

## **Technology and Human Liberation: Insights from Ancient Buddhist Legend Romavisaya**

**Dr. Anthony Savari Raj Lourdusamy<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

The incursions of philosophers have gone much into sociological field, and Marxism is an example. Philosophers are to yet to sufficiently interrogate with the technological reality which is sweeping our times.

The paper, therefore, has the objectives of inquiring what really is the destiny of technological civilization in the context of the contemporary meeting of cultures, of studying and bringing to contemporary relevance the ancient Buddhist legend Romavisaya with its seminal insights on technology and human liberation and of discerning the relevance and vitality of Buddhist insights for global well-being and qualitative transformation in the contemporary technological context.

The significance of this research may consist, of course assisted by the Buddhist insights, in suggesting a way for the traditional religions and cultures to wake up differently and dismantle gently the technocratic complex, by voicing and asserting commonly and uniquely our own visions and priorities of life and further suggest pathways for human liberation.

The study focuses on an ancient Buddhist legend Romavisaya as found in the text Lokapaññati. The text records the use of “mechanical devices” to protect the Buddha’s relics. One of the limitations of this research is author’s ignorance of the original language in which the text has been written in Pali. Though translation of the text and studies on the text are available, not being able to read the text in its original is surely a limitation.

### **Methodology**

The method adopted in this research is textual, as it bases itself on the study of the text Lokapaññati. Yet, it is marked by an existential attitude and a cross-cultural approach, since it is from our present cross-cultural context, problems and situation the study proposes to cull out insights from the text as regards technology and human liberation.

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1. Manipal University Jaipur, Jaipur, 303007, India. ansraj65@gmail.com

## Results and Discussion

With its power and efficiency, modern technology—also known as technocracy—is here to stay. Its unfathomable and indisputable benefits to humanity include comforts and conveniences. The humans of traditional cultures, however, have a deeply ambivalent attitude toward it, on the one hand, wanting the material benefits of technocratic civilization, while at the same time seeing that it equally causes deracination, alienation and impotence.

Furthermore, the interaction between technological culture and other civilizations has led to what we may call, “conflict of cosmologies” (specially between the Western techne and the Eastern Dharma). The priorities, values and vision of the technocratic world-view are neither neutral nor universal and they seem to be at loggerheads with those of the human of traditional cultures with their vitalistic cosmologies, especially in the comprehension of substance, life, time, space, wellbeing, and so on.

In this context the crucial question is: what really is the future of technological civilization and how human liberation is to be envisaged in the new technological context?

In response to this important question the paper takes up for study an ancient Buddhist legend Romavisaya – which occurs in one text: in the Burmese Lokapaññati. The legend clearly connects the mechanical beings (“bhūta vāhana yanta,” or “spirit movement machines” in Pali and Sanskrit) protecting the Buddha’s relics from Roma-visaya (the Greek-influenced West) automatons.

The legend is set in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean region known in Indian language as "Roma-visaya," where a large number of "yantakara," or robot creators, lived in the Western domain of the "Yavanas," or Greek-speaking people. The Yavanas kept their robotics technology a closely-guarded secret. Roma-visaya's robots were used for trading and farming, as well as for capturing and executing criminals.

Makers of robots who ventured to depart or divulge their secrets would be pursued and killed by robotic assassins. A young craftsman in Pāṭaliputra was motivated to learn how to build automatons after hearing about the incredible robots.

According to legend, the young man from Pāṭaliputra is reborn in Roma-visaya. After mastering his craft, he marries the robot maker's daughter. One day, he steals blueprints for robot construction and comes up with a plan to send them back to India.

Unaware that he would be killed by robotic assassins before he could travel, he cuts off his thigh, sews his skin back on, and reassembles himself. Then he sets out on his quest, instructing his son to see that his body finds its way back to Pāṭaliputra. After being apprehended and put to death, his son finds and transports his body to Pāṭaliputra.

After returning to India, the son finds his father's blueprints and follows their directions to construct the robot troops King Ajāsatta needs to guard the Buddha treasures in the subterranean chamber. The artifacts and robots were well concealed and skillfully guarded before being lost to time.

Asoka governed the strong Mauryan Empire at Pāṭaliputra from 273-232 BC, two centuries following Ajāsatta. Asoka built numerous stupas around his expansive kingdom to house the Buddha's relics. Legend has it that Asoka, investigating and learning about the fabled secret relics, found the underground room that the vicious android warriors guarded. Asoka engaged in violent combat with the robots.

This legend shows some historical human nature archetypes, relationships between East and West, and a mysterious warning about the future of human civilizations—particularly the technological civilization with its pan-economic ideology.

Furthermore, the narrative asserts the existence of powerful, genuine robots. It confirms that they originated somewhere, but if we figure out the recipe, we can grow them anywhere. It acknowledges that those who can master them become powerful, but it concludes by stating that people who interact with them will inevitably perish at their hands.

In the Kingdom of Roma, there are atoms, hydrogen, and neutron bombs; civilization is thought to be a megamachine propelled by its own ghost. Buddhist insight acknowledges its strength while simultaneously reaffirming its samsaric nature since the true meaning of existence appears to be obscured by its own glories. Humans must not permit themselves to become less in control of the world. They shouldn't give up in favor of automated systems.

The entire epic exudes the mahayanic tranquility of witnessing historical occurrences playing out within the parameters of time and space as representations and clues of that ultimate reality which, because it has no "substance" or "consistency," can coexist with anything. Nirvana is samsara, and samsara is nirvana.

The play must be performed, regardless of whether it appears to be or truly is a drama. It's hardly a tragedy, though. This does not automatically doom us to passivity, apathy, or even insensibility. It imparts only a sensation of calmness and equilibrium, and very little insensibility. And here, the objective is to provide the conditions for a sustainable and humane survival rather than to add to the agony of a dying society.

## Conclusion

Inspired by these Buddhist insights as derived from the legend Romavisaya, the common task ahead of us, particularly those of the traditional cultures, therefore, is to wake up differently and dismantle gently the technocratic complex, by voicing and asserting commonly and uniquely our own visions and priorities of life, remaining at the same time, be alive to the spirit of the new human situation and help, integrate, and bring about a change in ways that are both necessary and feasible. This, indeed, brings in the contemporary need for the cultivation of a technicultural attitude that needs to be assisted by a collaboration of cultures and an intercultural attitude.

**Keywords:** Lokapaññati, Mahayana, Nirvana, Technological Civilization, Romavisaya

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