



Cultivation: as the Actual Manual form of Labour and its evolution in different societies.

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Abstract : *All societies were primarily agriculture based in earlier period throughout the world. This paper is an attempt to analyze socio economic conditions of informal (unorganized) labor during ancient times. This was not different as far as Indian society was concerned. The rate of progress in agricultural labor was, of course, difficult to estimate and hence, in this paper an attempt is made to analyze one aspect i.e. the transformation of the labor class in various periods such as Indus valley, early Vedic, later Vedic, epic period, Buddhist period, period of Alexander's invasion, Mauryan period, Gupta period etc. An attention is given to the activities of the agricultural laborers of the south Indian regions too. Vedas, epics and other literary texts of ancient India provide several references to the agriculture labor of ancient India. In the age of Brahmanas, the agricultural labor played a significant role. Labor centered activities contributed much to the development of trade relations between Kerala and other European countries. Bible testifies this fact. This tradition of high production of spices continued in the modern period also due to the active participation of the labor. We can aptly say that the laborers were indirectly responsible for the occurrence of many battles in the southern regions. The present study helps us to assume that in each and every culture the animal labor played a significant role as it was strong support to the agriculture laborers in many ways.*

Key Words: *Vedas, epics, Gupta period*

Introduction

Labor class constitutes not only cultivators but also those who engaged in farming, cattle rearing, hunting, fishing, poultry farming etc. Almost all the societies were primarily agriculture based in earlier period throughout the world. This was not different as far as Indian society was concerned. Hence, in this paper an attempt is made to analyze the ¹ men had no idea of agriculture. Yet, it is interesting to note that they lived on the flesh of animals and such fruits and vegetables as grew wild in jungles. But the civilization of the Neolithic men shows a distant phase of advance. They started cultivation and grew fruits and

transformation of the labor class in various periods such as Indus valley, early Vedic, later Vedic, Epic period, Buddhist period, period of Alexander's invasion, Mauryan period, Gupta period etc. An attention is given to the activities of the agricultural laborers of the south Indian regions too. In India, the Paleolithic

corn. Consequently, as years rolled by, men acquired greater knowledge and skill in mastering the cultivation process. The rate of progress in agricultural labor was, of course, difficult to estimate. It may be assumed that it may have been hundreds or thousands years before a distinctly



higher type of agricultural labor evolved in India. This paper is organized into 8 sections. The second section focused on labor in epics period. The third section gives a light on labor in the Indus Valley Civilization, fourth section deals with Labor in the Vedic Period, fifth section focused on Buddhist period and the sixth section dealt with labor in south India and the **concluding** section presents a summary of the paper.

Labor during the Epics period

Vedas, Epics and other literary texts provide several references to the agriculture labor in ancient India. It is learnt from various sources that the economy in ancient India was mainly rural and agricultural in nature. There are numerous references to the agricultural labor and various crops in the *Atharva Veda* too. Other labor that chiefly contributed to the economy of ancient India included pottery, carpentry, metal-work, glass-work, jewellery making, weaving and leather-work. Besides cultivators, there were the carpenter, goldsmith, blacksmith, weaver, barber, woodcutter laborer, fighter, dancer, hunter, fowler, beggar, usurer, oil maker, garland-maker, stonemason, pearl cutter, armor-maker, attendant, merchant, trader, chariot-maker, metal-worker and craftsmen.

In the age of *Brahmanas* too the agricultural played a significant role as agriculture was the principal occupation. The *Shatapatha Brahmana* mentions the different agricultural operations, such as ploughing, tilling, sowing, reaping, threshing etc. The word *Panchakrsti* literally means either rotation of five crops in the same field or the growing of five kinds of crops in different fields. Besides paddy, barley and [sugarcane](#)

several other agricultural products are evident through the Vedic texts. *Rig Veda* appears to be familiar with the irrigation canals and the *Atharva Veda* describes the excavation of a canal from a river. Furthermore, cattle-rearing also contributed to the labor of ancient India. It was an essential occupation in the ancient society. Domesticated animals were known as *gramya* (rural). In a labor based society, which was mainly agricultural and pastoral, huge significance was attached to the cattle. Moreover, in several places described in *Shatapatha Brahmana*, cattle are stated to be the source of prosperity, fortune, goods, riches, food and even of home. *Atharva Veda* mentions the natural manure of animal. In the age of *Brahmanas*, various other arose to suit the needs of mixed castes. Brahmins performed rituals, rites and other religious practices along with the teaching duties. [Kshatriyas](#) were mainly engaged in the army. Trade, commerce and agriculture were the occupations of [Vaishyas](#). Service of the upper classes was the livelihood of [Sudras](#).

Labor during the period of Indus Valley Civilization

In recent years many archaeological excavations have been carried on at Mohenjo-Daro, Sind, Harappa, Baluchistan and different parts of Punjab including the Union Territory Chandigarh. These excavations have proved beyond that some four or five thousand years ago a highly civilized culture flourished in these regions. The valley of Indus thus takes its rank with the valleys of the Nile, the Tigris and the Euphrates as having contributed to the most ancient phase of human civilization of which we are yet aware. The antiquity of the civilization in India is thus carried



back nearly to the same period which witnessed the growth of ancient civilizations in Egypt, Assyria and Babylonia. We see that in these cultures agricultural labor played an important role in the daily life of the common people. Little do we know about the agricultural labor of the Indus people. The difficulty is that we have no contemporary sources as to the actual method of agriculture practiced by the Indus valley people. The oldest known description of the Indus agricultural labor on flood-irrigated lands comes from Alexander's captains. The existence of such big cities as Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa clearly indicates that food must have been available in an ample measure. Workmen's quarters was discovered at Harappa which comprised of fourteen small houses built in two blocks separated by a long narrow lane. The remains unearthed at Mohenjo- Daro demonstrate the existence of the learned class, warriors, traders and artisans, and finally manual laborers, corresponding roughly to the varnas of the Vedic period.² The learned class probably comprised of priests, physicians, astrologers and sorcerers constituted the first group. They were entitled to rule and administer the city. The existence of the armed people and watchmen's quarters at Mohanjo-Daro points to a class similar to the Kshatriyas, whose duty was to protect the people. A commercial class and various artisans such as the mason, engraver, shell – worker, weaver, gold smith etc. formed the third class. Domestic servants and manual laborers like leather workers, basket makers, peasants, and fishermen etc., belonged to last group.³ The prevalence of the distinct social groups in the Indus valley civilization indicates the importance given to them. They also

included the farmers who cultivated wheat and barley as their main crops. The examination of the specimens of wheat and barley discovered from the ruins indicates that they were not of the wild species. The same variety of wheat is cultivated in Punjab even today.⁴ From the evidences we understand that they did not use plough instead, only a toothed harrow was in use. Bullock carts were found among the toy models, denoting the use of animal in the field, where there was neither plough harness nor a plough proper.

The farmers of ancient India depended upon rainfall. Scholars believe that in olden days Sind and Punjab received copious rainfall, and this, as also the presence of many rivers, must have made the problem of irrigation easy of solution. Though in considerable part of India irrigation was not regular or common, yet canal irrigation was very popular and widely practiced in the ancient Punjab. This might be due to the easy availability of plentiful cheap labor to work for the irrigation related activities. Moreover the prevalence of fertile silt deposits left on the river-banks by natural floods, the Indus method of irrigation i.e. damming of the rivers on the smaller branches etc, also helped to produce a regular crop. The specimens of wheat, barley and cotton have been found there, indicating Indus valley people cultivated these crops on large scale. The valley made real agriculture, yielding a substantial surplus, possible, as well as necessary. This facilitated the search for material with exchange of commodities along the great trade route. The surplus production might have led to a revolution in the population, life style, art, literature and architecture of this culture.



Labor in the Vedic Period

When we consider the early Vedic age we see that the principal occupation of the village folk was cattle breeding. Agriculture was their second main occupation. They cultivated mainly wheat, rice and barley. The cultivated fields were known as *Urvara* or *Kshetra*. They were often watered by irrigational canals. Water was drawn from out of wells or from rivers. They used sickle, digging tool and plough, which was drawn by bulls. Ploughing appears to have been an old practice of the Aryans. All these indicate the highly developed labor activities of this period. There was no evidence of the division of land, or land ownership, selling or buying of land, or for that matter any commodities during this period. The wealth of a man was measured by the number of cattle he processed. The wide use of manure was also known.

In later Vedic period agriculture continued to be one of the main occupations of the people and hence the role of agricultural labor was very dominant which led to great progress in agriculture in this period. During this period labor contributed considerable improvement in the use of agricultural implements. The quality and size of the plough was improved and the use of manure was well understood to increase the production. New kinds of grain and fruit trees were grown. Barley, rice, wheat, beans and sesame were cultivated in their due seasons. The exchange of food surplus for commodities led to the development of a new labor based social organization. This new organization of the society made available for the first time a supply of labor whose surplus was easily expropriated, and with the aid of which new territories could be settled.⁵

Thus we see that the agricultural labor activities in the fertile plains increased the material prosperity of the Aryans and this gave rise to a variety of occupational groups and occupations to meet the various needs of the people. There were evidences of the division of labor during this period.

The principal change that took place after the invasion of the Aryans was in the productive relations. It was due to the formation of a servile class from the conquered *dasa* population. The *dasa* by caste had no property and were treated as same as the cattle. The word *pasu*, which applies generally to the beasts and particularly to the cattle, was once applied to human beings also.⁶ It may be assumed that these *dasas* were the descendants of the Indus valley people who had provided the surplus for the Indus cities. This was considered as the beginning of caste system in India. The post Vedic period witnessed great structural changes and also changes in physical measurements, structure of the labor class, birth rates and population ratios due to the superior methods of food production. The initial stage of Aryan transition in India from pastoral raider to agrarian food producing labor was represented by sources like rituals, legend, myth, fable and sermons. As soon as take to regular food production from a previous irregular food gathering mode, they breed more rapidly. In earlier stage Aryan lived by the labor of cattle breeding supplemented by plough cultivation. But in the crucial stage they realized that plough would produce much more than cattle. So what spread was a new method of life and labor. The plough agriculture greatly increased the food supply, and made it more regular. Thus both quality and quantity of life and



labor changed together. The Aryans advanced eastwards, burnt over the forest along the Himalayan foothills only through the physical labor. So we can say that the Aryans were able to settle in the east by the method of land clearing i.e. well utilization of the physical labor.⁷

Labor in Later Periods

In the epic age also agriculture was the main stay of the mass of the people. The bulk of the population lived in villages around forts, tending cattle and practicing agriculture. The villages were autonomous in ordinary affairs, but the king as the overlord administered justice and exacted taxes, which were perhaps paid mostly in kind. *Manusmriti* gives details of the tax collections.⁸ This indicates the significance of the as the perennial source of income and the best means to meet expenditures. It was during the period of Buddhism and Jainism the situation remained unchanged. The *Jatakas*, the *Pitakas* and other *Pali* works furnish detailed account of the village life and agricultural of this period. The village folk had common rights over the adjacent forest and grazing ground, where the cattle belongs to various house holders, were sent under the charge of a collectively hired herdsman called *gopalaka*. The rural economy was based on what may be called peasant proprietorship. But no owner could sell or mortgage his land without the consent of the village council. He cultivated the fields himself, but often employed labor and slaves to work. There were no big estates or landlords. The laborers of the village united of themselves in such undertakings as laying irrigation channels, building rest houses etc. The clan subsisted on the produce of the rice-fields, and the cattle grazed in the village common or the

forests. The laborers of the villages were grouped together, and the laborers following particular crafts and occupations generally lived at one place. On the whole, each village was self-sufficient, and life was simple and unsophisticated. It was during the time of Alexander's invasion the number of the agricultural labor was very large in every kingdom. Agriculture and cattle breeding were important occupations of the people of Punjab and the North West during this period. The bigger holdings were rare, which were owned by the Brahmins and nobles and were managed with the help of hired labor. Many irrigational canals and reservoirs were constructed in this period with the help of hired labor.

In the Mauryan period the state had a large part of the agriculture of the country directly in its own hands. It was specially the state's business and responsibility to organize and extend the agricultural productivity of the country by schemes of colonization, encouraging the surplus population to settle new or abandoned tracts, and also by assisting the emigration of foreigners to settle in the country (in Sanskrit it is said: *bhutapurvam abhutapurvam va janapadham paradesapavahanena swadesabhishyandavamanena va nivesayet*).⁹ Each village had its full apparatus of agricultural life. Fields with crops (*kedara*), horticultural gardens (*pushpa vata*), plantations of bananas and sugarcane (*mula vapa*) and fields of roots like ginger, turmeric (*ardrakaharidrathi*) etc. were developed and prospered due to the hard work of the agriculture of the villages in the Mauryan period. The recorded and registered area was known as *nibandha* of the village. After deducting from it the area covered by boundaries were known



simavarodhena. It consists of following parts: (1) Cultivated area (*krishta*), (2) Uncultivated wastes (*akrishta*), (3) High and dry ground (*sthalala*), (4) Fields with crops (*kedara*), (5) Grove (*arama* also known as *upavana*), (6) Plantations of fruits like plantains (*shanda* also known as *kadalyadi kshetram*), (7) Sugarcane plantations (*vata* or *ikshvadibhumih*), (8) The source of the firewood for the village and other requisites (*vana*), (9) Area under houses (*vastu*), (10) Sacred trees (*chaitya*), (11) Temples (*devagriha*), (12) *Setubandha* (embankments), (13) Cremation grounds (*samasana*), (14) Almshouse (*sattra*), (15) Store-house of drinking water (*prapa*), (16) Holy places (*punyasthanana*), (17) Grazing ground for village cattle (*vivita*), and (18) Area covered by roads (*pathi*).¹⁰ The played a significant role in managing and supervising these lands and hence we can proudly say that they were actually responsible for the prosperity of these lands.

Agricultural labor in South India

Even in south India too we see that society was primarily agricultural labor based. It is said that the trade relations between south India and the west countries started in ancient period itself due to the labor based activities in the south Indian region. South Indian ports had been frequently visited by the merchant ships from the Red sea and Persian Gulf in search of spices and valuable products from very early times. The credit for developing south Indian region as an emporium for international commercial and trade activities goes to the labor. The Sangam literature gives adequate proofs regarding the activities of the labor in various fields: It says that labor brought war horses that came through sea, bags of black pepper

brought overland by cart, gems and gold from northern mountain, sandal and *akil*¹¹ wood from the western mountain, pearls of the southern and corals of the eastern sea, the producer of the Ganga basin and Kaveri valley, foodstuffs from Ceylon and luxuries from Kadaram.¹² It validates the multi-phase of the labor based activities. Bible and early Greek-Roman records also testify to this fact. King Solomon built a fleet of ships...¹³ Hiran sent his servants with the fleet, sailors who were familiar with the sea, together, with the servants of Solomon.¹⁴ The arrival of the Greeks including the labor in ships is clearly validated in *Akananuru* also.¹⁵

In Kerala, the production of spices was dominant from ancient period onwards and hence always on high demands.¹⁶ Labor centered activities contributed much for the development of trade relations between Kerala and other European countries. Bible testifies this fact: The queen Sheba (Ethopia) came to Jerusalem with a very great retinue, with camels bearing spices, and very much gold, and precious stones...¹⁷ It is believed that the spices might have been reached Ethopia and other western countries from south Indian region especially Kerala through trade relation. This tradition of high production of spices continued in the modern period also due to the active participation of the labor. The magic of the spice trade lured traders from the western world to this region. Vasco da Gama's triumphant voyage intensified an international power struggle over spices.¹⁸ Among the spices, the pepper was the centre of attraction to the foreigners and,¹⁹ thus, the south Indian regions became the arena of many battles²⁰ and we can aptly say that the laborers were indirectly responsible for



the occurrence of many battles in the southern regions.

Conclusion

In short, in India the feudalization of the state can be traced from the close of the sixth century and beginning of seventh century A.D. Division in the labor, agrarian expansion, deforestation etc. of the ancient period led to the growth of private farming, improvements in techniques of agriculture and increase in crop production, all of which ultimately led to the growth of market economy even during the ancient period. The features of the developments, which characterized the growth of rural economy in and around these focal points, were summed up as: attempts to increase the production of food crops by reclaiming new lands and felling and burning forests, converting old dry land into wet rice field through consolidation of drainage facilities, development of new modes surplus collection etc. by the landlord class.

References

¹ The word Paleolithic has been derived from Greek words signifying old stone.

² K.N Dikshit, *Pre-historic Civilization of the Indus Valley*, pp.31-32.

³ R.C.Majumdar and A.D. Pusalker, *The History and Culture of the Indian People: The Vedic Age*, 1957, p.179.

⁴ R.C.Majumdar and A.D. Pusalker, *The History and Culture of the Indian People: The Vedic Age*, 1957, p.174.

⁵ D.D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, p. 91.

⁶ *Rig Veda*, 3, 62, 14. It is assumed that the word *pasu* was generally applied to call the labour especially agricultural labor.

⁷ The method of land clearing was confirmed by many adjectives for *Agni* mentioned in *Rig Veda*: The swallower of forests, the axe etc. were described in *Rig Veda*. Though this method was not a principal one for bringing land under cultivation in historical times, land burning was mentioned in *Mahabharat, Khandavadaha Parva*, 1.214-225 too.

⁸ *Manusmriti*, VII, 130-132.

⁹ M. P. Radha Kumud Mookerji, *Chandragupta Maurya and His Times*, 1952, p.197.

¹⁰ M.P. Radha Kumud Mookerji, *Chandragupta Maurya and His Times*, 1952, pp.197-198.

¹¹Neem tree (*Azadiracht indica*), also known as margosa tree or aloe wood. Elamko Atikal, *Chilappatikaram*, Vol. XIV, pp. 104-112 says that the rulers of Tondi dispatch vessels loaded with *akil* wood (eaglewood), silk, sandal and spices and all sorts of camphor (*Cinnamomum camphora*), indicating the role of as carpenter and textile worker. They even engaged in dealing with sandal and spices also.

¹² *Pattinappalai*, II. pp. 185-191.

¹³ *The Holy Bible*, 1 kings, 9. 26, 2 Chronicles, 8.17-18. The descriptions in the Bible regarding the buildings of the ships indicate the availability of the class, who were expert in ship building in



thousands and thousands years back. Moreover it also validates the service of the labor in the ships, fleet and also as sailors.

¹⁴ *The Holy Bible, 1 kings*, 9. 27. The sailors of Solomon are believed to have arrived at Kodungallur in Kerala.

¹⁵ *Akananuru*: 149: 7-11.

¹⁶ W.H. Schoff, Ed., *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, pp. 210- 215; E.H. Warmington, *Roman Trade with India*, pp. 181-183.

¹⁷ *The Holy Bible, 1 Kings* 10. 2. 2, Chronicles 9.1- 28, *1 kings* 10:10, 2, Chronicles 9.1- 28.

¹⁸ S.L. Kochhar, *Economic Botany in the Tropics*, p. 27,

¹⁹The travellers like Yaqt, Al Kaswini, Al Idrisi, Marco Polo and Marignolli give elaborate accounts of pepper cultivation and its trade in southern region. For details see, M. H. Nayinar, *Arab Geographers Knowledge of Southern India*, pp. 34, 41, 46, 206. The details of the extensive and intensive cultivation of paddy, different crops, vegetables and fruit trees practiced by the agricultural are also available.

²⁰ It is reported that special watchmen were appointed as in the palaces to protect them. In ships crews were instructed to use shirts and pants without pockets. Velayudhan Panikkassery, *Marko Polo Indiyil*, pp. 80-82.