



Economy of Vihāras and their social responsibilities in early medieval society of eastern India

Dr. Amit Jha
Associate Professor
Department of History
Sri Aurobindo College (Day)
Delhi University Malaviya Nagar New Delhi 110017

Buddhist monasteries in India that were primarily centers of spiritual activities gradually developed as strong economic units controlling various resources of production. Although this development was discernible in western India as early as the beginning of the Christian era, it became more pronounced throughout the sub-continent from the sixth century onwards. Hence, the study of the economic function of the monasteries, which were among the major institutions through which the general economy had been organized, is essential for a proper understanding of the economic history of early medieval period i.e. from the end of the 6th century to the twelfth century A.D.

Moreover, from the very beginning many religious foundations had functioned as corporate bodies, and this feature, though undergoing modification from time to time remained the basis of their organisation¹. Therefore, the study of the economic functions of the religious institutions may also reveal how a corporate body, which was not primarily designed for secular affairs, evolved into one of the major economic institutions, while preserving its fundamental character and serving its original ideals. Many scholars who wrote on the economic history of early medieval India have, from time to time, called attention to the role of religious institutions in the economy of the period. Yet, most of the studies done so far on the subject are limited to the south Indian and north Indian temples.

The Buddhist *vihāras*, as centres of religious activity, always maintained a close contact with society. They were often founded, financed and maintained from lavish donations made by wealthy patrons. Although more valuable benefactions came from the royalty and the rich, patronage came from many strata of the society. The result of these munificent endowments was the development of these *vihāras* into property owning organisations with manifold economic responsibilities. With the involvement in economic activity the relationship between the *vihāras* and society also acquired new dimensions, resulting in extensive contacts between various *vihāras*, groups and individuals.

The epigraphic evidences clearly reflect that the large majority of religious endowments was in the form of land grants and thus landed property constituted the major source of income for most *vihāras*. From fourth century A.D. onwards, *vihāras* in eastern India were endowed with cultivated land as well as uncultivated land with several types of privileges and immunities. By the end of the seventh century A.D., a considerable amount of uncultivated land, particularly

¹ R.C.Mazumdar, *Corporate Life In Ancient India*, Third Edition, 1969, pp.271 ff.



in Bengal, is reported to have been donated to *vihāras* and to individual monks. For instance some land granted in the Gauhati copper plate of Indrapāla² was either unsettled (*aprāda*) or fallow (*khila*) land. The Gunaighar inscription³ (507 A.D.) describes the five plots of land donated to the Buddhist monastery as water logged and uncultivated. A clear example of the endowment of uncultivated land during the period under review is found in the grant recorded in copper plate of Lokanatha (c. 650 A.D.⁴). According to this inscription, king Lokanatha granted a forest region (*atāvi-bhukhanda*) without any natural or artificial boundaries to a *vihāra* of Arhantanarayana for *bāli*, *cāru*, *sātra* and also for the residence of monks (*arhanta*). In this instance, the monasteries in order to create a permanent source of income for worship and the maintenance of the institution, would have had to bring the forest land under cultivation, as otherwise the forest would not have yielded an adequate income.

The mention of the fact that the land was also to be used for the residence of the monks implies that a new settlement was expected to be set up there. The establishment of the *vihāras* and the settlements of monks would no doubt have attracted other settlers such as cultivator's artisans, etc., whose services the institution and the monks required. Thus by donating the uncultivated land the kings apparently expected the *vihāras* to take the initiative in opening new areas for settlement and production. The records available from the eighth century onwards do not mention the transfer of uncultivated land or forestland; this perhaps was due to the fact that most of the uncultivated land situated in areas with good communication and other facilities had already been brought under cultivation during the preceding period. Therefore, almost all the land grants belonging to this period are those recording the transfer of cultivated land.

These land grants also reveal that the rights of the *vihāras* over their land varied according to the nature of the grant; in certain cases the rights were limited merely to the collection of taxes, but in certain other instances the institutions enjoyed some property rights. Moreover, the enjoyment of property rights made it necessary for the *vihāras* to assume the responsibility of cultivating the land they held. Sometimes the *vihāras* themselves cultivated such land using the resources at their disposal, and in other cases the land was assigned to tenants who cultivated it on a sharecropping basis.

I-tsing⁵ informs us that certain Buddhist monasteries assigned land to tenants who cultivated it on share cropping basis; yet it is not known whether the tillers were temporary or permanent tenants. However, according to a remark made by Fa-hsien in the beginning of the fifth century, the kings and the gentry not only endowed the Buddhist monasteries with land, but also assigned to them husbandmen to cultivate the land. Although the exact status of the cultivators who are said to have been assigned is not clear, it may be argued that the reference was to permanent tenants who had already been cultivating the land before such transactions.

The Ashrafpur plates of Devakhadga throw some light on the position of some peasants

² *IHQ*, XXVI, p. 33f.

³ *Ibid.*, VI, pp.53-56, 11.29-30

⁴ *EI*, XV, 1919-20, pp.301 ff., 11.21-22..

⁵ J.Takakusu, *Records of the Buddhist Religion*, pp.61-62.



who cultivated monastic land. Grant no.1 speaks of some land ‘enjoyed by’ a certain Sarvatantara, but cultivated by a certain *mahāttāra* Sekhara and others⁶. In grant no.2, mention is made of some land ‘enjoyed’ by Sulabdha and others, but cultivated by Durggata and Rajatasa⁷. The plots mentioned in the two grants were actually owned by the king and the crown prince who took it away from the; ‘enjoyers’ of income, and donated to some Buddhist monasteries. Although the records indicate that the ‘enjoyers’ were changed as a consequence of the transfer, there is no mention of a similar change as far as the cultivators are concerned. This was presumably because the peasants who tilled the land under the previous landholders continued to do so even after it became the property of *vihāras*. This shows that some land owned by the *vihāras* was cultivated by permanent as well as temporary tenants. Most land grants recording the donation of the whole village stipulate that the land was granted along with the rights over pasture grounds, reservoirs, bushes thickets, forests, habitable lands, barren land, etc., The particular mention of these resources suggests that they were placed at the disposal of the beneficiaries, and it also raises the question whether the transfer of these rights affected the villagers. The forestland, which was normally situated outside the boundaries of the village, gave the villagers the timber and firewood they required. The *Mitāksara*⁸, which may be broadly ascribed to the period under review, enjoins that the pasture ground shall be allotted for cattle, according to the desire of the villagers. R.S.Sharma⁹ has pointed out that the villagers were allowed to use the pasture grounds, reservoirs, forests, etc., without making any payment to the state and once the rights over these resources were made over to the *vihāras* and to the monks, the villagers could no longer enjoy these advantages free of charge. Therefore, in his opinion, the transfer of these rights to *vihāras* ‘added to the burden of taxation on the villagers.

Though it is most probable that the transfer of rights over these resources entitled the donees to receive income from them, it is not certain whether these in fact added to the burden of taxes on villagers, as Sharma had suggested. Although Sharma maintains that the villagers could use these advantages without making payments to the state before the villages were donated, the king’s rights over at least some of the resources are explicitly mentioned in some early legal works. For instance Kautilya enjoins that the king shall exercise authority over fishing, ferrying and trading in the reservoirs¹⁰. The statement in the *Mitaksara* that pasture ground should be allotted to the villagers according to their wishes does not help us to determine whether the villagers could use it without making a payment.

Even the villagers, in early days could use pasture land for grazing their cattle without payment, it is possible that, with the extension of taxation over every possible sources of income, the rulers of our period also brought pasture grounds, which were directly connected with a major form of livelihood under taxation. In fact Al-Beruni in the eleventh century, clearly mentions that the Indian villagers who grazed their cattle on common pasture grounds had to pay a tax to the state. Therefore it is logical to suppose that these resources were mentioned in the

⁶MASB, I, no.1, 1905, pp.89-90,11.6-8.

⁷*Ibid.* 90—91,11.6-17.

⁸*Mitaksara*,pt.IV, ch. II, pp..20-21.

⁹R.S.Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, 1965, pp.115 ff.

¹⁰*Arthashastra*, II, 1.20-24.



grants because the state had already been receiving gift from them. Moreover, it is impossible for the king to grant to donees rights, which he does not himself possess. It is therefore unlikely that the transfer of these rights to *vihāras* should have resulted in the villagers being forced to make additional payments. However, the repetitive and conventional nature of the prescriptions needs to be kept in mind in virgin territories. The very act of donation was aimed at extending state authority in such areas¹¹. So in such cases the undoing of community rights would take place only gradually.

A striking feature of some of the land grants is the endowment of villages together with their inhabitants. The majority of grants made by the Bhaumakara rulers of Orissa, specifically mention several groups of people engaged in particular occupations. These grants often mention that the villages were transferred together with the weavers, milkmen, brewers and other subjects¹².

The most important problem relating to these types of endowments is what was actually meant by the transfer of villages to *vihāras*. And it is also necessary to examine the nature of the relationship between the villagers and the *vihāras* that came into the existence as a result of this type of transfer. These records do not contain any direct evidence that would help determine the precise social status of the people who are said to have been 'given' to *vihāras*. On the basis of some literary and inscriptional evidence, Lallanji Gopal¹³ concluded that at least in certain parts of India, during early medieval period, there was a tendency towards the emergence of a form of land tenure, which resembled the European manorial system based on feudal serfdom. He points out that, according to a story in the *Upamitibhāvaprapanckathā* of Sidharasi, a king named Karmaparinama is said to have put the entire population of a city which was his fief (*bhukti*) into cells and kept them there for a long time until they were rescued by another king¹⁴.

As to the the transfer of villages together with weavers, milkmen, brewers, and other subjects in certain Orissan records, Gopal mentions that the king also claimed 'some sort of ownership' over men of certain occupations and crafts and would often transfer his rights over them. He also adds that it was not a mere theoretical claim but was one of practical applications.¹⁵

As there is no positive evidence to support the assumption that the king had any 'manorial rights' or 'some sort of ownership' over the inhabitants of the villages he donated, the most important question is the actual meaning of these expressions that refer to the transfer of villages including the inhabitants. It is quite probable that the king could transfer the service of such persons who held state land on service tenure to *vihāras*. And therefore, if the brewers, weavers, cowherds, etc., had performed some service to the state in the past, such services could

¹¹ Herman Kulke, 'Fragmentation and Segmentation versus Integration', *Studies in History*, vol.IV, no.2,1982.

¹² *EI*, XXIX, 1951-52, pp.201 ff.1.28; *Ibid.*, XXVIII, 2.11 ff. !&; and B.Misra, *Orissa under the Bhauma kings*, 1934, p.41 i.24..

¹³ L.Gopal, *Economic Life in Northern India*, 1965, pp.18 ff.

¹⁴ L.Gopal, *Op.Cit.*, pp.18-19.; also in *Upamitabhāvaprapanckathā*, Cal.1899, pp.176-178.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*



of course be transferred. As D.C.Sircar has pointed out that in some parts of India there were (and still are) different classes of people such as priests, barbers, washermen, carpenters, etc., who held village land on condition that they should serve the village. Such services could be transferred to the donees without implying that the king had any manorial rights over those who performed the services as they could terminate these whenever they gave up the enjoyment of service land.

Although it is quite possible that king could transfer the service of those persons who held state land on service tenure, in case of the Orissan inscriptions (and also in the case of the Bengal inscriptions), it is important to note that the transfer involved the entire village population. Hence, there is no question of the transfer of only those who were engaged in certain particular occupations. Therefore, it would be reasonable to argue that, by mentioning that a village was granted together with its entire population, it was meant that the king's right to obtain taxes and labour from the villagers was also transferred. Presumably the weavers, cowherds and brewers were particularly mentioned because of the special economic importance of their occupation as a source of income and labour for the state. It is also important to note that the Orissan grant enumerate almost all the possible sources of income in the donated villages and it is in this context that the mention of the brewers cowherds, etc., has to be understood.

The *Agni Purana*¹⁶, which can roughly be assigned to the ninth or the tenth century A.D.¹⁷, mentions that artisans should work for the king a day every month, free of charge, and the labourers should work for him without any remuneration as long as they are fed. The *Agni Purana* is generally believed to have been compiled in Bihar or Bengal¹⁸. If this can be accepted it is possible to suggest that there existed certain royal right to free labour in eastern India. Perhaps the specification in some land grants from eastern India that land was donated free from all oppression (*pariharta-sarvva-pidah*) covered the king's rights over compulsory labour. As it had been known in other regions for such a long time, there is no reason to believe that it was not known in eastern India. It is more logical, therefore to think that the right to compulsory labour is what was meant by the transfer of villages together with their inhabitants. After the transfer of the right to exact free labour from the villagers would no doubt have improved the economic potential of the *vihāras*. Compulsory labour could have been profitably utilised in the cultivation of land and other productive purposes. We have no evidence to determine in what ways the transfer of this right changed the relationship between the villagers and the *vihāras*. Apparently this must have resulted in forming a new relationship between the two parties, as villages now had to serve the *vihāras* instead of serving the state.

The above mentioned sources also indicates that the *vihāras* had to maintain a large labour force, mostly permanent, consisting of various categories of functionaries for the performance of administrative and religious duties. For this service these persons received monastic land or a prescribed share of income from the land set apart for that purpose. Moreover,

¹⁶*Agni Purāna*, p.223-233.

¹⁷ B.Misra, *Polity in Agni Purāna*, Cal.,1965, pp.20-25.

¹⁸*Ibid.*



at least some of the servants of certain establishments were slaves. The employment of paid servants and slaves indicates that the Buddhist *vihāras*, apart from being significant landowners had developed into an organisation providing employment to a large number of people. With the right to exact compulsory labour from the villagers the *vihāras* must have become a major organisation with the authority to control a large section of labour force in their respective areas.

Most of the donatory inscriptions stipulate the purpose or purposes for which the endowments were made, these included functions such as the performance of worship, provision for the inmates the maintenance of lamps and the conservation of the buildings. Some of the records even specify what particular items were to be supplied out of the proceeds of the grant. For instance, the BodhGaya stone inscription¹⁹ of Rashtrakuta king Tunga Dharmavaloka mentions the dedication of a repository for aromatics and incense or a well scented (*gandha-kuti*) for the service of the Buddha by the Rashtrakuta king. The Talcher plates of Sivakara²⁰ also make similar specifications, mentioning that the income of the grant should be used for the supply of sandal paste, flowers, incense, lighting and also garments for the mendicants.

Hsuan Tsang refers to various food items and commodities used by the Buddhist monasteries. He mentions that when he took up residence at the Nālandā monastery, he received every day one hundred twenty *jāmbhira* fruits, twenty *arecanuts*, twenty nutmegs, a *tael* of camphor and a *tael* of *mahāsāli* rice, and in addition to this he was provided with three measures of oil a month and also butter and other articles according to his daily needs²¹. This statement may give a fair idea of the requirements of the resident monks at one of the most affluent monasteries at that time. Also according to Hsuan Tsang, the Nālandā monastery received hundreds of *piculs* of rice and several *catties* of butter everyday from the tenants of the monastic villages²². A part from the needs to provide for the maintenance of daily worship, construction and repair work was a major responsibility of the Buddhist *vihāras*. Thus it is apparent that as a result of the manifold functions it performed, the *vihāras* of this period had also become a major consumer whose requirements covered a wide range of commodities. Not all such items came directly in the form of donations. In most cases donations were in the form of land grants and monetary endowments, and it was the duty of the administration of the establishment to make use of the income accruing from the endowments to provide for the requirements.

Certain commodities such as rice, milk, butter, flowers, etc., could have been obtained directly from the land owned by the institutions, but it is very unlikely that all the *vihāras* owned villages that supplied all the commodities they needed. For instance, the large quantities of cloth that was needed for religious rituals and also for making garments for the inmates may not always have been produced in their villages. In such circumstances, the institution would have had to purchase those commodities they needed from other villages or in the open market. With the expansion of religious rituals, festivals and such other activities, and also the increase in number of inmates, as it was the case in most Buddhist monasteries, the demand for consumer

¹⁹ASR, vol.III, p.126.

²⁰ B.Misra, *Op.Cit.*, p.51.

²¹ S.Beal, *Life of Hsuan Tsang*, p.109.

²²*Ibid.* pp.112-113.



goods would also have increased. Thus the *vihāras*, which had large funds at their disposal, were a constant source of demand for the commodities produced in the surrounding area. In other words the *vihāras* were a reliable market for village produce. The *vihāras* had wider linkages and were part of a larger world, which shatters the notion of self-sufficient settlements in early medieval India²³.

From this discussion it may have become clear that as a result of the extensive property which it accumulated and the manifold economic activities it carried out, the *vihāras* eventually developed into a major centre for the concentration of wealth and also as one of the most important institutions through which the general economy was organised. This gave it a strong economic basis suitable not only for religious purposes but also for carrying out certain social activities. It assumed a role similar to Brahmanical settlements in agrarian expansion and organisation of society. However, Bina Jain believes that brahmanical temples stood ahead in competition with Buddhist *vihāras*. They (Hindu temples) were the most developed and richest institutions of the time²⁴.

CRAFTS :

The Jatakassuggests that in the earlier period there were potters villages, where various types of bowls, jars and vessels of all types were made²⁵. There is a reference to *Rajaka* (dyer)²⁶, who performed the work of dyeing after having washed the cloth. Dyes were made with blue, yellow, saffron and red colours²⁷. From the Jatakas we get information about the localised guilds of the industrialists and traders, such as *dantakaras*, *rajakas*, *peshkaras*, *kumbhakaras*, *tantukaras*, *karmakaras*, *vaddhakis*, etc²⁸. We are also told in the Buddhist literature about textile industry (in particular), weavers (*pesakāras*)²⁹ the loom (*tanta*)³⁰ weaving appliances (*tantabhandā*)³¹ and weaving (*tantavitāthanam*)³². Similarly the Buddhist literature tell us that the sick *bhikhus* were allowed to eat sugar and the healthy ones were permitted to drink it³³. It is therefore natural to presume that sugar industry might have been in a flourishing state due to the consumption of sugar and its juice by the Buddhist monks and general people of the period. Fa-hsien³⁴ has mentioned that in most *vihāras* in Eastern India, all the ecclesiastics were supplied with necessaries by the people, so that they had sufficient and lacked nothing. Hsuan Tsang³⁵, says that there were buildings where gathered there a thousand priest a double congregation of

²³ For a refutation of the idea of self-sufficiency of settlements, see B.D.Chattopadhyaya, *Aspects of Rural Settlements and Rural Society in Early Medieval India*, last two chapters. Also see B.P.Sahu (ed.), *Land System and Rural Society in Early India*, Introduction.

²⁴ Beena Jain, Guild organisation in Northern India (from earliest time to 12th c.AD.), p.2.

²⁵ *Jātaka*, III, 368, 378, 385, 508; V, 291.

²⁶ *Digha Nikāya*, I, p.51

²⁷ *Majjhima Nikāya*, I, p.51..

²⁸ A.N.Bose, *Social and Rural Economy of Northern India*, pp.233-234.

²⁹ *Jātaka*, I, 356.

³⁰ *Sacred book of the East*, XIII, 28; *Digha Nikāya*, 51; *Jātaka*, IV, 475.

³¹ *Jātaka*, IV, 475.

³² *Vinaya*, II, 135.

³³ *Jataka*, I, 356..

³⁴ *Travels of Fa-hsien and Sung Yun, Fo-kwo-ki (Records of Buddhist Countries)*, 2nd ed., 1964, p.120-126.

³⁵ *Si-Yu-Ki*, by S.Beal, 1981, 130-37.



lay people and saints made their offerings of the four necessary things and provided gratuitously all the articles for use. According to another important statement in Hsuan Tsang's³⁶ account, two hundred householders of the villages that belonged to the Nālandā monastery contributed several hundred *piculs* of rice and several hundred *catties* of butter and milk to the monastery everyday. These supplies were meant for the use of the inmates. In a similar statement, I-tsing³⁷ mentions that when he first visited a monastery near Tamralipti, he observed that some tenants of the institution having brought some vegetables they had produced to the monastic premises divided the vegetables into three parts, one of which was handed to the monks. However, these statements made by the Chinese pilgrims seem to suggest that firstly agriculture flourished along with its allied sector i.e. nascent agro-based industry etc., Certain commodities such as rice, milk, butter, flower, etc., could have been obtained directly from *vihāra's* land, but it is not imperative that *vihāras* owned villages that supplied all the commodities they needed. For example clothes required for religious rituals and for general use of the inmates, may not have been produced in the nearby villages. In such circumstances the *vihāras* would have had to purchase those commodities from other villages or in the open market. Therefore, it appears that *vihāras* did not actively participate in the production side of this sector. But they merely served as the consumer market for the goods produced in those village handicraft industries.

There are some references to a few professional crafts being practiced in the *vihāras*. According to I-tsing³⁸ "the medical science one of the five sciences (*vidya*) in India, shows that a physician having inspected the diseased prescribes for the latter according to the eight sections of the medical science: 1. treats of all kinds of sores. 2. acupuncture for any disease above the neck. 3. disease of the body. 4. demoniac disease. 5. of the *Agada*-medicine (i.e. anti-dote) 6. of the disease of the children 7. of the means of lengthening one's life 8. of the method of invigorating the legs and body--- therefore the Indian greatly honour physician and traders for they do not injure life and they give relief to others."

Perfumers as a separate professional class has been talked by I-tsing³⁹, who has narrated the method of producing perfumes as follows, "take any perfume tree, such as sandal wood or aloeswood and grind it with water on a flat stone until it becomes muddy then anoint the image or body with it and next wash it with water."

According to Hsuan Tsang,⁴⁰ ornaments manufactured from pearl, were created by an exclusive class of jewellers in Kongoda in the seventh century A.D. Secondly, eastern Indian sculptures of this period afford examples of a variety of ornaments indicating the level of excellence achieved in the field in early medieval eastern India. The Buddhist images from Kurkihar representing mostly the goddess Tara, Bodhisattva and Avalokitesvara appear to be quite unorthodox from Buddhist point of view⁴¹. Some of the images appear to be gold-plated

³⁶ *Ibid.* pp.112-113.

³⁷ J.Takakusu, *Records of Buddhist Religion*, p.62.

³⁸ J.Takakusu, *Op.Cit.* p.128

³⁹ J.Takakusu, *Op.Cit.* p.193.

⁴⁰ S.Beal, *Op.Cit.* p.193.

⁴¹ Saraswati, Sarkar, Etc., *Kurkihar, Gaya and Bodh Gaya*, p.8.



and some of the images, which are decorated, have sockets in the ornaments and the crown, which were originally set with precious stones⁴².

A large number of specimens of the potteries, used by the monks of Paharpur and dating back to the eighth or ninth century, have been recovered in recent years. These include large storage jars, spotted vases or lotas, cooking utensils, saucers, inkpots, lamps, etc.,. The potters art is also exemplified by the immense variety of terracotta plaques discovered at Mahasthan (Bogra), Sabhart (Dacca), Paharpur. Some contemporary inscriptions refer to the potters (*kumbhakaras*)⁴³, and potters ditch (*kumbhakara-garta*)⁴⁴ and the context in which they are mentioned seem to show that pottery as an industry was conducted from rural settlements for the most part. The Khalimpur plate of Dharmapāla⁴⁵ records the grant of four villages along with their *hattika*, meaning rural market place, which must have facilitated such transactions in the locality.

Hsuan Tsang's description of the architecture of Nālandā *mahāvihāra* comes through the summarised version of Hwi-li.⁴⁶ It is a totalist impression, presented in a dazzle of colour and splendour of Nālandā's richly adorned towers and fairy like turrets, the four storeyed outside courts, their dragon like projection and coloured caves, carved and ornamented red pillars, richly adorned balustrades and roofs covered with tiles that reflect the light in a thousand shades.⁴⁷ One misses what is of more value to a historian- realistic particulars; only a few appear in Prajnavarman's⁴⁸ later account and I-tsing's reference to Nālandā's eight halls and three hundred apartments.⁴⁹ All the superlative wealth of architecture and sculpture Hwi-li so estatically describes, are an indicator of a well-developed professional class of masons who had achieved achieving high levels of technical skill.

Large-scale Buddhist monuments required planning, phasing and overseeing, which might originally have been left to the guild of builders but which eventually went into the making of the profession of *sūtradharas* so central to the architecture of the early medieval period⁵⁰. A monk named Viradeva was commissioned by king Devapāla to look after Nālandā and his activities in renovating its building are recorded in a littic inscription.⁵¹ One Vipulasri, a resident of Somapura has left an inscription at Nālandā recording his construction of a temple to Tara at Somapura, as well as the erection of a monastery at Nālandā. The inscription on Pālaeographic ground is assigned to the first half of the twelfth century A.D⁵².

Similarly, the Chinese pilgrims have given details of several gardens, mango orchards,

⁴²PMCA, pp.125-53.

⁴³ A.K.Maitreya, Kamauli copper plate, in *Gauda-lekha-māla* (Bengali), p.135.

⁴⁴ Nidhanpur Copper-plate (*kāmarupa-Sāsanāvali*), p.26.

⁴⁵ EI, XV, p.133-144.

⁴⁶ The words quoted do not occur in Si-yu-ki.

⁴⁷ S.Beal,Op.Cit., pp.112-113.

⁴⁸ *Buddhist monks and Monasteries*, S.Dutt, p.340-41.

⁴⁹ J.Takakusu,Op.Cit. p.154.

⁵⁰ B.S.Miller, *Power of Art*, pp.23-40.

⁵¹ *Guide to Nālandā*, A.Ghosh, p.46.

⁵² EI, XXI, pp.97-101.



flowers, fruits, etc., found in early medieval India. This indicates the existence of a separate class of gardeners involved in floriculture during the period.

Last but not the least, minning and metallurgical activities in the *vihāras* deserve special mention. We have substantial evidences to show *vihāras*' active participation in this sector. In the Raktamrittika *vhāra*⁵³ site in Murshidabad district of West Bengal, copper-bronze furnaces are found. A double oven⁵⁴ for metallurgical activity in bronze has been excavated from the site of Ratnagiri *vihāra* in Cuttack district of Orissa. From Taradih (Bihar) we have unique copper mirror. A remarkable use of brass and bronze was made in the construction work of an unfinished *vihāras* made near Nālandā (Bihar) around seven hundred A.D. Even Hsuan Tsang talked about a massive bronze image of Buddha at Sultanganj. A remarkable copper statue of Buddha discovered at Sultanganj (Bihar) and at present preserved in the Birmingham Museum (U.K.) is symbolic of the metallurgical skill of the craftsmen of the *vihāras* in early medieval eastern India.

An inscription at Mahabodhi (eighth century) mentions that a person named Kesava, who is described as a son of a sculptor, constructed a lake at the cost of three thousand *drammas* for the use of Buddhist *vihāras*. In some of the land grants it is mentioned that the donee was granted rights over *nidhi* and *upanidhi*.⁵⁵ It is not clear from the inscription what was precisely meant by these two terms. Some scholars⁵⁶ have taken *nidhi* to mean treasure troves, and *upanidhi* as deposits or accumulation on the soil. This may be taken to mean hidden treasures and deposits as well⁵⁷. Hence it may be argued that various kinds of valuable deposits, including salt and metal mines were meant by *nidhi* and *upanidhi*.

Before talking about the *vihāras*' metallurgical activities in the form of afflorescence of a distinct school of sculpture, one should also keep in his mind that it was so mainly because idolatory had formed an integral part of Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna Buddhism, as much as in the varied contemporary sects of Hinduism. As a result a new and prolific school of stone sculpture and bronze casting and manuscript painting came into being in Eastern India with Paharpur, Jhewari, Ratnagiri, Achutrajpur, Nālandā, and Kurkihar as its chief centres. As far as bronze images and artefacts are concerned, they have been excavated at three major sites of Jhewari (West Bengal), Kurkihar (Bihar) and Achutrajpur (Orissa).

The Tibetan historian Tārānāth, talks of two famous artists Dhimana and his son Vitapāla, who founded a school of sculpture, bronze casting and painting in Eastern India, which flourished in the monastic establishment of Nālandā. They belonged to the ninth century A.D., when the Pāla rulers Dharmapāla and his son Devapāla ruled Magadha. The discovery of brick built metal smelting furnace, with burnt metal pieces and slags in it, in the temple site no. 13,

⁵³ S.R.Das, *Arcaeological Discovery from Murshidabad* district, 1971, Cal.

⁵⁴ D.Mitra, *Ratnagiri, ASI*, N.Delhi, 1982.

⁵⁵ *EI*, XXIII, p.251, 1, 16.

⁵⁶ D.C.Sircar, *Landlordism and Tenancy*, p.52.

⁵⁷ M.Williams, *Skt-English Dictionary*, (1899), p.64 and 481.



proves beyond doubt that metal objects were cast at Nālandā.⁵⁸ The furnace is found made of four chambers in one square divided by short walls, each of the chambers being provided with two flues the fire to burn and air to pass. The splendid collection of bronzes all found in one spot of Kurkihar may suggest that the monasteries had their own bronze foundaries those days.⁵⁹ An inscription of the time of Dharmapāla, which lays great stress on an image having been made by artisans (*silpi*) of Nālandā (*atrayah-silpbhih*) and mentions their name as well⁶⁰, evidently suggests that Nālandā must have had its own workshop. The Pāla artists of Bengal thus produced not only stone sculpture but also metal images.⁶¹ An extensive series of images, votives, stūpas and utensils have been discovered, both at Nālandā and Kurkihar, which have been made out of bronze or octo-alloy.

The Nālandā (Bihar) bronzes, belonging roughly to the eighth-twelfth centuries A.D. were analysed by Dr.B.B.Lal. Most of these bronze images are of Buddha and Mahāyāna Buddhist deities. The following table provides details of the metallic composition of the examined artefacts:

Jhewari in Chittagong district of Bangladesh has yielded the largest hoard of metal images. In any case it is apparent that most of these metal images were cast within this district itself in view of the fact that a group of images of Buddha (some of which are fairly large in dimension) present a distinctive art-form and style; certain features of this group are also present in some other group of images from this hoard⁶². It is also not unlikely that the leading centre of metal casting was near Chittagong town where flourished, according to the Tibetan texts, an important Buddhist establishment called Pandita *vihāras*. It is also likely that there existed more than one metal –casting workshop within this district.

Achutrajpur⁶³ (in Puri district of Orissa) has yielded the maximum number of Buddhist icons (seventy five in number) and objects mostly small and easily portable cult icons and *stūpas*. Their small size and the advantage of their easy portability as well as their find in a hoard would point out that at least some of them form the pious offering of the devotees and itinerant, monks, nuns and pilgrims, desirous of earning religious merit. Once they were offered, they were not necessarily kept in the temples and shrines for long. From the evidence of the finds from the monasteries at Ratanagiri it is certain that these offerings used to be either in a secret cell or in the strong room of the monasteries. In fact, cell 17⁶⁴, the strong room of the monastery of Ratanagiri yields apart from bronze objects, a host of other antiquities including numerous sealings. These icons and *stūpas* might be fresh ones purchased from either the workshop of the centre itself or some other metal casting centres covered by pilgrims, during the course of their

⁵⁸ A.Ghosh, *Nālandā*, Delhi, 1959, p.28.

⁵⁹ S.K.Saraswati, K.C.Sircar and S.Kramrisch, *Kurkihar, Gaya and Bodh Gaya, Rajshahi*, 1936, p.7.

⁶⁰ *MAI*, no.66, p.86 and p.119.

⁶¹ R.K.Choudhary, "Bihar the homeland of Buddhism", Patna, 1956, pp.137-139.

⁶² D.Mitra, *Bronzes from Bangladesh*, p.1.

⁶³ *Ibid.* p.23-25.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p.144.



pilgrimage or even old family or personal cult icons under prolonged private religious worship which the monks and nuns carried during their visit to the centre. I-tsing's following statement also supports this point of view – "If a man makes an image as small as a grain of barley the size of a small jujube, placing on it a round figure, or a staff like a small pin, special cause for good birth is obtained thereby, and will be, as limitless as the seven seas and good reward will last as the four births."⁶⁵ Thus it appears that minning and metallurgical activities of the *vihāras* in the form of image, or artefact making, was mostly confined to the sacred domain. The possibility of these metal objects forming part of the workshop storage of the local artists and craftsmen is remote. For not only the objects cover a wide range of time but some of them bear traces of long ritualistic use. Apparently, these objects were kept in storerooms of the monasteries at Achutrajpur, as at Kurkihar, Ratnagiri, Jhewari, etc.⁶⁶

TRADE :

In early medieval eastern India the Bay of Bengal and its adjoining regions were the hub of maritime activity. The Bay of Bengal was surrounded by the coasts dotted with ports- the coast of Bengal on the north, that of Arakan and Burma on the north, that of Malay Peninsula on the east. A large part of South-east Asian trade used to be carried on by the coastal or deep sea voyages under taken by the merchants belonging to the countries encircling the Bay of Bengal.

Archaeological discoveries in the lower Ganges valley may throw light on the position of commercial centres in the Gangetic Delta. Excavation at Tamluk in 1955 led to the discovery of four periods. The excavation pertaining to period IV comprising of the regions of Tamluk, Tilda, Bahiri, Raghunathbari, Panna and Bandar in Midnapore district have resulted in the discovery of some three coins including a specimen of the 'Ship type' and also a large number of terracotta which now remain in the gallery of the Department of State Archaeology, Govt. of W.Bengal.

We have large number of literary evidences, which give some idea of maritime trade between eastern India and foreign countries during the early medieval period. In the early years of the fifth century A.D., the Chinese pilgrim, Fa-hsien, embarked at Tamralipti on board a great merchant vessel and sailed to Ceylon enroute to China. I-tsing made a direct voyage from Kedah (in the Malaya Peninsula) to Tamralipti. Hsuan Tsang's biography mentions that the trade in Bay of Bengal was connected with that of South China set and ships sailed directly from Tamralipti to Malaya peninsula. It is not without significance that in most of the stories of merchants sailing to Suvarnavdipa or Kataha are said to start from Tamralipti.⁶⁷ Merchants who are said to leave Pataliputra⁶⁸ or Campa for a Voyage to Suvarnavdipa must have sailed from Tamralipti. In Hsuan Tsang's words- "the coast of the country is formed by (or in) a recess of sea; the water and the land embracing each other. Wonderful articles of value and gems are collected here in abundance and therefore the people of the country are generally very rich."⁶⁹ 'the prosperity of Tamralipti was no doubt, caused by the brisk trade and commerce. The itineraries of I-tsing who visited

⁶⁵ J.Takakusu, Op.Cit. p.151.

⁶⁶ PMCA, p.125.

⁶⁷ Sammaraicchakaha, p.327.

⁶⁸ Chau-ju-kua, p.111.

⁶⁹ S.Beal. Op.Cit. p.408.



India at the end of seventh century A.D. inform us how Tamralipti was connected with the network of sea routes rising through the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. Hsuan Tsang has talked about a port town named Charitrapura, referred to as Che-li-to-lo, where from “merchants depart for distant countries.” He found a trade emporium on the coast in the northern part of the country. Travelling the distance of seven hundred li or so in a south –westerly direction from Tamralipti, the Chinese pilgrim arrived at U-cha (Udraor Odra). In Hsuan Tsang’s words “On the south-east frontiers of the country, on the border of the ocean is the town Che-li-ta-lo about twenty li round. Here it is merchants depart for the distant countries, and strangers come, go, and stop here on their way. The walls of the city are strong and lofty. Here are found all sorts of rare and precious articles⁷⁰”. Bhaskar Chattopadhyaya⁷¹ in his book has discussed various views regarding the modern identification and location of Che-li-to-lo. Che-li-to-lo, is derived according to Cunningham, from Sanskrit Charitrapura, that is the town of embarkation” or ‘departure’⁷²”. Cunningham has identified it with present Puri. Fergusson has proposed its identification with Tamralipti, while Waddel locates it at Nendra, the site of an old port near the mouth of Chitropata, which is a branch of the river Mahanadi.⁷³ Some scholars have identified it with Chandrabhaga, which has been referred to as a famous port in the Oriya Mahabharata composed by Saraladasa⁷⁴ (fifteenth century). Sylvain Levi has equated Charitraputra referred to by the Chinese pilgrim as the port of embarkation⁷⁵, with Ptolemy’s apheterium, that is the point of departure for ships abound for Chryse.

In Hsuan Tsang’s account, Che-li-to-lo is a port-town wherefrom “merchants depart for distant countries.”According to B.Chattopadhyaya the statement of Hsuan Tsang regarding the maritime centring Charitrapura is supported by a Chinese text recording the gift of an autographed manuscript of the Buddhist work Ganda-vyuha by an Orissan king to the Chinese emperor Te-tsong through his envoy Prajna in seven hundred ninety five century A.D., and also by the discovery of a Chinese copper coin dated in the eighth century A.D. at Sirpur. It appears that Charitra, being located not very far from Tamralipti on the one hand and Masulipatam on the other, acquired its importance, as an international port by the end of the eighth century, when the Bhaumakara kings ruled in Orissa.

As commercially expansive states rose in eastern India from the eighth century onwards, Buddhism as a state cult spread into neighbouring lands, in particular to Tibet, Burma, Cambodia and Java- where monumental Buddhist shrines appear to have been modelled on prototypes developed in Bengal and Bihar⁷⁶.

⁷⁰ S.Beal, *Op.Cit.* , p.411

⁷¹ B.Chattopadhyaya, *An Introduction to the Maritime history of India*, Cal.1994, p.118-119.

⁷² A.Cunningham, *The Ancient Geography of India*, Varanasi,1963, p.430

⁷³ *Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1892,

⁷⁴ D.K.Ganguly, *Op.Cit.*, p.68

⁷⁵ P.C.Bagchi, *Op.Cit.*,p.171.

⁷⁶ Haroun er Rashid, “ Some Possible Influences from Bengal and Bihar on Early Ankor Art and Literature”, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh*, vol.22, no.1,(April1977) : p.9-17.



Hsuan Tsang's reference to Orissan maritime activity and evidence of the Bhaumakaras' cultural ties with the outside world, has prompted Dr.B.P.Sahu to contend seventh century A.D. as the starting point of more meaningful Orissan trading activity with south-east Asia.⁷⁷ He further opines that tenth century onwards, Orissan trading activity gained momentum, which gets reflected both in literary and epigraphic sources of Chinese, South-east Asian and Singhalese origin.⁷⁸ Even archaeological evidences demonstrate that Khalakatapatna (near Konark), Manikapatna, Potagarh (on the Rishikulya) and Sunapur in southern coastal Orissa emerged as active port-towns and trading centres during the twelfth century⁷⁹. Some evidences like blue and white Chinese porcelain, celadon ware, coins with the characteristic square perforation in the middle and legend on both sides and egg white glazed ware of Arabian origins have been obtained during excavation in recent years. That's why, the few representations of boats and ships in sculptural art of the region⁸⁰ date to the early medieval period, specifically the ninth-thirteenth centuries A.D. These developments were related to contemporary processes of change such as phased rural expansion leading to the emergence of a regional agrarian base, rise of *hattas* and exchange centres and perhaps, the formation of a regional state.⁸¹

Currency:

In the inscriptions ranging from the sixth to thirteenth century several coin names are mentioned which would suggest the prevalence of metallic currency⁸². These include *aripindika*, *churnika*, *panap purana*, *nishka*, *dināra*, *Rupya*, *Sobhana*, *rupyā*, *Ruake*, *Vendi*, *Tanka*, *Satukanitanka*, etc., Surprisingly, not a single coin has been found at any of the excavated *vihāras* sites at Ratnagiri, Laitagiri, Udayagiri, etc., However, Hsuan Tsang who travelled through Kongoda (Puri-Ganjam region) observed, “ They (the people) use cowry shells and pearls in commercial transaction “. An inscription of the Bhaumakara dynasty also refers to the use of cowry shells which shows its popular use during the period.⁸³

We have numismatic evidences indicating the presence of a metallic currency in S.E.Bengal (on a limited scale), which facilitated trading activities with far off regions. Now if we concentrate on the find-spots of these coins, we get the name of two sites only a. Char Patra Mura and b. Salbana *vihāra*, which were just part of the larger Salbana *Vihāra*-complex⁸⁴. The excavations at these sites led to the discovery of two hoards of silver coins and one hoard containing three gold coins and six gold earrings. The coins of the first numbering fifty-two and in three denominations were found inside an earthen pot, which had been placed below the first

⁷⁷ B.P.Sahu, “Situating Early Historical Trade in Orissa”, *Social Science Probings*, (March 1944-Dec. 1995), p.28.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ See IAR 1984-85, pp.57 and 59; Sila Tripathi, “Traditional Boat-Building and Navigational Techniques of Southern Orissa,” at NISTADS seminar.1994; B.K.Sinha, Khalakatapatna; A small port on the coast of Orissa,” in B.U.Nayak and N.C.Ghosh(eds.) *New trends in Indian Art and Archaeology*”, pp.423-428.

⁸⁰ J.K.Patnaik and B.K.Tripathy, “Ships and Shipping in Orissan Art”, *Op.Cit.* p.61.

⁸¹ B.P.Sahu, “Aspects of Rural Economy in Early Medieval Orissa”, *Social Scientist*, no.236-237(Jan-Feb.1993), pp.48-68.

⁸² K.S.Behera, *Op.Cit.* p.11.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ ‘Excavation on Mainamati Hills Near Comilla’, I.A.Khan, *ASI*, New Imperial Series, pp.1-20.



floor of a cell in the monastery. They are, as already mentioned 'the Bull and Triglyph' type. The second hoard contains one hundred and seventy-two coins of similar type in the largest denomination. Majority of the coins of this hoard are inscribed with the legend 'Pattikera'; but three of them are inscribed with a different legend which reads as Lalitakarah; two coins contain the legend *Dharma-Vijaya*. Both, Pattikera and Lalitakera are the names of two places located in the same region. The third hoard contains one gold coin of Chandragupta II A.D. (380-414). It is of Lakshmi and Archer type. The second gold coin is unique and of great importance. It is also of the Lakshmi and Archer type but it does not seem to be a Gupta coin. The legend inscribed on it bears '*Bangala Mriganka*' deer stamp of Bangala, a title that is also inscribed on the seals of the copperplates of the Deva kings discovered from the same site. The third gold coin is an imitation of the Gupta gold coin. So, one can safely assume that these coins were issued by the contemporary rulers and not by the *vihāra*, as such. However, the find-spots of all these coins and the Buddhist affiliation of the contemporary rulers (i.e. the issuer of these coins) gives strength to the idea of indirect involvement of the *vihāras* in trading activities in the region of South-east Bengal till eleventh century. The existence of the Bull and Triglyph type of gold and silver issues, which show resemblance to some Arakani coins, has undoubtedly extended the phase of this importance to the eleventh century, if we do not reject the hypothesis that these coins belonged to the Candra kings. Although no indigenous coins have come to light to represent the period between eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Abbasid gold and silver pieces belonging to more than one Caliph indicate continuity in the history of maritime trade of southeast Bengal.

The precious metals could come to southeast Bengal if the region was in a position to export commodities needed by the neighbouring countries. In this connection we have to presuppose the continuity of commodity production and the existence of urban centres located along serviceable trade routes. Excavations at Lalmai hills have laid bare pottery pieces of considerable quality and even at present potters form a significant class of artisans in Mainamāti-Lalmai region⁸⁵. There exist also a group of people called *patua*⁸⁶ or the painters, who perhaps got the appellation from the fact of their original profession of executing motifs and designs on pottery pieces made for the purpose of export. Indirect evidence of existence of weavers' community is also available. The Natha Yogis, who constituted till recent times a significant socio-religious community in Comilla and the regions of Dacca and Noakhali adjacent to it, were originally weavers⁸⁷. The essential immobility of the groups of artisans like those of the potters and weavers indicates that they formed two major socio-economic classes of people in Comilla in the early medieval period as well⁸⁸. It is thus highly probable that south-east Bengal got gold and silver from southern China, Pegu and South-East Asia in exchange of textile goods, earthen wares and also perhaps rice.

⁸⁵ F.A.Khan, *Op.Cit.*, p.34ff.

⁸⁶ M.R.Tarafdar, Trade and society in early medieval Bengal, in *IHR*, IV, p.278.

⁸⁷ It is quite significant that in 1910 there were 68000 yogis in Tippera district only. I.E.Webster, *District Gazetteer of East Bengal and Assam*: Tippera(Allahabad), p.26.Kalyani Mallik, *Sampradayer Itihas, Darshan O Sadhanapranati*(Cal.1950), p.95.

⁸⁸ Tartafdar, M.R., Trade and Society in Early Medieval Bengal, in *IHR*, IV, p.278.



Firstly, the two occupational classes of Patua (painters) and Nathayogis (weavers), whose ancestors are believed to be the producer of ornamented potteries and textile goods, respectively, do not exhibit any Buddhist affiliation. If we study the artefacts discovered from the monastic complex in this region, we don't have any evidence of availability of any type of fabrics, dying vats, weaving machine or any other object related to textile production. As discussed earlier, monks' demand for robes in the *vihāras*, was met by supplies from outside. However, a few decorated potteries of fine quality have been discovered from the *vihāra*-complex⁸⁹. Out of these ornamented potteries, some of them portray human and animal figures, which appear to be of Brahmanical origin⁹⁰. Secondly, in another area of the same site, a group of partially complete pots consisting of water pitchers, open drinking bowls, cooking pots have been found⁹¹. Most likely they were prepared in the *vihāra* itself and quality-wise they were quite inferior as compared to the ornamented potteries, which do not appear to be indigenously prepared in the *vihāra*. Therefore, these evidences again support the idea that *vihāras* were not directly involved in the trading activities in southeast Bengal during the early medieval period.

Although there is no doubt that Buddhist religion as well as institutions would have influenced the contemporary socio-economic scenario, the *vihāras*' active participation in maritime commercial transaction appears to be highly improbable. Most of the extensive land grants made in favour of *vihāras*, who used to be served within the donated lands by such sections of people as *mālākaras* (florists), *tailikas* (oilmen), *kumbhakaras* (potters), *kāhlikas* (drumbeaters), *Sankhavādakas* (conch-blowers), *karmakāras* (blacksmith), *karmakaras* (artisans), *carmakāras* (shoemakers), *sūtradhāras* (carpenters), *sthāpatīs* (architects or masons), *nāpitas* (barbers), *rajakas* (washermen), *vaidyas* (physicians) and others,⁹² These terms give us some idea of the various occupational groups and artisanal classes which served the *vihāras*.

Social role

We have discussed that Buddhist *vihāras* covered extensive areas and had a firm economic basis for its functioning. This strong economic basis made it suitable not only for religious purposes but also for carrying out certain social activities.

It is well known that from early days of the Buddhist monastic order much emphasis was given, particularly in the training of novices, to the teacher-pupil relationship. And when the Buddhist monasteries were established, teaching became one of the most significant functions they performed. Above all, the most remarkable development of the educational activities of the *vihāras* of the period under consideration was the growth of some establishments into full-fledged educational centres with thousands of students.

⁸⁹ Excavations at Mainamāti, A.S.I., New Imperial Series, pp.1-25.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² These socio economic groups are mentioned in the Paschimbhaga copper plate of Sri Candra (925-75), Nalinikanta Bhattasali Commemoration Volume, ed. , pp.179,180,186-7.;K.K.Gupta, *Copper plates of Sylhet*, pp.92.99,106-7.



A fairly detailed description of the internal organisation and the system of education at the major Buddhist centres in eastern India is available from the record of Hsuan Tsang and I-tsing. Those institutions such as Nālandā, Vikramashila and Odantipuri received special attention of the Chinese travellers. As centres of high learning they attracted students not only from all corners of India but from various foreign countries as well.⁹³ Both, Hsuan Tsang and I-tsing mention that there was thousands of student monks at Nālandā *mahāvihāra* who were maintained by the *vihāras*.⁹⁴

One of the most interesting aspects of a study of the education activities of the *vihāras* appears to be the expansion of the scope of education. Though the scope of education at the *mathas* seem to have been limited to Hindu religious studies and allied subjects, the curriculum of at least the major Buddhist centres of learning covered a wide range of subjects. In addition to the Buddhist scriptures of different schools, *adhyātmavidyā* which may have included metaphysics, *hetuvidyā* or logic, *sabdavidyā* or grammar, *cikitsāvidyā* or medicine, *silpsthānavidyā* which may have included various arts and crafts, the *Sāṅkhya* system of philosophy and miscellaneous other subjects were taught at Nālandā.⁹⁵

It is significant that the education given at major Buddhist centres like Nālandā was not limited to Buddhist studies; it also included various secular subjects such as medicine and arts and crafts. The fact that the teaching also included some non-Buddhist religious scriptures and secular branches of learning may suggest that the Buddhist monks were not the only students attached to these institutions. In fact, I-tsing clearly mentions in a general statement, that there were three types of students at Buddhist *vihāras*, namely the monks, the laymen who intended to enter the order and those who chiefly studied secular subjects.⁹⁶

The monasteries maintained both the student monks and the teachers. Hsuan Tsang⁹⁷ informs us that that, as the monks were so abundantly looked after, they did not have to ask for the four requisites, and because of this they were able to devote their whole time to studies. According to I-tsing⁹⁸, monasteries maintained the student monks, but on certain occasions the lay students, too, could receive subsistence out of the common funds. From this it is evident that because of their firm economic basis the *vihāras* were able to provide for a large number of students and scholars.

There are also some evidences which indicate that *vihāras* provided health service to the contemporary society and functioned as modern day hospitals. There, is however, as yet scant evidence for the existence of separate structures for the sick, though there is an early reference to the hall of the sick located in the great forest near Vaisali.⁹⁹ A sealing found during the

⁹³ S.Beal, *Op.Cit.*, Intoduction, pp.XXVII-XXXIX

⁹⁴ S.Beal, *Op.Cit.*,p.112.;J.Takakusu, *Op.Cit.*, p.154.

⁹⁵ T.Watters, *Op.Cit.*, p.155.

⁹⁶ J.Takakusu, *Op.Cit.*, p.105-106.

⁹⁷ S.Beal, *Op.Cit.*, pp.112-115.

⁹⁸ J.Takakusu, *Op.Cit.*, p.106.

⁹⁹ *Samutta Nikaya*, IV, p.210-13.



excavation at Kumrahar reads—“ *sri ārogya-vihāre bhiksusanghasya*, the *ārogya Vihāra* being an infirmary attached to the Buddhist monastery at Pataliputra.¹⁰⁰ Fa-hsien¹⁰¹ narrates that the heads of *vaisya* families established houses for dispensing charity and medicine to the poor in the city of Pataliputra .A logical conclusion to the importance of medicine in early Buddhist *vihāras* was the emergence of a Bodhisattva of healing--- Bhaisajyārājan¹⁰² in *Saddharmapundarika* (ch.22). All these evidence prompted H.P.Ray¹⁰³ to contend that one of the most crucial contribution of Buddhist *vihāras* to the physical well-being of its lay devotees was in establishing their role as an institution with a developed indigenous system of medicine According to I-tsing¹⁰⁴ physician in medical science had developed as a noble profession in early medieval India. “The medical science one of the five sciences (*vidyā*) in India, shows that a physician having inspected the diseased prescribes for the latter according to the eight sections of the medical science: 1. treats of all kinds of sores. 2. acupuncture for any disease above the neck. 3. disease of the body. 4. demoniac disease. 5. of the *Agāda*-medicine (i.e. anti-dote) 6. of the disease of the children 7. of the means of lengthening one’s life 8. of the method of invigorating the legs and body--- therefore the Indian greatly honour physician and traders for they do not injure life and they give relief to others.” According to Hirananda Sastri, at the site of Nālandā, there is a monastery of rectangular shape and has seven chambers on each side with possibly a shrine chamber in the south. It had a pillared verandah, the quadrangular rows of what appear to be hearths, seven in number and connected by a common corbelled duct, about 2’ in height. The same feature is to be found in the eastern verandah also. It is not unlikely here there was a medical seminary or bhisaksala where rasas of sorts were manufactured and the medical students were given practical lessons in pharmacy¹⁰⁵. Thus *vihāras*’ such a crucial role in the early medieval society in eastern India, made them (*vihāras*) infallible for the contemporary rulers. The fact that a broadly based educational system which included different secular branches of learning, existed in these institutions and that laymen were also admitted as students signifies that they exerted great influence and control over the educational activities of society Therefore the king could’nt afford to ignore the *vihāras* which acted as an agency for human resource development in the contemporary society.

Besides, their educational functions, most *vihāras* were able to perform certain charitable activities as well. Some inscriptions from eastern India concern endowments made to *vihāras* for the maintenance of *Sattras* or free feeding centres. For an instance, in Ambari stone inscription of Samudragupta, King Samudrapāla established a *sāttāra* institution in Yogahali, where rituals were performed.¹⁰⁶ It is evident from fairly large number of endowments that were made for the maintenance of *sāttaras*, that it had become an established institution for poor relief. And the free distribution of food among the needy would no doubt have discouraged begging.

¹⁰⁰ Altekar and Misra, 1959, p.52-53(pl.XXXII, no.5,XXXIV, no.2,XXXV, nos.4-5).

¹⁰¹ Legge,*Op.Cit.*, p.79.

¹⁰² *Saddharmapundrika*, Ch.22.

¹⁰³ H.P.Ray,*The winds of change*, p.78.

¹⁰⁴ J.Takakusu, *Op.Cit.*, p.128.

¹⁰⁵ Nālandā and its epigraphic material, H.Sastri, *MAVI*,vol.66, p.23.

¹⁰⁶ *EI*, XV, p.3.



Although most endowments to *vihāras* were earmarked for specific purposes, it is quite possible that in many cases the income from the grants was more than adequate for the intended religious purposes, and thus provided a surplus income to the establishments. This surplus income was sometimes invested in profit-earning pursuits, which no doubt added to their wealth. The surplus income strengthened the economic position of the *vihāras*, thereby making it possible for them to expand their religious and social activities. Evidence from the accounts of Fa-hsien and I-tsing indicate, that, as a general practice, the surplus income of the Buddhist monasteries was annually distributed among the resident monks at the end of the monsoon rain retreat (*vassāvāsa*)¹⁰⁷. I-tsing in another passage, quoting some *Vinaya* rules, explains how the income of the monastery was to be expanded. He says that the valuables left by a deceased monk should be divided into two portions, one of which is spent on copying scriptures and on building or decorating the 'Lion seat (most probably the preacher's chair). The second portion is distributed among the monks who are present.¹⁰⁸ Although it is not certain whether this was the system followed in the annual distribution of income, it is quite probable that all the surplus income was not distributed among the resident monks, as at least some of the income had to be kept in reserve for future use. Also on the subject of the distribution of income of Buddhist *vihāras*, I-tsing remarks that this practice was not universally followed. He says that some monasteries merely hoarded their wealth, having granaries full of rotton corn, treasuries filled with money and other treasures, while all the members of the community suffered from poverty¹⁰⁹. Therefore, it is difficult to say that *vihāras* in general, played the role of an investor (like banks or other financial institutions) in the society. But, there must have been few exceptions, which followed those *Vinaya* rules as quoted by I-tsing.

The excavated materials from the *vihāras* and the accounts of Hsuan Tsang, I-tsing, etc. reflect on exchange networks and trading activities. However, the relationship between artisanal production, trade and *vihāras* has not attracted the attention it deserves¹¹⁰. While the role of the monasteries in early historical trade and society is admitted, its socio-economic functions in early medieval centuries are just beginning to be appreciated.

¹⁰⁷ H.A.Giles, *Travels of Fa-hsien*, p.22; J.Takakusu, *Op.Cit.* p.62.

¹⁰⁸ J.Takakusu, *Op.Cit.*, p92.

¹⁰⁹ J.Takakusu, *Op.Cit.*, p193.

¹¹⁰ D.D.Kosambi, 1955; p.60