

UNIT 147 – UPSC - POST-MAURYAN PERIOD

(20BC - 300AD), ECONOMY AND SOCIETY

In the post-Mauryan era (200 BC. To 300 A.D.) the economy moved at an accelerated tempo. Society witnessed structural reorientation as significant groups of foreigners penetrated into India and chose to be identified with the rest of the community.

The occupation of craftsmen was an important segment of the day's socio-economic milieu. The craftsmen were not only associated with the towns but also villages like Karimnagar in the Telengana region of Andhra Pradesh. The categories of craftsmen who were known in this period bear out the truth that there was considerable specialization in mining and metallurgy. A large number of iron artifacts have been discovered at various excavated sites relating to the Kushan and Satavahans Periods. It is surprising to notice that the Telengana region appears to have made special progress in iron artifacts - not only weapons but also balance rods, sickles, ploughshares, razors and ladels have been found in the Karimnagar and Nalgonda districts. Also, cutlery made out of iron and steel was exported to the Abyssinian ports.

Equally significant was the progress made in cloth-making and silk-weaving. Dyeing was a craft of repute in some south Indian towns like Uraiyur, a suburb of Tiruchirapalli, and Arikamedu. The use of oil was also high because of the invention of oil wheel. The inscriptions of the day mention weavers, goldsmiths, dyers, workers in metal and ivory, jewelers, sculptors, fishermen, perfumers and smiths as the donors of caves, pillars, tablets, cisterns etc. Among the luxury items the important ones were ivory and glass articles and bead cutting. At the beginning of the Christian era the knowledge of glass-blowing reached India and attained its peak. Coin minting also reached a high level of excellence made out of gold, silver, copper, bronze, lead and potin. A coin mould of the Satavahans period shows that through it half a dozen coins could be turned out a time.

In urban handicrafts the pride of place goes to the beautiful pieces of terracotta produced in profuse quantities. They have been found in most of the sites belonging to the Kushan and Satavahans periods. In particular, terracotta figures of great beauty have been found in the Nalgonda district of Telengana. The terracotta figures were mostly meant for the use of upper classes in towns.

This immense manufacturing activity was maintained by guilds. At least to dozen kinds of guilds were there. Most of the artisans known from inscriptions hailed from

the Mathura region and the western Deccan which lay on the trade routes leading to the ports on the western coast.

The guilds, coming from the days of the Mauryan period, became a more important factor in the urban life both in being instrumental to increase in production and moulding public opinion. The primary guilds of the day were those of the potters, metal workers and carpenters. Some guilds organized their own distribution system while owning a large number of boats to transport goods from various ports on the Ganges.

The guilds of the day fixed their own rules of work and the standards of the finished products. They exercised care regarding price also to safeguard the interest of both the artisan and the customer. They controlled the price of the manufactured articles. The conduct of the guild members was regulated through a guild court. The customary uses of the guilds had the same force as those of laws.

The extensive activity of the guilds can be known from their seals and emblems. The banners and insignia of each guild were carried in procession of festive occasions. These prosperous guilds in addition, donated large sums of money to religious institutions and charitable causes.

Since the activity of the guilds was so buoyant, it appears that they attracted the attention of kings too. It is said that kings had financial interests in guilds. Royalty invested its money in commercial activities. This naturally led to protection being provided by State to the guilds. Regarding the activities of guilds, it appears from inscriptions that they acted as bankers, financiers and trustees although these activities were carried out by a separate class of people known as sresthins. Usury was a part of banking and the general rate of interest was around 15% loans extended to sea-trade carried higher interest rate. An authority of the day states that the rate of interest should vary according to the caste of the man to whom money is lent.

Interestingly, apart from the guilds, there were workers bodies also. The workers co-operative included artisans and various crafts associated with a particular enterprise. The classic example of this activity was the co-operative of builders, which has its members drawn from specialized workers such as architects. Engineers, bricklayers etc.

The immense commercial activity was bolstered by the thriving trade between India and the Easter Roman Empire. With the movement of Central Asian people like Sakas, Parthians and Kushans, trade came to be carried across the sea. Among the ports, the important ones were Broach and Sopara on the western coast, and Arikamedu and Tamralipti on the eastern coast. Out of these ports Broach was the most important as not only goods were exported from here but a also goods were received. Across land, the converging point of trade routes was Taxila, which was connected with the Silk Route passing through Central Asia. Ujjain was the meeting point of good number of trade routes.

The trade between India and Rome mostly consisted of luxury goods. To begin with Rome got her imports from the southern most portions of the country. The Roman imports were Muslims, pearls, jewels and precious stones from Central and South India. Iron articles formed an important item of export to the Roman Empire. For certain articles India became the clearing house, as for example, silk from China because of impediments posed by the Parthian rule in Iran and the neighboring areas.

The Romans, in return, exported to India various types of potters found in excavations at places like Tamluk in West Bengal, Arikamedu near Pondicherry and a few other places. Probably lead was important from Rome. It is also presumed that the Kushans had brisk trade with the Romans as they conquered Mesopotamia in 115 A.D. At a place close to Kabul, glass jars made in Italy, Egypt and Syria have come to light, apart from small bronze statues of Greko-Roman style, And the most significant Roman export to India was the gold and silver coins - nearly 85 finds of Roman coins have been found. There is nothing surprising in the lamentation of the Roman writer Pliny in the 1st century A.D. that Roman was being drained of gold on account of trade with India.

Indian kingdoms sent embassies to Rome the best known being the one sent about 25 B.C. Which included strange collection of men and animals-tigers, snakes, tortoises a monk and an armless boy who could shoot arrows with his toes. This mission reached Rome during the days of Emperor Augustus in 21 B.C.

In the southern kingdoms maritime trade occupied the pride of place. The literature of the day refers to harbours, docks, light houses and custom offices. Large variety of ships were built, both for short distance as well as long distance voyages. According to pliny the largest Indian ship was 75 tons. Other sources mention higher figures.

In the self-same period there was a boom in trade with south-East Asia. This was first occasioned by the Roman demand for spices. Gradually this trade grew in dimensions.



The growing number of strangers in the port towns and trade centers led to their absorbing Indian habits as their numbers grew, social laws of the day became rigid as to be seen from the law code of Manu. Further as conversions to Hinduism was technically impossible the non-Indian groups gradually grew into separate sub-castes. After all the conversion of a single individual was a problem but the device of caste made such absorption easier. Moreover the foreigners found it easier to become Buddhists instead of Aryans. Faced one theoretical knowledge confined to brahmins and the other practical and technical knowledge which became the preserve of the professionals.

It was during this period Dharmashastras came to be written. These Shastras made the social structure to be rigid. Apart from these writings poetry and drama were also popular. The outstanding poem in Tamil was Shilappadigaram. Another poem in Tamil was Manimegalai. In Sanskrit, Asvaghosa and Bhasa were the two great dramatists. The manuscripts of Asvaghosa were found in a monastery in Turdan in Central Asia. Both of his plays deal with Buddhist themes. Bhasa appeared a couple of centuries later. His plays are based on the incident from the spics or historical romances around the exploits of king udayan in Avanti.

In the field of plastic art. Great were the achievement of this period like the stupas at Sanchi and Bar hut the caves at Karlellora and Ajanta. At Amravati the great age of painting began. Also the sculptures at Amravati show a mastery of stone sculpture and with the mathura school of sculpture the Indian tradition of sculpture began.

The booming trade and commerce of the period was at the base of the urban settlements that came into existence. The important towns of northern India were Vaishali, Pataliputra, Varanasi, Kausambi, Sravasti, Hastinapur, Mathura and Indraprastha. Most of the towns flourished in the Kushan period as revealed by excavations. The excavations at Sonkh in Mathura show as many as seven levels of the Kushan are but only one of the Gupta period. Again in Jalandhar, Ludhiana and Ropar also several sites show good Kushan structures. The Satayahans kingdown also witnessed thriving towns like Tagar, Paithan, Dhanyakataka, Amravati, Nagarjunakonda, Broach, Sopara, Arikamedu and Kaveripattanam.