

Mauryan Society: A Case Study of Megasthenes

Abstract

This paper deals with the social aspects of Mauryan society stated by Megasthenes. He seems quite impressed by the idea of Mauryan society and writes its appraisal in his fabulous account Indica. His notion of social stratification is mainly based on the level of skill that people possessed. During the time of his visit Slavery existed but not in the sense how it was in Greek perception and other European Domains. The question, how existence of slavery was overlooked by Greek traveler and how it had actually existed in Mauryan times. The divisions of Indian society as conceived by Megasthenes consisted of seven different castes/divisions such as, The Philosophers, Husbandmen, herdsmen and hunters, artisans, fighter men, overseers and councilors and assessors.

Keywords: Caste, Indica, Philosophers, Slavery, Arthaśāstra, Megasthenes, Varna.

Introduction

The phenomenal concept of early Indian society and its structure were most significant as it was guided by the standards of certain set principles. These principles of early Indian structure were highly influenced by the rites, rituals and customary observances persistently cruising through the waves of time. Mauryan society was none the exception. It of course had improvised features of a society with considerable efficacy in administration and governance. The Greek traveler seems quite impressed by the idea of Mauryan society and writes its appraisal in his accounts. Historians like N.S. Kalota quote Megasthenes about the prevailing social conditions in Mauryan times. Kalota refers to the writing of Megasthenes, how he sees a prosperous society with lessened rate of crime and a maintained decorum. Megasthenes' writing suggests that the honesty was the distinguished characteristic and the state flourished with plethora of morality and paucity of atrocity. People adopted healthy habits and led a happy life. Vices too were seen but in rarity. Drinking of intoxicants like wine was ceremonial or occasional.¹ Smooth trade and administration resulted in high standards of living.

Mauryan social stratification was mainly based on the level of skill that people possessed. Slavery existed but not in the sense how it was in Greek and other European Domains. The question, how existence of slavery was overlooked by Megasthenes and how it had actually existed, will be dealt later on exclusively. For now, it seems as if Megasthenes wanted to eye the Slavery in India in strict sense of terms as being practiced in Europe. Indian *Dāsa* on the contrary seemed more voluntary in deeds with certain rights to Megasthenes. He might have taken them for state employees. No doubt the hierarchy in social order had existed but morals of sustenance had found some place in newly codified laws.

Mauryan society was necessarily based on Brāhmanical Traditions. People settled in the villages. We have various literary and epigraphic sources which provide sufficient information about the socioeconomic aspects and its role in the formation of a huge, stable and adequately functional society.

Social Division

Ancient Vedic society underwent transformations in structure and character with the passage of time. By the time it reached at the thresholds of Mauryan Empire, it was diversified and heterogeneity modeled its basis. Concept of *Varna Āshram* which was more of skill based categorization degenerated into a narrow Caste System which defined the social order at later stages. The term *Jāti* was a subsequent introduction. Supremacy of one class over the other became prominently visible. Institution of caste was not Rig-Vedic but of later origin. We find no trace of a single instance where term *Jāti* had been equated with Caste in historical sources. *Varna*

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Ashram for sure differed in its form and character to its degenerated form; Caste System. *Varṇa* System as comprehended historian like G.C. Chauhan is the categorization with respect to ability, equipment or propensity to perform a certain task or duty. The *Varṇa* was not formed of individuals who possessed certain sets of similar abilities but of rights and obligations possessed by them by virtue of these abilities. And these rights and obligations constituted their *Varṇadharmā*, ethics of that particular *Varṇa*. Thus Indian Society was classified into four *Varṇa* based on abilities, each *Varṇa* being associated with a specific *Varṇadharmā*.² *Jāti* came to be associated with caste in the sense that a social separation of classes will be maintained whereas the contemporary sources point in the different direction.

V. S. Agarwal throw some lights basis on the information contained in Vedic Texts and *Kātyāna Srauta Sūtra* about the significance of word *Jāti* where it has been used in the sense of Family³. He delineates that *Jāti* has more often been used for caste whereas; *Jāti* is in association with word *Bandhu* such that the *Jāti* or class which in itself is invisible entity achieves concrete form only through its component, *Bandhu*. *Bandhu* itself meant an individual who by the concept of unitary fraternity formed whole *Jāti* thus *Jāti* had evolved out of the common bond of mutual kinship. Idea of kinships is further expressed by word *Sambandhu* mentioned in the *Sūtra*, and which has today taken the form of *Sambandhu* (Relative).⁴

Buddha Prakash argues that Indian caste system is a complex and various factors are to be taken into consideration while evaluating it. He thinks that term Caste has wrongly been applied to *Varṇa*.⁵ In support of his argument, we have G.C. Chauhan emphasizing on the character of *Varṇa* System. *Varṇa* system was a simple division of society into four elements; *Brāhmaṇa*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Śudra*. Ones, capable of acquiring and imparting knowledge were *Brāhmaṇa* and were put on the top, those with the ability to fight battle and defend boundaries composed *Kshatriya* and were put next to *Brāhmaṇa*, those with ability to do trade and business were put in *Vaishya Varṇa*. The last one was *Śudra Varṇa* which consisted individuals who ought to serve. Besides being conformed to ability, *Varṇa* System had feature of accommodating individuals who had risen in deeds and actions. Example of Valmiki, poet who composed *Rāmāyana*, has been put forth in the context; As per narrative, Valmiki lived a life full of vices but with his improvising in his performance of pious action, he was assigned *Brāhmaṇa Varṇa*.

Caste System is rigid enough and would not allow anyone to absorb in so easily. Whereas, in Vedic tradition, no restriction was on the members of particular *Varṇa* as regards their profession. A *Brāhmaṇa* could take profession of a physician or a mason without losing his social status. A reference comes from Vedic Hymn; *I am a poet, my father is a physician, my mother is a stone grinder, planning in various ways desirous of wealth we live*.

Thus it is crystal clear that there is no trace of divine origin of *Varṇa* confining people to one

profession. More than heredity and profession, *Varṇa* system was based on individual traits.⁶ Personification in terms of its origin has been the part of *PurusaSukta* of Rigveda where *Brāhmaṇa* is perceived to have originated from mouth hence the task of dispensing knowledge ascribed to him, *Kshatriya* (Rājanya) from arms, symbolizing strength and given the task of protector, *Vaishya* from stomach and thighs and *Śudra* from his feet of a Universal Man *Purus*.

Varṇa System holds true for Vedic Society but later numerous communities emerged whose place in the scheme of four *Varṇa* could not be easily determined. Dissemination of *Varṇa* as a complete social thought was literally diluted by the end of later Vedic period. The conception was merely treated parallel to much limited term, *Jāti*.

Mauryan social division as conceived by Megasthenes consisted of seven different castes. The Philosophers, first in rank but smallest in number. Their services are to be employed privately by the persons who wish to offer sacrifices or perform sacred rites as much as by the king at the great public Synod or gathering. King shall employ the thoughts and ideas of these philosophers in writing pertaining to crops, cattle or any other public interest wherein, in the beginning of new-year they are assembled before the king at royal gates. The one who is detected of giving false information thrice shall bear the consequences and shall not speak throughout his life. On the contrary, the one with sound advice shall be rewarded with exemption of taxes.

The second class was Husbandmen who were far numerous than others and most mild and gentle in disposition. They were exempted from military duties and cultivated their lands undisturbed by the fear. They hardly take part in any kind of social gathering convened in the towns. While in distress some of them could be drawn up in array of battle for fighting at the risk of their lives. The whole land was the property of the king and the husbandmen tilled it on the condition of receiving a share of it.

Third class consisted of herdsmen and hunters who alone were allowed to hunt, and to keep cattle and to sell draught animals or let them out on hire. In reciprocity, for clearing land of wild beasts and fowls which ravage the seeds sown in the soil, they received an allowance of grains from the king. They led a life of wanderer and lived under tents.

The fourth class was of artisans who vend wares, work at trades and are employed in bodily labor. Some of these paid tribute and rendered to the state certain prescribed services. But armour-makers and shipbuilders receive their wages from King for whom alone they work.

The fifth class included the *fighter men* who form a more homogenous body, Military. It is well organized and equipped for war. When not engaged in active service, they pass their time in idleness and drinking. They are maintained at the King's expense and are always ready to take the field as the occasion calls.

The sixth class consisted of *overseers* who were assigned the task of watching all that goes on and were supposed to secretly report it to the king.

Some were entrusted with the inspection of the city and other with that of army. Ablest and most trustworthy men were appointed to fill these offices.

The seventh class comprised Councilors and Assessors of the king. The highest post of Govt, tribunals of justice and the general administration of public affairs belonged to them. No one was allowed to marry out of his caste or to exchange one profession or trade for another or to follow more than one business at a time.

Romila Thapar uses an exclusive mirror to evaluate the seven class system of Megasthenes. She quotes Didorus who uses the word seven *mere* meaning a share of portion, a share, a part or a lot. Whereas the reservations of marriage are signified by another word, *geno* representing division relating to race, stock, family and direct decent; and has a common usage in Greek as clan. Herodotus in History also refers to seven genes in Egypt. Word when translated came to be nation, tribe, class or clan which reflects the vagaries of translations.⁷

Romila Thapar holds seven mere of Megasthenes true from the perspective of Aristotelian concept. They are list of important divisions of population involved in functioning of society. In an attempt to comprehend as to why Megasthenes ascribed Seven Classes system of classification to India, she quotes; it might have been based on seven divisions of Egypt. And the reason why it was applied to India might be the emergence of notion of constituent elements of the state with the introduction of monarchy in late 4th century BCE, which was referred to *Saptāṅga*. These constituents were: the king, the ministers, the capital, the treasury, the army, territory and allies.⁸ These elements were vaguely understood by Megasthenes. He surpassed the significance of number to the real character of these elements.

It is evident that in order to frame the system of castes and classes in India, Megasthenes relied upon his understanding of classes and clans in context of Greek and Egypt. Megasthenes paid perfunctory attention to assimilate the real nature of Social Order and classification. Similarities in the execution of various functions of the state by different social groups resembling those back at home might have confused him to a great degree hence convincing him on concluding that division of society in India was no different than that of Europe. For classifying Indian society, Megasthenes formed the basis of profession and occupation. Whereas it has been depicted before that profession or occupation was not subjected to a specific *Varna* belonging. There was no obligation as regards choosing of one's profession and everyone was free to take up any vocation that he might deem fit. So, how can vocation be criteria for modeling the whole Caste System upon it? Megasthenes surely was wronged by his assumptions, perceptions and observations of Indian populace. And reason might be his unfamiliarity of lingua-franca of Mauryan and lack of profound understanding of ethics and ethos of Mauryan Society as a whole.

Religion

Religion having originated from a Latin word *religo*, indicates the way to conduct in the society, good faith and the way one binds himself to a certain theory of divinity. In subsequent times it came to be associated a set of practices and rituals performed in order to pacify and appease Gods and deities apart from earning some merit. The concept of God in religion became more dominating as it was conceived to be the guiding authority by those who adhered to that specific religion. Religion developed in accordance with the societal, economic, political and other varied factors in different places and societies of the World. Religion of one society could be entirely different from that of another but still resemble in certain aspects in the way that all pay obeisance to their Gods and Deities. Religion imbibed the idea of monotheism and polytheism at different stages.

India is a vast land where religion nurtured in its own fashion but complex enough to be assimilated so easily. Megasthenes has bleak understanding of Indian religion. He accepted things as served to him by the courtiers of Chandragupta Maurya. Again Megasthenes confuses religion of India with that of Greek idea of Religion whereas a lot difference in terms of religious adherence has been seen in these two societies. We must examine the question of Megasthenes' reliability as a historian of religion. Megasthenes treats Krishna and *Shiva* of India parallel to Greek gods, Heracles and Dionysus. It clearly shows that understanding of Megasthenes into Indian origin was not profound or deep rooted. Superficial remarks cannot be treated as a Historical evidence let alone rely upon them for further investigation.

Allan Dahlaquist says that it was not Megasthenes who identified Heracles and Dionysus with two Indian Gods but actual identification was done during the course of Alexander's campaign of India. It was done purposefully as Alexander was regarded holding a special status in relation to these Gods; in fact they were his ancestors. Besides, these Gods too conducted various victorious campaigns in the tune of Alexander. Also Heracles and Dionysus had special place in Alexander's devotion. Nonetheless, it was an attempt to emulate his divine ancestors by Alexander. It is evident in some of his actions; a town he found, he named Herakleia and also he named his son after Heracles.⁹

But how these Greek Gods differed from Indian Gods can only be clear after we give a brief description of these Gods. Megasthenes writes about Dionysos that he came, conquered people, founded cities and gave laws, introduced the use of wine amongst Indians and taught them to sow the land and he himself supplied seeds to them. He as well, yoked oxen to the plough, made many Indian agriculturists, and offered to them the agricultural implements.¹⁰ Dionysus' mother died before he was born and Foetus was transferred to thigh of Zeus, his father. Dionysus was promoter of civilization, lawgiver and a peace lover more than a century before Alexander. He is also believed to have conquered Asia. Heracles too was son of Zeus and is portrayed hero in number of

adventures but his end was tragic. Their resemblance to Indian Gods Krishna and Shiva does not seem scientific at all. It is quite surprising as to what criteria did Megasthenes choose upon to decide for these Gods in close affinity with that of Greek Gods.

Allan Dahlquist scrutinizes the details of Megasthenes about Indian Religion. He points out the distortion in Megasthenes' text by consequent writers; Arrian, Strabo and Didorus. He collects various views regarding Indian Gods Krishna and *Shiva* in the bright comparison to their Greek parallels as taken by Megasthenes. Also in the sense of authors' attitude concerning the relationship between *Krishnaism* and Christianity, an attempt has been made by A. Dahhalquist to clarify. He has portrayed his own understanding.

Panini makes mention of *Bhakti* for *Vasudeva*. *Bhakti* as a devotion and inclination towards a god attributed to the *Vasudeva* form of Krishna.

Megasthenes' reference to Heracles in association with Krishna is exclusive. But in 4th century B.C.E. there is no clear evidence of Krishna cult either nor for any pre Christian date. Therefore the passage of Heracles to India according to Dahlquist is better suited to another Indian god who resembled in identifications that we have talked about, who was Indra. Indra was the chief deity of Vedic Aryans in the phase of conquests and expeditions. Vedic Aryans underwent a major transformation so did their Gods transform from a tribal chief to the king of all gods. In the later versions, *Indra* can be seen in fully fledged royal status.

In India after or before Christian era, no religion was seen predominantly occupying the attention of people. Nor was the classical era of monotheism and *Bhakti* popular as of now. Just that everyone had the liberty to choose their respective gods for devotion. Panini Sutra indicated that this freedom of choice might have taken the discrete shape of *Bhakti*, Monotheism in later phase.

Megasthenes' idea of comparison Heracles, a Greek God to Indian God might be the outcome of his dialogues and discussions with Indians. As for Heracles, he was a deified god and Megasthenes observes the emergence of Krishna cult of Mathura and forms the definite fusion of these two heroes. Yadava Krishna was heroic in deeds and actions and humane in bent of mind. Megasthenes at the same time was well aware of the feature of Greek God too. Witnessing Krishna performing the acts of bravery and humanity in lands of India was just like seeing what he had expected.

Dionysos too was associated with the identifications of Indian god Shiva by Megasthenes. Whereas, Allan Dahlquist finds Dionysos to be a Munda tribal god serving as a cultural hero.¹¹ But we can hardly be so sure of this analysis as circumstances in Northern India changed frequently and a single ideological thought might not apply to all times uniformly.

It is quite palpable that only fragments of Megasthenes' work have survived. Those texts too have been loaded with the quotations and details

provided by the subsequent writers and pertained to their own thoughts and perceptions on the context. To what extent these fragments actually represented the actual thoughts of Megasthenes is still unpredictable. It is yet another challenge in our pursuit to dig deeper into past, finding truth more relevant to our realm of study.

Gender Relations

Gender relations have a special place in our *Dharmaśāstras* and other Vedic sources. It has been indicative of human instinct of forming an institution, family which would supplement the process of social conformity.

Marriage in the times of Mauryans as well was regarded an important social institution. There are billions of references together of marriages being conducted in multiple ways. Marriage Indian tradition has been a pious institution whereas progeny is regarded as the biggest bliss conceived as a result of this union. But to the westerners, the marriage is a social institution in which the relation of one or more men to one or more women is authenticated by custom or law and involves certain rights and duties.¹² Westermarck is of view that marriage more than a regulated sexual behaviour is an economic institution which may in various ways affect the propriety rights of the parties.¹³ In this contrast amongst Indians, *Vivaha* is compulsion for every person as it is linked with the ultimate freedom or salvation by the means of obtaining a son.

Megasthenes was to notice the marriages in Indian tradition too of course with his self guided vision. He says that Indian marry many wives on the tune of trade, in lieu of a yoke of oxen. Some marry with the hope of finding a helpmate and other with the desire of lust and pleasure and have their house full of children. This was reflective of polygamy being in practice in his times. Want of children was also one of the motives behind getting married. What Megasthenes says about Indian marriage might be well in accordance with the tradition prevalent. As such, Megasthenes might differ in his description but to great extent, the element of the subject matter remains similar to that of *Dharmaśāstras* and *Arthaśāstra*. When Megasthenes talks of giving a yoke of oxen, he might be trying to explain the *Arsa* form of marriage described by Kautilya.¹⁴

Megasthenes fails to understand the real purpose of marriage and remarks superficially, which was definitely not restricted to seeking helpmates and joy making. He might have confused his thoughts on the eight forms of marriage existing in India out of which four were popular. Popular ones were : (I) Brahma form, consisting of *danam* (gift) of daughter by father, (II) *Daiva* form, involving gift to a priest Brahmin, (III) The *Arsha* form, where father gives daughter after receiving a cow and a bull or two pairs of these and (IV) *Prajapatya* form, in which father makes gift of daughter by addressing the couple with *Mantram*.¹⁵ Out of these, *Prajapatya* and *Daiva* aim at the higher ideal of woman being a helpmate and life-partner in weal and woe. The last four were *Asura*, in which bridegroom gave money to the father or kinsman of bride, *Gandharva* where mutual love and

consent was the only condition, The *Rakshasa* which involved forcible abduction of maiden and *Paishacha* which involved the seduction of a sleeping, intoxicated or disordered girl. *Asura* and *Paishacha* were unlawful and should never have been practised.¹⁶

Status of Indian marriage is highly elevated and the idea marital union for certain concrete purpose was lost to Megasthenes. Statement of Megasthenes that Indians produces numerous children so as to compliment the slave absence in India. It seemed quite vague and inappropriate as the question of slavery in India in Mauryan times still stands unsettled. If at all slavery was absent, would it be appropriate to produce offspring in the sense of producing more labor and hence more efficacy in vocational affairs. This could apply to a culturally backward society on the contrary, India was culturally rich.

Although orthodox doctrine was applied to Indian marriage system by Kautilya, which restricted the marriages to be inside the caste and outside the *Gotra*, still there is not any evidence supplied that marriages beyond law were not practised. A type of marriage comes into terminology and casts impact once it has come into practice in any given society. Though it might be the case that these types are not conformed and given acceptance by the society but it is not a definite proof that these were checked at all. *Gandhrava* and *Rakshasa* kind of marriage are few such examples. Patanjali quotes *Mahabhasya* saying; a lawfully wedded wife is called *Bharya*.

Kautilya recognized the tradition of mixed castes marriages and further it gave rise to multiple castes were born out to these, though such persons were placed in low social gradation.¹⁷

There are few mentions in *Arthaśāstra*, which provide rein of flexibility to this institution. For example if husband was away for more than stipulated no of years, and had left no child or provision for maintenance, the wife was allowed to remarry. Those whose husband were abroad for long time or suffered from a chronicle disease could remarry as per their wish. Kautilya forbids cruelty in relationship and recommends reciprocity.¹⁸

People longed for offspring especially male child. It was also for the reason that in Indian Tradition securing a male child was compulsion to perform the sacred duties pre and post death. The idea was that if one could not have a son, he could adopt on to propitiate his spirit after his death. This is how religious elements were mingled with social institution and marriage itself became a sacrament on that account. So, getting a son was a sacred duty of the family. Sometimes, people remarried if first wife did not conceive son for first ten years.

Megasthenes however could not distinguish religious and biological significance attached to sons in Indian families.

Kautilya speaks of divorce (*Moksha*). A marriage could only be dissolved by mutual hatred or enmity between husband and wife. If wife sought divorce against the will of husband, she had to forego whatever she might have received from her husband

till now. In case of husband, he had to return whatever he had had from his wife's wealth.

Widow Remarriage is another aspect of marriage. Leading a pious life or getting married again was the sole discretion of woman with the consent of in-laws. A widow deciding to lead a pious life could retain the all property given to her by her late husband.

Polygamy had become fashion in ancient time and people married as many wives as they desired or were offered to them. Kautilya supports this by saying that *Brāhmaṇa*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Śudra* could have many wives even of different *Varṇa*.¹⁹

Arthaśāstra depicts the restriction of freedom of women belonging to higher class. They could not go anywhere without the prior permission of their husband. This to some extent show that conservativeness in higher class might have born to the narrow thought that their women must retain fidelity even at the cost of their freedom. But it seems highly contradicting at the times of Kautilya who besides being a finest statesman was well versed in art of beautifying life. He had liberal thinking and carefully tackled all social issues. He allowed widow remarriage, legalized prostitution and uplifted their status. *Ganikas* were well trained in fine arts and art of communication. A king also used to keep them for personal company. Besides *Ganikas*, there were other beautiful girls who used to sell their youth and were licensed by the state. They paid huge tax to the state and lived life of luxury. Kautilya thus proved to be a great philanthropist to regulate social affairs by means of an organized approach. Welfare of society seemed his prime motive. He granted civil rights to women including *Śudra*, social security to old, disabled and helpless.

Megasthenes notices women being employed in state owned spinning and weaving factories and also in their own houses for wages. Again *Arthaśāstra* also speaks of *purdhnashin*, helpless and widows being employed by state for wages. Chastity of women workers was guaranteed through the protection. There were laws made for dealing with women workers especially. Cruelty, rape, molestation and other crimes against women were seriously dealt with by the state.

Megasthenes tried to understand the things to the best possible degree but surely was he not a social scientist so as to understand every social phenomenon simultaneous in different societies and yet so different. His attempts are worthy of appraisal in regard that he tries to collect every minute detail but only by enjoying the prerogatives granted to him by the state.

The Question on Śudras

Śudra as a concept has engaged thousand divergent ideas yet we remain ignorant of its real essence. Numerous attempts have been made to understand *Śudra* as a social phenomenon. But for sure, for generations together a bizarre of discrimination and differentiation has been playing havoc with the lives of these people. In retrospect, it is hard to predict the emergence of *Śudra* as a

complete social class. An attempt has been made to inquire into the real nature of *Sudra* in ancient past but my study will be restricted to Mauryan period. Term *Sudra* does not find reference in Vedic age until the appearance of *Purusukta* according to which, *Sudra* arose from the feet of Primordial man and thus ought to serve other three *Varnas*. They constituted service class. But G.C. Chauhan questions the validity of *Purusasukta* in this regard. He doubts that *Purusasukta* might be fabrication of later period and hence not hold genuine for the contemporary social conduct. This questions the very existence of *Sudra* in Rig-Vedic times as reference in *Purusasukta* is an exclusive one. It was only in post Vedic times that *Sudra* formed a separate *Varna*. Western Scholars land in the mode of perplexity thinking that *Sudra* were original inhabitants of India, and these black people were defeated and subjugated by white race, Aryans. They are treating *Dāsa* and *Dasyus* of Vedic times parallel to *Sudra*. In fact, there is no reference of use of might and lethal weapons against *Sudra* in Vedas as is for *Dasyus*. As for color, many Aryans and sages were dark complexioned. So skin color does not define the social identity of any individual.²⁰

R.S. Sharma reaches at a distinct conclusion that *Sudra* appeared as a social class towards the end of period of Atharva Veda and until now they should be seen as a tribal entity more than a social class.²¹ Whether *Sudra* was a tribal entity or a social class is still not an established truth but their subjugation and dominations indicates the nature of their communal identity.

Megasthenes turned his eyes to the machinery of administration and found numerous *Sudra* engaged in multifaceted jobs. Though not with their status raised so high but still empowered with certain rights which would be clear from the percepts of Kautilya's *Arthaśāstra*. *Arthaśāstra* in a way tried to empower *Sudra* no doubts, in order to serve its own means and ends. Now *Sudra* was not confined to service class. A whole new phase of transformation of *Sudra* into agricultural, cattle rearing and trade had ushered in. They were now employed as agriculturists and referred to as peasants. A large area brought under cultivation in the *Gangetic* plain was attributed to their efforts. Numerous references in *Arthaśāstra* point out to the stances where *Sudra* as agricultural laborers were engaged.

Debate on Slavery

Slavery has been the topic of high controversy amongst historians and scholars in India and abroad. Some of them think that slavery was absent from Indian lands. In this context, they often bring in Indica of Megasthenes in support of their argument that slavery did not exist in India in ancient times. To analyze the extent of reliability of Indica is our challenge. Megasthenes in his work out rightly rejects the notion of presence of slavery in India. He professed the prosperity of Indian society saying that all men were free and led a content life. Whereas, another historic document, *Arthaśāstra* not only speaks volume of slavery in practice in India but also lays down a definite passage to take it into service. What surprises us most is how such process could

have escaped vision of Megasthenes. Was he illusioned by preoccupied thoughts of Greek Society? This is the question which might explain his ignorance of slavery in India.

Megasthenes' *Indica* what we see today is not an original work but the interpretation of subsequent writers like Strabo and Arrian. So, the degree of authenticity of the later cannot be determined. Also if it was to be prime work of Megasthenes, it would still be filled with distorted details as explained by *Brāhmaṇa* and other courtiers to him. But this should at no time mean that *Indica* is an unreliable source in its entirety. Also, Megasthenes was not familiar with Indian lands and its social processes and phenomenon. So wherever possible he applied the idea of Greek society to investigate into his findings.

As a matter of fact, slavery was the regular feature of India since long although it operated in much milder forms than any ancient civilizations of Europe. The word *Dāsa* is a version of Iranian word *Dahae* meaning a common man and term further has been interpreted as slave.²² *Dasyu* has been treated as its synonym of slave. G C Chauhan gives the credit of growth of organized industry and agricultural system to the system slavery in Harappan period too. We have references of engagement of *Shūdraas* ploughman on a large scale on vast lands created afresh after the expansion of monarchy. In Vedic period, slavery was perhaps confined to domestic corridors where women played a leading role. Buddhist sources have plethora of references where *Brāhmaṇa* treat slaves as their property, inherit and share them. *Dharmaśāstras* also stand witness to this which authenticates the exchange of slaves. Bongard Levin states that slavery was widespread and had major role to play especially in the developed regions of Mauryan Empire.²³

With the advent of iron, a new wave of technological revolution sailed through. Vast expansions into virgin lands needed manpower so was it needed to fill the vacuum hence created in the field of trade and commerce. Propriety of upper class did not benefit slaves on the contrary dominated them a bit more. Economic equality was unachievable as the class of newly created landlords would hardly step down to provide a chance to others to grow. This permanently created a class of slaves to which the concept of service and domination was bound. Slaves were the actual tillers of the land but they worked only for the advantage of their landlords. Slavery formed important part of rural economy as it was based on peasant proprietorship.

Kautilya goes in lengths and breadths of slavery in Mauryan times and pays exclusive attention to its socio-economic status. Kautilya mentions nine types of laborers who did manual labor instead of paying taxes. These included artisans, *karmakaras*, *Sudra* and slaves. They were provided with food and other amenities in lieu of wages.

Term *Sītādhyaksha* in this context is highly relevant as it indicates an official to whom report a number of hired laborers chartered under state for its agricultural operations. Besides, slaves were also

employed in other productive works of economic significance. They were assigned the task of grinding grains, separating cotton from husk, spinning, weaving, building and the like. About the power of master and their hired laborers, Kautilya states that neighbor should be familiar about the nature of agreement between them. The slave ought to get promised wages. If wages are not fixed beforehand, the magnitude of work done and time spent by slave will decide the wages. All these slaves employed in various works were to get as much wages as similar persons employed elsewhere. Disputes regarding wages were to be settled on the strengths of evidences produced by witnesses. Failure to pay wages was fined with amount ten times of actual wage. Misappropriation of wages was to be fined with 12 panas.²⁴

Slaves formed the commodity of master's family. Also captured soldiers were enslaved. We find such references from our epics, Mahābhārata and Rāmāyana. The rigidity of slavery before Mauryan times is reflected in BrihaspatiSmṛiti, which holds selling of *Mleccha* child into slavery legitimate. Sources indicate the trade of women slaves from India to Roman Empire. G.C. Chauhan explains that 100 *kahapanas* were the conventional price of a slave. In practice, 700 *kahapanas* were enough to buy a slave, male or female. *Arthaśāstra* informs us of similar precedents about selling and mortgaging *Sudra* who was not a born slave. But selling of *Vaishya*, *Kshatriya* and Brahmin born attracted the fine of 24, 36 and 48 panas respectively. Slave shall be entitled to enjoy whatever he has earned from his master without prejudice and also inherit the property of his father or ancestor.²⁵

But it is also evident that Slavery in India was purely in the form of economic adventure. There were no grudges as such to enslave people but the upper class got used to getting served at the cost of lower caste which was submissive in disposition. The privilege enjoyed by the upper class became the permanent feature of society and was deep rooted with the passage of monarchy.

Nevertheless, Slavery in India did not in any aspect resemble that of West except for the clause of service. It might be one of the reasons why Megasthenes confuses with Indian slavery. Indian slaves were not treated with cruelty and did not dwell in filthy conditions. The institution of slavery might have been more rigid at the time of Manu who denies them any rights of property but by the time Megasthenes traveled to India, it had gained a lucid flexibility. They had certain rights and privileges which were purely state defined. *Arthaśāstra* tells us that Slaves could inherit property but not the *Mleccha* who were deprived of this privilege. Some of the slaves even earned wages and appeared more like volunteers of the state.

Kautilya embraced the theory of volunteer labor to the forced labor. He ensured that in Mauryan state no one violated the laws set in accordance with the sense of right and wrong. Megasthenes seems to have taken these slaves for state employees seeing their volunteer approach of work. Also the areas

where extensive slavery was in practice might have been kept out of his reach for internal security reasons. *Arthaśāstra* also indicates the provision of Manumission or freedom to slaves on the condition of paying a ransom or having served for a time of period. Women could get manumission if she conceives a male child from her master.

Severe punishments were meted out to the offender of law. In case of sale of pregnant woman slave, both seller and purchaser were declared offenders alike and were punished likewise. Failure to grant liberty on pay of ransom, or putting slave under confinement without reason was met with penalty of 12 *pānas*. The property of a slave was ultimately to pass to his kinsmen in whose absence, master could retain the property.

Conclusion

So we conclude that slavery was in wide practice in India from early Vedic period. Hence its existence cannot be questioned merely on the basis of one source, *Indica* which is fighting for its recognition as a reliable historical document. Though the character and feature of Indian slavery transformed from a more rigid institution containing unproductive and lowly looked upon slaves to a more flexible phenomenon engaging a productive class of laborers who formed the integral part of Mauryan economy, polity and society. Slavery as a phenomenon might have remained obscure to Megasthenes for the reasons that he did not want to peep into the past of India from where he could easily have traced the slavery in India. Nor did he want to shed the Greek inhibitions and break the bounds of royal prerogatives. It cost him dear in his narratives of *Indica*. Had he been more inquisitive about Indian society, truth was not lingering so far.

Be what may, *Indica* of Megasthenes is a work of great discretion and scholarly. Though not to be taken at its face value, it provides us loads of information on contemporary society. It is us who try to find the diction and narrative of history in his writing but who know with what purpose, the real *Indica* was actually composed by Megasthenes. We have regards and appraisals for Megasthenes as a writer representing his times to the best of his knowledge and findings.

Endnotes

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