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Early historical period: An observation : (200BC - 300AD)

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Abstract
The period from 6th century B.C to 4th century B.C is a landmark in the evolution of Indian society and culture. The period saw the strengthening of the kinship or monarchy which, in fact was an important development in the sphere of polity. The period saw the emergence of sixteen Mahajanpada where we come across human settlements designated as village, market town, town and cities. Thus this period witnessed the beginning of the second urbanisation. It implies that people were following different professions besides food productions on a larger scale. The dichotomy between rural and urban areas began at this time. The concentrations of food producing groups by following agriculture and cattle herding led to the demarcation of rural area. This not only led to surplus productions but also to the growth of trade, industries, coinage and accountancy. All these changes were possible only because of massive use of Iron technology which led to the formation of new socio and agricultural economy.

Keywords: Town, Production, Rural

1. Introduction
The first Important powerful dynasty was the Mauryas. In the Mauryan period the epicentre of political power was Magadha, but with the decline of the Mauryas, Magadha lost its position of pre-eminence. As we shall see in this section several regional dynasties established themselves and the epicentre shifted from the Ganga valley. The Shungas, who were officials under the Mauryas rose to power in the Ganga valley in 180 B.C. But their embattled kingdom gradually diminished in size till their rule was limited to Magadha alone. They were succeeded by the Kanvas who ruled until 28 B.C. By this time several regions in the subcontinent had achieved autonomy and independence.

Kalinga ascendency to power was in the middle of the first century B.C. under the King Kharavela. Much of the information about Kharavela's rule and his military conquests is available from a lengthy, though somewhat damaged inscription at Hathigumpha- the elephant's cave in Orissa. Kharavela described his successful campaigns against Magadha, the northern Deccan dynasties and against the Pandyan kingdom of the south.

In the north-west, the erstwhile generals of Alexander declared their independence and established themselves in Bactria. This history of these rulers, known as the Indo-Greeks, has been reconstructed mainly on the evidence of their coins bearing legends in Greek and later in Brahmi as well. As several kings bore identical names the evidence is often confusing. The best known of the Indo-Greek kings was Menander. He has been immortalised in the Buddhist work *Milindapanha* which narrates the discussion on Buddhism conducted between King Menander or Milinda and the philosopher Nagasena. Menander extended his control over a vast territory and his coins have been found as far as Kabul in the north and Mathura near Delhi.

Another interesting relic of the Indo-Greeks is a pillar-inscription at Besnagar in western India. The pillar was erected by Heliodorus, the envoy of king Antialkidas of Taxila to the king of Besnagar. The king of Besnagar was perhaps one of the later Shunga kings. In his inscription, Heliodorus professes to be a follower of Vasudeva, associated with the god Vishnu.

Indo-Greek supremacy in Bactria came to an end with attacks by nomadic tribes from central Asia. The first of these were the Shakas who overran the north-west, swept down into the Indus valley and settled in western India. Their power extended as far as Mathura in the north. The second wave of attacks was by the Yueh-Chi tribes led by Kujula Kadphises. They established themselves in Kabul and Kashmir. Kujula Kadphises was succeeded by his son Vima Kadphises, though it was under his successor Kanishka that the empire reached its peak. The relationship between the first two kings and Kanishka is uncertain. Equally problematic is the date of the reign of Kanishka and the extent of his political power. Scholars date the accession of Kanishka between 78 -144 A.D. The debate arises from the fact that an unspecified era has been used to date. Kushana inscriptions, epigraphs, finds of coins and literary sources have been used to define the extent of Kushana rule. The capital of the Kushanas was Purusapura near modern Peshawar while Mathura had the status of almost the second capital. Their kingdom stretched as far east as Varanasi and as far south as Sanchi. Under Kanishka, close links were established with central Asia and China. Hence Chinese annals are an important source of information for this period. The successors of Kanishka continued to rule in the early centuries A.D. but their power had greatly diminished. The emergence of Sassanian power in Persia in the third century A.D. provided the final blow to Kushana rule in the north.

The Kushanas seem to have had a somewhat tenuous relationship with the Shakas in western India, who had established themselves in the region of Kutch, Kathiawar and Malwa. The Shakas continued in power until the early

fifth century A.D. and are credited with the introduction of the Shaka era in 78 A.D. The most prominent of Shaka rulers was Rudradaman who ruled in the second century A.D. and details of his rule are known from a lengthy inscription in Sanskrit at Junagarh. The inscription describes Rudradaman's conquests in the Narmada valley and against the Satavahanas, as well as the Yaudheya tribes in Rajasthan. It also records the repair of the Mauryan dam on lake Sudarshan.

In the first century B.C. the Satavahanas were gaining prominence in the northern Deccan. The earliest inscription of the dynasty is at Nasik and records the excavation of a cave during the reign of king Kanha. The Satavahanas are referred to as Andhras in the *Puranas* and a list of Satavahana rulers is included in the section of genealogy. Unfortunately there is a lot of discrepancy both in the number of kings listed in these texts as well as in their reignal years. As a result, Satavahana chronology can only be worked out from a variety of sources, such as the use of inscriptions, coins and other literary references.

These show that the western Deccan was the core area under the early Satavahanas and we have already referred to the importance of the region around Nasik. Early in their rule, the Satavahanas came into conflict with the Shakas of western India. Inscriptions of the Shaka Shatrapa Nahapana have been found in the Nasik area indicating that in the first century A.D. Shaka control had been established in this region. Much of this territory was, however, regained by the Satavahanas under Gautamiputra Satakarni. The Nasik inscription of the king's mother describes Gautamiputra as the uprooter of the Shakas and the restorer of Satavahana glory. Gautamiputra is also known to have over struck a large number of the silver coins of Nahapana with his own symbols. In what may be seen as an effort to resolve the conflict one of the Satavahana rulers forged a matrimonial alliance with the daughter of the Shaka ruler Rudradaman. It was under Gautamiputra's successor Pulumavi that the Satavahanas extended their sway into the Andhra region. For the first time an inscription of the dynasty was found at Amaravati on the river Krishna. Another piece of corroborative evidence comes from coins. Silver portrait coins of Pulumavi and his successors now carried the legend in a Dravidian language, in addition to the one in Brahmi. Yajna Sri Satkarni was the last important Satavahana ruler. By the third century A.D. the Satavahana kingdom had become fragmented and was divided between several minor rulers in different pockets of the Deccan.

Information about the far south is contained in Tamil poetry known as Sangam literature. The earliest texts consist of heroic and love poems composed by bards. These form a part of the six anthologies and have been dated between 100 B.C. and A.D.250. Unlike Vedic literature these poems are not religious in origin.

They are a major source of information for the history of the early southern dynasties—the Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas. The early Cholas under their chieftain Karikal figure prominently in these texts. What is important is that all these three dynasties established themselves in the coastal tracts of the agriculturally fertile river valleys. Thus the Cholas dominated the Kaveri valley with their political centre at Kaveripumpattinam or Puhar; the Cheras the Periyar valley; and the Pandyas the Vaigai and Tamraparni river valleys. Maritime trade, as we shall see in the next section, was becoming increasing profitable and the control of ports and towns along the coast provided major source of revenue to the emerging kingdoms.

Society and Economy

One of the important features of the early historical period is its marked prosperity. The number of urban centres increased rapidly and there was an overall expansion of settlements. Archaeological excavations show that in contrast to the mud and wattle houses of the earlier period, the quality of construction was far superior. Bricks were regularly used and tiles fixed with iron nails were employed for roofing. Floors were made of brick-concrete mixed with lime which made for greater stability of the structure. The evidence from the inscriptions shows that this prosperity was not restricted to the ruling classes but had filtered down to traders, artisans and a large number of occupational groups. These inscriptions are brief records of donations and gifts made to religious establishments, mainly Buddhist and Jaina, by lay devotees.

A majority of these inscriptions are in the Brahmi script except in the north-west, where Kharoshti was used. The language adopted over a greater part of the subcontinent except the south was Prakrit which was at times mixed with Sanskrit, as a Mathura. These inscriptions occur on railing pillars of stupas, images and relic caskets embedded in stupas. In the Western Deccan, nearly 800 Buddhist caves were cut into the Sahayadri range and its offshoots. About 128 of these caves contain inscriptions. Similarly, inscriptions have been found in the caves at Udayagiri and Khandagiri in Orissa. These caves were, however, dedicated to the Jainas. In Tamilnadu, an important cluster of seventy six inscriptions occur in the caves around Madurai. These inscriptions in Tamil are engraved in Brahmi characters and record donations to Jaina monks who resided in these natural caverns. A significant factor is the location of monastic establishments along trade routes and passes.

The evidence from inscriptions can be corroborated by a large number of Sanskrit and Pali texts. The value of the *Puranas* for a reconstruction of Satavahana history has already been referred to. Of the *Smritis* or *Dharmashastras* dated to the early historical period, the most important is the *Manusmriti*. Buddhist literature may be divided into the canonical and the non-canonical. While the *Jatakas* belong to the former category, the *Milindapanha* is the most important text of the non-canonical literature. The *Jatakas* contain five hundred stories connected with the previous birth of the Buddha and are important for a socio-economic study of the period.

A study of the *Jatakas* reveals the wide range and complexity of commercial transactions at this time. Thus for articles of royal consumption such as horses, elephants, jewels and gold, it was the king who decided the price. Commodities for the consumption of city dwellers were transported and traded by merchants in caravans. Similarly there were merchants who invested in ships and traded by sea. Goods acquired by these land and sea-traders were sold in shops in urban centres. The *Jatakas* mention an ivory workers' street, dyers', perfumers' and florists shops. A distinction is thus made between a general trader or *vanik* and the *setthi* who was perhaps a financer. As opposed to these was the *sarthavaha* or caravan leader who either transported his own goods or those of other merchants. The craftsman formed the basis of handicraft production. Here again there was a distinction between a master-craftsman who employed a number of apprentices on a wage to do the

actual work for the customer and the artisan working independently with his own capital and workshop. There is also a mention of guilds or *shreni* such as the guilds of bamboo-workers, weavers, potters, oil-millers, etc. It also seems that the guilds performed banking functions as well and several inscriptions refer to money invested with guilds and also specify the rate of interest.

In addition to trade, the other major resources at this time was agriculture. Carbonised grains recovered during archaeological excavations from Nevasa in Maharashtra indicate the cultivation of wheat, barley, rice, millet and sorghum. But the most important aspect of the agricultural economy was the ownership of land. Unlike the Mauryan period, we no longer hear of state farms worked by *dasas* and hired labourers, but land seems to have been mainly in the possession of individual farmers. The *Milindapanha* refers to individuals who clear the land and bring it under cultivation and thus claim ownership. This is corroborated by the *Manusmriti* which says that the field belongs to him who cleared away the timber.

It was the Satavahana rulers in the first century A.D. who started the practice of donating the revenue of a village to either a brahmin or the Buddhist *sangha*. This was followed by the Kushanas and a second century A.D. inscription refers to the grant of a village to brahmins officiating in a sacrifice probably in the Allahabad region. In addition to the rulers, several inscriptions from the western Deccan record donations of land by lay devotees to the Buddhist *sangha*. Although the inscriptions of this period do not refer to grants of land to administrative officers, the *Manusmriti* states that land could be given to revenue officials. Another area in which we have no information is the amount of revenue claimed by the state, either under the Kushanas or the Satavahanas. Gautamiputra Satakarni, however, proclaimed in one of his inscriptions that he never levied taxes except in conformity with *dharma*.

The presence of coins seems to be the good indicator of the economic prosperity. In the post-Mauryan centuries, there was a great spurt in the minting and circulation of coins vastly superior to the punch-marked coins of the Mauryas. A new and uniform monetary system was introduced throughout the Kushana dominions by Vima Kadphises in the first century A.D. The Kushanas were also the first dynasty to mint gold coins, in addition to the large numbers of copper coins. The characteristic coinage of the Shakas was in silver, while the Satavahanas minted coins of lead copper and potin- an alloy of copper and tin. No gold coin of the Satavahanas has so far been reported, though a Nasik inscription refers to a *suvarna* identified by some scholars as a gold coin. Further south there is no evidence of a regular monetary system. It seems that a majority of the transactions was either in the form of barter of commodities or in exchange against bullion. There are, however, a few exceptions. A few coins of crude and archaic character have been assigned to the early have been assigned to the early historical period. Similarly, a single hoard of punch-marked coins is attributed to the Pandyas.

What was the impact of this unprecedented expansion of trade on the social fabric? There was a proliferation of artisanal and occupational groups who were prosperous enough to be able to make large donations to the Buddhist *sangha*. What was their position in the *varna* hierarchy? According to the *Manusmriti* the activities of artisans are listed among occupations of mixed-castes, i.e. the progeny of marriages between the different *varnas*. The non-Sanskritic names of many of these mixed-castes mentioned by Manu indicate that they were older tribes and occupational groups who were now assimilated in the *varna* structure. This process of assimilation was a continuous one as is evident from variation in the number of mixed-castes in the *Dharmasutras*. According to Gautama, their number was eleven, while according to Baudhayana it was fourteen. By the time the tenth chapter of the *Manusmriti* came to be written in the late Gupta period, their number had risen to sixty-one. Among the donors to the Buddhist *sangha* in the Deccan were a large number of artisans like the goldsmith, blacksmith, ironmonger, carpenter, perfumer, etc. The prosperity of these donors can be judged from the gifts which included caves, paths, cisterns and a *chaitya*. But what is significant is that nowhere in these records do the donors mention their *varna* affiliations and only their occupations are referred to.

Another important group of donors were women, both nuns and lay worshippers. They make gifts to the *sangha* either on their own or together with their husbands or sons. Two of the Satavahana queens- Nayanika and Banashri-performed Vedic sacrifices and made large donations. These donations have to be seen in relation to the somewhat contradictory rules laid down by Manu. On the one hand he decrees a position of total dependence for a woman—either on her father, husband or son. On the other, he states that what is given to a woman by her parents is stridhana and becomes her own property which could be equally divided between her sons and daughters. Thus she could possess property in her own right. What these contradictions signify is an attempt to narrow the gap between reality and the brahmanical ideals of a patriarchal society.

A somewhat similar dichotomy of status is again evident in the case of the *Yavanas*. The term *yavana* originally denoted lonian Greeks, but was gradually extended to include not only the Greeks of west Asia but any group of people coming from the Mediterranean region. In the earliest stratum of Sangam literature the *Yavanas* are referred to as merchants coming from the Roman East while second century A.D. onwards they were increasingly employed in varied roles such as bodyguards and palace guards. The *varna* status accorded to the *Yavanas* was marked by contradictions. In the second half of the first millennium B.C. a major distinction was based on language. All the areas where a *mleccha bhasha* was spoken came to be designated as *mleccha desha* and included frontier areas such as the lands of the *Yavanas* and the *Kambojas*. But as the economic and political power of the *Yavanas* increased in the early historical period, attempts were made to provide them with *varna* status. The Gautama *Dharmasutra* elevated them to the progeny of kshatriya men and shudra women. By the time of the Mahabharata, an indigenous origin had been found and the Yavanas were described as the sons of Yayati, thus associating them with one of the early and important tribes of north India. Elsewhere in the *Mahabharata* the *Yavanas* are degraded as shudras. The *Mamumriti* also does not seem to be very clear about the position to be accorded to the *Yavanas*. At one point they are described as *vatya kshatriyas*. i.e. basically of kshatriya origin but having become degenerate owing to the non-performance of sacred rites, while soon thereafter they are referred to as dasyus or demons.

We thus see that the expansion of trade had far-reaching

effect n the expansion of settlement to the marginal areas and in the increased prosperity of several social groups. Other major beneficiaries were the State and the Buddhist *sangha*, both of whom also contributed to the maintenance of stability.

Even during the lifetime of the Buddha, there were people who did not accept his authority, the most prominent example being that of Devadatta. Besides not enough precaution was taken to preserve the actual words of the Master and to prevent interpolations. Thus within a hundred years of the Buddha's passing, differences arose among the monks regarding his teachings and their interpretation. This divergence of opinion resulted in dissensions within the *sangha* and the emergence of several sects and sub-sects. At the Fourth Buddhist Council held in Kashmir in the early second century A.D. a major schism in the Buddhist *sangha* was recognised. The more orthodox Buddhists maintained that they followed the original teachings of the Buddha and their sect came to be known as the Hinayana. The followers of the new ideas, on the other hand were called the Mahayana sect. two basic changes introduced by the Mahayana school were the deflection of the Buddha and the concept of the *Bodhisattva*. During his lifetime, the Buddha had opposed any tendency to deify him, yet by the first century A.D. his image was carved in stone and worshipped as that of a god. At the same time the *Bodhisattva* was revered as a saviour who foregoes his own *nirvana* in order to work for the good of humankind. Maitreya was worshipped as the future Buddha who appeared to save the world from suffering.

The Mahasanghika sect is accepted as the forerunner of the Mahayana school. They adapted the existing rules of discipline of the *Vinaya Pitaka* to their doctrine and introduced new ones, thus revolutionizing the Buddhist *sangha*. The presence of Mahasanghikas is known from inscriptions recording donations made to them. These occur in Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda in Andhra. Another major centre was at Karle near modern Pune. An epigraph records the gift of a village and a nine-celled hall to the followers of the Mahasanghika sect. Further north, the inscription on the Mathura Lion capital records that a teacher named Eudhila was given a gift so that he might reach the Mahasanghikas.

One of the sub-sects of the Mahasanghikas was that of Chaityakas. They propagated the doctrine that one could acquire great merit by the creation, decoration and worship of chaityas. Even offerings of flowers, garlands and incense to chaityas were considered meritorious. Not only could wealthy merchants and traders acquire their credit of merit by building stupas, but they could also transfer this merit to their relatives and kinsmen. It was these concepts that were responsible for the popular appeal of Mahayana Buddhism. Eventually Mahayana Buddhism became the dominant sect in India and also spread to Central Asia, Tibet, China and Japan, whereas Hinayana Buddhism found its stronghold in Sri Lanka, Burma and other countries of South-east Asia.

These changes were not limited to Buddhism alone. The teachings of Mahavira also suffered a schism and the Jainas came to be divided into the orthodox Digambara sect as well as the more liberal Svetambara sect. By and large, however, Jainism maintained itself far more closely to the original teachings of Mahavira and has returned a fairly constant number of adherents. Moving west from Magadha, Jaina communities settled first at Mathura and Ujjain and finally in Saurashtra on the west coast. We have referred earlier to the royal patronage provided to the Jainas in Kalinga under Kharavela. The main concentration in south India was in Karnataka and the Tamil country.

The onslaught of heterodox sects altered the fabric of Brahmanical religion as well. The emphasis shifted from Vedic sacrifices to monotheistic thinking and the idea of the Trinity of gods. Brahma was revered as the creator, Vishnu as the preserver and Shiva as the destroyer. Of these three gods, Vishnu and Shiva gained a vast following while Brahma receded into the background. It was also in the early historical period that images of these gods first came to be sculpted. These borrowed heavily from figures of the Buddha suggesting that there may have been a common guild of sculptors who carried out both Buddhist commissions and also sculpted Brahmanical icons.

An analysis of the Vaishnava and Shaiva cults shows the various folk and tribal elements that were incorporated into the Brahmanical fold, though it is not always possible to identify the various stages. A study of Vaishnavism in its formative stage clearly reveals how the religion arose by an amalgamation of the popular cults of Vasudeva, Krishna and Sankarshana with the Vedic god Narayana-Vishnu Similarly Shiva evolved from the Vedic god Rudra and Tamil god Murugan. Shaivism also incorporated a number of fertility cults such as those of the phallic emblem (*linga*), the bull, etc.

Though Vedic sacrifices were not entirely rejected and were still being performed by the rulers as is evident from the inscriptions, yet there was a gradual shift in emphasis from ritual to a personal relationship between God and the devotee. This personal devotion or *bhakti* became a dynamic force of later Hinduism. One of the most remarkable documents of this time is the *Bhagavad Gita* which incorporates the emerging philosophy of *bhakti*. In addition the stress is on *karma* or transmigration and the belief that actions performed in this life will condition the next. One's destiny can however be altered by consciously performing good deeds. These are defined as those performed in conformity with *dharma*.

The *Gita* also proclaims that each man should do his duty in accordance with the sacred Law without questioning the results of his action. This is brought out in the episode where Arjuna is reluctant to fight and kill his kinsmen in war. Krishna explains that Arjuna would be exempt from sin in fighting for a righteous cause.

Art and Architecture

The changes in religious beliefs are to be reflected in the art and architecture of the period. The emergence of the Mahayana doctrine encouraged the construction and embellishment of stupas and viharas, the resources for these being donated by merchants and other occupational groups. Thus Buddhist monuments from the largest category of architectural remains of the period. The stupa was a hemisphered dome built over a sacred relic either of the Buddha or of some revered monk. It was surrounded by a railing with gateways in the four cardinal directions. The best known gateways of the period are those at Sanchi, though the stupa itself has its beginnings in the Mauryan period. The gateways are intricately carved and depict scenes from the Buddha's life as well as a large number of *Jataka* stories.

Two prominent schools of art that arose in the north were

those of Mathura and Gandhara. Mathura emerged as an important centre in the early historical period and remained a seat of Kushana power for at least a hundred years if not more. Carving of images of Tirthankaras and the Buddha as well as the earliest images of Brahmanical deities like Vishnu, Balarama, Shiva, Durga, Kubera, etc. was the important contribution of Mathura art. In addition to the reaction of a varied statuary, the school of Mathura is also famous for a large number of shrines. The remains of six large stupas of which two were dedicated to the Jainas and four to the Buddhists and early Brahmanical temples have been found in the region of Mathura. None of the structures has, however, survived and only railings and pillars have been recovered during excavations.

Due to its strategic geographical location Mathura became the meeting point of several traditions. As a result the art of Mathura reflects a free use of Hellenistic motifs and themes. Several classical themes such as the Eagle of Zeus or Heracles and the Nemean lion are depicted at Mathura with admirable insight. Another important feature of the Mathura school is the fusion of the old Indian folk-cults such as the worship of the Yakshas and Nagas with the new forms of worship introduced by the Buddhists, the Jainas and the Hindus. It was the earlier Yaksha figure which perhaps formed a model for the sculpting of the first images of the Buddha. It is futile to go into the controversy whether it was the Gandhara or the Mathura school that may be credited for the introduction of the Buddha image. What is important is the amalgation of various strands and influences and the sensitivity of the sculptors to react to religious beliefs and needs.

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