

Understanding Social Dimensions of Sārtha: An Early Historic Perspective
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ABSTRACT

The term 'sārtha' means something that has a meaning or purport, however, in Sanskrit the term in masculine gender means a caravan or a group of itinerant traders. The term is also used to indicate the mobile community of mendicants, beggars, refugees, labourers who are in search of work, and even to the herds (2ndKāṇḍa, Sīmhādivargaḥ, Verse 105). The present research paper uses the term Sārtha in the sense of a caravan. It is worth mentioning that in Pali lexicons use the term sattha, which is derived from the Sanskrit sārtha that denote the same meaning. Sārthavāhas literally means the one who carries sārtha or in other words the one who leads or guides the sārtha. So, he is the leader of the itinerant traders and necessarily is a trader himself. In some context, the term is also used to indicate a trader in general. Buddha is also mentioned as a sārthavāha in Buddhist literature. Sārtha travelled across the boundaries of the countries and communicated with important trade centers of the subcontinent and even beyond it along with their merchandises. As far as the inland network is concerned, the caravan traders acted as major link and acted as facilitators for long distance trade. Sārthas thus played a vital role in this phase of second urbanization and became a bone of contention between the cities and the exchange centers located in the hinterland. Though the traders were seminal in the preparation and organization of sārtha, in the making of the caravan and also the successful accomplishment of a journey one can trace several other factors and individuals involved in the process. The purpose of the present research is to explore the diverse social elements (other than the traders) which resided in sārtha, their role, their relation to the sārtha and the broader society and to situate this in the early historic (Pre-Gupta) socio-economic context of the lower and middle Gangetic valley.

Keywords: Sārtha, Sārthavāhas, sārthagaṇavāsi, Social elements, Arthaśāstra, Jātaka, vaidehakas.

Sārtha is a mobile group of traders who travelled across the boundaries of the countries and communicated with important trade centers of the subcontinent and even beyond it along with their merchandises. One of the major markers of the early historic phase was interconnectivity between the cities and exchange centers and hence enhancement of trading activities. As far as the inland network is concerned, the caravan traders acted as major link and acted as facilitators for long distance trade. Sārthas thus played a vital role in this phase of second urbanization and became a bone of contention between the cities and the exchange centers located in the hinterland. Sārthavāhas were the leader of the sārtha.

In Sanskrit the term 'sārtha' in masculine gender means a caravan or a group of itinerant traders who travelled with the carts loaded with commodities. The term is also used to indicate the mobile community of mendicants, beggars, refugees, labours who are in search of work, and even to the herds (2ndKāṇḍa, Sīmhādivargaḥ, Verse 105) . In the present research paper we would like to use the term Sārtha in the sense of a caravan. It is worth mentioning here that, in Pali lexicons use the term sattha , which is derived from the Sanskrit sārtha to denote the same meaning. Sārthavāhas literally means the one who carries sārtha or in other words the one who leads or guides the sārtha. So, he is the leader of the itinerant traders and necessarily is a trader himself.

In Arthaśāstra, the term sārtham is used to imply a caravan and it has always been mentioned in neuter gender and in singular number. Interestingly, in Apasarpapranidhi (13.3.50-3) of Arthaśāstra the term have been supplemented with the term vaidehakāḥ i.e. the traders (in plural number, masculine gender). This reflects that, the term sārtha has a collective sense and therefore, the term in singular has been used to address the mobile community as a whole. Secondly, it indicates the traders or vaidehakas. However, the Arthaśāstra only mentions the vaidehakas and that too not in the positive frame. They have been mainly depicted as fraudulent merchants and the state should deal strictly with them, be careful of their moves and suppress them.

Though the traders were seminal in the preparation and organization of sārtha, in the making of the caravan and also the successful accomplishment of a journey one can trace several other factors and individuals involved in the process. The purpose of the present research is to explore the diverse social elements (other than the traders) which resided in sārtha, their role, their relation to the sārtha and the broader society and to situate this in the early historic (Pre-Gupta) socio-economic context of the lower and middle Gangetic valley.

I

Arthaśāstra, interestingly provides some clues, though in a different context on the composition of a sārtha. Kautilya, while talking about the Apasarpas suggests them to be along with those moving in caravans transporting/ sending the troops in disguise (13.3.48-9). Among them are mentioned 1. ātivāhika or the extra load bearers. 2. Kanyāvāhika i.e. those accompanying brides, 3. Aśvavyavahārika i.e. horsesdealers 4. paṇyavyavahārika i.e. the dealer in crops, 5. upakaraṇhāraka i.e. carriers of implements, 6. dūta i.e. envoys, 7. Dhānyakreṭṭ & dhānyavikreṭṭ i.e. the purchasers and sellers of grain (respectively), 8. pravajitalingi i.e. those bearing the marks of monks.

Besides traders and merchants, some references from Arthaśāstra help us to locate a few others who usually were associated or travelled along with the sārtha. Among them mention may be made to the Tāpasa or the ascetics (1.11, 1.16.24, 2.35.13), Bhṛtyas and dāsabhaṭakas or the slavemen (3.14.18-22) and carrier of ādeśa or/and anvādhī i.e. courier persons (3.12.). To these may be added a few more taking cue from the Jātakas like escorts (valanāyaka in Jātaka, Nipāṭha 1, No.1, Nipāṭha 15, No. 513), Āryaśrāvaka (Jātaka, Nipāṭha 1, No.76), and guides (Jātaka, Nipāṭha 1, No.2). Jain literature also mentions children, old aged and beggars as a part of sārthas.

It is worth mentioning here that, to indicate those moving with caravans, the term which has been coined and collectively used in Arthaśāstra was sārthagaṇavāsī. The suffix added to it is in plural form i.e. sārthagaṇavāsībhiḥ (13.3.48). Elsewhere the terms sārthika (4.13.7) and sārthavasi are found mentioned which indicate the individual members of the sārtha i.e. in singular number.

II

Sārtha and its Members

Ātivāhikas were probably the extra load bearers. In fact, there were certain difficult and inhospitable terrains where the caravan needed some extra strength and equipment to carry the loads. Jātakas mention Sārthavahaputta who while crossing through a lowland felt the need of extra carrier and rented Bodhisattva, who was the strongest bull, to help him to cross the area. Interestingly it is mentioned that, Bodhisattva along with the other bulls of the village had been waiting there for long to earn money (Jātaka, Nipāṭha 1, No. 29). However, it may be pointed out that here we do not get reference to ātivāhika but the context is very similar to that of an ātivāhika. It is also probable that there were some people who escorted the traders by carrying loads in the uneasy contours and thus were mentioned as ātivāhikas. It is noteworthy here that the same term is also used in Arthaśāstra as in the list of expenses which one would have to bear while undertaking an initiative of trade in foreign country (2.16.18-21, 2.35.12). It is probably the charges for the service of the ātivāhikas which is meant to be mentioned here by the same term.

Existence of kanyāvāhika implies that, brides travelled along with the caravans while moving to the house of in laws or to their parental house. The term kanyāvāhika did also imply that there were separate arrangements or some distinct carriage for the women, mostly for the travelling bride. Plethora of evidences is available where we find references to such carriages in Jātaka, Dīghanikāya and Mahābhārata and so on. This is evident in Nigrodha- Jātaka (Jātaka, Nipāṭha 10, No.445) that, when the daughter in law of the śreṣṭhi of Magadha declared her wish to return home and bring forth her child in her father's house, taking leave of her

husband's parents, she mounted a carriage, and with a large number of attendants left Rajagraha behind her, and proceeded along the road. It is noteworthy is that, travelling in front of her was a caravan and she was always trying to maintain close proximity to them while in the move. Here we get reference to another lady who was mentioned as poor and hence stood in sārtha. She had to give birth to her child under a banyan tree. After that, she was mentioned to be thinking, "That without the caravan she could not get along, but that if she lived, she might receive the child, covered him up as he was, and left him lying there, at the foot of the banyan tree" . What is common in the case of both the women is that, they were pregnant. There was (and is in today's country) a practice of travelling to the paternal house for giving birth of child and these women used to travel along with sārtha. Though the woman who belonged to rich families travelled by their own conveyance, yet took the option of travelling with the sārtha for the sake of aid in case of need whereas the poor or the ordinary women were bound to be a part of the general section of the sārtha.

In Nalopākhyāna of Mahābhārata we see that Damayantī while wandering in the forest in search of her husband took shelter with a sārtha . The play Nalodaya by Kālidāsa on the basis of the Nalopākhyāna of Mahābhārata, also resonates the same description.

In the narrative of Payasi-suttānta of Dīghanikāya, we see that, a fire worshiper who dwelled in the forest found a new born child in the camp of the caravan. The new born child in turn indicates the presence of the lady in the caravan (Dīghanikāya.XXIII.21) .

There were religious mendicants and other passengers who took shelter with the sārtha for the purpose of travelling. Similarly, the religious persons/mendicants while travelling took shelter with the caravans mainly for the sake of food and safety. They were not member of sārtha in proper sense but they tried to be in association with sārtha during the course of their travel. Terms which is found mentioned in association with sārtha are āriyasāvako (Jātaka, Nipāṭha 1, No. 76) i.e. āryaśrāvaka, tāpasa , pravajitalingī (13.3.48) and śramanas, bhikṣu and bhikṣuni .

It is suggested in Arthaśāstra to indulge the spies, secret agents in disguise of Tāpasa for collecting information about the traders (2.35.13) . This in turn reflects that some tāpasas used to travel with the traders. There are many references available in Bṛihadkalpasūtrabhāṣya that clearly shows that Jain monks most often travelled along with sārthas. This text mentions about a lot of duties and restrictions of the monks while on the move. This also discloses some difficulties which they would have to face during the travel. Once a group of such monks left behind by the caravan reached the camp where the carts carrying goods for the king had encamped. There they got food and were informed about the road that they had to follow. But the monks had to face many difficulties when the caravan did not provide them with food.

Two points emerge from the above discussion that there were separate arrangements for carrying goods for the king and the second is that monks needed the association of sārthas not only for the food but also for the proper guidance of the routes. For example, the case of Āryaśrāvaka mentioned in Aśaṁkya Jātaka (Jātaka, Nipāṭha 1, No. 76) who was travelling along with sārtha. The mention of apasarpa in disguise of pravajitalingī i.e., those bearing the marks of monks in Arthaśāstra also implies that, people were well acquainted with the visual of parivrajakas or mendicants as a component of the sārthas. Among other co-travelers as part of the sārtha we find reference to children and old aged in the Bṛihadkalpasūtrabhāṣya . According to the Arthaśāstra, the brāhmaṇa, mendicants, children, old, sick and pregnant women were allowed to use ferry only by showing the gate pass, and without payment (2.28.18). The same rule might be followed in the other modes of transport too. As earlier mentioned, dutas or the messengers were mentioned as a part of the sārthagaṇavāsi (13.3.48) in Arthaśāstra. They were probably regular messengers and if they were so, they certainly did not carry urgent messages which would require swift movements. In general, the movement of the sārthas, especially big sārthas

would have been slow but at the same time it should also be kept in mind that, traders were well aware of the distance and the expected travel time to reach the final/ desired destination.

There were also some men in sārtha, who were engaged in dispatch of couriers. In relation to the rules concerning ādeśa or anvādhi, it is mentioned in Arthaśāstra that, “if a person in whose charge is the object to be handed over, does not reach the place indicated while going with a caravan, or is plundered and abandoned by robbers, he shall not be liable for the object in his charge” (3.12.2) . So, this is clear that, anvādhi (and/or ādeśa) bearers (sārthenanvādhihasto 3.12.20) used to move with sārthas it is further mentioned that, “if ... the caravan or the herd is plundered by robbers, or there is loss of the wheeled carriage, or the (deposit) is enveloped but flames or by the current... or the boat has sunk or is plundered, the (depository), if himself involved, shall not be liable for the deposit” (3.12.19) . So, it is reflected from both these references that, the owner of the goods did not travel himself in all cases. Instead they appointed some agents to dispatch their goods as courier. These agents and/or the vendors on behalf of the agents did travel with the sārthas. The people were liable to send/dispatch those couriers to the intended person at the proper place and on time. In this connection this is worth mentioning that, Manu also mentions about the men who made a contract to carry goods by a wheeled carriage for money and had agreed to a certain place or/and time (VIII, 256) .

The businessmen who were present in the above-mentioned citation (13.3.48) from the Apasarpapranidhi of Arthaśāstra were aśvavyavahārika i.e. dealers in horses, paṇyavyavahārika i.e. the dealer in crops, dhānya-kreṭṭ-vikreṭṭ i.e. the sellers and purchasers of grain. Here it is noteworthy that, the dealer of paṇya had been distinguished from the dealer of aśva in one hand and also distinguished from the sellers and purchasers of dhānya on the other thus indicating two things; first, neither aśva nor dhānya was equated with or regarded as paṇya. Secondly, vahārika and kreṭṭ-vikreṭṭ indicated two distinct business people who were associated with two different kind of business transaction. It is worth mentioning here that, Jātakaas are replete with references to horses and horse traders or dealers. Among all the horses the demand for the saindhava horse i.e. the horses coming from the Indus region was high. Mostly they have been portrayed as coming from north (Jātaka, Nipāṭha 1, No. 5 ; Nipāṭha 2, No.158 ;Nipāṭha 254). In the Mahābhārata and in Bṛihadkalpasūtrabhāṣya the horses are found mentioned as a part of the caravan probably as commodities of trade.

As the sārthas used to travel long they would have to carry required implements tools and equipments for raising camps, clearing the path, even making arrangement for water by digging well, if necessary, and so on. This also brings us to the question of man power which the sārthas would have carried along. They were probably the upakaranahārakas (which is mentioned in Arthaśāstra, 13.3.48). They were indeed kind of slaves and laborers. This is noteworthy that, there is no mention of dāsabhaṭakas or bhṛtyas in aforesaid group of men but sārtha would have been composed with a lot of bhṛtyas/slaves worked under the traders. Though there is no direct reference to slaves travelling with sārtha but we get mention of saṁghabhṛtyas working in partnership (labourers from unions) under the traders (3. 14.18-23). Ātivāhikas were probably the persons who used to carry some extra loads. They might be included among the bhṛtyas. In this connection it is worth mentioning that the following citation from Divyāvadāna (yet this is a later text), where we see that the load bearers are mentioned to carry the loads or the merchandise along with the carts and camels.

There were persons who guided the sārthas, while traveling across the deserts. They were the sthala-niyamakas. Jātaka mentions that, “Travelling on this desert, was like voyaging over the sea; a ‘desert-pilot’, as he was called, had to convoy them over by the knowledge of the stars. And this was the way in which our merchant was travelling that wilderness” (Jātaka, Nipāṭha 1, No. 2). We have also found corroborative evidence of the desert pilot in Jain texts. We also get informed that some of the caravan leaders appointed assistants or officers to guide their caravans.

As sārthas guided by the sārthavāhas communicated with many regions, sometimes the envoys accompanied this. We have shown earlier that in Arthaśāstra dūtas or the envoys traveled in sārtha along with other sārthagaṇavāsis (13.3.48-9) . While describing the term Arivarga on the basis of Kharoṣṭhī documents found from Niya, in central Asia. Borrowes showed that envoys followed Arivargas i.e. sārthavāhas to conduct their message to other regions . It is interesting that, sārthavāhas have been mention as Arivarga/Arivargi which means mediator or one who mediates. Thus, the role of guiding an entourage to their goal/direction is reflected. As far as the mode of transportation is concerned the question of carts and bulls come in. A lot of men were involved with cart driving, though there is no direct mention of cart drivers in the sources which have been surveyed. As the sārthavāhas generally had their own carts and bulls they receive fare from the other passengers. We have the references of Yānabhāṭaka (Arthaśāstra 2.16.64) , which the people who used the yāna or the cart of others had to pay.

III

What emerges distinctly from the data culled from some of the early historic literary sources is that though sārtha is modulated and regulated by the sārthavāha and set out to make profit through trade its role and activity was not limited to trade only. As a by-product we find that it provided employment opportunities to several sections of the society. Thus, in one hand, people those who were engaged as professional escorts like ātivāhik and Kanyāvāhika, those who were engaged in courier services, dessert pilots, slaves and labourers, cart drivers found their livelihood in sārtha. On the other hand, sārtha being a mobile group also provided the services for human movement from one region to the other. Especially for those who could not travel alone this mobile community provided the services for the safe travel for such people, for example at a time women could move without the help of family members along with sārtha. The situation was quite similar to the old and children. We are not sure sārtha provided the service in lieu of money or it was a philanthropic service but such people who are not connected to trade and not connected to any kind of exchange or profit-making business also traveled along with the sārtha. Thus, sārtha emerged as a vibrant and composite mobile community.