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AGRICULTURE AND SOCIETY FROM THE VEDIC PERIOD TO THE GUPTA PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolution of agriculture and society in ancient India from the Vedic period to the Gupta period, tracing the transformation of land ownership patterns, agricultural practices, and social structures. The study analyzes how the Indian economy, fundamentally based on land from ancient times, developed from a primarily rural agrarian society to more complex agricultural and commercial systems. The research explores the transition from collective to individual land ownership, beginning with evidence from Rigvedic literature that suggests individual farming families owned agricultural land, animals, and gold as personal property. The paper traces agricultural development through various periods including the later Vedic era, post-Vedic Buddhist period, Maurya-Sunga period, and post-Mauryan times, examining how land classification systems, irrigation methods, crop cultivation, and animal husbandry evolved. Key findings include the establishment of various land types (cultivated, barren, pasture, and forest land), the development of artificial irrigation systems, and the emergence of complex taxation and land grant systems. The study demonstrates how agricultural practices influenced social stratification, with Brahmins gaining prominence through their role in agricultural rituals, and how hereditary occupations eventually crystallized into the caste system. The paper also examines the role of state administration in agricultural development, particularly during the Mauryan period under Kautilya's economic framework, and analyzes different categories of landowners including farmers, sharecroppers, and landless laborers.

Keywords: Ancient Indian Agriculture, Vedic Period, Land Ownership, Agricultural Society, Irrigation Systems, Caste System, Rural Economy, Mauryan Administration, Kautilya Arthashastra

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. EVOLUTION OF SERVICE SECTOR

From ancient times, the Indian economy was based on land. Although the Rigveda mentions Aranya, Gram, and Pur, and scholars like Dr. Ghurye have supported the existence of this distinction in earlier periods, there was not much difference between rural and urban life at the time. This is because the basic structure of life in both settings was fundamentally rural. The distinction between towns and villages was based on their function as political strongholds rather than centers of commerce. The daily routine of most town dwellers involved agriculture and animal husbandry.

In Vedic literature, agriculture is considered superior, while gambling (dyoot) is viewed as despicable. It is said that agriculture provides wealth, and animals provide a prosperous home and a wife. There were both large and small villages. Mahagramah (large villages) are mentioned in the Rigveda. In Vedic villages, fields were spread around houses and were divided by fences. Surrounding the fields was pasture land (Gavyuti), and beyond that were forests. During this period, villages had rights to the pasture land, but no one seemed to have individual rights to the forest land.

Some historians have speculated that in the tribal era, land may have been collectively owned. Due to the lack of iron in the early stages of Indian civilization, it would have been difficult to plough uncultivated land individually, supporting the idea of collective ownership. However, according to other scholars, evidence from the Rigvedic period suggests that agricultural land was owned by individual farming families. During this time, animals, land, and gold were considered personal property. The Rigveda contains around thirty-six references to land, most related to ploughing. It is natural to assume that someone who tills the land would consider it their own property. Fertile land was regarded as personal property, akin to owning animals or tax-free land.

In the Rigveda, Apala refers to her father's field and his hair as her personal property. Her prayers for a fertile field and worthy descendants further demonstrate individual ownership of land.The practice of measuring land with a stick also points to individual ownership. However, in the context of joint families, it is unclear whether land ownership was initially divisible. According to the Mimamsa Sutras, the king did not have the right to donate the entire land, nor was there evidence of collective ownership by the village community. Scholars like Shedder, Macdonell, and Keith also believe that there was individual ownership of land in the Vedic era.Land types included fertile land, khitya or barren land, gavyuti for pasture, and aranya or forest land.

In the Rigvedic period, in addition to natural land fertility and rainfall, artificial irrigation and fertilizers were used in agriculture. The term Apaah in the Rigveda indicates artificial irrigation. Artificial wells, canals, and other irrigation methods are also described. In one passage, it is suggested that a lotus was attached to a stone wheel with a reservoir, and water was drawn with a wooden bucket. Artificial canals are also mentioned.

The Rigveda compares the process of performing Yagya (ritual sacrifice) to agriculture, with clear references to ploughing, sowing, and harvesting. The ripe crop was cut with the help of a sickle (Datrashreni), bundled, and placed in a grain mill (Khal). The grain was then separated from the straw and cleaned using a sieve (Tito) or through winnowing (Group). The person who did the winnowing was called Dhanyakrit, and the vessel used to measure grain was called Urdar. Nasatya was regarded as the god of agriculture. Barley was the primary crop, with frequent mentions of barley and grain. Later texts also reference wheat (Godhoom), rice (Brihi), black gram (Bhasha Muddam), lentils (Masoor), and sesame.

In addition to agriculture, animal husbandry was an important part of the economy. Cows and bulls held special significance. Two entire Suktas of the Rigveda are dedicated to the cow deity (19 and 169 of the Dasham Mandal). One of the main purposes of wars at the time was to acquire cows. Cowhide products were used in daily life, and bulls were used for agriculture, pulling carts, and offering to gods like Indra. Buffaloes, goats, and sheep were used for food, while horses were employed in both war and agriculture. Elephants, known as Ibha and Varan, were domesticated and controlled with goads. In rural industries, carpenters (Tvashta), blacksmiths (Karmakar), and leather tanners (Charamman) were notable professions

The social structure of Vedic society was primarily rural and agrarian. Social status was influenced by control over agricultural and land-related resources, but according to some scholars, social hierarchy was based on a hierarchy of values. Brahmins often sought the right to collect taxes from a specific village (Gramkam).

In the later Vedic period, the concept of land ownership remained vague, with both individual and state ownership being debated. A story from the Shatpath Brahmana and Aitereya Brahmana mentions King Vishwakarman's attempt to donate land, only for the land to refuse the donation. The king's authority to expel a Brahmin or Vaishya from his kingdom was based on royal power rather than ownership. During this time, wheat, barley, rice, sesame, and other grains were cultivated. The use of iron for tools like ploughshares also began in this period, leading to the development of new industries and social stratification.

Over time, hereditary occupations took the form of castes. While professionals initially had a high status, they were later classified as Shudras. The rise of Brahmins during this period was partly due to their role in conducting agricultural Yagyas, which earned them rewards from the king.

2. POST-VEDIC PERIOD

In the post-Vedic period, the concept of villages evolved to include larger community settlements. According to ancient Buddhist texts, a village could consist of several dwellings or a large ranch for keeping animals. The Vinaya mentions 80,000 villages in Magadha during the time of King Bimbisara.

In this period, the concept of individual land ownership developed further. Regional rulers were known as Khettapati, Khettasamika, and Vatyupati, and their territorial boundaries were clearly defined. Land donations, such as those made by Anayapindika, Amrapali, and Jeevak, are also recorded. There were different types of land, such as Halya (cultivated), barren pasture, and Goshth (grazing land).

The main farming tool was the plough, whose various parts included the Isha, Potr, and Kushi. Agricultural processes like ploughing, sowing, and irrigation are described in the Chullavagga. The state was entitled to a share of the produce, with tax rates varying from 1/6 to 1/10 depending on the land's productivity. The industries of the time included pottery, blacksmithing, rope making, hunting, dog breeding, and elephant driving. Various metals, such as gold, silver, iron, and lead, were also used in these industries.

3. MAURYA-SUNGA PERIOD

Kautilya's Arthashastra contains abundant material on the economy. Agriculture, animal husbandry, and commerce came under Varta, and Varta was called the "foundation of the Janapada" (8.1.29). Among these three, agriculture was considered the most important. According to Kautilya, ancient shastra writers believed that pasture land should be converted into agricultural land. However, Kautilya disagrees with this and opposes the encroachment of pasture land for agricultural purposes (8.4.39-40).

Prananath suggests that the word "village" should be understood as a large farm, but according to other scholars, the number of families in a village during that time would have been around 100 to 500. Kautilya classifies villages in various ways, such as new villages settled by foreigners or by additional populations of the natives. Villages were also classified based on revenue, including tax-free villages, villages sending soldiers to the royal army, those supplying grain, cattle, or raw materials to the state, and others providing labor for the construction of royal palaces.

During this period, land was generally of three types: personal land owned by the king, land held by farmers who paid taxes, and infertile land. Kautilya described various types of land: (1) Krish (cultivated land), (2) Akrisht (uncultivated land), (3) Kedar (field), (4) Aaram (garden), (5) Dashand, (6) Mulvaap, (7) Vat (orchard), (8) Van (forest), (9) Virvat, and (10) Pathi. The state played an important role in colonizing rural areas, often by settling people from more populated provinces or foreign countries in uninhabited regions.

Kautilya provided a detailed plan for agricultural development. Farmers who were given fertile, prepared land were allowed to keep it for their lifetime, but upon their death, it was typically leased to the next generation. Farmers who prepared unworked land were allowed to keep it, and if they left their land unused, it could be given to someone else (11.1.10). Some scholars infer that all land was under the control of the state, but others, like Lallanji Gopal, argue that there were two types of land: state land and personal land. This rule applied only to newly colonized land under state control. Another passage from the Arthashastra reveals that people strongly resisted when the king attempted to seize

their land. Farmers were allowed to lease or sell their land, and disputes between farmers over boundaries are also mentioned in the text.

Land was classified into two main types: Devmatrik (land with sufficient rainfall) and Adevmatrik (land dependent on artificial irrigation). The king was responsible for building wells and ponds, and farmers had to pay Udakabhaag (a portion of their produce) for irrigation services, ranging from 1/5 to 1/3 or 1/4, depending on the region. The Girnar inscription of 150 AD by Rudradaman mentions that Chandragupta Maurya's governor, Pushyagupta, initiated the construction of the Sudarshan lake, which was completed during Ashoka's reign.

The main crops included various grains, sesame, pulses like Mudraga, Maash, Masoor, Kulutya, barley, wheat, linseed, mustard, and vegetables like pumpkin. As agriculture relied on animals, the state made efforts to improve the quality of livestock, and cattle sheds were established. Officials overseeing animals included Gopalak, Pindarak, and Dohkamathak, a system expanded by Ashoka.

The superintendent of state lands was called Seemadhyaksha, who had expertise in agricultural systems. The Samahartri maintained records of land-related accounts. Land donations, particularly to Brahmins, were also mentioned in the Arthashastra, with tax exemptions for Brahmin-held lands (3.10.9). Some officials and leaders were granted land donations, though they were not permitted to sell the land, and it was not exempt from taxes. These donations cannot be considered examples of feudalism or Jagirdari.

Even in Manusmriti, villages were described with fields around houses and grazing land around the fields. In the post-Mauryan period, agriculture remained crucial, but crafts and commerce also grew in importance due to foreign trade. Although the king was theoretically considered the owner of the land, this referred to sovereignty and the right to collect taxes, not individual ownership of all agricultural land. Manu outlined seven ways a man could own property: inherited property, donations, purchases, conquests, interest, labor, or gifts from saints (115), making individual ownership clear.

In Manu’s time, land was categorized as state land, personal land (subject to taxes), and barren land. Those who damaged cultivated land faced penalties ten times higher than the farmer's tax. Taxes on farmers were kept moderate to avoid harm to both the ruler and the people.

Land was often donated to Brahmins as tax-free property (11.133), or it was granted to officials (11.11a), who collected village taxes but did not own the land. Some scholars suggest that, during Manu's time, village taxes were granted to officials, while in Kautilya's time, actual land was granted. Small farmers were another class of landowners, and by Manu’s era, there was greater mention of smaller land areas due to the tradition of dividing ancestral property (×115).

Other landowners were farmers leasing land from landowners. Yajnavalkya also describes such farmers, noting that any improvements they made to the land benefitted the landowner. These farmers had little incentive as they were subject to exploitation by the landowners, who acted as intermediaries between them and the king. Sharecroppers were another category, who shared a portion of their harvest with the landowner, and Shudras were the majority among them.

There were also landless farmers who lived on the outskirts of villages and worked on other people's land for wages. The landowners were entitled to profits from the produce.

According to Patanjali, the village had several meanings. It was referred to as a "Sala community." The phrase "the village was burnt" meant "the houses were burnt." The term gram was also associated with the boundary markings of the village, encompassing the fields, forest, and other areas. Some villages consisted of just one house (Ek Shalo Gramah (1.1.21)).

The land around the village was divided into three parts: Sitya (plowed land for grains), Gochar (grazing land), and Upar (barren land). Animal enclosures, called Goshtha, were located outside the village. Individual ownership of land is evidenced by many examples, and the term "Krishival" was used for farmers. Bulls were the primary means of agriculture, along with the plough. Irrigation methods included canals and wells. Agricultural crops included grains, pulses, fiber trees, spices, and fruits, while non-irrigated crops included wild grains like nivar and sawa.

Animal husbandry was also important, with cows playing a central role. Various crafts, such as pottery, carpentry, and blacksmithing, were also practiced. Villages were often named after the dominant caste, and those of lower castes lived on the village outskirts.

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