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**SOCIO RELIGIOUS LIFE OF NORTHERN INDIA
600 BC TO 300 AD**

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Socio Religious Life of Northern India 600 BC To 300 AD

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Abstract – A considerable change was noticed in the material life of north India around c. 600 B.C. Agriculture became the mainstay of the material life during this time. The settlements grew in the middle Gangetic basin. The topography and climate of this region together with technological innovations (use of iron) was responsible for agrarian prosperity in this region. This in turn had its reflection in the contemporary socio-political and economic life. The use of iron was at first restricted only in the manufacturing of weapons. The introduction of iron in the field of manufacturing weapon reflects the development in military machinery as well as the strengthening of the power of the ksatriyas.

Keywords: Ksatriyas, Ancient, Society

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INTRODUCTION

A change from a lineage based society to a stratified society has been observed during this period. This period also witnessed the emergence of territorial powers (janapadas/mahajanapadas) in place of lineage based polities (Janas). The agrarian prosperity during this time paved the way for the development of various types of crafts. The plains of northern India, especially, the middle Gangetic basin experienced the second urbanisation during this time. In fact they were the manifestation of the overall changes that took place.

The migration of the Vedic people from the Punjab to east, south, and south-east began since c.1000 B.C. In the Satapatha Brahmana, there is an allusion to this movement from Sarasvati to the middle Ganga valley¹. Search for new lands and demographic growth may be the cause behind this migration. A large number of agrarian settlements grew in the middle Gangetic basin around c. 600 B.C. The climatic condition in the middle Gangetic basin was favorable for the development of settlements. At present, greater part of this region receives 45 to 55 inches of rain. This area is drained by perennial rivers from the Himalayan glaciers. It is noted for its very fertile alluvial soil. It is likely that the region had a thick forest cover during this time. Fire was used to clear the jungles and for establishing the settlements. However, for making the land suitable for cultivation it was necessary to take out or cut out the stumps of the trees which strike horizontal roots in this area.

Iron implements were also used in agriculture, which in a way was responsible for increasing the production during this time. It is noted that for tilling the hard soil

(kewal) of Patna iron ploughshare is required, unlike the light, loamy soil of the upper Gangetic basin, where wooden ploughshare could work. Agriculture became the basic occupation of the population living here. Rice is the main crop in this region. This region had a precedence of rice cultivation from the Neolithic Age. The earliest evidence of rice cultivation was found in the Neolithic site of Koldihawa², near Allahabad. According to Ram Sharan Sharma, paddy production by transplantation began around c. 600 B.C. References of paddy transplantation were also found in the Pali texts. A new variety of rice namely sali appeared during this period. Fine sail variety of rice was associated with Magadha region.

The cultivation of these cash crops clearly reflects the agrarian developments. Different types of agricultural activities are mentioned in various Buddhist texts³ and also in the Brahmanical texts⁴, irrigation was also practised but the dependence on irrigation was much less due to the presence of perennial rivers' and regular amount of annual rainfall. However, where paddy was the single crop, a substantial amount of excess was required at each harvest, for storing and utilizing it during the fallow season. So, there was a need to increase the production. This required more land to be brought under cultivation, more labour and irrigation projects.

There are references of dSsa-karmakara (slaves, servants, and hired labourers) in the fields of rajakula (the land owning ksatriya clans) in the Kunala Jataka, the Ahguttara Nikaya and the DFgha Nikaya⁶. The availability of the land, labour and irrigation systems were responsible for the production of surplus, which in turn were able to sustain a large number of population. Emergence of various types of

crafts were also found during this time, among which iron works and pottery were important. The pottery of this time was represented by Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW). Technologically this pottery was more advanced than the Painted Grey Ware (PGW) potteries. This period witnessed the beginning of organizations of industries under the names of *gana*, *puga* and *samgha*.

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Ksatriyas also took part in the trade. Thus a complex society has emerged with the intensification of *varna-jmi* differentiation. The *varna* system became much more defined. The *vaisyas* and the *sudras* were the main producing classes. They were categorized as the lower class. While the rulers and priests who were not directly involved with the production system were defined as the higher classes. The fruits of the economic expansion was enjoyed by these higher classes with the exclusion of peasants and labourers. It is noted that the *vaisyas* being the traders and the peasants were the chief tax payers while the *Sudras* were the main producing force.

Thus the power of the *ksatriyas* found to be increasing during this time. The use of iron was restricted previously in the manufacturing of weapons. This has indicated the advancement of military machinery. The *ksatriyas* could extract more surplus. They could maintain a standing army and an efficient bureaucracy with this. This period witnessed the growth of sixteen *mahajanapadas* or great states from Gandhara in the north to Asmaka in the south and from Avantf in the west to Anga in the east.

Most of the *mahajanapadas* were located in the middle Gangetic basin, that is in the eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The beginning of secularization of political and social life was observed during this time. The rise of *mahajanapadas* also coincided with the rise of secular religion like Buddhism and Jainism questioning the orthodoxy of the Brahmanical religion. Both Jainism and Buddhism were against the destruction of surplus in the form of *yajnas*. Both these religions denounced *yajnas*. They preached *ahimsa* or the preservation of material life in the form of cattle power which again was so vital for agriculture.

So agrarian surplus had an important role in the changes, which took place around c. 600 B.C. The accumulation of surplus was vital for the growth of a secular political authority in place of traditional orthodoxy. Destruction of surplus through the *yajnas* were denounced by the settlers of *majjhima*. The influence of traditional Brahmanical religion in political sphere was also diminished with the increase in power of the *ksatriyas*. Further a tendency towards accumulation and extraction of surplus was observed. The ideal site of storage of surplus crops was the granary, located in an urban space. However, granary

as a store house of this surplus was found only in the urban site of Atranjikhhera.

The ancient site of Atranjikhhera (27° 42' North; 78° 44' East) was situated in district and tehsil Etah in Uttar Pradesh. The site experienced four periods of occupation. The last period was characterized by Northern Black Polished Ware (c. 600 - 50 B.C.)

However, archaeological evidence of granary as a symbol of agrarian surplus was absent in other cities of this period. The reason cited by Romila Thapar was that the political system was still relatively decentralized. Romila Thapar emphasized that the *gahapatis* had their own granaries and mention of state granaries were only found in the Mauryan age.

There are references of stores of food attached to *samghas* in the Vinaya Pitaka also. The buildings during this time were mostly made of mud and wood. So the chances of their survival in the present age is least. This may be one of the causes of the absence of granaries in most of the archaeological sites of this period. Lack of horizontal excavations may be another cause.

The development in material life witnessed the gradual concentration of power in the hands of four monarchical powers, namely Kosala, Vatsa, Avantf and Magadha and one non-monarchical clan, the Licchavis. There was a continuous struggle between the urge for empire building in the monarchical state and the love for local autonomy in the republican/oligarchic powers (*ganasamghas*). The need of the hour was a strong and sizeable army, the maintenance of which required sufficient amount of agrarian surplus. The concentration of power in the hands of the king also witnessed an hierarchy of officials under his control. Proper extraction of agrarian surplus was felt. The concentration of coercive powers in the hands of the king enabled him to extract levies from agrarian, industrial and commercial activities. The levies were usually collected in kind. Proper storage of these levies was required.

DISCUSSION

In this struggle for supremacy, Magadha emerged as the most powerful *mahajanapada* establishing its sway over other powers. Its imperial initiatives started from the days of Bimbisara. The conquest of Anga during Bimbisara's realm indicates the tendency to bring the economically important regions under the control of Magadha. Magadhan imperialism reached its peak under the imperial Mauryas. The Mauryans maintained a huge standing army and a substantial bureaucracy. So sufficient resources were needed to maintain them.

The state took active participation in agriculture. Contemporary sources highlights the interest of the state in irrigation projects. In the writings of Megasthenes, there is a mention of a government official, *Agoranomois*, whose duty was to look after the

sluice gates on rivers in order to ensure distribution of irrigation waters to tillers. The lake Sudarsana in Kathiawad was another example of the participation of the state in irrigational activities. The Arthasastra prescribes that all the irrigational projects (setu) should be brought under governmental supervision and recommended levy of irrigation cess (udakabhaga). Kautilya also directed the sitadhyaksa to install a rain-gauge ('varsamanakudya), so that irrigation facilities could be provided to relatively dry and arid zones.

The Arthasastra gives an image of highly centralized state controlled and regulated economy under the reign of the Mauryas. A reading of other contemporary sources however suggest that the Mauryan control over economic life was not all encompassing as Kautilya would have liked. The state initiatives in utilizing crown lands for agriculture (sita) and the janapadanivesa programme could have been practised only in Magadha region and adjoining areas in eastern Uttar Pradesh, the metropolitan state in the vast Maurya empire. The surplus agrarian product were collected in the form of revenue and were stored in the royal granary (kosthagara). According to the Arthasastra, land revenue was the most important source of income. Megasthenes describes the second caste as the peasants, who cultivate the soil and pay tributes to the king³¹. The revenue assessment varies from region to region while the sources mentioned a range from one-sixth to one-fourth of the produce.

The Sohagaura inscription was issued from the Manavasiti camp of the mahamatras of Λ ravastf. It is said here that there were two three-storied granaries in the villages of £riman and Vamsa-grama³⁹. The figures of two three-storied structures along with the symbols of a tree within a stone fence, lotus-bud and moon above a hillock appeared in this inscription. In the text part, it is also mentioned that the agrarian production from Mathura, Canca, Mayudama and Bhallaka were to be stored in these granaries and to be distributed in times of emergency (atyayika)⁴⁰. The grains were not to be reimbursed by the people. This region was in the fertile tract of the middle Gangetic basin. So sufficient amount of surplus were generated from this region. The amount of surplus collected from here in the form of revenue was sufficient and so reimbursement of the granary by the residents of this region was not required. However, the types of emergency situations were not mentioned in this inscription. But it is clear from this inscription that the granary had an important role in emergency situations.

The importance of granary at the time of emergency is mentioned in the Mahasthan inscription also. In the Mahasthan inscription it is mentioned that sesame and mustard should be given to the Samvagiyas⁴¹ during emergency situations like floods, fire or drought [udakatyayikaya, devatyayikaya (yadba agnyatyayikaya), sukatyayikaya]⁴². Sumatra, the distinguished officer of Pundranagara would look after this. In favorable condition, the granary from where these were to be distributed should be replenished

with grains (dhanya) and gandaka coins. So the normal collection of tax was insufficient for reimbursing the granary. Perhaps the surplus production in this region was not sufficient.

But if the agrarian surplus of this region was insufficient, and if the revenue collected was inadequate to fill up the granaries, then this type of attitude is justified. Not all the regions of Mauryan empire yield similar type of surplus. So the attitude of Government varied from region to region. The amount of tax also differed from one region to another. So it can be said that the granaries in the Mauryan period were not only used as store houses of taxes but also served as grain banks from where grains were to be distributed in times of emergency. The role of granary in times of emergency is referred in the Arthasastra also. It is mentioned in the Arthasastra that the superintendent of the magazine (kosthagaradhyaksa), should keep aside half of the store of the granary for distribution during emergency situations.

There should be four halls in it which open up into a quadrangle. It should have ground and upper floors. There should be a secret passage too. This structure should be surrounded by a ditch. Adequate protections should be taken against fire and poison and also against cats and rodents. There should be a basin in the magazine as a rain gauge with a mouth one aratni in width. The Director of Stores should also build a store for forest produce with many long halls and walls surrounded by rooms.

CONCLUSION

In the Arthasastra, instructions are given regarding method of storage of different items. Grains should be stored at higher levels. Sugars should be stored in close knit grass bags and fats in earthen jars and wooden casks. Salt should be stored underground. So the practice of underground storage was also prevalent in the age of the Arthasastra.

In the granary, other than grains, there should be implements for weighing and measuring, grinding-stones, pestle and mortar, pounding and crushing machines, scatterer, winnowing basket, sieve, cane-basket, box and broom as suggested by the Arthasastra. Perhaps these equipments were associated with various types of activities connected with the store house like cleaning the grains, measuring it, pounding the grains and also cleaning the granary.

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historians were only too ready to repeat and ring the change upon it.

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