

# Commerce and Culture: Dynamics of Trade, Traders and Trading Commodities in Urban Spaces of Pali Buddhist *Jātakas*

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## Abstract

The paper explores the intersection of commerce and culture as portrayed in the Pali Buddhist *Jātakas*, focusing on the role of trade, traders, and trading commodities in early urban spaces of India. It highlights how Buddhist teachings were intertwined with social and economic certainties. The *Jātaka* tales serve as a socio-cultural lens, juxtaposing Buddhist ethical principles with the materialistic pursuits of the lay community. They reflect the dynamics of trade, guilds, trade routes, and maritime commerce in early Indian history. The *Jātakas* are a compilation of 547 tales narrating the Buddha's past lives, organized into sections such as present and past stories, verses, and connections between characters. Historically rooted in oral traditions, they gained textual form between the 3rd century BCE and the 5th century CE. They blend folklore and Buddhist doctrine, offering insights into early India's socio-economic and cultural conditions. Traders were central figures in the *Jātakas*, often depicted as *sārvavāhas* who led organised caravans. Guilds were flexible organisations governed by their own rules, often involved in statecraft and policy-making. Trade encompassed commodities like textiles, jewels, and spices, with ethical restrictions on trading weapons, humans, and intoxicants. The paper describes that the trade occurred through well-maintained land and sea routes, connecting urban centres like Varanasi to regions as far as Southeast Asia and the Persian Gulf. Accounts depict challenges such as robbers, wild animals, and natural obstacles, highlighting the role of guilds and tribal guides in ensuring safety. Trade employed coins and barter systems and collateral-based transactions. Guilds played a significant role in financial operations,

including issuing letters of credit and negotiating trade agreements. Thus, *Jātaka* tales provide a comprehensive view of early Indian commerce, portraying a sophisticated network of trade supported by guilds, ethical practices, and infrastructural development. These tales propagated Buddhist principles by aligning the Bodhisattva's role with merchant values while appealing to traders for patronage.

**Keywords:** *Jātakas*, Buddhism, Traders, Trading Commodities, Commerce, Pali Buddhist

## Introduction

Buddhism and Buddhist teachings are mainly expressed and framed in popular cultural forms, often articulated using folklore embodied within lay communities' social experiences and ideas. The textual tradition of Buddhism, structuralized with such folklore, while expressing Buddhist doctrine, usually presents the social dimension of early India to illustrate knowledge's validity, social legitimacy, and acceptance in early Indian society. This literary technique is a significant aspect of the Pali Buddhist *Jātaka* tales, which describe the past lives of Buddha and the virtue that a Bodhisattva must have to attain absolute enlightenment or *nirvana* from the *Samśāric* existence. For this, *Jātakas* often present Bodhisattva functioning in the socio-spiritual framework to achieve *nirvāṇa* and other virtues. These stories have been circulated socially to impart and propagate the teachings of Buddha in the form of fables. The basic principle of these teachings was to give up all materialistic possessions and worldly attachments and become recluses from *Samśāra* to achieve the goal of *nirvāṇa*. Thus, Buddhist doctrine seems to be least interested in worldly affairs. However, the aspiration of the lay community differed from that of monks. Thus, they did not seem to have aspired for the *nirvāṇa* in the Pali Buddhist *Jātakas* tales. Instead,

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they wanted to have material success in their life. That's why, wherever they are depicted in the Pali Buddhist *Jātakas*, they are presented to Bodhisattva to overcome their household problems and other economic affairs. They wanted some advice and guidance conducive to their materialistic development and well-being rather than spiritual salvation from worldly affairs. Therefore, Bodhisattva taught them ethical principles related to trade and commerce, directly or indirectly depicted in more than 547 stories. Bodhisattva is presented as having been born into families linked with commerce and trade. In some of these stories, Bodhisattva himself is shown as a trader who often led the caravans.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, these stories, along with the portrayal of Bodhisattva, are very significant for understanding the trade, trade routes trading patterns, and other dimensions in early India and the Buddhist perspective towards the same, which this paper aims to explore through the tales from the Pali Buddhist *Jātakas*.

### ***Jātakas*: Structure and Historical Contexts**

*Jātakas* are the collection of the 547 tales of Buddhist literary tradition. As mentioned above, these are the narratives from the past lives of the Buddha, which illustrate the virtue that a *Bodhisattva* must possess to attain enlightenment. These stories or tales are divided into four parts: *paccupannavattu* (story in the present), the *atītavattu* (the story of the past), the *gāthā* or verses, forms the basis of how tales would be organized in text like *Ekanipata*, *Dukanipata* and *Tikanipata* etc., and the *samodhāna* (connect the character of the present with the character of the past).<sup>3</sup>

For long, these *Jātakas* remain in oral tradition before their compilation. Therefore, locating *Jātakas* within a particular historical context is difficult. However, E.B. Cowell pointed out that two historical sources could offer certain clarity on the time and historical context of *Jātakas*. The first source is the portrayal of *Jātakas* in the art and inscription on the Bharhut, Sanchi, and Amaravati, which are dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. It indicated these stories were in social spaces in oral tradition till the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. Another source is Fa Xian's record in the 5th century CE, which mentioned the depiction of 500 bodily forms of *Bodhisattva* in Ceylon.<sup>4</sup> This indicates that the stories of the *Jātakas* were in circulation and significant enough to be recorded within this period. Uma Chakravarti also pointed out its composition between the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE before the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D, which, as Ranbir Chakravarti underlined, reflects the socio-economic condition of the period commonly known as the *Saka-Kuṣāṇa* and *Sātavāhana* phase.<sup>5</sup> But it can also be argued that the different layers of *Jātaka* and structural

components of these texts have come together over a long period. Therefore, Kumkum Roy called it a long, drawn-out process.<sup>6</sup>

Despite its long-drawn chronological composition, the *Jātaka* text is the composition of a rich repertoire of the narrative, which has the experiences and lives of ordinary men and women with great vitality. But these *Jātaka* stories are firmly situated in the Buddhist worldview. They are the product of the mediation between the "high culture" and "low culture." These stories are an alternative to the Brahmanical texts. Therefore, they could also be visualized as "dichotomized other" of the elite texts of Sanskrit tradition.

K.R. Norman pointed out that some *Jātaka* stories might have "un-Buddhist roots." He further underlined that a close study of these stories shows different types of composition of the verses, in which the "Buddhist qualities" of the text belong mainly to the prose section or later part, where the *Bodhisattva* is depicted as in the central of teaching. Thus, these tales existed before their composition. Norman further pointed out that the similarities in fable short of texts like *Jātakas*, *Pañcatantra*, and *Hitopadeśa* suggest that they were independent components that were brought together in a particular period in the fold of *Jātakas*.<sup>7</sup> Even Winternitz also believes that these stories are a combination of old and new tales. Thus, they have characteristics of folklore that are not only concerned with the notable character but also shed light on the lives of normal people. Thus, these tales are especially important to look into the history of the ordinary masses, who were not in the central structure of 'historical artefacts and literature,' and provide a good insight into the everyday history and 'subaltern one' compared to other texts. A.K. Ramanujan also pointed out that these stories or tales fundamentally preserve societal memories. Thus, these *Jātaka* can be fruitful to look into the historical process of early India.

### **Commerce and Camaraderie: Trade, Guilds and Treasures in the *Jātakas* Tales**

Traders and Buddhism share an intriguing intersection, offering a unique perspective on the convergence of commerce and spiritual philosophy. Therefore, the tales of *Jātakas* recount various lives of Buddha surrounding trade, and traders devolve into both moral and ethical lessons as well as the nature of trade in early historic India, mainly between the period of c. 300 BCE to 300 A.D. These tales, as part of "popular culture" in the form of folklore, devolve into the structural fabric of the society and utilize the depiction and narrative of multiple social groups for articulating Buddhist principles. Therefore, *Jātaka* tales either present Bodhisattva as a merchant or

depict the traders who interact with Bodhisatta while carrying out their commerce. For example, *Vannupattha-Jātaka* portrays Bodhisatta as a prosperous leader of merchants, often designated as “*sārthavāha*,” which means “one who is the leader of travelling merchants or “*sārtha*,” who invests an equal amount of the capital in trade and carries on their trade outside market travelling in a caravan.<sup>8</sup> These caravans were often said to consist of five hundred wagons<sup>9</sup>. The merchants or *sārtha* were organized in guilds, which were governed by their own rules and regulations headed by the office of *sārthavāha*, assisted by *anuseṭṭhī*.<sup>10</sup> These *sārthavāha* were supposed to be rich in organizing skills, honest, courageous, ready to handle fresh problems, full of commonsense, bestower of alms, and proficient in the knowledge of their own country and foreign lands as well as their language and customs.<sup>11</sup> Such skill possessing *sārthavāha* or *jetthākā* had control over the movement of the caravan, which was expected to be obedient to his command. But turmoil often erupted among them during long commercial journeys.<sup>12</sup> It was his duty to resolve it, arrange the food for the caravan, ensure its proper distribution,<sup>13</sup> and safeguard them from any potential mishaps. In one of the *Jātaka*,<sup>14</sup> it is mentioned that when a caravan entered a forest, then, the master of the caravan issued an order to his followers that without his permission, they should not eat strange leaves, fruits, and flowers. Once his followers fell ill by eating the forbidden articles, the caravan master cured them by administering emetics.

These merchants and artisans, or “*sārtha*” of the caravans, organized themselves in guilds based on socio-economic, and political conditions, by which they entered into certain agreements. These agreements were limited and confined to prevent competition in the trade and market.<sup>15</sup> Thus, these guilds were not permanent organizations. The hereditary rights to crafts and trades, along with the authority to appoint the head, were regarded as primary privileges.<sup>16</sup> Despite such fluid organizational structure as discussed above, these guilds used to have their own rules and regulations led by the heads or *śreṣṭhī* or *sārthavāha*, who had respect in the king’s court and outside of it. They used to attend the king’s court daily as merchants’ representatives. Ranbir Chakravarti argued that these *śreṣṭhī* or *sārthavāha* acted as the linkmen between the king and the trading-merchant communities of the empire. They used to assist in framing the commercial policies of the state and provided financial help when needed.<sup>17</sup> These trading and manufacturing communities were engaged in the works like carpentry (*Vaddhaki*), bamboo-workers (*vasakara*), reed-makers (*konacika*), oilmen (*tilapisaka*), garland-makers (*malakara*), ivory-workers (*dantakāra*), goldsmiths (*suvarṇākara*), blacksmiths (*lohikakaruka*),

etc.<sup>18</sup> They were also engaged in the trade of jewels, gold, horses, elephants<sup>19</sup>, cotton, woollen and silk textiles, precious stones, etc. John Garrett Johnes pointed out that five kinds of trades were not entertained in the Buddhist world, even of *Jātakas*, due to the Buddhist notion of right speech and action. These traders restricted trading of 1) weapons, 2) other human beings, 3) flesh, 4) alcohol and 5) poison.<sup>20</sup> But overall, these traders, with the right action and speech, protect and collectively carry forward their interests.

The small hawkers and ordinary merchants used to carry out their trade individually. The standard policies of the caravans didn’t impose any binding on them. However, they often partnered to sell goods and extract profit from urban markets. *Jātaka*’s narrative gracefully unfolds the story of a *Bodhisattva*, who, in a unanticipated alliance, accompanied a purveyor of pots and pans. Navigating the rhythmic currents of the Jailavaha River, their journey culminated in the enchanting city of Andhapur (Pratishthana). Against this bustling urban expanse, the duo, united in purpose, artfully divided the town into two realms, entrusting each other with a segment to cultivate their commercial endeavours. A symphony of entrepreneurial spirit resonated as they beckoned to the denizens, gracefully weaving their persuasive calls through the labyrinthine streets, enticing the populace to partake in the wares of their pots and pans. In this harmonious dance of commerce, their collaboration flourished, a testament to the enduring bonds forged in the pursuit of prosperity.

### Pathways and Prosperity: Trade Routes and the Flow of Goods in *Jātakas*

The *Khurappa Jātaka* and *Gumbiya Jātaka* have references to the movement of caravans with five hundred and more than five hundred with the purpose of the trade.<sup>21</sup> The trade and transportation were facilitated through both land and sea routes, likely controlled and maintained by the state authorities. Additionally, the state probably managed smaller routes and roads to ensure the smooth flow of trade and commerce, as well as the efficient functioning of statecraft. However, there is a scarcity of references to make a clear difference between the major and minor roads and routes depicted in the literary landscape of the *Jātaka* tales. There are references to words like *mahamagga* or *rajamagga*, which might be the grand routes. These were specially constructed by the state. We also came across a reference from the *Kutaunija-Jātaka* that *Anathapindaka*’s caravan had travelled from the southeast of Savatthi to Rajagaha and then returned to Gandhara. Other trade routes mentioned in the *Jātaka* tales were north to south-west, *Savatthi* to *Patitkana*; the



major stoppages on the routes were places like Mahissati, Ganddha, Ujjani, Vidisha, Saket, and Kosambi.<sup>22</sup> J.N. Samaddar has also pointed out another main land route along the river Ganga, from where boats were plied for hire. These boats went right down to the mouth of the Ganga and then across the coasts of Burma.<sup>23</sup> Rhys Davids also pointed out a minor route from the Videha to Gandhara, Magadha to Souira, Bharukaccha round to the coast of Burma, from Banaras a route to Champa and then to Burma.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, *Chullakalinga Jātaka* mentions that Dantapura (Palur), the port town in the Kaling, was linked with other kingdoms like Assaka and Champa.<sup>25</sup>

These *rajamagga* were constructed by the state. The study of the *Jātaka* tales underlines that these roads were constantly repaired, even in *Jātaka*.<sup>26</sup> Bodhisattva himself is presented as engaged in repairing roads and routes. This tale states that the Bodhisattva and his colleagues used to get up early in the morning, and they used to go together with road-making implements like shovels and rollers to repair the road. They used to remove the large stones from the road crossing and cut down trees to make proper roads. The thoroughfares, rendered immaculately, underwent meticulous levelling while strategic dykes were meticulously erected, tanks were excavated, and the rest houses were raised elegantly. Discerning insights from the *Jātakas* illuminate that the custodianship of road sanitation and maintenance was delegated to a cadre of specialized labour. However, the precise status they occupied within the broader framework of city administration remains veiled in historical obscurity.

Apart from this *rajamagga* or *mahamagga*, there is mention of many minor routes in the *Jātaka* tales, which were small tracks. They might have come into existence because of the moment travellers passed by them. These roads are said to be uneven and muddy in the tales. These tracks often pass through forests and deserts full of dangerous wild animals, ghosts, robbers, and poisonous plants.<sup>27</sup> Often, heavily armed robbers robbed the travellers of their clothing and other goods.<sup>28</sup> The leader of the robber often aims at the challenging routes as their primary target for plundering. Occasionally, they apprehended travellers intending to extract substantial ransoms from acquaintances and family members. To secure the pre-determined payment, they initially released a portion, precisely half, of the captured individuals, followed by the release of the remaining half at a later time.<sup>29</sup> Dense Forest, deep rivers, unpassable mountains, and plains covered with grass and shrubs were their hideouts. The state often hired these robbers for their profit.<sup>30</sup> Whenever they were caught, inquiries were initiated against them. They were seriously punished by being tied with ropes and were also put into jails. Even they were mutilated and often put into the lonely caves. However, they

are portrayed as bribing the state officials to evade punishment. Thus, the state did not take any initiative to prevent the depredation of outlaws. Rather, travellers and traders travelling on these routes had to arrange their protection while trading and travelling from such routes.<sup>31</sup> They enlist the services of the primordial tribes, denoted as *atavimukhavasi*, to serve as their guides through arduous pathways, and in reciprocation, these tribes are generously remunerated. Perils abounded along the paths, where the menace of ferocious beasts lurked. *Jātaka* tales suggest that the main route to Banaras harboured a man-eating tiger.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, a prevailing belief in narratives of *Jātakas* held that the woods were inhabited by malevolent witches, who, under deceptive guises, preyed upon unsuspecting travellers.<sup>33</sup> It is informed that once, when Bodhisattva, as a merchant leader, was about to start his journey, a foolish trader decided to begin his caravan at the same time; fearing the probability of scarcity of food and water, Bodhisattva changed the time of his caravans. This story narrates the difficulty of a trader and traveller on this route and popular beliefs related to the routes and roads.

Due to the unavailability of sustenance along the journey, travellers were compelled to carry their provisions. Cooked meals were transported via bullock carts, while those on foot relied on *sattu* (grain meal) for nourishment. An anecdote recounts the tale of a venerable Brahman, accompanied by his youthful wife, who diligently packed a leather bag (*chammaparisibbakam*) with *sattu* for her spouse. Yet, in a moment of oversight, after consuming a portion of the *sattu*, he quenched his thirst, neglecting the bag. Tragically, a serpent seized the opportunity to slither inside. Another narrative unfolds around a Bodhisattva hailing from an untouchable lineage, embarking on a journey with rice. Along the way, a destitute northern Brahman, lacking any sustenance, joined him. Stricken by hunger pangs, the Brahman reluctantly consumed the remnants left by the Bodhisattva. However, as a result of his transgression, the Brahman met his demise in a dense forest, the ultimate expiation for his unwitting sin.

The routes and roads, particularly *mahamagga* or *rajamagga*, were provided with a free rest house for the comfort of travellers and traders. *Illisa -Jātaka*<sup>34</sup> provides a story in which Bodhisattva, along with his colleagues is depicted in constructing a rest house at the city square. But they were determined that they would not take help from any of the women for performing such a “pious” task. Then, a woman approaches them and asks them to make a pinnacle for her. The carpenter, equipped with dry wood, promptly moulded the necessary components. Upon the completion of the rest house, builders realized it lacked a pinnacle. Consequently,

they approached the carpenter to make one. However, he revealed that a specific woman possessed the required pinnacle. Despite their request, she insisted on sharing the ensuing merit before parting with it. Eventually, circumstances compelled them to agree to her terms. The rest of the house featured sitting areas, water pots, and a walled enclosure with a gate. Open spaces within were adorned with sand, and a row of palm trees adorned the exterior. In another *Jātaka*, it is noted that the inhabitants of Anga and Magadha frequently journeyed between their respective kingdoms. Upon reaching the borders of these states, they took refuge in designated rest houses.<sup>35</sup> During the evening, they blissfully indulged in sipping wine and savouring kababs and fish. With the break of dawn, they commenced their expedition aboard bullock carts. However, upon arriving at the city gate during the night, they encountered a restriction preventing their entry. Consequently, they were compelled to spend the night in the gatekeeper's lodgings or seek refuge in a decrepit, weird dwelling.<sup>36</sup> In a *Jātaka* tale, it is recounted that along the route to Kasi, there existed a profound well lacking proper steps for access to its water. Despite this, compassionate travellers traversing that path, driven by a desire for virtuous deeds, drew water from the well to fill troughs for the benefit of animals. Numerous rivers intersected the pathways, featuring ferries for the convenience of those journeying. A *Jātaka* tale recounts the narrative of a naive boatman who, having transported passengers across a river, neglected to collect the fare from them. In response to this oversight, the Bodhisattva offers sagacious counsel, suggesting that the boatman must request payment before conveying passengers.<sup>37</sup> This recommendation stems from the understanding that individuals may exhibit different dispositions on either side of the river, making it prudent to settle financial matters before the emotional transition of the journey takes place. All these routes and rest houses were utilized by traders, ascetics, pilgrims, showmen, jugglers, and students.

The wanderers embarked on their journeys either by foot, embracing the rhythmic cadence of their strides, or seeking the aid of various conveyances. Sturdy and steadfast bullock carts boasted wheels encased in the embrace of iron, their rhythmic creaks echoing the tales of distant roads.<sup>38</sup> Chariots, resplendent in their design, and sedans adorned with comfort cradled their passengers with cushioned luxury. In opulence, princes and wealthy individuals graced the pathways in regal fashion, choosing the palanquin as their carriage.<sup>39</sup> Adorned with lavish details, these portable thrones carried their occupants with dignified ease, allowing the elite to traverse landscapes with grace and distinction.

The land routes often come across to the rivers. Thus,

they were submerged with the connecting land routes. But these rivers were not covered by chains of bridges connecting two edges. Instead, people seemed to cross the river with the help of the dykes and boats.<sup>40</sup> In one of the *Jātaka* tales, it is mentioned that the king of Varanasi used to cross the Ganga with the help of a flotilla boat. Varanasi, the commercial and cultural epicentre of *Jātaka*'s narrative world, is frequently mentioned as being visited by merchants because of its commercial prosperity. In one of the *Jātaka* tales, there is a story of a horse trader who came to Banaras with 500 horses from *Uttarapath*. The Bodhisatta, who was in service of the king, permitted the trader to sell horses at his own fixed price, but due to the king's tactics, he was forced to sell them at a low price. In another story related to Varanasi, it is mentioned that the potters from Varanasi used to carry ceramics on donkeys from their city to Taxila.<sup>41</sup> Thus, these urban spaces of *Jātaka* were just not "Agro-urban spaces",<sup>42</sup> instead, they were dominated and shaped by non-agrarian groups. Interestingly, a *Jātaka* tale informs that a group of acrobats and dancers travel from one place to another in search of livelihood. It also mentions that they usually come to *Rajariha* every five years, where they earn sufficient money to sustain themselves.

The narrative of *Jātaka* tales provides a glimpse of the seas and activities over it, which used to serve as the gateway to foreign trade. Indian merchants went through these gateways to a foreign land, and similarly, foreign traders also came to India to sell their articles and purchase Indian manufactured goods and raw materials. Unlike the Brahmanical view towards merchants and overseas travel, the literary figures in tales and narratives of the *Jātaka* present a broader outlook towards the overseas trade of Indian merchants and their foreign counterparts. The Buddhist principles, depicted in Pali Buddhist *Jātakas*, did not see sea voyage as an element of bringing loss of varna.<sup>43</sup> Unlike Brahmanism, they had no religious objection to the sea voyages. Even *Jātaka* tales record several sea voyages carried out by the Brahmans for the trade.<sup>44</sup> Thus, as Uma Chakravarti, by quoting Alsdorf, pointed out *Jātaka* stories present an "anti-Brahmanical" tenor, which presents Brahmana himself violating the prescription of the sacred texts and carrying out trades.<sup>45</sup> These overseas trade by Indian sailors led them to establish trading links between diverse regions under the leadership of the *Niyāmakajetthā*<sup>46</sup> with the support of the royal families.<sup>47</sup> These *Niyāmakajetthā* used to have a responsibility to save merchants and navigate the proper and safe routes with the help of "direction-giving crows" or *disakaka*.

The *Mahajanaka-Jātaka*, *Supparaka-Jātaka*, *Valatassa-Jātaka* *Supparaka Jātaka*, and others provide insights into the historical dynamics of foreign trade between India

and other regions with five hundred ships during ancient times. *Supparaka-Jātaka* mentions the trading activities of the merchants, who started their ships on the high seas for seven days and sailed upon sea and ports of the harbour town Bharukaccha. These ships passed several oceans and spent four months on voyages in distant regions with certain dangers and risks. The *Valatassa-Jātaka* recounts an incident where five hundred ships were lost in a sea; however, the specific country involved is not identified. The *Mahajanaka-Jātaka* narrates the exploits of a prince who, despite his mother's concerns about the perils of the sea, engaged in maritime commerce. He amassed a stock of goods and, accompanied by seven caravans of merchants, embarked on a voyage bound for Subannabhumi.<sup>48</sup> *Sankha Jātaka* also mentions a story of overseas trade to Suvarnadvipa by a Brahmin named *Sankha*, who took a sea voyage on ships constructed by himself with cargo loaded to earn profit.<sup>49</sup> Numerous traders at several places in *Jātakas* embarked on maritime journeys to Suvarnadvipa (Malaysia) and Ratnadvipa (Sri Lanka). According to the *Baveru Jātaka*, specific merchants from Varanasi, equipped with a guiding bird, ventured on a sea expedition to Babylonia. In their subsequent journey, these merchants successfully traded a peacock, navigating the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf.<sup>50</sup> The *Supparaka Jātaka* recounts the adventures of courageous ancient Indian sailors who traversed *Khuramala* (the Persian Gulf), *Agnimala* (the Red Sea), *Dandhimala*, *Nilakusamala*, *Nalamala*, and *Balabhamukha* (the Mediterranean Sea).<sup>51</sup> The tales record the details about the "sea-trading friends" who circulate the news of the arrival of large ships in ports. Thereafter, they were assisted by a correspondent to facilitate the trading.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, before the Christian Era, Indian navigation did not extend beyond Bab-el-Mandeb. At this juncture, Arab agents took charge of Indian cargo and transported it to Egypt. Scholars pointed to the frequent references to *Suvarnadvipa* in *Jātakas* as evidence supporting the later dating of these stories.<sup>53</sup> Land routes were also utilized to export these goods along with copper from the port of *Tamralipti*.<sup>54</sup>

These sea travellers had to tolerate many dangers, risks, and difficulties, and those who returned successfully were considered lucky (*Valatassa-Jātaka*). The *Valāhassa-jātaka* narrates a story of a shipwreck near the shores of Sri Lanka. After the ship's destruction, the stranded sailors swam ashore. News of the shipwreck soon reached the *Yakshinis*, supernatural beings living on nearby islands. These *Yakshinis* dressed themselves attractively, brought rice gruel, and approached the stranded merchants, accompanied by their children and servants. Pretending to seek matrimonial alliances, the *Yakshinis* gained the merchants' trust, only to deceive and consume them later.<sup>55</sup>

Similarly, *Mahajanaka-Jātaka* provides a story in which a ship sank because of the cracks, and the voyagers began cursing their fate and praying. However, some of them were presented as having been attacked by dangerous fish and turtles, and the sea became red with their blood.<sup>56</sup> The anxieties of relatives in such situations can be easily imagined, mainly the concerns of the mothers and wives of the travellers. In the *Mahajanaka Jātaka*, mothers and wives are depicted as trying to dissuade their loved ones from embarking on perilous journeys. This text also highlights the worship of the goddess *Mañimekhalā*, who was invoked by these women to safeguard sailors. According to the *Sankha Jātaka* and *Mahajanaka Jātaka*, *Mañimekhalā*, the goddess presiding over the seas, protected devout voyagers. Sylvain Lévi noted that *Mañimekhalā* was a widely revered goddess among the common people of Puhar, a city located at the mouth of the Kaveri River. She had a temple in Kanchi, and her worship extended from Cape Comorin to Lower Burma.<sup>57</sup>

There is a lack of clarity regarding the specific goods that were imported and exported in the historical context of the *Jātakas* narratives. However, the nature of the tales provides some insights. Cotton textiles were significant items in both internal and external trade. Varanasi was mainly famous for its silk production. Several references suggest that the items involved in trade included spices, slaves, garlands, horses, ivory, jewellery, embroidery, silk, muslin, cutlery, and various types of gems.<sup>58</sup>

### Trading Wisdom: Mode of Exchange

The *Serivāṇija-jātaka*, *Kanha Jātaka*, *Mahāsupina-jātaka*, etc., frequently refer to coins as a means of exchange in the trade. These coins might be silver and gold, but to a certain extent, they also indicate the punch-marked coins. The *Jātaka* story of *Mahāsupina* and *Akatañṇu* and others mention frequent references to the barter system as well. Therefore, in one of the *Jātaka* tales, it is mentioned that a person exchanged 500 wagons with commodities and articles of the same value.<sup>59</sup> These tales often refer to rice, slaves, and other grains as the primary goods for the bartering system. In *Anatannu-Jātaka*, there is a reference to a border town merchant who ordered his agents to exchange the 5,000 cart-loads with the local goods.<sup>60</sup>

To enhance the facilitation of trade and commerce, instruments of credit were also prevalent in the said period. Within this context, prominent town merchants were engaged in the practice of issuing letters of credit to one another.<sup>61</sup> However, historical accounts frequently refer to using signet rings and depositing wives and daughters as collateral to secure financial transactions. Notably, this practice extended to the pledging of wives,



children, and even teachers as forms of security in obtaining credit.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusion

The trade and trading patterns depicted in the *Jātaka* tales offer a vivid and comprehensive representation of early Indian commerce, revealing intricate inland and sea trade networks managed by well-organized merchant groups or guilds. These guilds, governed by their regulations and led by *Sārthavāhas* and *Niyāmakajethās*, held significant influence in urban centres and political institutions due to their pivotal roles in urban economies and their contributions to state revenues. The state used to support these guilds by constructing major trade routes (*rājmagga* and *mahāmagga*), rest houses at stoppages, and bridges, facilitating the smooth movement of goods, commodities, and ideas across regions located on routes of *Uttarāpatha* and *Dakṣiṇāpatha*. Apart from it, maritime trade was another vital dimension depicted in the Pali Buddhist *Jātakas*, connecting regions like Brigukacchha to Khuramala (Persian Gulf), Agnimala (Red Sea), and Balabhamukha (Mediterranean), as well as Tamralipti to Suvarnadvipa (modern Malaysia), Subannabhumi, and Ratnadvipa (modern Sri Lanka). These routes supported the exchange of goods such as textiles, silk, spices, ivory, and garlands while concurrently extending Indian cultural and Buddhist influences into Southeast Asia. Unlike Brahmanism, Buddhism posed no religious restrictions on sea voyages, which encouraged participation in maritime trade. Even Brahmins are occasionally depicted in *Jātaka* tales as engaging in overseas trade, reflecting the fluidity of societal norms in early India. *Jātaka* tales, as part of Buddhist literary and folklore traditions, also emphasize ethical commerce by portraying merchants as abstaining from trading in weapons, human beings, flesh, alcohol, and poison. This moral framing was reinforced by the protective presence of the Buddhist goddess *Mañimekhalā*. Another aspect of these tales is that over 547 *Jātaka* tales depict the Bodhisattva as a merchant engaged in both land and sea trade, illustrating the Buddhist strategy of appealing to guilds and merchants. By highlighting Buddha's past lives as a trader, the *Jātakas* effectively sought to align the moral and economic interests of these groups with Buddhist principles, fostering their patronage and support for the faith.

## Notes and References

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3. *Ibid.*, 1895, p.6.
4. Ranbir Chakravarti, *Trade and Traders in Early Indian Society*, Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, New York, 2021, pp.51, 71.
5. Kumkum Roy, *The power of Gender and the Gender of Power: Explorations in Early Indian History*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2010, p.291.
6. K.R. Norman, *A History of Indian Literature: Pali Literature: Including the Canonical Literature in Prakrit and Sanskrit of all the Hinyana Schools of Buddhism*, Vol.2, Otto Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden, 1983, p.79.
7. Moti Chandra, *Trade, and Trade Routes in Ancient India*, Abhinav Publication, New Delhi, 1977, p. .
8. *Phala- Jātaka*, No. 54, *Kūṭavāṇija-jātaka*-98, *Kanha Jātaka*- 29 etc.
9. *Sudhābhajana-jātaka*, No.535.
10. *Vannupatha- Jātaka*, No.2.
11. *Losaka-jātaka*, No.41, *Vedabbha- Jātaka*, No.48.
12. *Vannupatha- Jātaka*, No.2.
13. *Abbhantara-Jātaka*, No.281.
14. *Kuta-Vanija Jātaka* mentions that there was no agreement between the merchants. Instead, they came to some agreement between themselves. This story narrates a quarrel between two partners, which shows that agreements were often carried out individually.
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18. *Tandulānālī- Jātaka*, No.5.
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22. J.N. Samaddar, *Lectures of Economic Condition of Ancient India*, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1922, p.155.
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25. Moti Chandra, *Trade and Trade Routes in Ancient India*, Abhinav Publication, New Delhi, 1977, p.54.
26. *Apannaka- Jātaka*, No.1, *Veri- Jātaka*, No.103, *Bherivada- Jātaka*, No.59, *Ekapanna- Jātaka*, No.149, *Phala- Jātaka*, No.54.
27. *VedabbhaJātaka*, No.48.
28. *Paniya- Jātaka*, No.459.

29. *Kharassara- Jātaka*, No.79, *Mahasilava- Jātaka*, No.51
30. *Asamikiya- Jātaka*, No.76.
31. *Mahapingala- Jātaka*, No.240.
32. *Losaka- Jātaka*, No.41.
33. *Illisa- Jātaka*, No.78.
34. *Gutha- Pana- Jātaka*, No.227, *Cullaka-Setthi-Jātaka*, No.4.
35. *Gutha- Pana- Jātaka*, No.227.
36. *Avariya- Jātaka*, No.376.
37. Moti Chandra, *Trade and Trade Routes in Ancient India*, Abhinav Publication, New Delhi, 1977, p.55.
38. Ibid.
39. *Avariya- Jātaka*, No.376, *Cullakunaa- Jātaka*, No.464, *Duta- Jātaka*, No.478 and *Serivaniya- Jātaka*, No.3 etc.
40. *Pancavudha Jātaka*, No.55.
41. Ranbir Chakravarti, *Trade and Traders in Early Indian Society*, Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, New York, 2021, p.16.
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