

Kapilavatthu and the Sakyans in the Early Buddhist Scriptures

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Paralleling the Himalayan foothills that define the modern India-Nepal border is a strip of terrain called the Terai. The whole region is flat, and the soil is a rich fertile alluvium. The numerous rivers and streams that flow down from the hills to the north sink into the gravel and then percolate to the surface in the Terai, creating pools, marshes and swamps. For centuries most of the Terai was made up of thick malarial forest, but beginning in the late nineteenth century it has been deforested and given over to rice cultivation. To get some idea of what it was like before the deforestation, one has to visit the Katarniaghat and the Suhelva sanctuaries, Dudhwa National Park or Valmiki National Park. Elephants, one-horned rhinoceros, the beautiful chital deer, tigers, leopards, monkeys, wild buffalo and hyenas roam through stands of sal, rosewood, khair, champak and bahera trees and areas of tall grasses. During the monsoon, when the rain has washed the dust from the atmosphere, the snowy peaks of the Himalayas can be clearly seen on the horizon to the north.

In the fifth century BCE one of the ethnic groups who inhabited parts of the Terai were the Sakyans, and it was into this group that the person who was to become the historical Buddha was born. Nothing in the early texts suggests that the Sakyan homeland was anything other than a small and unimportant chiefdom, and it would never have become famous or even been remembered had the Buddha not been born there.¹ In several places in the Tipitaka sixteen of the main states in the Middle Land are listed, but Sakya is not amongst them. The Tipitaka also records the names of a mere ten villages in the Sakyan country, again suggesting that it covered a modest area and probably that it was sparsely populated.²

¹ *Mahāvamsa* II,1 ff and *Mahāvastu* I, 338 ff give genealogical data about the Sakyans, and the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* IV,22,3 mentions Suddhodana, the Buddha's father, but not the Buddha himself. However, these texts were composed centuries after the Buddha, and there is no way of knowing if their information is reliable.

² In 1962 an archaeological survey in what had been Sakyan territory, located dozens of ancient sites dating from the 6th to the 2nd centuries BCE, some of them possibly the remains of these villages. See Debala Mitra. *Excavations at Tilaura-Kot and Kodan and Explorations in the Nepalese Terai*, 1972, pp.205-249

The Sakyans claimed to be descendants of the sons of the semi-mythical King Okkāka, who had been driven into exile by the machinations of his second queen.³ Wandering through the forest, they came to the hermitage of the sage Kapila who invited them to settle down nearby. Out of gratitude to him, they named the settlement they established Kapilavatthu, which became the Sakyan's principal town. Because this settlement happened to be in a grove of *sāka* trees, the exiles became known as Sakyans – at least that's what Sakyan clan history said.⁴ The name Sakya, sometimes Sākya, is more likely to be derived from *śak*, meaning “to be able” or “capable”. The Sakyans also claimed to be of the Ādicca lineage, which supposedly went back to the Vedic sun god, and to be of the warrior caste.

Although nominally independent, the Sakyans were under the influence of the kingdom of Kosala, their larger and more powerful neighbour to the south and west. The Tipitaka says: “The Sakyans are vassals of the king of Kosala; they offer him humble service and salutation, do his bidding and pay him homage”.⁵ This explains why the Sakyan land, “the land of [the Buddha's] birth” (*jātibhūmaka*), was described as belonging to the king of Kosala and why the king once said to the Buddha that the two of them were Kosalans.⁶ Tradition says that, towards the end of the Buddha's life, or more likely after his death, the Sakyans' *de jure* independence came to an end when their lands were formally absorbed into Kosala.

The Sakyans' neighbors to their east were the Koliyans. The border between their territories was the Rohiṇī River, which has its source in the Himalayan foothills and flows into the Rapti River a little west of the modern town of Gorakhpur. A later, although plausible, legend claims that, during a summer drought, the Sakyans and Koliyans nearly came to blows over the use of the water in this river, an argument which was later arbitrated by the Buddha.⁷

The Sakyans had a reputation for pride and impulsiveness and were considered rustics by their neighbours. A group of Sakyan youths are reported as saying of themselves, “We Sakyans are proud”, and Upāli, himself a Sakyan, described them as “a fierce people”. Taking a more

³ D.I,92.

⁴ The *śal* is *Shorea robusta*.

⁵ D.III, 83; Sn.422.

⁶ M.I,145; II,124.

⁷ Dhp-a. 254.

positive stance, the Buddha said his kinsmen were “endowed with wealth and energy”.⁸ When an arrogant young brahmin complained to the Buddha that during a visit to Kapilavatthu the Sakyan youths did not give him due respect, the Buddha defended his kinsmen, saying: “But even the quail, such a little bird, can talk as she likes in her own nest”.⁹ The Buddha’s comparison of Sakyans with a little bird is further evidence of their country’s diminutive size and unimportance.

There are only a few scattered references to what the main Sakyan town Kapilavatthu was like. There was some kind of school and a council hall (*santhāgāra*) where the elders of the clan would meet to discuss matters pertaining to the running of the chiefdom. The texts mention that after the construction of a new council hall and the Buddha was invited to inaugurate it by spending the night in it: “the floor was spread; ¹⁰ seats were arranged; a large pot of water was put out; and an oil lamp was hung up”.¹¹ Within walking distance of Kapilavatthu was the Nigrodhārāma, a park where the Buddha would stay during his occasional visits. From there he could walk to the Mahāvana, the Great Forest, indicating that the town was surrounded on some sides by this extensive forest which reached into the Himalayan foothills and stretched all the way to Vesālī and probably beyond.¹² Another place where he would sometimes stay was the mango orchard owned by the Vedhañña family, of whom nothing else is recorded.¹³

Although Kapilavatthu was almost certainly a small town, one of the few detailed references to it describes it as being “rich and prosperous, crowded and full of people, its streets busy”, which seems to suggest that it was something more than a small place.¹⁴ Archaeology can help resolve the apparent disparity between these two descriptions.

In the 1980s archaeologists conducted surveys of ancient settlement sites in the Kanpur district of Uttar Pradesh dating from between the seventh to the third century BCE. They found eighty-one settlements of

⁸ Sn.422.

⁹ D.I,91.

¹⁰ This probably refers to spreading a thin layer of cow dung over the floor, still commonly done in village homes. When dry, it prevents the feet getting dirty from the earthen floor. See also Vin.III,16.

¹¹ S.IV,182-183.

¹² S.III,91.

¹³ D.III,117.

¹⁴ S.V,369.

less than two hectares and calculated that these could have had a population of not more than 500 people. There were fourteen settlements covering an area of between two and four hectares, and these could have had a population of between 500 and 1000. Four settlements were more than four hectares and could have accommodated between 1,200 and 1,300 inhabitants.¹⁵ All these population centres were much smaller than the main cities of the time, and they would qualify as villages today. If Kapilavatthu had a population of 1,300, it would have been big enough to be described as bustling and crowded, especially if it was also a centre of commerce and the seat of government.

Excavations conducted at Piprahwa, the site of Kapilavatthu, in the early 1970s confirm the impression that it was a modest place. They revealed that the area it took up was small, although the whole site could not be explored because some of it was under cultivation. All structures dating from the Buddha's time had mud walls, while those made of baked brick were from a much later period. Kapilavatthu was nothing like the grand royal capital as described in later Buddhist legend.¹⁶

Numerous contemporary biographies of the Buddha repeat the inaccuracy that Kapilavatthu was in the Himalayan foothills. In fact, the terrain around it is as flat as it is possible to be; the first line of hills only starts about thirty kilometres further north.¹⁷

¹⁵ See M. Lal. 'Summary of Four Seasons of Exploration in Kanpur District, Uttar Pradesh,' *Man and Environment* 8, 1984.

¹⁶ Srivastava, 1986. The description of Kapilavatthu having high circling walls with strong battlements and gates at Tha.863 must be fanciful, as no such walls, not even modest ones or even a defensive ditch, has been revealed by archaeological investigation. See K. M. *Excavations at Piprahwa and Ganwaria*, 1996.

¹⁷ Sn. 422 says the Sakyan country was flanked by, or beside, *passa*, the Himalayas.

