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10. The Socio-Economic Condition Of Bihar During Early Medieval Period (800-1200)

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Agriculture was the backbone of ancient Indian economic life as it was the main occupation of the common mass. Bihar was no exception and the majority of the population was engaged in cultivation throughout Bihar during the period of our study. In earlier periods also, the condition was same. The word 'Krisi' stood for of demarcation between the barbarian community and a civilized community. The latter was not only engaged but interested in the cultivation of land. The word 'Ksetrapati', the lord of field, evidently refers to the importance of land in the context of agriculture. Thus the theory that the king was entitled to receive revenue from the subjects on return for their protection went deep on to the economic thinking of Bihar during our period of study. The Hindu theory of taxation, thus, more or less corresponds with the canons of Adam Smith. Literary sources of our period do refer to the relative importance and considerable advancement in the field of agriculture particularly with the advent of iron in the post-vedic age. Various excavations in Bihar have yielded numerous iron tools and equipments of agriculture. Plough-shares, sickles and other objects were definitely used by ancient Indians in cultivation of land. The Mahabharata and Manusmriti tell us that one of the eight acts for a king was to attend to agriculture. It obviously shows its importance. The cultivators were highly esteemed in the society and their profession was considered as an honourable one. The Arthashastra speaks of agricultural profession according to which it was superior for one's livelihood. Thus, a cultivator obtained high position in the society for food production.

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The main agricultural implements were the same as we find them today. They have been enlisted in the literary works and inscriptions. We find the mention of plough, phawara, kudali (pick-axe), and harrow (locally known as chauki or henga), etc., which were used by the cultivators in the ordinary course of their agricultural operations. It will not be out of place here to mention the different components for the manufacture of a plough. The plough was made up of three parts, viz., the long wooden pool (isa), the central bent portion called potra and the plough share of kusi fitted in the potra and made up of iron. The share was called 'phala'. The bullocks of plough were fastened to the yoke (yuva) by a rope called yotra or yaktara.¹

The importance of agriculture was so much in our period that we find that almost all the law-givers have laid down certain penal methods for the safety of agricultural operations and implements. Theft in agriculture was considered to be a serious offence and various punishments were recommended by the authors of our period. Provisions of punishment were also made for mutilation for selling false seed corn, for taking up seed already sown and for destroying boundary marks. According to the provisions of Brhaspati, stealers of grains were compelled to pay ten times as much to the real owner and the double amount as the fine for the offence.² The above perusal of facts shows that during the period under review, agriculture had a place of pride in the society, enjoyed great respect as giver of life generating energy through agricultural products. Even in the state administration, agriculture had an important place and the state took great care of the problems of the farmers. The agricultural implements and the methods of cultivation were practically the same as they are today.

As agriculture was the mainstay of the people and the land being fertile, all sorts of crops were produced in ancient Bihar during the period of our study. The crops of our period may be divided under three main heads, viz., food crops, green crops and fibre crops. Among the food crops mainly rice, barley, wheat, millet, pulse and sesame, etc., were cultivated but rice was certainly the most important of all the crops and almost all the literary texts refer to rice and its numerous varieties that were generally cultivated in North Bihar and elsewhere. Fine qualities of rice were grown in the Magadha region of Bihar and it was known as Mahasila. In the Pali Nikayas³ and the Jatakas⁴ Remains of fine quality of wheat have been discovered in the Nalanda monastery. Apart from barley and wheat, we also find references to millet in the Jatakas, which was certainly cultivated during our period. Different kinds of pulses were cultivated during the period under review. Of these, the

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Buddhist literature makes a mention of gram (kalaye),⁵ In the Amarakosa we find the mention of peas, lentil and beans.⁶ Besides the food crops a large variety of other crops, such as sesame, castor oil seed and mustard oil seed were cultivated for purpose of oil extraction and sauce. For the lack of sources, epigraphic and literary, our idea of economic life of Bihar during our period is rather vague and fragmentary. But we do possess some information about the land system. During the period of our study, the economy of Bihar was predominantly rural and agriculture was the main source of livelihood of the peasants. They were required to pay a fixed share of their produce to the king but they had no right to dispose the land.⁷

Several Pala copper-plate inscriptions throw some light on the village economy of Bihar. The village consisted of various kinds of land-low (garta), barren (usara) and land under occasional flood (tila). Curiously enough there is no mention of irrigated land, which suggests that there was not much of artificial irrigation in the province. Agriculture naturally depended on rains. We have five copper-plates grants of the Palas in Bihar embracing ten villages granted by the kings to priests and temples. In one case Devapala granted four villages to Nalanda Vihara at the request of king Balaputra Deva of Suvarnadvipa. The monastery continued to hold the villages from the 7th century and it would appear that its landed property increased in the 8th century. Thus villages and their portions held by priests, temple and monasteries and exempt from taxes, formed an important category. Majority of villages, however, seem to have been in temporal hands. The material condition of the peasants is difficult to describe. A brahmana officer, Ghantisa, described as a servant of the king, granted land, with the permission of Vignahapala II (A.D. 1055-70), out of his own possession in Tirabhukti.⁸ Such a practice shows that the grantees enjoyed rights of ownership over the villages and their peasants. But we are not in a position to say whether the peasants were better off under the grantees.

That the profession of the craftsmen was considered to be an honoured one during the post-Gupta period is also pointed out by yuanchwang who says that there were five standard sciences of which the second one was that of skilled professions. In the Indian terminology the science of skilled professions can be named as silapasthana. The inclusion of silapasthana in the list of standard science shows that there was a good scope also for the professional and useful education in the early Indian system of education. The Kavya Mimasa of Rajasekhara also includes silapasastra as one of the principle vidyas. During the eleventh century A.D. the social position of many of the handicraftsmen

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appears to have been low because of the existence of numerous mixed castes in the then society. Kalhana mentions as many as sixty-four castes, among which numerous were the mixed ones. The Brahavaivarta Purana.⁹ The fact that the social position of the craftsmen was very low in the eleventh and twelfth centuries A.D. is also corroborated by the evidence supplied by the contemporary literary sources. Aparaka (commentary on Yajnavalkya Smriti)¹⁰ Alberuni quotes the Brahma Purana to show that the food which comes from the hands of a goldsmith, a blacksmith, a carpenter, a potter and a worker in bamboo is forbidden. He also approves the rules of Yajnavalkya, Devala and Angina, who prescribe that a Brahmana cannot take the means offered by carpenters, blacksmiths, weavers, garland-makers and painters. It is already been noted that most of the craftsmen were sudras. Apart from them there were some craftsmen who were known as antyajjas whose position was below the Sudras. That the antyajjas were beyond the four orders or varnas is also observed by Alberuni, after the Sudras, followed the people called antyajjas, who rendered various kinds of services. They were not reckoned amongst any caste, but only as members of a certain crafts or profession. As for example mentions the shell makers and the weavers who lived near the villages and towns of the four castes, but outside the. It appears that though the antyajaja class of craftsmen developed a caste hierarchy, their position has always been pitiable and they have been regarded as untouchables in the society. The position of the weavers seems to have improved in the Sena times. Dhobi, which belonged to the community of weavers, rose to the position of the court poet of king Lakshmanasena.

It is interesting to point out here that during the eleventh and twelfth centuries there was probably no differences between the Vaisayas and the Sudras. Though the Vaisyas continued to be counted as a separate caste in the digest up to the end of the seventeenth century, a tendency manifested itself very clearly to degrade them to the Sudra community. The approximation of the Vaisyas to the Sudras began as early as Manu and Baudhayana Dharma Sutra. Alberuni also did not find any difference between the Vaisya and the Sudra. If men belonging to either of these castes recited the Vedas, their tongues were cut off by the rulers.¹¹ He categorically states; "Between the latter two classes there is no very great distance. Much however, as these classes differ from each other, they live together in the same town and villages, mix together in the same houses and lodging." On the basis of Alberuni's statement and other supporting evidence G.S. Ghurye¹² has rightly pointed out that the Vaisyas were

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levelled down to the position of the Sudras. From the evidence already noted, it therefore, appears that some of the craftsmen may have belonged to the Vaisya community but their position always remained equal to that of the Sudras.

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