

A NOTE ON ATĪŚA DĪPAÑKARA, DHARMAKĪRTI AND THE GEOGRAPHICAL PERSONALITY OF SUVARṆADVĪPA

H.B. Sarkar

In a recent paper published by Helmut Eimer in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, Vol. XXVII, no. 4, on "Life and activities of Atīśa", the writer suggested (p.8) that Atīśa might have met Dharmakīrti in Bodh Gaya or some monastery and that the account of Atīśa's sojourn in Suvarṇadvīpa has not yet been confirmed. The learned Director of the Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology having invited my comments to these two points, I wish to discuss them below but in a larger context, so that I may also present my current thinking in a somewhat newer orientation.

I

Atīśa's meeting with his future guru Dharmakīrti of Suvarṇadvīpa at Bodh Gaya or some monastery is apparently based upon a Tibetan tradition of legendary character, one of which has been translated by S.C.Das in *JBTSI*, i, pp. 8-9. It refers to the congregation of outstanding scholars of the Buddhist world at Vajrāsana, i.e. Bodh Gaya. At this congregation, the great Ācārya Mahā Śrī Ratna was present. According to the same tradition, Lama gSer-gling-pa, the future teacher of Atīśa was also present there and he attached himself to the great ācārya for sometime. He was given the title of Dharmakīrti by this *guru*. It is not easy to determine the date of this congregation. There are however two considerations which make it likely that Atīśa and Dharmakīrti might have met at Bodh Gaya or at some monastery. First Dharmakīrti is reported to have stayed in India for several years to study the Law and during this time he might have visited the famous sacred places of the Buddhist world like Bodh Gayā, Rājagṛha, Nālandā and Vikramśīlā. Second, Atīśa is also reported to have studied the Law at Nālandā, Rājagṛha, Vikramśīlā, completing his studies at Maṭi Vihāra in Bodh Gayā. So it is not unlikely that Atīśa and his future guru might have met each other in one of these centres of learning, but at present there is no trustworthy document anywhere to authenticate this point, as far as my information goes.

II

The question of the geographical identity of Suvarṇadvīpa is however much more important and complex than the points discussed above. Unfortunately all previous authors including the present writer, have followed S. Lévi in regard to the identity of Suvarṇadvīpa in his famous article "Ptolémée, le Niddesa et la Brhatkathā" published in *Etudes Asiatiques*, t.II, 1925 pp. 1-55 and 431-2. Research during the last fifty years or so convinced me that the paper had become obsolete in some major respects and was rather creating anomalies in the progress of research. I discussed these difficulties in a paper entitled, "A geographical introduction to South-East Asia: The Indian perspective," which was published in the *Bijdragen (Bki) of the Royal Institute*, Leiden, the Netherlands, vol. 137 (1981) pp. 293-324. In that paper, I have shown that Suvarṇabhūmi and Suvarṇadvīpa are two distinct geographical entities. Of these two, the former refers to lower Burma. I also pointed out in the same connexion that the geographical entity known as Suvarṇadvīpa did not figure at all in any authentic text prior to the date of the Nālandā Charter of king Devapāladeva of the Pāla dynasty. Further researches have led me to the conclusion that Sumatra was merely a segment of the much bigger geographical entity called Suvarṇadvīpa. As the date of the Nālandā Charter and the significance of what is Suvarṇadvīpa have very often been confused, these have led to the distortion of the history of the Malayo-Indonesian world also in some major respects. This distortion needs rectification by authors dealing with the history of that part of the world. For this reason also the geographical personality of Suvarṇadvīpa should be better defined.

The above mentioned Nālandā Charter (*Ep. Ind.* XVII, pp. 322-24), which mentions king Bālaputradeva as a contemporary of Devapāladeva, was issued on the 21st day of the Kārtika in the 35th or 39th regnal year of king Devapāla. The reading of the second numeral in the regnal year was uncertain, but it has probably to be read as regnal year 35. Due to the discovery of some new epigraphs, D.C. Sircar, in his *Dynastic Accounts of the Pāla and Sena Epoch*, (in Bengali), 1982, pp. 12, 67 ff., revised the reign-period of Devapāla as being from AD. 810-847, that of Śūrapāla I from C. 847 to 860 and that of Vīgrahapāla from 860-861. So the date of the Nālandā Charter should be AD. 845. Many scholars, notably J.G.de Casparis, have placed date of the Nālandā Charter in C. 850 AD. in one place (*Pras. Ind.* I, p.97) and between Ad. 860 and 870 in another (*Pras. Ind.* II, p. 297). The fixation of the latter date is absurd, as it unsettles the firm chronology of several dynasties of India. The date of the Nālandā Charter cannot therefore be later than AD. 847, when Devapāladeva died. If this is admitted, the chronology of the later Śailendra monarchs of Java, the account of civil war propounded by de Caspairs and his theory about the flight of Bālaputradeva to Suvarṇadvīpa will prove to be somewhat illusory,

or at least would demand a fresh assessment. Since the grandfather of Bālaputradeva has been described in the Nālandā Charter as *Yavabhūmipālah* and Bālaputradeva has been described in contradistinction as "Suva (r̥ṇa)-dvīpādhipa-ma(hā)rāja" in Verse 37, a difference in status between the two kings has been deliberately thrown in.

Let us now look for contemporary records to define the Geographical Personality of Suvarṇadvīpa. Fortunately for us, the Perso-Arabic travelogues for at least two centuries throw considerable light in the elucidation of his point. In the shorter text of the Ligor inscription found in Malaya and dated AD. 775, it was already stated of King Viṣṇu "that the selfsame (person) is known by the appellation of Śrī mahārāja because of the mention of his origin in the Śailendra dynasty." As a matter of fact, for a very long time thereafter, the designation mahārāja was applied only to the rulers of the maritime empire of the Śailendras, and later on, of Śrīvijaya. This vast empire figures in Arabic texts as Zābag (var. Jāvaka, Sāvaka), and ibn Khurdadhbeh, writing in AD 844-48, said that the ruler of Zābag is king of the islands of the southern ocean and is called the mahārāja. As ibn Khurdadhbeh and Bālaputradeva were contemporaneous, and the latter was ruler of Suvarṇadvīpa, it is obvious that Zābag of the Arabic text could only refer to Suvarṇadvīpa, but its headquarters were in Java where Bālaputradeva lived in AD 845. The position becomes clear from the statement of another author of a contemporary text (prior to AD 851), edited by Abu Zayd Hasan in C. 916 AD. We read there, "Kalāhbar (formed) part of the empire of Zābag, which is situated in the South of India. Kalāhbar and Zābag are governed by one king." Now, Abu Zayd Hasan has stated that the city of Zābag, whose circumference is 900 *parasangs* is ruled over by a king who "is known by the name of Mahārāja." We read further : "this king is in addition, the Sovereign of a great number of islands that extend for 1000 *parasangs* and even more. Among the states over which he ruled is the island called Sribuja, whose circumference is 400 *parasangs*, and the island Rami (Achin, north of Sumatra) ... Also part of the possession of the mahārāja is the maritime state of Kalāh, which is situated half-way between China, and Arabia The authority of the mahārāja is felt in these islands." Here Sribuja has been shown as a segment of Zābag. Ferrand thought that Zābag referred to Sumatra, but Pelliot understood it in the sense of Java - Sumatra. It seems to have been a bigger geographical entity, because a little later Masūdi, who had visited both Zābag and China, wrote in C. 955 AD about "the kingdom of the mahārāja, king of the isles of Zābag and other isles in the sea of China, among which are Kalāh and Sribuja ... Voyaging in the most rapid vessel, one cannot go round all these isles in two years." Zābag is thus the metropolitan country, exercising authority in various degrees over many parts of Sumatra, Malaya and smaller isles all about. This is explicitly stated another part of his text which reads : "Zābag is the chief island of his kingdom and the seat of his empire."

Al-Bīrūnī, the greatest scholar of his age, wrote about Suvarṇadvīpa in the following terms (Sachau, *Alberuni's India*, i, p 210): "The eastern islands in this ocean, which are nearer to China than to India are the islands of Zābag called by Hindus Suvarṇadvīpa, i.e. the gold islands." The same idea is repeated in pt. II, p. 106 of the same text, but he was particular in distinguishing it from Suvarṇabhūmi, which he rightly placed in his classified list under : IX, as being in the north-east (aiśānya)" (of India). In this context, it should not be forgotten that Al-Bīrūnī and Aṭiśa Dipaṅkara were contemporaries. So, Tibetan MS-notions about Suvarṇadvīpa receive better precision in the writing of Al-Bīrūnī.

What all the relevant Arabic texts had not recorded specifically have been supplied by the *Kathāsaritsāgara* (C. 1060 AD.), in *taranga* 54, Verses 97 ff., where we read that Kalasa (n) was the capital of Suvarṇadvīpa. As the earliest reference to Kalasan in connexion with Tārā worship occurs in the Kalasan inscription of Java, dated AD. 778 and not long thereafter in the Sanskrit text called *Āryamañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, dated C. 800 AD., this toponym could not have possibly been borrowed from the *Bṛhatkathā* of Guṇādhya, usually believed to be the source of the Kathā-text referred to above and placed in a date not later than the fifth century AD. (S.N.Dasgupta and S.K.De, *A History of Sanskrit Literature : classical period*, P. 696 and H.B.Sarkar in the *Bijdragen* article referred to earlier). As the East-West trade route passed by the maritime belt of Western India, particularly the Cambay region, traders of this region must have disseminated the information about the capital of Suvarṇadvīpa at Kalasa (n). It is also for this reason that I did not dismiss this information lightly, as it concerns a problem whose solution is not yet in sight.

When I visited Java in 1985, I had this problem in mind. The temple of Kalasan was a royal temple, established by rake Panangkaran (king Indra) with the assistance of "the Guru-s(preceptors) of the Śailendra king" (no. V in H.B.Sarkar, *Corpus of the Inscriptions of Java*, Vol. 1). As this was a royal-temple established by the royal preceptors, it stands to reason that the royal palace, according to Indian religious conception, could not be far off, as the members of the royal house-hold obviously worshipped here, irrespective of the change of dynasties among collateral branches. That struggles for power took place in its neighbourhood in subsequent times have been sought to be delineated by J.G.de Casparis in his *Prasasti Indonesia II*, pp. 244 ff., although I have reservations about the interpretation of the events.

The identification of the capital-city of Suvarṇadvīpa, having central authority over the loose segments of the confederation having thier respective zonal quarters, is as yet an unsolved problem, but it cannot escape one's attention that most of the durable archaeological treasures,

monumental and sculptural art are found only in the Southern half of central Java and not in any other part of Suvarṇadvīpa. As the founders of the Śrīvijayan kingdom in Sumatra were Sailendras from the start, as I have tried to prove elsewhere (vide my article 'Kings of Śrī Sailam and the foundation of the Sailendra dynasty of Indonesia' in the *Bijdragen*, 1985), there was nothing incongruous in their ruling over the isles of Suvarṇadvīpa from Kalasan, at least for a long time. It is indeed against human psychology to erect saga in stone in places where their founders do not live. Military and strategic needs might have compelled them occasionally to live in zonal headquarters for sometime and, send missions therefrom to China, as classified dates on Ho-Ling and Śrīvijaya missions seem to atleast, but this cannot be interpreted as the dismemberment of the empire of the mahārāja. A new investigation is no doubt needed to clear up all the issues involved in this context, but Ho-Ling seems to be no other than the central Javanese part of the Sailendra empire.

III

After the discussion made above, it will be easier for us to take up the account of Atīśa Dīpaṅkara and his *guru* who lived in the Śrīvijayan part of Suvarṇadvīpa. There are some references which have been noted by Alaka Chattopadhyaya in her work *Atīśa and Tibet*. In the *Abhisamaya-alamkāra-nāma prajñāpāramitā upadeśa-śāstra vṛttidurbodha-āloka-nāma-līkā* (A.C. l.c., p. 475), Colophon K makes it clear that it was composed by Ācārya Dharmakīrti of Suvarṇadvīpa in the tenth regnal year of Sri Cūḍāmaṇivarman of Suvarṇadvīpa from a place called Malayagiri in Vijayanagara. As Cūḍāmaṇivarman's successor Māravijayottuṅga Varman ascended the throne of Śrī Vijaya not later than AD 1008, the text in question could have been composed sometime before the death of the former. Here the geographical particulars are important. About the second text called *Bodhisattva caryāvatāra-piṇḍārtha* (A.C. l.c., p. 484), it has been stated that it was expounded at the request of Kamalarakṣita and Dīpaṅkara Śrījñāna, who were students of their *guru* Dharmapāla of Suvarṇadvīpa. This *guru* is generally believed to be no other than Dharmakīrti himself. There are some other texts of similar nature, but they do not yield any new information. Taken together these and other Tibetan data seem to imply that Atīśa went to Suvarṇadvīpa at the age 31, studied there for twelve years - this is rather a stereotyped duration assigned to studentship in general, about which I am sceptical - in the place called Malaya-giri in Śrīvijaya.

The foundation of Śrīvijaya by the dispossessed scions of the Ikṣvāku dynasty took place sometime between AD. 300 and 392. (vide my article in the *Bijdragen*, 1985, pp. 323-38). The Malayalam-speaking people collaborated in the foundation of Śrīvijaya and they themselves seem to

have settled down at a place which came to be known as Malāyu, after the name of their home-country on the Malabar coast of Southern India. It is usually identified with modern Jambi on the northern coast of Sumatra. A bigger influx organised by Śrīvijaya strengthened the demography of the place between AD. 671 and 695. It gradually grew up in importance and its ruler sent a mission to China in 644 and again in 645.

In the days of I-tsing (AD. 671), there were more than 1000 Buddhist priests in the "fortified city of Bhoja". They were told, "study all the subjects that exist in the Madhyadeśa (India)" Pelliot thought that this Bhoja, i.e. Śrīvijaya was located at Palembang, a view I also share. It is very difficult to state why the Buddhist centre at Palembang declined and that at Malayu-Malayagiri prospered. Whatever be the reason, it saw its prosperity in the tenth century AD., at least in the reign of the Śailendra King Cūḍāmaṇivarma-deva in the last quarter of the tenth century AD. The name of Malaya as Malay-giri seems to be justified, as it is a hilly terrain.

Atisa came to Malaya in AD. 1012, when the previous king of Śrīvijaya had already died and after Māravijayottuṅgavarman had ascended the throne in AD 1008. No evidence is however available at present from the Indonesian side regarding the existence of the Buddhist University at Malaya in the beginning of the eleventh century or Atīśa Dīpaṅkara's sojourn there for advanced studies in Buddhism.

A critical study of the progress of researches on Śrīvijaya up to 1979 had been furnished by O.W. Wolters in his "Studying Śrīvijaya", published in the *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 52 pt. 2, 1979, while a Bibliography on the same topic up to the same year has been furnished in the *Pra Seminar Penelitian Śrīvijaya*, published by the Pusat Penelitian Purabakala Dan Peninggalan Nasional, Jakarta, 1979. The latest authoritative discussion on Śrīvijaya and some other matters related to it is to be found in P. Wheatley, *Nāgara and Commandary University of Chicago*, 1983.



DIPANKARA ATISA