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Reflections of Socio-economic progress during Mauryan period in early India

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Abstract

The main discourse of this study is the great economic and social transformations which took place in India during *Mauryan oeriod*. In terms of cultural and historical development, this period registered a transition from the agrarian way of life of Early Historical Period to the full-fledged agrarian economy, trade and urbanism in India. During this period of study, as we might expect Aryan culture became influenced by the cultures of the peoples whom they met in north India and we find, at the end of the period, the beginning of what we can recognize today as classical Indian culture. The C14 dates for the spread of the Northern Black Polished Ware in different parts of the northern India provide a range from 475 BC to early centuries of Christian era, which support the pre-*Mauryan* penetration of the techno- cultural elements from north India into the Ganga valley. If this deluxe ware is linked up with the second urbanization in north India and its spread to the south-east of India as a resultant factor of this trade as well as early Buddhism. The Northern Black Polished Ware collected from various excavated sites of middle Ganga valley, indicates the pre-*Mauryan* advent of Buddhism in this region. The indisputable evidence of the rise of *Mauryan* presence in India comes from these excavated several sites where the *Mauryan* stratum overlaps the early historical layer in stratified context. The expansion of early historical sites into the fertile flood plains of the Ganga-Yamuna doab and the *Mauryan* presence there indicate a diversification of the resource base and a greater reliance on agriculture in addition to the exploitation of the mineral resources.

Keywords: Mauryan, Ganga Valley, Agrarian, Urbanization, Empire

Introduction

In the Buddha period, there was a great development in commercial activities both internal and external. One of the Sutras of Panini refers to trading with island. It reflects the extensive development of foreign trade. From other Sutras we know of merchants trading with certain parts of the country. In the earliest literature of the Buddhist and Jain's, we meet with the word 'vannigo' meaning merchants in general. Some of these merchants traded with foreign countries and carried their goods in their own vassels (samudda-vanijo). The Nikayas too, speak of sea-voyages to distant foreign lands but details are lacking until we come to the period during which the Jatakas and other later books were composed. As to circumstantial evidence there are supposed references to Indian goods in foreign literature which go to confirm the existence of commercial intercourse with the people of Western Asia the evidence of the Jataka stories speaks of a voyages to Babylon, Ceylon and *Suvanna-bhumi*, identified with the portions of Indo-Chinese peninsula. Besides, the sea-voyage was not unknown among the Indian Aryans ^[1]. The sustainable and permanent commerce and trade, to western parts of Asia, which we find in later Smritis and Baudh works, came into existence is during Later-Vedic periods. The term *Yavanika* which occurs in Panini's Astadhyayi too confirms the hypothesis.

In the last phase of the Buddha period there was a larger and wide circulation of gold, silver and copper pieces which are mentioned as a medium of exchange. Not only do we meet with the old names of Niska and Satman but we find evidence of the rise of new and varied coins. The older types of coins the *Satman* or *Niska* are referred to in many places of Upanishad and the Sutras. The circulation of the Niska and Satmanas continued, but a newer currency system came into use, with the time of the Budhha. The earliest information about these coins has been furnished by the Sutras of Panini. Moreover the evidence of Panini, is really significant and proves in clear and unmistakable terms, the practice of stamping impressions

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on coins. Coming to the Buddhist works, we have repeated mention of the words as used by Panini. In addition there were pieces of intermediate or fractional values.

The C14 dates for the spread of the Northern Black Polished Ware in different parts of the northern India provide a range from 475 BC to early centuries of Christian era, which support the pre-Mauryan penetration of the techno-cultural elements from north India into the Ganga valley. If this deluxe ware is linked up with the second urbanization in north India and its spread to the south-east of India as a resultant factor of this trade as well as early Buddhism, the Northern Black Polished Ware collected from various excavated sites of middle Ganga valley, indicates the pre-Mauryan advent of Buddhism in this region. It is important that Campa, Rajgriha, Saket, Banaras, Kusinara, Kaushambi, Ataranjikhera, Shravasti, Lalqila and Kurukshetra are the site that has yielded the largest quantity of the Northern Black Polished Ware from Early Historical context in India ^[2]. This is matched with the big hoards of the silver punch-marked coins found in India. Thus, indisputable evidence of the rise of Mauryan presence in India comes from these excavated several sites where the Mauryan stratum overlaps the early historical layer in stratified context. The expansion of early historical sites into the fertile flood plains of the Ganga-Yamuna doab and the Mauryan presence there indicate a diversification of the resource base and a greater reliance on agriculture in addition to the exploitation of the mineral resources.

The prime motivation for the Mauryas to conquer the central western and northern India due to the necessity to extend their resource base and get an access to the raw materials. This brought the Mauryan system into close interaction with the early historical settlements of the area and thus middle Ganga valley formed a core region within the Mauryan state. Of the other early Buddhist centers of middle Ganga valley, have yielded remains ascribable to the Mauryan period. The middle Ganga valley was crucial and unavoidable to the routes of trade and contact through which the north province of Asoka maintained contact with the metropolitan state capital of the Mauryas located in the eastern Gangetic valley. There were several possible routes, both overland and coastal, connecting the several points of interaction on the way. Such a route passed through Mathura-Rajgrih stated as Uttara path ^[3]. Another route passed through central India as Dakshina path. The entire Ganga valley participated in the emerging early historical traffic in India.

In thinking about the Mauryan era we need to consider that what kind of states that was, avoiding imposing political notions from modern, western experience on material from the past. When we consider the history of empires in ancient India, it is useful to keep in mind that they were relatively short in time, compared to the Han Empire in China or the Achaemenid Empire in Iran. This means, among other things, that they did not have a strong restructuring effect on local institutions. The social structure of the Gangetic valley, the varna and, especially, the caste model for social organization, spread throughout entire north India. Administrative procedures for penetrating local societies and bending local political and social structures to the will of the state did not spread. Curiously, the Mauryan Empire was probably administratively more centralized than those that followed. Still, as we shall see, the arm of the state did not reach deeply to the extent that it was centralized ^[4]. The

Mauryans could succeed because state formation in general in India had been so slow. The Mauryan hinterland was not studded with aggressive chiefs and princes looking for a fight from an imperial challenger. Ironically, in trying to make contact and to establish some control over the frontier regions, the Mauryans initiated state formation in those areas.

First, however, we shall consider the emergence of Magadha as an empire. There has been much speculation about this emergence, which from one point of view seems to have sprung into existence at the periphery of the Gangetic civilization after just two generations of leaders. One theory was that imperial state administration had diffused from Western Asia. An Achaemenid emperor established a province on the banks of the Indus in the 6th century BC and many have considered that the Mauryans took their cue here. Evidence for this point of view comes from the most famous symbol of the Mauryans - the stone pillars of Ashoka. From the point of view of art historians, there is evidence for strong influence in Mauryan statecraft from Iran. A second theory about the emergence of the Mauryans comes from Indian Marxists who emphasize materialist causes as the motive force in historical change. These historians have speculated that iron made a major impact in agriculture in the Ganges Valley from about 750 B.C., leading to a greater agricultural surplus which could support more complex state formations, the mahajanapadas which emerged. The historian Kulke points out that there is little evidence for widespread use of iron in agriculture. Rather than look for a single cause, we do well to consider to entire long process of political change which was basically internal to Indian society. The process of change accelerated markedly around the 7th century B. C. with the Aryans shift to the ecological zone of the middle Gangetic plain. The Iranian province of the 6th B. C. century and the invasion of Alexander the Great in the 4th B. C ^[5]. century could not have made a noteworthy impact on political development in north India if there had not already been the long-term political and economic changes which we noted for the late Vedic age. When we examine the ideological changes of this period and examine their long-term impact we will see that Iranian influence on Indian statecraft was quite superficial. The Mauryan Empire consisted of a great variety of political formations and ecological zones: it contained forest peoples and nomads, chieftaincies and oligarchies like the gana-sangha confederacies of chiefs. It contained smaller kingdoms with a range of administrative structures not necessarily similar to that in Magadha. Romila Thapar argues that the Mauryan Empire was made up of a metropolitan state, core areas, and peripheral areas. The metropolitan state, Magadha was the state that initiated conquest and control over other entities. It was the administrative center of the empire ^[6]. The core areas included existing states like Gandhara, whose capital was Taxila. It also included regions of incipient state formation like Kalinga and Saurashtra included existing centers of exchange-connecting points of active trade-like Ujjain and Amaravati. One can think of core areas as sub-metropolitan areas which could develop into metropolitan areas themselves when the empire disintegrates. The peripheral areas included a variety of social forms, ranging from hunters and gathers to agriculturally settled communities. They had in common that they had not yet developed into state systems. The peripheral areas were often borders

between rich agricultural belts.

Looking at the expansion of Magadha from the point of the desire for wealth, we can note that the lower Indus Valley had fine horses which could have acted as a stimulus to attempted political control. It appears, as well, that the Mauryans wanted to control the daksinapatha, the way south. In the south were the gold reserves of Karnataka. This southern area could also be approached from the west coast or along the Krishna valley to the east. So these routes were marked out for protection. Kalinga may have been desirable partly because it was territory which Magadha had controlled earlier and then lost—so the desire to uphold dynastic honor may have made this area a priority but also the area was rich in agriculture, trade and elephants. Holding Kalinga would secure the defense of Magadha from the southeast and would protect the coastal route down the east coast ^[7]. The policy toward the peripheral areas was slightly different. Rather than try to collect revenues from these areas, the Mauryans were interested in containing tribal groups on its borders, using them as buffer zones which could separate well-developed areas from each other. The policy of segregation would help to keep the core areas under control without excessive use of the imperial army and imperial administration. When we consider the core and peripheral areas outlined above, it is clear that they were highly varied politically, socially and economically. Some of the core areas were still tribal republics—gana-sanghas, for example. The Middle Gangetic Valley shared the cultural synthesis which developed out of the meeting of Aryan elites with the native populations, but there were still wide cultural differences between the northwest and the east. Even in the core areas, as well, there was, thus, a wide variety of land tenures and systems of taxation and tribute. Economically the areas ranged from barter to more complex commercial transactions involving markets, guilds (sreni) and major traders (setthis) ^[8]. However, even though the Arthashastra shows an interest in the state recovering revenue from all kinds of activities, Magadha itself did not attempt to enter deeply into local politics and economies with the aim of maximizing revenue by active attempts at restructuring.

One of the indications of a policy of relative noninterference is the lack of major irrigation works which can be said to have been sponsored by the state. There is only one single large-scale irrigation work attributed to Mauryan enterprise. The Mauryan Empire, like other states in Indian history, did not control irrigation works. Irrigation was considerably decentralized, frequently in small-scale systems drawing water from rivers, pools, wells, springs and artificial ponds called tanks. More elaborate reservoirs and embankments were built with local resources, though the empire assisted irrigation works in newly settled lands. Evidence suggests that irrigation works were locally controlled. The Mauryans appear to have had interest in gaining revenue from trade ^[9]. They did not, here, either; however, take an active role in the regulation of trade. This is indicated by the fact that they appear not to have issued metallic money of a distinctive kind. The modest punch-marked coins which have been found may very well have been issued by guilds or other local bodies. It is curious, however, that when the great emperor Ashoka set up pillars or had his edicts sculpted into rocks, he had these placed in centers associated with trade and along the extended trade network radiating from the metropolitan kingdom. Ashoka erected numerous edicts

along nodal points on important trade routes and areas of raw materials. The nodal points beyond the Ganges valley were Kandahar, Taxila, Ujjain, the northern Konkon, Raichur and Bellary districts, and Kalinga, all of which have provided evidence of inscriptions. Ashoka had roads built both to serve the needs of imperial administration and to facilitate trade. Imperial control of trade routes and major trading centers gave revenue without necessitating control of upland areas ^[10]. The state attempted to maintain control over individual traders and guilds, inspecting their identity, their merchandise and their profits. The sale of goods at the place of production was not permitted, presumably because sale in markets was more accessible to revenue collectors. The state collected a series of taxes at various points in the production of goods from raw materials to commodities. Special officers were appointed to ensure standards and prevent fraud as well as to intercept trade in those items which the state had a monopoly such as, weapons, armor, metals, and gems. Commodity production was therefore an independent enterprise geared to a market and trade was a major revenue resource for the state.

In communicating to subjects in a society not yet completely absorbed in varna categories, Ashoka did well to emphasize universal moral qualities and not particular sects and groups. Ashoka's ideas came from debates current at the time on dharma, but he set his notions within an imperial framework. The universalistic ethic of Jainism and Buddhism as opposed to the caste-based ethic of brahmanical teaching suited the needs of empire since it could forge new ties cross clans, tribes and castes. Even though Ashoka did not associate his message of dharma distinctly with Buddhism in his edicts, he had close ties with the Buddhist sangha, the communities of the committed, and the monks. The sangha prospered on royal patronage and it provided networks of loyalty which could be supportive of political needs. The orders of monks and nuns cut across both caste and clan ties and weakened existing identities—allowing for the forging of new attachments to an expanded and new concept of the state ^[11]. This is seen in their continuing patronage to Buddhism and Jainism for a period after the decline of the Mauryas. The teachings of Buddhism and Jainism were preserved and transmitted through orders of monks recruited from many social groups (including Brahmins). Buddhist and Jain monasteries broadened participation in high religion such that participation shifted in communities from only a handful of sacrificial priests and rich clients who paid for elaborate sacrifices and supplied materials, including cattle and other valuable animals. Buddhism was appropriate for the Mauryans, considering their dependency on trade because of the appeal of that faith and Jainism to the wealthy who wanted to protect their wealth from arbitrary appropriation and unproductive destruction in sacrifice ^[12]. The link of trade and Buddhist institutions existed for the next several centuries after Ashoka because places where Buddhist monks of the sangha concentrated for part of each year attracted the pious from all social strata and also traders to supply the wants of monks and lay clientele.

Ashoka may have attempted such an ideological integration, but it was not sufficient to hold the Mauryan Empire together after his death in 232 B.C. The empire rather quickly disintegrated into successor states. While the empire may have been loosely integrated, it did leave a political legacy. As it is mentioned earlier, state formation was

probably accelerated in areas where there had been no states previously, and the confederacies and tribal oligarchies experience evolution toward kingdom organization. Another legacy was the use by succeeding states of Buddhism as a universal, legitimizing principle of integration, as ambitious kings made their attempts at building empires. Here we find, too, the patronage of Buddhism and Buddhist rituals having an effect upon the development of Hinduism and the relationship of Hindu worship to the integration of state systems.

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