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Agriculture In India: Traversing Through Ancient Indian Literature

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Agriculture is a system of life in which humans, plants and animals are interwoven. It has been playing a major role in the economy of India since the pre-Neolithic times. It was considered as an honourable profession and man took this as the principal means of livelihood. The earliest evidence as regards to agriculture comes from Mehrgarh (8000 BCE onward) in the North West and from sites in the Deccan, central India, Kashmir and the northwest^[1]. 'The process of domestication of plants and cereals would have taken a long time. Evidences of cereals can be traced at Mehrgarh and in the Vindhya in 6,000 BCE. Wild varieties of rice have been found in the Vindhyan region in a Mesolithic context at Chopanimando in Meja Tehsil of Allahabad.'^[2] In later times, the excavations at Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro proved that there did exist a good system of agriculture^[3]. The fabric of Indus agriculture rested undoubtedly on plough cultivation^[4] The discovery of the furrows of a 'ploughed field' at Kalibangan and the plough explains the really large extend of Indus agriculture, covering the North-West plains and extending into Gujarat^[5]. The granaries at Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro, the stack of storage jars at Kalibangan etc. suggest that the people were producing surplus^[6] grains^[7]. From the early historical period onward, texts and inscriptions in Sanskrit, Pāli, Prakrit and Tamil literature provide occasional descriptions of agricultural practices. Probably all castes and communities of Indian society, rich and poor, male and female were engaged in agricultural activities. They were commonly known as farmers and do not constitute a homogeneous group.

The Vedic literature gives plentiful evidence to agriculture. In *Rgveda*^[8] there is abundance of data with regard to agriculture. Agriculture was the significant characteristic of the Ārya community and it was counted as a distinguishing mark of the 'civilized' from the 'barbarians'. It was not confined to the lowest strata of population, but had been the occupation of a class of men who were held an important position in the society^[9] According to *Rgveda*, cultivated fields are called kṣētra^[10] and fertile ones urvara^[11] which might indicate alluvial lands as well. Another term used in connection with agriculture is sītā. The term kṛṣṭi in *Rgveda* which denotes people in general, appear to imply that they were by and large agriculturists^[12]. It refers to the preservation of seeds which indicates that agriculture was a regular occupation from year to year (5.53.13).

The *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* mentions different agricultural operations such as ploughing (karṣaṇa), sowing (vāpa), reaping (lava), and threshing (niṣpāva). It may be understood from this that in the total processing there were four stages of operations, viz., ploughing the field, sowing of seeds, harvesting ripe corn, and threshing and separating the straws from corn (1.6.1-3). It distinguishes two kinds of plants, viz., grāmya-oṣadhi, cultivated in rural areas and arānya-oṣadhi, growing wild (2.1.72). 'The later Vedic people produced barley, wheat, rice, sugarcane, paddy, and several kinds of pulses. They also produced mudga (green gram) which takes 6-8 weeks to ripen, and they grew kulmāṣa (black gram) which was considered to be the food of the poor in times of famine in the Kuru land.'^[13] The maxim 'अन्नं वै कृषिः' mentioned in *Śatapathabrāhmaṇa* (7.2.26), meaning 'food is agriculture' clearly declares that food was chiefly derived by agriculture^[14].

According to *Taittirīyasaṃhitā*, cultivation of at least fourteen types of corn was known to the people (चतुर्विंशतिर्विपति सप्तग्राम्या ओषधयः सप्तग्राम्या 5.2.5). It is learnt from it, two crops were grown in a year (तस्माद्द्विसंवत्सरस्य सस्यं पच्यते।1.7.3)^[15]. Megasthenes states that during the Mauryan

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period the greater part of the soil of India was under irrigation and consequently bore two crops in the year ^[16]. The *Vājasaneyasamhitā* (18.12) mentions a long list of various crops such as rice, yava, wheat, māṣa, sesame, mudga etc. *Bṛhadāraṇyakopaniṣad* (6.3.13) enumerates ten kinds of grāmyāni dhānyāni ^[17]. The main products of agriculture in Sangam period were sugarcane, paddy, ragi, pulses like lab-lab etc. The importance of cereals (anna) is emphasized in the *Chāndogyopaniṣad*, which also tells how the rains contributed to the origin of anna, and the sun to its ripening ^[18]. Cultivation of various types of fruits, flowers and vegetables was done in Buddhist time ^[19]. During the post-Vedic time agriculture, cattle rearing, trade and commerce which altogether known as vārtā, ^[20] were the principal means of livelihood. Among these agriculture was the most prominent, for the rural economy was based upon it ^[21]. This period witnessed significant progress in various fields of agriculture. Rice and wheat were cultivated in this age. When the Aryans moved to the Gangetic valley, pulses of different varieties and other products were developed. Agricultural operations came to be associated with domestic rituals in the later Vedic age ^[22].

Work Force

As regards farmers, in Vedic literature, there are four or five terms viz. kināsa (*Rgveda*, 4.57.8), kārṣvaṇa (*Atharvaveda*, 6.116.1), vāpa (*Vājasaneyīsamhitā*, 30.7, *Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa*, 3.4.3.1) and idvāh (*Aitareyabrāhmaṇa*, 3.4.3.1). All these terms seem to mean cultivator or farmer in its general sense, or the persons who were somehow involved in the process of cultivation ^[23]. The protector of the agricultural fields- Kṣētrarakṣakā is also seen in *Rgveda* (10.68.1). Probably he may have protected the cultivated fields from birds, fire and pest ^[24]. The major sources for labour-force during the period of *Rgveda* were Dāsas who were made captive in war or received in donation from the king. *Arthaśāstra* recognizes that in early centuries of Christian era, agriculture was depended to a very large measure on the labour of Sūdras and avaravaṇas ^[25]. The labour force was responsible for most of the agricultural operations such as ploughing, levelling, sowing, watering, threshing, collecting, loading on cattle the produce and carrying them to owner's house ^[26].

Agriculture as a Profession

In *Manusmṛti*, it is stated that agriculture is thought to be good by some, but as a profession it was blamed by all ^[27]. (कृषि साध्विति मन्यन्ते सा वृत्तिः सद्विगर्हिता । भूमि भूमिशयांश्चैव हन्ति काष्ठमयोमुखम् ॥10.84). In terms of Varṇa *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* recommended that the agriculture, cattle-rearing, trade and money lending as an activity specific to Vaiśya community (कुसीदकृषिवाणिज्यं पशुपाल्यं विशः स्मृतम् 1.5.108). However, other sources mention that men belonging to all social categories participate in agricultural production. Specific terms are used to designate cultivators include Kināsa, Karṣaka, Kuṭumbin, (Sanskrit), and Kassaka (Pāli). Agriculture appears as a pious, devoted and virtuous job in Pāli canonical literature. The farmer has been designated in Pāli as Kassaka or Kṣētrapāla. It does not represent a caste but mentions the person who is engaged in cultivation of land or agricultural activities ^[28]. Buddha says for a farmer- यो हि कोचि मनुस्सेसु गोरककम् उपजीवति एवं वासेथ जानाहि कस्सहो न ब्राह्मणे। (Among persons, who ever live by keeping cattle is known as farmer, not as a Brāhmaṇa. ^[29]). In Buddhist age agriculture was not looked down as an occupation of low grade, where as it was considered as an honourable profession.

According to Sangam literature the dignified cultivators or farmers of wetlands were popularly known as Maratam. The cultivators or farmers employed labourers or tenants for their agriculture. However, the ownership right of land was vested in the state and thus kings and rulers were the real owners of the land. The peasants were cultivating their fields on a rent fixed by their landlords. The cultivation was done both by men and women workers untiringly, with the result that food was produced in abundance in the Sangam age. Carpenters, blacksmiths, and weavers were the main groups in assistance of agrarian social groups ^[30].

State assistance for Agriculture

Mahābhārata informs that the state has to do a lot of things for the well being of agriculture. The state was held responsible for any damage to crops due to its inadvertence or negligence (*Śāntiparvan*, 88.28) ^[31]. *Abhijñānaśākuntala* of Kālidāsa (Act V, Verse 9) also supports this view. It was a bounden duty of the king to please cultivators. The state had to give seeds and other materials for agriculture free of cost (*Sabhāparvan*, 5. 79). A sixth part of the produce was to be levied on cultivators as revenue. Kālidāsa too refers to it in his drama ^[32]. In *Mahābhārata* the king is advised to have large tanks in different areas of the country. There should be full of water and the king must see that agriculture did not depend on the rains alone (कश्चित् राष्ट्रे तडागानि पूर्णानि च बृहन्ति च। भागशो विनिविष्टानि न कृषिर्देवमातृका ॥ *Sabhāparvan*, 5.78.)

The state was granted loan to needy peasants at one percent interest per mensem. Such a loan was also granted which was called anugraha-ṛṇa (loan for favour) ^[33]. *Agnipurāna* [253.66] also refers to this practice. According to *Arthaśāstra* agricultural production was managed by an officer known as Sitādhyakṣa. The text reminds that the state could have played an active role in organizing agricultural production, mobilizing labour and allocating resources. The state had taken steps for the management of famine. No land was left unutilized. Agriculture was one of the lawful modes of acquiring wealth, according to *Arthaśāstra* tradition ^[34].

The ancient Indian cultivators had acquired a wealthy knowledge of climatology, classification and selection of soil, plant physiology, seasonable cultivation and rotation of crops, protection of crops, treatments of seeds and different kinds of manure ^[35]. *Bṛhatsamhitā*, *Agnipurāna*, *Vṛkṣāyurveda*, *Arthaśāstra*, *Kṛṣiparāśara*, and *Kṛṣi-saṅgraha* contain advanced knowledge of crops, weather, rainfall, fertilizers, implements etc. The ancient Indians knew the use of manure, and the *Arthaśāstra* lays down several rules for the management of the state farms which points to a well developed agricultural technique ^[36].

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16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Sharma RS. op.cit., 87.
19. See Shukla HS. Agriculture as Revealed by the Pāli Literature, in D.P. Chattopadhyaya (Gen. Ed.), Lallanji Gopal and V.C Srivastava (Eds.), op.cit., 393.
20. Vārttā was an independent branch of learning in ancient India. The term is derived from the root vṛtu, which etymologically denotes vṛtti or means of livelihood. Agriculture, cattle rearing, and trade constitute vārttā, according to Kautilya (1.4.1). Vārttā is used in two different senses in Sanskrit. In the primary sense, it stood for the group of occupations specially set apart for Vaiśyas. The second meaning of the term follows the primary one, and the science that had Vārttā as its subject of study came also to receive that appellation. See for a detailed discussion on this subject Ambuj Nath Banerji, Studies in Economics of Ancient India, Annals of Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute. 1929, 10(1/2)
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