

The Southern Highway and Its Significance for the Location of Kapilavastu

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ABSTRACT: In *Vatthugatha of Sutta-Nipata*, there is a legend which refers to a highway which joined Rajgir, the capital of Magadha, with Paithan, a place on the bank of River Godavari. This highway, known as *dakshinapatha* or Southern Highway, passed through various cities situated to the south of the Ganges. Since Shravasti, the capital of Koshala, and Kapilavastu, Buddha's birthplace, were on this highway, it implies that Koshala was the same as South-Koshala and that Kapilavastu was situated to the south of the Ganges. This contradicts what has been believed hitherto, that Kapilavastu was situated in the North-Koshala region. Identification of Buddha's birthplace in Nepal was based on this belief. Examination of various evidences confirms that Buddha's birthplace was indeed situated in South-Koshala.

Key Words: Shravasti, Koshala, *dakshinapatha*, Kapilavastu

Dakshinapatha

From a legend appearing in *Vatthugatha of Sutta-Nipata* we learn that there was a highway between Rajgir, the capital of Magadha and Paithan, a place on the bank of River Godavari¹. This highway was known as *dakshinapatha* or Southern-Highway. The legend is about a Brahmin ascetic named Bavari, who went from Shravasti, the capital of Koshala kingdom, to live in a river-island of Godavari. The island lay half in the territory of Assaka and half in the territory of Alaka. Once Bavari held a great sacrifice, in which he spent everything he had. Shortly thereafter, a Brahmin demanded 500 coins from him. When Bavari could not pay, the Brahmin cursed him saying that his head would split into seven pieces. Bavari was distressed at this. Adevata reassured him saying that the Brahmin was totally ignorant and that a Buddha had appeared on earth who could explain the terms 'head' and the 'splitting of it'. Bavari sent sixteen of his disciples to Shravasti to see Buddha and get clarification. The disciples travelled northwards and the first place they reached was Patitthana (present day Paithan). Then they passed through the cities of Mahissati, Ujjeni, Gonaddha, Vedisa, Vanasavhya, Kosambi, Saketa and finally reached Shravasti. By that time, Buddha had left Shravasti for Rajagaha (present day Rajgir), so they went there passing through the towns of Setavya, Kapilavastu (Kapilavastu), Kushinara, Pava, Bhoganagara, and Vesali. This is the route which was known as *dakshinapatha*.

Dr. Benimadhab Barua explains that the entire route of *dakshinapatha* was situated to the south of the Ganges². This is reasonable, since both Rajgir and Paithan are situated to the south of the Ganges. Had a part of the route been situated to the north of the Ganges, one would have to cross the Ganges twice. This is absurd and could not have been the case. Barua informs,

1. The Southern-Highway lent its name to the region through which it passed. The whole tract of land lying to the south of the Ganges and to the north of the Godavari was known, according to Buddha Ghosa, as *Dakshinapatha*.
2. *daksinatyejanapadepataliputramnamanagaram*, occurring in one of the stories of the Panchatantra, means that Pataliputra, the capital of Magadha, was in *Dakshinapatha*.
3. *Avantidakkhinapathe*, occurring in one of the passages of the *Vinaya Pitaka*, indicates that Avanti or present-day Malwa region was in *Dakshinapatha*.

The above means that all the places situated along *dakshinapatha* were collectively known by the same name, *dakshinapatha*, and were situated to the north of Godavari and to the south of the Ganges.

¹Mills, *Sutta Nipata*, pp. 296-304.

²Barua, *Brahmi Inscriptions*, p. 218.

We learn from the scriptures that Kapilavastu was situated in the country of Koshala and that Shravasti was the capital of that Koshala³. Fa-hien places Kapilavastu about 100 miles southeast of Shravasti⁴. If we could determine the location of Shravastitaking the help of *dakshinapatha*, then we can determine the location of Kapilavastu too. Kapilavastu being situated on the southern highway means that it was situated to the south of the Ganges. Determination of the location of Shravastiis of immense importance since it could indicate the exact location of Kapilavastu.

Koshala

There were two Koshalas in the past, North-Koshala and South-Koshala. North-Koshala was situated to the north of the Ganges and comprised of the 'Oudh' region of Uttar Pradesh. On the other hand, South-Koshala comprised of the undivided Bilaspur, Raipur and Sambalpur districts and a part of Ganjam⁵. These districts are situated in Mid-India and to the south of the Ganges. Therefore, Koshala situated on *dakshinapatha*, Koshala situated to the south of the Ganges, Koshala of Mid-India and South-Koshala are synonymous.

Contradiction in the Scriptures

That Shravasti and Kapilavastu were situated to the south of the Ganges is a revelation. Although it was all along known to those doing research on *dakshinapatha*, the researchers on Kapilavastu appear to have been ignorant of such research. They have been taking completely opposite stand and claiming Shravasti and Kapilavastu to be situated to the north of the Ganges and near the Himalayas. All the places which were identified with Shravasti and Kapilavastu in the past, are situated either in Nepal or in North Uttar Pradesh bordering Nepal.

The belief that Kapilavastu was situated near the Himalayas was based on a sentence found in Divyavadana⁶. It says, "*devaShakyanam kumara utpanno'stiHimavatparshvenadyaBhagirathyastireKapilasayarisherashramapadasyanatidure*" or 'Shakya prince has been born near the Himalayas, on the bank of River Bhagirathi, not very far from the hut of the ascetic named Kapila'. Some authors interpret Bhagirathi as the Ganges, but it cannot be so since neither North-Koshala nor South-Koshala is situated near the Ganges. It must be some other river.

It has been described in Buddhist texts that the original settlers of Kapilavastu, the forefathers of Buddha, were looking for an appropriate spot for building a city, when an ascetic named Kapila offered the spot where his hut was situated, to the princes, perceiving that place to be most appropriate⁷. The city was named Kapilavastu after the ascetic, as a mark of gratitude. The description 'not very far from the hut of the ascetic named Kapila' is said in that context, and it means that the spot of Buddha's birth or Lumbini was 'situated not far from Kapilavastu'. It does not offer us much idea about the location of Lumbini since we do not know where exactly Kapilavastu was situated. On the other hand, location of the Himalayas is well known. When it says that Buddha was born near the Himalayas and not very far from Kapilavastu, it was interpreted as 'Kapilavastu was situated near the Himalayas'.

We are therefore faced with an interesting contradiction in the scriptures about the location of Kapilavastu. Whereas some texts indicate Kapilavastu to be situated to the south of the Ganges, others indicate it to be situated to the north of the Ganges and near the Himalayas. Obviously one of them has to be wrong, although at present we are not sure which one.

Method

To resolve the contradiction, other sources of information were referred to, such as travel accounts of the Chinese pilgrims and archaeological findings. Information about Kapilavastu and Lumbini were gleaned from these and other sources, and analysed to determine which of the above was true.

Account of Fa-hien

After travelling through several countries, Fa-hien arrived at the city of Ki-jou-i situated on the bank of the Ganges. Thereafter, he crossed the Ganges and travelled three yojana to the south to arrive at a forest named A-lo. Then he travelled ten yojana to the southeast and arrived at Sha-chi. From Sha-chi he travelled eight yojana to the south and arrived at Shravasti, the capital of Koshala. On arriving at Shravasti, he describes that

³Watters, 'Kapilavastu', p. 536; Beal, Si-Yu-Ki, p.xliv.

⁴Beal, Si-Yu-Ki, p.xlviii-xlix.

⁵Barua, Brahmi Inscriptions, pp. 200-201.

⁶Cowell, Divyavadāna, p. 548.

⁷Thomas, Life of Buddha, p. 8.

country as a country of Mid-India⁸. This narration of Fa-hien clearly indicates that Shravasti was not situated near the Himalayas. First of all, he explicitly states that Koshalawas a country of Mid-India. This validates the Koshala of 'Mid-India' or South-Koshala narrative and goes against the 'near the Himalayas' narrative. Secondly, after crossing the Ganges he travelled only southward. This means that A-lo, Sha-chi and Shravasti were all situated to the south of the Ganges and therefore cannot be near the Himalayas.

Archaeological Findings

Regarding the archaeological sources, there is a reference to 'Koshala' in the Allahabad pillar inscription. It tells that King Samudragupta captured and set free twelve kings of south. One of them was King Mahendra of Koshala. According to Barua, South-Koshala was the first kingdom in *dakshinapatha*, against which Samudragupta directed his attack and defeated its king, Mahendra⁹. This corroborates that the Koshala situated on *dakshinapatha* was the same as South-Koshala.

It is interesting to note that the above inscription refers to the country vanquished by Samudragupta simply as 'Koshala' and not as 'South-Koshala'. This indicates that the vanquished country was known simply as Koshala and not as South-Koshala till that time. It cannot be argued that such naming was the result of ignorance or oversight. Samudragupta and his predecessor Chandragupta-I had suzerainty over a considerable part of Oudh¹⁰. Had Oudh been known as North-Koshala during Samudragupta's time, the newly acquired country would have been termed as 'South-Koshala' in the inscription, and not as 'Koshala', to avoid confusion with his existing territory, Oudh. We can therefore infer that Oudh came to be known as North-Koshala, and the vanquished Koshala was first labelled as South-Koshala, during a period subsequent to this inscription, i.e. subsequent to the fourth century CE. Prior to that, there existed only one Koshala, the Koshala on *dakshinapatha*, the country where Buddha was born.

Linguistic Analysis

We have shown above that the birthplace of Buddha should be located in South-Koshala. We arrive at the same conclusion when we analyse Buddhist texts from a linguistic point of view. Srilankan Buddhist literature is mostly written in Pali language. Rhys Davids argues that Pali was the language of Koshala, where initial Buddhist movement took the firmest root. Although Ashoka made efforts to spread Buddhism in Srilanka, it would not be correct to infer that Pali was the language of Magadha since the Buddhist canon had already been compiled in Koshalese by that time¹¹. Moreover, various dialects used in Ashokan inscriptions, which should be those used in Magadha during Ashoka's time, differ from Pali in respect of reduplication of consonants, which is a distinguishing feature of Pali.

Rhys Davids' contention finds support from Bhikku Bodhi, who suggests that Pali belongs to the same broad language family as what Buddha would have used in his teaching¹². This language should be Koshalese since Buddha belonged to Koshala. While both Rhys Davids and Bhikku Bodhi suggest Koshalese as the origin of Pali, neither has specified which Koshala was this. Apparently they believed it to be North-Koshala, which was thought to be the Koshala of Buddha by all the researchers of that time.

Regarding the question 'to which part of India did Pali originally belong?', Dr. Oldenberg suggests that the answer to this question, might be found by two methods: 1. by an investigation to determine the road by which the sacred texts written in Pali language were carried to Srilanka or, 2. an analysis of the ancient inscriptions, to find out the geographical limits within which grammatical peculiarities of Pali language were prevalent¹³.

With regard to the first, there is a view that Mahinda, who went as a missionary to Ceylon, took the sacred texts with him. But there are indications that Buddhism had been known to people of Srilanka much before Mahinda's visit, apparently, imported through the neighbouring coastal districts of the Deccan¹⁴. This is because the Sthavira School, which was predominant in Srilanka, did not exist anywhere in North India except at Gaya. However, it existed in the districts on the eastern shores of India, including Kalinga. This suggests that the Sthavira school of Buddhism might have advanced to Srilanka through one of these coastal districts. Dr. Oldenberg conjectures that the sculptures found in the Ganesha Gumpha and the Raja Rani

⁸Beal, Si-Yu-Ki, p. xlviii

⁹Barua, Brahmi Inscriptions, pp. 200-201.

¹⁰Smith, Samudragupta, p. 25.

¹¹Rhys Davids, Buddhist India, p. 11.

¹² Bhikku Bodhi, Buddha's Words, p. 10.

¹³Beal, Four Lectures, p. 45.

¹⁴Beal, Four Lectures, pp. 45-46.

caves at Khandagiri in Odisha, refer to the conquest of Srilanka by King Vijaya of Kalinga. Such conquest would have established an early connection between the two countries¹⁵.

The second method involves comparing the language of ancient inscriptions with Pali. Dr. Oldenberg found similarities between Pali and the language of the Nasik inscription of the mother of the Andhra king, Satakanni, and the language of the Khandagiri inscription of Kalinga king, Aira Mahameghavahana¹⁶. He therefore concluded that the Pali had its origin in the districts situated to the south of Vindhya.

The above clearly establishes that Pali was the language of Koshala and that it was spoken in the region south of Vindhya. In other words, it was the language of South-Koshala. This corroborates the conclusion we reached earlier that the Koshala of Buddha was the same as South-Koshala.

Resolution of Contradiction

We have seen above that there is overwhelming support for Buddha being born in 'Mid India' or 'South-Koshala'. On the other hand, we do not find any evidence in favour of the 'near the Himalayas' narrative except one sentence in Divyavadana.

In *Buddha Charita* written by Ashvaghosha, the birthplace of Buddha has been described as "a city surrounded by the beauty of a lofty tableland"¹⁷. In this book, Ashvaghosha has used the Himalayas as a symbol of greatness, and compared it with various objects including abstract concepts such as holiness, firmness, whiteness. It is therefore highly unlikely that he would describe surrounding of Kapilavastu as 'table land', had it been actually situated near the Himalayas.

There are many other Buddhist scriptures too, which put Buddha's birthplace in Majjhimadesa or Mid India¹⁸.

We have noted earlier that North-Koshala region was not known as Koshala until centuries after Buddha's birth. This is why we do not find mention about 'South-Koshala' or 'North-Koshala', in Buddhist scriptures; not even in those scriptures which were written during Ashoka's rule, although Ashoka's kingdom encompassed both the regions. If North-Koshala was not known as Koshala, then it could not have been the Koshala of Buddha.

Moreover, had Kapilavastu been near the Himalayas, Fa-hien and Hiuen Tsiang would have described this fact, but they have not. We can therefore conclusively rule out Kapilavastu being near the Himalayas.

Cause of Confusion

Now question arises, if Kapilavastu was not situated near the Himalayas, then why was it mentioned as being so in Divyavadana? The obvious answer is that it was the result of some kind of confusion. Watters says that the authors of Buddhist scriptures were generally not sure about the location of the Himalayas relative to Kapilavastu. While some texts put them twelve yojana to the north of Kapilavastu, some others put them to the east and the rest put them to the south of that city. Some authors even say that the first Buddhist council was held at the Himalayas, although they were actually held in Rajgir. This indicates that the depiction of Kapilavastu 'near the Himalayas' does not have much credibility. Watters insists that one is therefore not obliged to regard it to be actually situated as far away among the Himalayas¹⁹.

Watters, however, has not made any conjecture about the reason why this confusion had set in. One possible reason could be that there existed another hill near Kapilavastu which was confused with the Himalayas. One such hill is Gandhamardana Hill of Western Odisha, which was a part of South-Koshala region in the past. This hill is full of medicinal plants just like its Himalayan namesake. It is possible that the original scripture writer described Kapilavastu to be situated near this hill, which the subsequent scripture writers engaged in redrafting the text confused with the Gandhamardana Hill of the Himalayas²⁰.

Implication:

The finding that Kapilavastu was situated in South Koshala, is ground-breaking in nature. Till now Nepal's Tarai was being thought to be the birthplace of Buddha on the assumption that Buddha was born in North-Koshala. This article disproves that assumption. The implication is that the place which is presently identified with Buddha's birthplace is not the right place; its identification must have been arrived at by

¹⁵Beal, Four Lectures, pp. 46-47.

¹⁶Beal, Four Lectures, pp. 46-47.

¹⁷Cowell, Buddha Carita, Verse 1.2.

¹⁸Beal, Romantic Legend, pp. 26-27.

¹⁹Watters, 'Kapilavastu', p. 567.

²⁰Mishra, True Lumbini, Chapter 20.6.

mistake. On the other hand, the true birthplace of Buddha should be looked for in *Dakshinapatha*, to the South of the Ganges.

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