



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)
A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal
ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)
Volume-III, Issue-II, September 2016, Page No. 257-264
Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711
Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

Rewinding the Ancient past: Social condition during Mauryan Empire

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Abstract

Mauryan Empire is one of the most remarkable and earliest empires in the history of Ancient India. After the decline of Nanda dynasty and the invasion of Alexander the Great during 323-24 B.C, Chandragupta Maurya became the first ruler of Mauryan Empire during 324 BC. He was the first historical ruler of ancient India. Bindusara was the next important ruler of Mauryan Empire. Asoka, son of Bindusara 'Amitraghata', ascended the throne in 273 B.C. Social condition is one of the most debatable issues in the area of Ancient Indian history. So, the main object of this topic is to highlight on the social condition of Mauryan Empire. The caste division theories of Megasthenes, writings of other historians, Kautilya's Arthashastra are the main evidences related to this topic. We also came to know about these conditions with the help of inscriptions and many foreign accounts. This paper focuses on the socio condition of Indian people from Chandragupta Maurya to Asoka's reign with the help of primary and secondary sources.

Key Words: *Mauryan Empire, Social condition, Division of caste, Condition of women, Slavery, Megasthenes's Indica.*

Introduction: There are three major historical sources to know about the history of Mauryan Empire. The first and most important of these consists of the edicts of the emperor Asoka, which were inscribed on rock surfaces and specially erected pillars in various parts of his empire. The second source is the account of Mauryan India written by Megasthenes, a friend of Seleucus Nicator, who ruled the territories in West Asia on the death of Alexander. The third source – the Arthashastra of Kautilya – is more controversial as its date is uncertain. Most historians take it to have been written in an early form in the reign of the first Mauryan ruler, as Kautilya was his minister, but this form was revised and possibly rewritten in the third century AD. (Thapar 2013:228)¹. This research article will focus on the social condition of India during Asoka's reign and also highlight the condition of women with the help of secondary sources.

India's most powerful empire during ancient time was Mauryan Empire. One of their main achievements was to create political unity and harmony in this subcontinent. Chandragupta Maurya was the first ruler of this dynasty. He ascended the throne in 324 BC.

The credit of freeing the country from the yoke of the Greeks is unanimously assigned to Chandragupta. Later Brahmanical texts represent him as the son of a Nanda king of Magadha, by a low-born woman named Mura, from whom the dynasty name Maurya is supposed to be derived. According to Buddhist Sutta, the Moriyas were a well known republican clan as far back as the time of Gautama Buddha. The splendid success of Chandragupta was due, as much to his own military genius as to the statesmanship of his Prime Minister Kautilya. Chandragupta drove away the Greek garrison from the Punjab and Sindh and made himself master of these provinces. (Majumdar 2007:104)².

Pataliputra, the capital City of Mauryan Empire, was situated by the bank of river Ganga and Son. Chandragupta Maurya's first major political success was started with a victory over the last Nanda king Dhanananda in 325-324 BC. His second success against the Greek governors probably came seven or eight years later, during which time Chandragupta must have consolidated his hold over greater parts of the Ganga valley. His victory over the Greek governors of the Punjab and the north western frontiers of the subcontinent resulted in the steady expansion of the Maurya rule beyond the Ganga valley and into the north western parts of India. (Chakravarti 2013:123)³

Bindusara, son of Chandragupta Maurya, was the next ruler. Due to lack of evidences, we know very little about his reign. He possibly ruled for about 27 years, from 300 – 273 BC. Deimachos, a Greek ambassador, came to his court. Bindusara had a friendly relationship with Greek king Antiochus, the son and successor of Seleucus. Some historians believe that he brought the southern territories of the Cheras, the Cholas, and the Satyaputras under the control of Mauryan Empire. Taranatha writes of Bindusara conquering sixteen states and extending the empire from sea to sea. Early Buddhist sources do not have much to say on Bindusara. This may have been due to the king's lack of enthusiasm about Buddhism. It would appear that Bindusara was more interested in the Ajivikas.

Asoka's reign: About seven years after the death of Seleucus, Asoka-vardhana, commonly called Asoka, a son of Bindusara, and the third sovereign of the Maurya dynasty, ascended the throne of Pataliputra (273 B.C), and undertook the government of the Indian empire, which he held for about forty years. Asoka succeeded his father in 273 B.C, and four years later, in B.C 269, was solemnly consecrated to the sacred office of Kingship by the rite aspersion (*abhisheka*). (Smith 2010:19-22)⁴

The four decade long reign of Asoka witnessed only one military campaign and conquest, that of Kalinga. The RE XIII furnishes information of Asoka's victory over Kalinga. He defeated and conquered Kalinga when eight years had elapsed since his coronation. The conquest therefore took place in the thirteenth regnal year, i.e., 261 B.C. Asoka himself admits that the Kalinga conquest was associated with terrible bloodbath and violence: hundreds of thousands of people were carried away forcefully, probably as prisoners of war; many more were killed in the battlefield and even greater number than these died because of war. The massacre perpetrated during the Kalinga war left deep

impressions on him and through victorious, he was full of remorse. Asoka was justifiably celebrated for his unique feat of having eschewed war for ever, not in defeat but after a victory. Perturbed by the horrors of war, he is said to have embraced Buddhism soon after the Kalinga war and this was followed by his promulgation of the Law of Piety (Dhamma). One of the most significant changes in Mauryan polity since the victorious Kalinga war was the official replacement of the sound of the war drum with the sound of Dhamma. The victory over Kalinga and its annexation to the Maurya realm resulted in the maximum expansion of the empire. Asoka's edicts are the most reliable evidence for determining the extent of the Maurya Empire at its peak. (Chakravarti 2013:127-28)⁵

The Mauryan Empire was organized formally into five parts during his time. Magadha and some other mahajanapadas were under his administration. There is evidence from the reports of Megasthenes's *Indica* and from the *Arthashastra*, of relatively centralized administration in the centre part. There were four provinces - Taxila as its capital, one in the east--Kalinga, one in the west--with the city of Ujjain, and one in the south with a capital near Kurnool in present day Andhra were under Asoka's dynasty. Mahamatras were the head of these provinces.

After the end of historical Kalinga war, Asoka became the follower of Buddhism. Asoka declared that all men were his children, and more than once reproved his local governors for their failure to apply this precept thoroughly. He strongly supported the doctrine of ahimsa (non injury to men and animals), then rapidly spreading among religious people of all sects, banned animal sacrifices, at least in his capital, and regulated the slaughter of animals for food, completely forbidding the killing of certain species. He took pride in the fact that he had substituted pilgrimages to Buddhist holy places for hunting expeditions, the traditional sport of the Indian king, and he proclaimed that he had reduced the consumption of meat in the palace to negligible proportions. Thus Asoka's encouragement was in part responsible for the growth of vegetarianism in India.

Asoka abolished the death penalty. He declared many animal species protected species and said that whereas previously many animals were killed for the royal kitchens, now they were down to two peacocks and a deer per day, "and the deer not regularly — and in future even these three animals will not be killed." (Here as so often the rather clumsy style seems to have the spontaneity of unrevised dictation.) He had wells dug and shade trees planted along the roads for the use of men and beasts, and medicinal plants grown for both as well. (Seneviratna 1994:16)⁶ Among his positive social services Asoka mentions the improvement of communications by planting fruit trees along the roads to provide shade and food, digging wells at intervals, and setting up rest-houses for weary travellers. He developed the cultivation of medicinal herbs, which, with other drugs were supplied to men and animals alike. To ensure that his reforms were put into effect he inaugurated a new class of official, the "Officers of Righteousness" (*dharma-mahamatra*), who, taking their instructions direct from the centre, were ordered to investigate the affairs of all the provinces, to encourage good relations between man and man, and to ensure that the local

officials carried out the new policy. Thus Asoka's reforms tended to centralization rather than devolution. (Basham 2004:55-56)⁷

Division of Caste: According to the ancient Greek traveller Megasthenes (at least as his account has come down to us in the writings of others), when he visited South Asia about 300 B.C.E. the society was divided into seven castes and one hundred and eighteen tribes. He further observed, so we are told by classical Greek historians, that in all of the sub-continent "all the Indians are free and not one of them is a slave." (Majumdar 1960:220)⁸

A graphic account of the caste system is given by Megasthenes, the Greek ambassador at the court of Chandragupta Maurya. He enumerates seven classes or caste into which the whole population of India divided, viz. 1. Philosophers, 2. Cultivators, 3. Hunters and shepherds, 4. Artisans and dealers, 5. Soldiers/Army, 6. Spies/Inspectors/Overseers, 7. Counsellors and Assessors. (Majumdar 1968:549)⁹

Sophist or the Philosopher was held in the esteem in the society. They were considered as public benefactors; sophists made public prophecies in the beginning of the year what would happen during the year. If a sophist failed in his prophecy for three times, he was supposed to have remained silent for rest of his life. As public benefactors, they were exempted from taxes. (Chakravarti 2013:148)¹⁰. Megasthenes's comments on the privileges of the philosophers are interesting. Amongst them he mentions the exemption from taxation. Diodorus states that they were free from any kind of service, but Arrian writes that they were free of all duties to the state except that of state sacrifices. They were small in number but have a high status. They performed sacrificial rituals and lived off gifts and honours. They made predictions about climate and weather for the state. (Thapar 2013:253-301)¹¹

Cultivators were the most numerous of all groups. Megasthenes stated that all lands belonged to the king and cultivators tilled the land on condition of paying to the king one fourth of the produce. According to one Greek account however, cultivators received one fourth of the produce for tilling the land of the king. The theory of the four fold *Varna* society tends to locate the cultivator in the *Vaisya Varna*. But Kautilya states that cultivators mostly belonged to the *Sudra* group.

Hunters and shepherds, third group lived outside the settled agrarian society. Hunters, neatherds, gatherers were considered public benefactors since they cleared the country from obnoxious beasts and birds. They had to pay the state a portion of animals reared or captured by them. Fishermen were possibly included in this group. (Chakravarti 2013:148-149)¹² Neatherds and Shepherds and in general of all herdsmen who neither settle in towns nor in villages, but live in tents. By hunting and trapping they clear the country of noxious birds and wild beasts. They apply themselves eagerly and assiduously to this pursuit, they free India from the pests with which it abounds,--all sorts of wild beasts, and birds which devour the seeds sown by the husbandmen. (J. W. McCrindle 1877:33)¹³

The fourth caste consists of the Artisans. Of these some are armourers, while others make the implements which husbandmen and others find useful in their different callings. This class is not only exempted from paying taxes, but even receives maintenance from the royal exchequer. (ibid 34)¹⁴. The Artisans and Innkeepers, and bodily Labourers of all kinds, of whom some bring tribute, or, instead of it, perform stated service on the public works. But the manufacturers of arms and builders of ships are entitled to pay and sustenance from the king, for they work only for him. The keeper of the military stores gives out the arms to the soldiers, and the governor of the ships lets them out for hire to the sailors and merchants. (Strabo 2012:1-2)¹⁵ Some Greek authors describe that all the artisans were employed by the state and hence were exempted from paying any taxes to the state. A variant account is that only armour makers and ship builders were employed by the state and hence, only they were not to pay any taxes. This implies that artisans other than these two paid taxes to the state. In terms of the Varna theory, artisans and dealers belonged to the vaishya category, though artisans and merchants often maintained their distinct identities different from their rituals Varna status. (ibid 149)¹⁶

Soldiers and Army were not exempted from taxes, but were paid by the state exchequer during the times of wars and peace as well. When there was no war being waged, they led a leisurely life. This group is commonly identified with the *Kshatriya* whose prescribed profession was soldiery. The term to denote ordinary soldiers is *yodha*. The existence of a professional body of soldiers figures in the *Arthashastra*. Spies or Inspectors are described as the most trusted persons in the realm. Megasthenes makes an exaggerated statement that Indians were never accused of lying. Counsellors and assessors were the small in number but held in high esteem, because from this group were appointed the highest functionaries of the realm, e.g., the General of the Army, the head of the treasury, etc. The function of this group has close analogies to that of the *amatya* of the Indian sources. (Chakravarti 2013:149-50)¹⁷

Condition of women: The epics and *Puranas* equated women with property. Even Buddhism did little for women. Though the Maurya kings often employed female bodyguards, spies and ‘*Stri-adhyaksha mahamatras*’, their status was still quite bad. Upper caste ladies had to accept the *purdah*. During this period men were polygamous and widow burning was an accepted norm. Arthashastra imposed more stigmas on women as Kautilya dismissed women’s liberation and they were not free even to go elsewhere without husband’s permission. The role of women in Ancient Indian Literature is immense. Ancient India had many learned ladies. There were two types of scholarly women — the Brahmadakinis, or the women who never married and cultured the Vedas throughout their lives; and the Sadyodvahas who studied the Vedas till they married. Panini mentioned of female students’ studying Vedas. Katyana called female teachers Upadhyaya or Upadhyayi. Asoka got his daughter, Sanghamitra, inducted into preaching Buddhism. From the Jain texts, we learn about the Kousambi princess, Jayanti, who remained a spinster to study religion and philosophy. Often, Buddhist nuns composed hymns. Women did write

Sanskrit plays and verses, excelled in music, painting and other fine arts. (Arnab Basu 2014, 19 Feb. History of Ancient India. Role and Status of Women in Ancient India)¹⁸

The role of women in Mauryan society is of some significance. It was taken for granted that their position was subordinate to that of the men. This is particularly the case in the type of society envisaged by the Arthashastra. The women employed in the royal palace either worked in the harem, or were responsible for looking after the king. Those in the latter category were brought from their parents. Evidence of the king's personal attendants being women is confirmed by the Arthashastra, where the king is advised to maintain an armed bodyguard of women. The king's hunting expeditions seem to have been very elaborate. Even on this occasion the king was encircled by armed women. (Thapar 2012:111)¹⁹

The *Arthashastra* suggests that women of all ages can be gainfully employed by the superintendent of weaving. But this occupation is suggested largely for deformed women, widows, ageing prostitutes, or women compelled to work in default of paying fines. The *Arthashastra* further discusses the position of women in the chapters concerning marriage, and the relationship between husband and wife. The social role of married women is still more flexible than in later centuries. The marriage of a widow outside the family of her in-laws is not unheard of; she must obtain the consent of her father-in-law. Divorce was permitted if both husband and wife wished it under certain circumstances, but this only applied to those marriages which were either voluntary unions or abductions, or contracted with a high bride-price. (Thapar 2013:284)²⁰

Slavery: Megasthenes has stated in his account that there were no slaves in India. This remark has led to much debate, since the existence of slaves is mentioned in Indian sources, and in fact, most of the labour power was supplied by slaves and hired labourers. It is possible that Megasthenes, having the Greek conception of slavery in mind, did not recognize the Indian system which was different from that of the Greeks. If, for instance, Mauryan slavery was organized according to the system described in the *Arthashastra*, then Megasthenes was right. Arrian writes that, "all Indians are free and not one of them is a slave. The Lacedaemonians however hold the helots as slaves and these helots do servile labours; but the Indians do not even use aliens as slaves, and much less a countryman of their own". Strabo affirms that in India no man is a slave. (ibid 284-85)²¹

Kautilya's *Arthashastra* dedicates the thirteenth chapter on *dasas*, in his third book on law. This Sanskrit document from the Maurya Empire period (4th century BCE) has been translated by several authors, each in a different manner. Shamasastri's translation of 1915 maps *dasa* as slave, while Kangle leaves the words as *dasa* and *karmakara*. Kangle suggests that the context and rights granted to *dasa* by Kautilya implies that the word had a different meaning than the modern word slave, as well as the meaning of the word slave in Greek or other ancient and medieval civilizations. (R.P. Kangle (1960), *The Kautiliya Arthashastra - a critical edition, Part 3, University of Bombay. page 186*)²²

According to Arthashastra, anyone who had been found guilty of *nishpatitah* may mortgage oneself to become *dasa* for someone willing to pay his or her bail and employ the *dasa* for money and privileges. Shamasastri's 1915 foundational translation of the Arthashastra describes the rights of the *dasa*, confirming Kangle's contention that they were quite different than slaves in other ancient and medieval civilizations. For example, it was illegal to force a *dasa* (slave) to do certain types of work, to hurt or abuse him, or to commit rape against a female *dasa*. (Shamasastri (Translator, 1915), Arthashastra of Chanakya.111-12)²³

Employing a slave (*dasa*) to carry the dead or to sweep ordure, urine or the leavings of food; keeping a slave naked; hurting or abusing him; or violating the chastity of a female slave shall cause the forfeiture of the value paid for him or her. Violation of the chastity shall at once earn their liberty for them.

— *Arthashastra, Translated by Shamasastri*

When a master has connection (sex) with a pledged female slave (*dasa*) against her will, he shall be punished. When a man commits or helps another to commit rape with a female slave pledged to him, he shall not only forfeit the purchase value, but also pay a certain amount of money to her and a fine of twice the amount to the government.

— *Arthashastra, Translated by Shamasastri*

A slave (*dasa*) shall be entitled to enjoy not only whatever he has earned without prejudice to his master's work, but also the inheritance he has received from his father.

— *Arthashastra, Translated by Shamasastri (Ibid.113-14)*²⁴

Conclusion: The Maurya Empire is a landmark in Indian history as the pioneer in establishing a nearly pan-Indian paramountcy, an efficient administrative system with a centripetal orientation. The ideal of *chakravarti* (universal) ruler ship was realized during this period. It will be remembered for the formulation of the policy of Dhamma to underline and accommodate plurality in the socio-economic and cultural situation in the subcontinent. Two other legacies that the Maurya period left behind were the tradition of inscribing royal order and documents, and the use of stone as a major medium of sculptural art in India. (Chakravarti 2013:165)²⁵

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