

Chapter 2: KINGS, FARMERS AND TOWNS

EARLY STATES AND ECONOMIES (C.600 BCE-600 CE)

(Political and Economic History from the Mauryas to the Guptas)

Introduction

There were several changes in economic and political life between 600 BCE and 600 CE. The most important was the emergence of early states, empires and kingdoms. There were other changes as well like growth in agricultural production, emergence of new towns etc. Historians tried to understand these changes by using a variety of sources- Inscriptions, texts coins etc. This is a complex process and sources do not tell the entire story.

Some developments during the long span of 1500 years following the end of Harappan Civilization

- There were several developments that took place in India during the long span of 1,500 years following the end of Harappan civilization. They are:
 - Rig-Veda was composed along the Indus and its tributaries
 - Agricultural settlements emerged in many parts of the subcontinent.
 - Emergence of new mode of disposal of the dead like Megaliths in central and south India.
 - Emergence of new towns and kingdoms.

The Sixth century BCE was a turning point in early Indian history: Reasons

- The sixth century BCE is often regarded as a major turning point in early Indian history.
- This era is known for some crucial developments. They are:
 - Increased use of iron
 - Development of coinage
 - Emergence of early states and cities
 - Rise of new religions, namely, Jainism and Buddhism

Features of Mahajanapadas

- The sixth century BC is known for the rise of the sixteen Mahajanapadas.
- These states were either ruled by kings or Ganas (Sanghas)
- Each had its own capital often fortified.
- Some states maintained permanent standing armies recruited from the peasantry and regular bureaucracies.
- Dharma sutras laid down norms for kings and other people.
- Functions of the rulers were to collect taxes and tribute from people.

Factors responsible for the rise of Magadha

- Between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE, Magadha became the most powerful Mahajanapada
 - Powerful and ambitious rulers like Bimbisara, Ajatasattu and Mahapadmananda.
 - Availability of iron enabled the Magadhans to make tools and weapons.
 - Availability of elephants in forests constituted an important part of the army.
 - Fertile soil provided agricultural productivity
 - Ganga and its tributaries provided means of cheap and convenient communication.
 - Location of Pataliputra facilitated routes of communication along Ganges.
 - Rajgriha, the old capital of Magadha was located amongst hills.

The Mauryan Empire

- The rise of Magadha culminated in the emergence of the Mauryan Empire.
- Chandragupta Maurya (c.321BCE) was the founder of the empire who extended control up to Afghanistan and Baluchistan.
- His grandson, Ashoka, the most famous ruler conquered Kalinga

Variety of Sources to reconstruct the history of the Mauryan Empire

Historians have used variety of sources to reconstruct the history of the Mauryan Empire. They are:

- Archaeological finds especially sculpture, Asoka's inscriptions
- Literary sources like Indica account of Megasthenese, Arthashastra of Kautilya, and Buddhist, Jaina and Puranic literature.

Asoka's Dhamma

- Asoka was the first ruler who inscribed his messages to his people on stone (rocks and pillars)
- He used the inscriptions to proclaim his principles of Dhamma. This included,
- Respect to elders
- Generosity towards Brahmanas and others sects
- Kindness to slaves and servants.
- Religious tolerance towards other religions

Features of Mauryan Administration as mentioned in the Asokan Inscriptions

The mauryan king was the centre of the great administrative system .He enjoyed absolute power.

The vast empire was divided into number of provinces. The mauryans had a strong standing army

1. Five Major Political Centres

- There were five major political centres –Pataliputra,Taxila,Ujjaini,Tosali and Suvarnagiri to administer the vast empire.
- These centres were situated on important long-distance trade routes. Communication along both land and riverine routes was vital for the existence of empire.

2. Role of the sub committees

- Megasthenese mentioned a committee with six sub committees was organized for coordinating military activity. They looked after the navy, transport infantry, cavalry, chariots and elephants.
- The second committee was to arrange bullock carts to carry equipments procure food for soldiers and fodder for animals and recruit servants and artisans to look after the soldiers

3. Measures of Asoka to hold his empire

- Asoka tried to hold his empire together by propagating dhamma.
- He appointed Special officers called dhamma mahamattas to spread the message of dhamma

New Notions of Kingship (Post-Mauryan period)

- By second century BCE, new chiefdoms and kingdoms emerged in several parts of the subcontinent.
- Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas in Tamilakam were known from Sangam texts.
- Several states including Satavahanas and Shakas took advantage from long distance trade.
- Kushans (C First century BCE to first century CE) ruled over a vast kingdom extending from central Asia to North West India.
- Their history has been reconstructed from inscriptions, coins, and sculptures. The notions of kingship they wanted to convey are well reflected in their coins and sculpture.
- Huge Statues of Kushan rulers have been found in U.P and Afghanistan. This indicates that the Kushans considered themselves godlike. They claimed divine status and adopted the title devaputra, or 'son of god'.
- History of the Guptas (4th century CE) has been reconstructed from literatures, coins and inscriptions including prashastis (For e.g. The Prayaga Prashasti (Allahabad Pillar Inscription) composed by Harishena, the court poet of Samudragupta.)
- What did subjects think about their rulers? Historians have tried to understand this by examining stories contained in Jatakas (written in Pali) and Panchatantra.
- The jataka story indicates the strained relationship between kings and subjects. Kings demanded high taxes and peasants opposed to this.

Strategies for increasing agricultural production

- Use of iron tipped ploughshare
- Introduction of transplantation of paddy
- Irrigation through wells, tanks and canals
- Hoe agriculture in semi-arid parts of Punjab, Rajasthan and hilly tracks in North-Eastern and Central parts.

Differences in rural society

- With the increase in production, differences arose among people engaged in agriculture.
- Buddhist tradition refers to landless agricultural labourers, small peasants and large landlords.
- Landlords and heads of village were more powerful and had control over farmers
- Sangam texts mention large landowners or vellalar, ploughman or uzhar and slaves or adimai.
- Thus, differences in rural society were based on control over land, labour and technologies.

Land grants and new rural elites

- Land grants by kings were recorded in inscriptions.
- Most of the records are generally about grants to religious institutions or to Brahmanas.
- Prabhavati Gupta, daughter of Chandragupta II, was married into the family of Vakatakas in Deccan.
- According to Sanskrit legal texts, women were not supposed to have access to land.
- But Inscription indicates that Prabhavati had access to land.
- The inscription gives us an idea about rural people-Brahmanas, peasants and others.
- There were regional variations in the sizes of land donated.
- Land grants were made to extend agriculture to new areas or to win allies by making grants of land.
- Land grants provide an insight into the relationship between peasants and the state.
- However, groups such as pastoralists, fisher folk, hunter gatherers, sedentary artisans and shifting cultivators did not keep detailed records of their lives and transactions.

Towns and Trade

- From c. sixth century BCE, urban centres emerged in different parts of the subcontinent.
- Majority of the towns such as Pataliputra, Ujjaini, Puhar, Mathura etc.were located along riverine or land routes.
- Votive Inscriptions give us an idea about town people.
- In the towns different types of people used to live such as washingfolk,weavers, scribes, carpenters,potters,goldsmiths,blacksmiths,officials,religious teachers,merchants and kings.
- Artisans and traders organized themselves in guilds or shrenis.Guilds procured raw materials, regulated production and marketed the finished product.
- Trade was not confined within the subcontinent but extended to East and North Africa and West Asia and to Southeast Asia and China.
- India used to export spices, fine pearls, ivory, silk cloth, medicinal plants etc.

Coins and Kings (Numismatics of the 6th century BCE onwards)

- Exchangers were facilitated by the introduction of coinage.
- Punch marked coins made of silver and copper were amongst the earliest to be minted and used.
- Coins were issued by kings, merchants, bankers and town people.
- The first coins bearing the names and images of rulers were issued by the Indo-Greeks.
- The first gold coins were issued in first century CE by the Kushans.
- Hoards of Roman coins have been found in south India. This indicates that there was a close connection between south India and Roman Empire.
- Coins were also issued by tribal republics .For e.g. Yaudheyas of Punjab and Haryana (first century CE) issued thousands of copper coins.
- The Guptas also issued gold coins. These were remarkable for their purity. These coins facilitated long distance transactions.
- From c.sixth century onwards finds of gold coins are fewer. Historians divided on this issue. Some suggest that there was an economic crisis following the collapse of Western Roman Empire. Decline of long distance trade affected the prosperity of states, communities and regions.
- Others argue that new towns and networks of trade began to emerge around this time though finds of coins are fewer.

Decipherment of Inscriptions

- James Prinsep, an officer in the mint of the English East India Company was able to decipher Asokan Brahmi in 1838.
- The coins of indo –Greek kings contain the names of kings written in Greek and Kharoshti scripts.
- The European scholars compared the letters in both scripts. For e.g. the symbol for “a” could be found in both scripts for writing names such as Appollodotus

Historical evidence from inscriptions-Interpretation of inscriptions by historians

- It is found that the name Asoka is not mentioned in inscriptions.
- Instead, the king is referred to as devanampiya (“beloved of the gods”) and piyadassi (“pleasant to behold”).
- There were a few inscriptions which also referred to the king as Asoka. These inscriptions are also containing such titles.
- By examining the content, style, language and paleography, of these inscriptions, epigraphists have come to the conclusion that they were issued by the same ruler.

Limitations of Inscriptural Evidence

Inscriptions have some limitations:

- Letters may be very faintly engraved
- Inscriptions may be damaged or letter missing
- It is not sure about the exact meaning of the words.
- Inscriptions may not have lasted the ravages of time. Thus, what is available at present is simply a fraction of what was written.
- Inscriptions may not provide a complete idea about political and economic history
- Inscriptions are written from the point of the view of the person who commissioned them.
- So, the routine agricultural practices may not be recorded in the inscriptions.

Key words (Read Instructions regarding contents)

Inscriptions: Inscriptions are writings on stone, metal, pottery etc

Epigraphy: Study of Inscriptions

Janapada: The land where a Jana (a people, clan or tribe) sets its foot or settles.

Oligarchy: A form of government where power is exercised by a group of men

Girnar Inscription: The inscription mentions the achievements of the Shaka ruler Rudradaman and Sudarsana Lake

The Manusmriti: Legal texts of early India

The Harshacharita: A biography of Harshavardhana, the king of Kanauj composed by his court poet Banabatta.

Agrahara land: Land granted to a Brahmana. He was exempted from tax but had the right to collect tax dues from local people.

Votive Inscriptions: Votive inscriptions record gifts made to religious institutions.

Periplus of the Erythrean Sea: Periplus of the Erythrean Sea was composed by an anonymous Greek sailor (First century BCE). "Periplus" is a Greek word meaning sailing around and "Erythrean" was the Greek name for the Red Sea.

Numismatics: Study of coins.

India, 600 B.C.

The 16 Mahajanapadas

