

UTTARAKURU

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According to the earliest geographical conception of the Puranas, the earth was taken to consist of four continental regions, viz Jambudvipa, Ketumala, Bhadravarsa and Uttarakuru.¹ Jambudvipa stood for India proper, Ketumala represented the Oxus region, as the river Svaraksu (Vaksu) flowed through it, Bhadravarsa signified the Jaxartes region, as the river Sita watered it, and Uttarakuru denoted the country beyond it. In Buddhist texts these continental regions are differently named as Jambudvipa, to the south of mount Sumeru (Sineru), Aparagodana (Aparagoyana) to its west, Puravavideha to its east, and Uttarakuru to its north.² Both these traditions agree on the fact that Uttarakuru was the name of the region to the north of India.

The name Uttarakuru or northern Kuru is used in contradistinction to Daksinakuru or southern Kuru. In the *Mahabharata* the Uttarakurus are juxtaposed with the Daksinakurus.³ The distance between their countries can be measured by the marches of Arjuna described in the *Sabhaparvan*. After crossing the White Mountain (*Svetaparvata*), he marched through Kimpurusavarsa and reached the Manasarovara Lake, in the country of the Hatakas, dominated by the Gandharvas.⁴ From there he entered into the region called Harivarsa, beyond which lay the land of the Uttarakurus. Elsewhere in the epic, the region to the north of India, corresponding to Svetaparvata and Kimpurusavarsa, is called Haimavata, and the site of the Manasarovara Lake is indicated by the mountain Hemakuta, beyond which is said to lie Harivarsa.⁵ The Kailasa Range, running parallel to the Ladakh Range, 50 miles behind it, is, thus, the dividing line between Haimavata and Harivarsa. According to Bana, Arjuna reached the Hemakuta mountain, whose caves were echoing with the twangs of the bows of the irritated Gandharvas, after traversing the territory of China.⁶ Here the use of the word China seems to be intended to denote the Mongoloid peoples of the Himalayan regions, also called *Kirata*, a word derived from *Kiranti* or *Kirati*, the name of a group of people in eastern Nepal.⁷ Beyond Harivarsa, including the territories of Tibet, lay the idyllic and utopian land of the Kurus, called Uttarakuru. This was the land of mystery

and solitude, where nothing familiar could be seen,⁸ and it was useless to wage war.⁹ According to a tradition, the head of the demon Mahisa, severed by Skanda, formed a huge mountain, that blocked the entry into the Uttarakuru country.¹⁰ Yet Arjuna is said to have reached its frontier and conquered the northern Kurus living there.¹¹ The result of this campaign was that the people of the mountainous regions presented themselves with the offerings of garlands of jade, characteristic of Uttarakuru, and the powerful herbs of the Trans-Kailasa territory at the Rajasuya sacrifice of Yudhisthira.¹²

It is clear from the above account of the location of Uttarakuru that it lay to the north of the Himalayas, possibly, beyond Tibet, in the vicinity of the mountain Meru,¹³ which seems to represent the Pamirs, as shown by Sylvain Levi.¹⁴ According to the Great Epic, this land was marked by idyllic pleasure, bucolic beauty and sylvan silence. The trees produced elegant fruits and flowers; the earth yielded gold and rubies; the seasons were agreeable; the people were healthy and cheerful and had a life-span of 11,000 years; they passed their time in song, dance and merrymaking and among them sexual relations were promiscuous and unbridled. It was a veritable land of gods (*devaloka*). There the righteous people were born to enjoy the fruits of their meritorious deeds. In particular, the warriors, losing their life on the battle field, were transferred to that region.¹⁵ Even those, who made gifts of houses to Brahmanas, were entitled to be born in that country.¹⁶ These data show that Uttarakuru cannot be the bleak mountainous country of the Himalayas, but the region to the north of it, watered by the Tarim and its tributaries, where the oases-states of Bharuka, Kuca, Karashahr and Turfan, on the northern route, and Khotan, Niya, Endere, Calmadana, Kroraina, Charklik and Miran, on the southern route, flourished in ancient times. Chinese travellers and pilgrims have testified to the prosperity and richness of these regions and the religiosity and righteousness of their people and Indian writers have described their luxury, affluence, wealth and bliss by the terms Manikanavarsa, Bhadravarsa, Gandharvaloka and Aparagodana.

The names Kuru and Uttarakuru came into vogue in the Brahmana period. It is significant that the word "Kuru" is conspicuous by absence in the earliest strata of the *Rgveda*. Only once in the tenth mandala there is a reference to Kurusravana Trasadyava, but he is called the king of the Purus.¹⁷ Even in the territory of the Drasadvati, Sarasvati and Apaya, later known

as Kuruksetra on account of the association of the Kurus, the Baharata kings are said to have kindled the sacred fires.¹⁸ In the Apri hymns Sarasvati is mentioned with Bharati, the glory of the Bharatas. In the *Vajasneyi Samhita* the Bharatas appear in place of the Kurus-Pancalas.¹⁹ But in the Brahmana texts the Kurus become very prominent and are usually associated with the Pancalas.²⁰ They are also said to be in occupation of the territory, through which the rivers Drsadvati, Sarasvati and Apaya flowed, and which, consequently, came to be known as Kuruksetra.²¹ It was the home of later vedic culture : its speech was best and purest and its mode of sacrifice was ideal and perfect.²²

Besides the Kurus, there are references to the Uttarakurus in Brahmana literature. In the *Aitareya Brahmana* (VIII, 14), it is stated that the people, living beyond the snowy regions, like the Uttarakurus, anoint their kings for *Vairajya*, who, as result, are called *Virats*. At another place, in the same text (VIII, 23), Vasistha Satyahavya is stated to have anointed Janamtapi Atyarati, according to the ritual of Aindra Mahabhiseka, who, in consequence, went over the whole earth and conquered it upto the oceans. Thereupon, Vasistha Satyahavya demanded his fees. Atyarati replied that when he would coquer the Uttarakurus, he would confer the whole empire on him and himself become the commander of his army. Satyahavya retorted that the country of the Uttarakurus was the land of gods, whom no body could conquer, and, since he had deceived him, he would snatch everything from him. As a result, Atyarati lost his prowess and Susminson of Saibya, killed him.

It is clear from the above data that the Kurus came into the limelight in the later vedic period. They migrated from their homeland to the north of the Himalayas, and entered into India, driving away the Bharatas and occupying their habitat between the Drsadvati and the Sarasvati. Gradually, the Purus and the Bharatas mixed with them and became one people, as is clear from the expression *Kuravo Nama Bharatah* occuring in the Mahabharata (XII, 349, 44). In the beginning their relations with the Pancalas were good, but, in course of time, differences appeared among them and culminated in the famous *Mahabharata* war.²³ Though settled in the fertile and prosperous country of the Sarasvati and the Yamuna, they preserved the memories of their idyllic home in the northern regions and treated it as the abode of gods. Another section of the Kurus reached Iran and Western Asia and penetrated into Anatolia. Traces of the

volkerwanderung of the Kurus in these regions are found in a series of place-names and personal names current there. A town in Sogdiana still bears the name Kurkath; two kings of the Parsuwas Ansan branch of the Achaemenian family of Iran were named Kuru; a river in Transcaucasia, to the north-west of Panziz, is called Kur (Cyrus of Hellenic geographers); the region round the confluence between the river Hermus and its right bank tributary, the Phrygius, just to the north of the city of "Magnesia-under-Sipylos" is known as Koroupedion, meaning the Kuru Plain or Kuruksetra, which, like its Indian namesake, was the scene of memorable wars, like those between Seleucos Nicator and Lysimachus in 281 B.C. and the Romans and Antiochus III in 190 B.C., which decided the fate of empires in that region.²⁴ Thus, it appears that a wing of the Kurus left their homeland for the west, swept through the corridor between the southern foot of the Elburz Range and the northern edge of the Central Desert of Iran and reached the pasture-lands in the basin of Lake Urmiyah and, beyond that, in the steppe country in the lower basin of the rivers Aras and Kur, adjoining the west coast of the Caspian Sea. From there they travelled on still farther westward over the watershed between the basins of the Aras and the Qyzyl Irmağ (Halys) and debouched into the Anatolian Peninsula to settle in the region called the Kuru Plain after their name. Another detachment of the Kurus found its way to Luristan and joined the Early Achaemenids; whilst a third one swung to the southeast and through Bactriana and the Hindu-Kush moved into the Panjab and occupied the Sarasvati-Yamuna region. It is significant that one section of the Kurus, called Pratipeyas, are known as Balhikas, since one of the sons of Pratipa was called Balhika.²⁵ According to the Ramayana, Pururavas Aila, the progenitor of the Ailas, with whom the Kurus were associated, migrated to the middle country from Balhi or Bactriana.²⁶ Thus, we observe that, starting from their northern homeland (Uttarakuru), the Kurus moved to the west, and, breaking into several branches, migrated upto Anatolia, Luristan and the Panjab. As I have shown elsewhere, the painted grey ware, which succeeded the ochre-coloured ware, at more than fifty sites in U.P. and the Panjab, and may be dated 1200-1100 B.C., was associated with the Kurus.²⁷ We may, thus, date the *volkerwanderung* of the Kurus about the middle of the second millenium B.C. or a bit later.

The *Mahabharata* connects India with the land of Uttarakuru through Himalayan regions rather than the north-western passes. As shown above, Arjuna is said to have gone there *via* Kimpurusavarsa, Gandharvaloka, Haimavata, Hemakuta and Harivarsa, corresponding to different Himalayan regions. From early times the people of the Indian plains have been in contact with the Kailas region through many routes. Some of them are :

- (1) from Almora *via* Askot, Khela, Garbyang, Lipu Lekh Pass (16,750 ft.) & Taklakat to Kailas (Tarchhen) 238 miles,
- (2) from Almora *via* Askot, Khela, Darma Pass (18,510), and Gyanima Mandi 227 miles,
- (3) from Almora *via* Bageshvar, Milam, Unta-Dhura Pass (17,590), Jyanti Pass (18,500), Kungri-Bingri Pass (18,300) and Gyanima Mandi-210 miles,
- (4) from Joshimatha *via* Gunla-Niti Pass (16,600), Nabra Mandi, Sibchilim Mandi and Gyanima Mandi-200 miles,
- (5) from Joshimatha *via* Damjan Niti Pass (16,200), Tonjan La (16,350), Sibchilim Mandi and Gyanima Mandi-160 miles,
- (6) from Joshimatha *via* Hoti-Niti Pass (16,390), Sibchilim Mandi and Gyanima Mandi-158 miles,
- (7) from Badrinath *via* Mana Pass (18,400), Thuling Matha, Dapa, Nabra, Sibchilim and Gyanima Mandi-238 miles,
- (8) from Mukhuva-Gangotri *via* Nilang, Jelukhaga Pass (17,490), Puling Mandi, Thuling, Dapa, Sibchilim and Gyanima Mandi-243 miles,
- (9) from Simla *via* Rampur, Shipki Pass (15,400), Shiring La (16,400), Loache La (18,510), Gartok (15,100), Chargot La (16,200), and Tirthapuri-445 miles,
- (10) from Simla *via* Rampur, Shipki Pass, Shiring La, Thuling, Dapa, Sibchilim, and Gyanima Mandi-473 miles,
- (11) from Srinagar (Kashmir) *via* Zojila (11,578), Nammik (13,000), Fotu La (13,446), Leh (Ladhakh), Taglang La (17,500), Damchok, Gargunsa, Gartok, Chargot La (16,200) and Tirthapuri-605 miles,
- (12) from Kathmandu (Nepal, Pasupatinath) *via* Muktinath, Khocharnath and Taklakot-525 miles,
- (13) from Kullu in Kangra District through Rampur Bashahr state *via* Thuling.

In the east there were routes connecting Assam with Tibet and China. One route passed through Yung-tch'ang and Wanting and corresponds to the Burma Road. Another route led from Szechuan to Lhasa and Assam. Often pilgrims used to bypass Tibet in the south by following the Tasng-po route. The twenty Chinese monks, who, according to I-Tsing, arrived in India during the reign of Srigupta, who constructed for them a temple called Chinese Temple (Chihna-ssu), 40 Yojanas to the east of the famous Mahabodhi Temple at Nalanda, came by one of these routes. Chinese bamboos and silks reached India along these routes, whence they

were carried to Bactriana before the journey of Chang-K'ien in the second century B.C. Later, the Chinese adventurer Wanghsuan-Tsche advanced along one of these routes to capture Kanauj after the demise of Harsa and the usurpation of Arjuna or Arunasva in the seventh century. According to the *Mahabharata* (III, 177, 11-13) the Pandava brothers advanced north of Badri and, scaling the Himalayas, probably *via* Mana Pass, Thuling Math, Dapa, Nabra, Sibchilim and Gyanima Mandi, and passing through the lands of the Chinas, Tusaras, Daradas, Kulindas etc reached the kingdom of the Kirata king Subahu. It is noteworthy that in subsequent Indian traditions, embodied in the Great Epic, the routes leading to Uttarakuru are said to pass through the Himalayas rather than the passes of the Hindu-Kush and the Pamirs. It appears that either there was an infiltration of people from Uttarakuru to Kurukshetra along the Himalayan routes, besides the immigration of these peoples from Bactrian quaters along the north-western passes, or, after the settlement of the Kurus in India, the tradition of their coming from the north-west was forgotten and a connection between their Indian abode and their *urheimat* beyond the Himalayas was established through Himalayan routes, that were regularly in use.

NOTES

1. *Mahabharata* VI, 7, 11
 भद्राश्वः केतुमालश्च जम्बूद्वीपश्च भारत ।
 उत्तराश्चैव कुरवः कृतपुण्यप्रतिश्रयाः ।
2. *Papancasudani*, I p. 434; *Dhammapada-atthakatha*, p. 482;
 G. P. Malalasekera, *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, Vol. II p. 236.
3. *Mahabharata*, I, 102, 10.
 उत्तरैः कुरूभिः साधं दक्षिणाः कुरवस्तथा ।
4. *Ibid*, II, 25, 5.
 सरो मानसमासाद्य हाटकानभितः प्रभुः ।
 गन्धर्वरक्षितं देशं व्यजयत्पाण्डवस्ततः ॥
5. *Ibid* VI, 7, 6.
 इदं तु भारतं वर्षं ततो हैमवतं परम् ।
 हेमकूटात्परं चैव हरिवर्षं प्रचक्षते ॥

6. Bana. *Harsacarita*, ed P. V. Kane, p.
पाण्डवः सव्यसाची चीनविषयमतिक्रम्य राजसूयसम्पदे क्रुध्यन्मन्वर्व-
धनुष्कोटिटङ्कारकूजितकुञ्जं हेमकूटपर्वतं पराजैष्ट ।
7. Suniti Kumar Chatterji. 'Kirata-Jana-Krti', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal (Letters)*, Vol. XVI (1953) p. 169.
8. *Mahabharata* II, 25, 12.
प्रविष्टश्चापि कौन्तेय नेह द्रक्ष्यसि किञ्चन ।
न हि मानुषदेहेन शक्यमनाभिवीक्षितुम् ॥
9. *Ibid* II, 25 11.
उत्तराः कुरवो ह्येते नात्र युद्धं प्रवर्तते ।
10. *Ibid* III, 231, 14612.
पतता शिरसा तेन द्वारं षोडशयोजनम् ।
पर्वताभेन पिहितं तद्गम्यं ततोऽभवत् ॥
उत्तराः कुरवस्तेन गच्छन्त्यध यथासुखम् ।
11. *Ibid* V, 22, 8.
दिशं ह्युदीचीमपि चोत्तरान्कुरुन् गाण्डीवधन्वैकरथोजिगाय ।
12. *Ibid* II 48, 6.
उत्तरेभ्यः कुरुभ्यश्चाप्यपोढं माल्यमम्बुभिः ।
उत्तरादपि कैलासादोषधीः सुमहाबलाः ॥
पार्वतीया बलिं चान्यमाहृत्य प्रणताः स्थिताः ।
13. *Ibid* VI, 8, 23.
मेरुप्रदक्षिणं कृत्वा संप्रयात्युत्तरान्कुरुन् ।
Ibid VI, 8, 2.
दक्षिणेन तु नीलस्य मेरोः पार्श्वे तथोत्तरं ।
उत्तराः कुरवो राजन्पुण्याः सिद्धनिषेविताः ।
14. *Buddha Prakash, India and the World*, p. 226
15. *Mahabharata* XI, 26, 17
ये तत्र निहता राजन्नन्तरायोधनं प्रति ।
यथाकथंचित्ते राजन्संप्राप्ता उत्तरान्कुरुन् ।
16. *Ibid* XIII, 57, 2958

17. *Rgveda* X, 33, 4.
18. *Rgveda* III, 23.
19. *Vajasaneyi Samhita*, XI, 3, 3.
20. *Jaiminiya Upanisad Brahmana* III, 7, 6; VIII, 7; *Kausitaki Upanisad* IV, I; *Gopatha Brahmana* I, 2, 9; *Kathaka Samhita* X, 6.
21. *Pancavimsa Brahmana* XXV, 10; *Satapatha Brahmana* IV, 1, 5, 13; *Aitareya Brahmana* VII, 30; *Jaiminiya Brahmana* III, 126.
22. *Satapatha Brahmana* III, 2, 3, 15; *Sankhayana Srutasutra* XV, 3, 15; *Latyayana Srutasutra* VIII, 11, 18.
23. Buddha Prakash, *Political and Social Movements in Ancient Panjab* pp. 128-131.
24. K. J. Beloch, *Griechische Geschichte*, Vol IV Part II pp. 458-71.
25. *Mahabharata* II, 63, 2112.
26. *Ramayana* VII, 90, 21-23.
27. Buddha Prakash, *Political and Social Movements in Ancient Panjab* p. 23.

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