

## Research Paper

### REWINDING THE ANCIENT PAST: SOCIETY AND ECONOMY OF THE MAURYAS

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#### ABSTRACT

Scholars writing on the Mauryan social organization have often quoted Megasthenes and his division of Indian society into the following seven categories: philosophers, cultivators herdsman, artisans and traders, soldiers, overseers and councilors. The term used in Greek texts is mere and this has been somewhat arbitrarily translated as 'caste'. A question debated among scholars is how Megasthenes arrived at the figure of seven. In case he was writing of varna divisions, he should have restricted himself to only four : brahmin, kshatriya, vaishya and shudra. If, on the other hand, the reference is to jati or occupational groupings then the number becomes far larger than seven. These contradictions can only be resolved when one studies Megasthenes in relation to other contemporary Greek writing and tries to see the 'model' Megasthenes may have had in mind.

**KEYWORDS :** Varna, Scholar, Megasthenes, Greek.

#### INTRODUCTION

Megasthenes spent most of his time in Kandahar, though he often visited the court of Chandragupta. He was greatly influenced by other Hellenistic writers. It is interesting that in the Hellenistic world, the seven divisions were frequently discussed while describing the idealised state of Egypt which was a different kind of society than that of the Greeks. Thus when Megasthenes set out to write the history of another exotic land i.e. India, it is understandable that he readily accepted the division of society into seven. These seven-fold, division was accepted by two later authors as well, Diodorus Siculus and Strabo. Thus the term mere used by Megasthenes should not be translated as caste but seen as a division of society. These divisions were important to the smooth functioning of society. Another misconception based on a statement by Megasthenes is that there were no famines in India. We know, however, from the Mauryan inscriptions at Sohagaura and Mahasthan that this was

not true. Famines caused considerable damage and the state was actively engaged in providing relief to the people.

Megasthenes remarked that there were no slaves in India and this was reaffirmed by Arian and by Strabo. Buddhist literature on the other hand, refers to three types of dasa, those that were inherited from one's father; those that were bought or given as a gift; and those that were born in the house. Similarly the Arthashastra states that an arya may temporarily work as a dasa on account of some misfortune or the necessity of earning more money. This has led some scholars to suggest that the Mauryan economy was dependent on slaves. A detailed analysis of these references, however, makes it clear that the dasa was very different from the slave in the Greek system and this explains Megasthenes' denial of slavery in India. References in Buddhist literature indicate that the dasa was employed in the household rather than in the production process. They were paid wages in

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accordance with the work performed. The Arthashastra states that a *dasa* was to be paid one and-a-half *pana* per month and he and his family was to be fed. Thus domestic slavery was prevalent in the Mauryan period, but slavery was certainly not the basis of the Mauryan economy. The mainstay of the economy under the Mauryas was agriculture, though trade was becoming increasingly more important. It would seem that cultivators formed a majority of the population and taxes on agriculture were the main source of revenue. The Arthashastra lays great stress on increasing the revenue potential by settling new lands. Peasant migrations from over-populated areas were to be encouraged. One of the Ashokan edicts speaks of the deportation of prisoners after the Kalinga war. These may have been used for establishing new settlements, but this seems to be the only instance of this kind. There is no confirmation from other sources of any such effort made by the state.

This brings us to the question of the ownership of land. It is quite clear that no single type of land-ownership could prevail in an area as vast as the Mauryan empire. In some parts of the empire the *igana sangha* system with communal ownership of land continued. There are also references to state-owned lands called *sita* lands. These were worked under the supervision of the superintendent of agriculture either directly by hired labourers or they were leased out to individual cultivators. In the latter case, a share of the produce had to be paid to the state:- In addition to these were private owners of land who were required to pay taxes to the king. A small section of the Arthashastra refers to the sale of land. This category of land was auctioned and sold to those who bid for it. It would seem that village pastures were largely held by the entire community.

In the fertile Gangetic plain, a variety of taxes are mentioned. These include *bali*, *bhaga*, *shulka*, *kara*, etc. The problem is that it is not quite clear how much exactly the tax was as different sources give different figures. Megasthenes states that one-quarter of the produce had to be paid as tax. It is likely that this was the figure in the fertile region around Pataliputra. Most Sanskrit texts, on the other hand, lay down that not more than one-sixth of the produce could be claimed by the king. It is very unlikely that a uniform tax was levied over the entire areas as the fertility of the soil varied from region to region. In addition the Arthashastra states that the amount of tax would also depend on the nature of irrigation facilities and would range from one-fifth to one third. The *Rumindei* inscription is the only Ashokan edict where a precise reference is made to the amount of tax levied. It is said that because the village of Lumbini was the birth-place of the Buddha, the king exempted it from taxes and only one-eighth of the produce was required to be paid. It is likely that as the region of Lumbini was further north from the Ganga plain and not as fertile, the tax may have been lower. For the assessment of revenue all cultivable land was carefully demarcated and the boundaries fixed. We have earlier referred to village-level officials entrusted with revenue collection.

The Arthashastra also specifies that the state should assist in the setting up of irrigation works. But so far there is only one example of a large-scale irrigation work attributed to the Mauryas and that is the dam on the Sudarshan lake at Girnar. Other references are mainly to small-scale irrigation works like wells, etc. set up with the help of the local populace.

The other source of revenue was

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trade and this was to become a major earner in the post-Mauryan period. The Arthashastra deals at length with the duties of the superintendent of tolls and customs duties. The sale of merchandise was strictly regulated by the state and a toll tax of one-fifth of the value of the commodity was levied. The percentage of profit to the merchants was fixed and excess profit-making was curtailed. Goods could only be sold at authorised places and customs houses at the gates of the city were empowered to check the goods being **brought** in. Commodities manufactured in the country were stamped at the place of manufacture, while those that were brought in from foreign countries were stamped at the toll-gates. Quality was strictly maintained and if found guilty traders had to pay heavy fines. Buddhist literature provides a very different picture of the organisation of trade. It talks of much less state control and attributes a major role to merchants and guilds. A range of commercial transactions from barter to those conducted by the guilds are described. It would then seem that the state exercised monopoly over items that were of direct relevance to it such as gems, precious stones, horses, etc.

The Arthashastra also lays down rules for artisans and craftsmen. They could either work independently on their own or were organised in guilds. Of the two, the latter system was preferred. Wages were determined according to the quality of the work and the quantity produced. In addition, the state also employed some artisans such as armourers, ship-builders, etc. These were then exempt from tax but had to work in the state's workshops. Guilds of textile workers must have been prominent at this time and the Arthashastra mentions several places in the country which specialised in textiles. Cotton fabrics were

made at Madhura, Aparanta, Kalinga, Kashi, Vanga, Vatsa and Mahisa. It is likely that cotton fabrics may have been exported from the port of Bharuch on the west coast.

Trade routes in the Mauryan period followed either the main highways or the navigable rivers. The most important of these was the Royal Highway extending from the region around Taxila to Pataliputra. This route extended eastwards along the Ganga to the Port of Tamralipti. It was from here that ships sailed for Sri Lanka and for Suvarnabhumi, identified with Burma at this time. Another route connected Pataliputra through Ujjain with the west coast port of Bharuch. Buddhist literature refers to the journey of Vijaya, the first king of Sri Lanka from Sopara, also on the west coast. There are references to voyages between Bharuch and Baveru or Babylon. As compared to these northern routes, traffic to the Deccan and the South was still limited and just opening up. The Arthashastra has an interesting discussion on the merits of the different types of routes. The water route was cheaper than the land-route, but could not be defended in the same way. Of the water routes, the route along the coasts was more profitable than the ocean-route because the former touched many ports. The safest, of course, was the route along a navigable river. Of the land-routes, Kautilya preferred the route to the South as it passed through mineral rich areas and gold and gems could be obtained along it.

The mining of gold and access to semi-precious stones like agate, carnelian and quartz, seems to have been the main reason for Mauryan expansion to the South. Indeed the name of the southern province itself has a marked association with gold and Ashokan inscriptions near Maski and Brahmagiri are located in gold-

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rich areas. The Arthashastra has a section on the technology of gold-mining and the supervision of its production. But when we compare this with the archaeological evidence from Karnataka, we find that the Iron Age Megalithic settlements continued unchanged right through the Mauryan period. The Mauryas seem to have been content to exploit the gold reserves but made no attempt to change the Megalithic economy, so that it could generate a greater surplus. This, as we have discussed earlier, was the greatest weakness of the Mauryan economy.

A similar situation prevailed with regard to pastoral groups. Megasthenes lists shepherds and herds men as the third division and adds that they paid tribute to the state. This remark is

confirmed by the Arthashastra which also mentions payment in dairy produce. Ashokan edicts refer to various forest tribes who lived both in the interior regions as well as along the borders. But these were again left alone by the state. In the final analysis, though the state obtained revenue from a variety of sources it did very little resources may, perhaps explain why the Mauryas did not leave behind magnificent and grandiose monuments generally associated with Empires. As we shall see later on that Mauryan Art, remains are more modest in nature and include primarily pillars, caves and a few sculptures.

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