18. The Questions of King Milinda, part-I, II, 1.12, P.59; II.2.2, p.65; II.2-6, p.73; III.4.4, p. 105; Part-2, IV.5.1, p.1; IV.5.2, p. 13; IV.6.67, p. 203; IV. 8.87, p. 203; VI.1, p. 244.

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20. *The Questions of King Milinda*, Part-I, 1.15, p. 10; 1.20, p. 15; VI.2.20, P. 219; IV.2.22, p. 210; IV.2.25, p. 222; IV.2.26, pp. 222-223.

21. *Ibid*., 1.20, p.14; 1.23, p.18; IV.2.20, p.219.

22. *Milinda's Questions*, Vol. II; I.B. Horner, p. 233.

23. *The Questions of King Milinda*, Part-I, IV.1.47, p.184, 3.26, p. 247, 3.27, p. 248; Part-2, VI.1. p. 244.

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