

Social Challenges of the Mauryan King

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ABSTRACT : The essay corresponds to the prevalent social environment of India. Social environment implies the social structure and elements of the society. It corresponds to the mutual relationships among the elements of the society. The problems arising out as the consequence of the fractured social order, is still prevalent in our progressive society. It is still a huge challenge for our governing bodies, especially when it comes to implement welfare policy equally to all sections of the society. Mauryan kings especially Asoka, tried to do so. The Mauryan state intensified the welfare activities during their regime. It can be presumed that the society as reflected in the religious texts would have attained the respective environment up to the time. Mauryan kings appear to have worked for the welfare of almost all sections of the society. It would have been a difficult task for them in light of the sacred texts. How the Mauryan kings approached the problem has been a matter of discussion. The same has been discussed here in the presented work.

KEYWORDS : Indian Society, Ancient Indian State, Social welfare, Varnashrama Laws

I. INTRODUCTION

A state was responsible for protecting the interests of the parent society. The society has to contribute in the form of Taxes so that the state may execute its required functions. The state with the help of the treasury performs various functions for the goodwill of the people. It is well known that the Indian society was divided into four Varnas or major groups. The states were almost monarchial in nature and their kings were kept as protector of the Varnashrama tradition. The powers of the Varnas differed and their rights varied. Thus there was an environment which keeps the status of some Varnas high and others as low. It was according to the provisions of the sacred literature. Under such conditions it is interesting to know how the welfare of mankind was executed and all sections of the society were benefitted. Mauryan kings appeared as triumphant for the welfare activities. But how they succeeded to benefit all sections of the society is a matter of discussion.

II. SOCIAL CHALLENGES OF THE MAURYAN KING

The society got started restructuring with the advent of the Aryans in India. The new society getting into shape was by the joint efforts of the pre-Aryans and Aryans making efforts jointly. Both of them look equally vigilant and prejudiced about their originality and hardly allowed others to enter into their social systems. Even after that some groups of the castes like Ayogava started to grow which were cautious about their existence and thus were very vigilant about the betterment of their social status and the order in the growing society. The circumstances would have certainly created bitterness among the constituents of the society not at least but on various occasions. We hear about the cause of the war between the Shakyas and king Vidudabha of Kosal kingdom was the marriage of Vasabhkhattiya, daughter of Mahamana Shakya, from the slave girl with king Prasenjit, the father of Vidudabha.¹

A state has to maintain the required status of the parent society, over which it exists, if it wanted to exist. State has not only to maintain law and order, but also to uphold the social norms of that particular society, to act as the guardian for the values and the custom of the society on which a society, stays normally. A state has to perform functions for the sake of the lowest unit of the society i.e. the family; which is always to be kept intact. The intactness of the family guarantees the intact and well bound society, which in turn gives stability to the existence of a state.

The constituents of the society were trying to establish their hold over the new growing society. Whereas some would have started to discourage the process of betterment for the rival groups which would have been a matter of conflict many of the times gone to the extent of dividing or destruction of the society that has been the very foundation of the state.

The Mauryan state, though it appears that, did hardly ever interfered with the professional life of its people, but never hesitated to undertake harsh steps against those who destroy the peace of the others or the society or try to create bitterness in the society. This regulation was in accord with the circumstances prevalent then. There were several threats like Buddhism and the Jainism to the already existing society under the high influence of the Brahmanism, giving the Brahmin community, the highest rank in the social order of then, on the basis of mere birth. Buddhism was a challenge against the superior principle of the Brahmins who depended mostly on the Vedic texts. Buddhism tried to make the people to test the utility of the principles taught by the Brahmins. That tried to spread the use and utility of the ‘Logic’ in day to day life, which was in the bitter contradiction of the very foundation of the Brahmanism. ‘Logic’ was determined to destroy all the formulae established for the benefit of the Brahmins. Why it were the Kshatriyas were to lead army consisting almost all castes of the society, to protect and die but under the guidance of the Brahmins, and the Brahmins were not to, etc. It was stated that the paths, suspected to be dangerous to life would be led by Kshatriya, or anyone else but not by the Brahmana in any circumstances², why? It was regulation on the behalf of the state that actors, dancers, singers, musicians, professional story tellers and monstrels shall not create obstruction in the work of the common beings³.

It appears from the incidents of the Arthashastra that the society of that period was under stronghold of the Vedic traditions. The provisions laid by the Dharmasastras went more rigid due to the recognition of the state. The society thus tended towards the orthodox traditions in which the wells of drinking water made for the Chandals community were for the Chandals only⁴. On the other hand, question of the security of lower and poor class people, extended the social attitude more wide and became more objective. It was the duty of the king to protect the all section of the people in the society⁵. It implied that the state had to take care of the Sudras also. Which was without any doubt against the existing principles of the society? Any person, who opposed the interest of the society as whole, was liable to the punishment, even if he happened a Brahmin. Such a special provision in the Arthashastra was not because of the liberal attitude of Kautilya but was due to the political essence of the period.⁶

Kautilya was well aware of the consequences of the spread of the revolutionary ideas that were being spread by new ideology of the Buddhism. He himself was a staunch Brahmin, stern believer in the principles giving undisputed superiority to one minority sect Aryans, to direct and rule over the majority section inclusive of both the Aryans(Of course of the lower grade), the Non-Aryans (The indigenous people) and new growing group of their mixture (may be of the lower Aryans, that came in India earlier but without women and the original inhabitants of the land)⁷ He, thus forbade the people of the state to give shelter or feed by food to the ascetics, the Buddhist monks, which was an unpardonable offence for which the guilty to be fined @ 1000 Panas⁸ Moreover people of the Sakya origin, Ajivikas cult and heretical monks were put equivalent with the Sudras in the same paragraph. The king was advised to not to allow the Sanghas and ascetics of the different origin to spread in the country⁹. Here Kautilya has put forward his anti-Buddhist character; the fear of the Buddhism is very clear here.

Agriculture was protected as the most needful commodity; it was protected against only fines, taxes but also against laborers. Herds of cattle were protected against the thieves, wild animals poison, crocodiles and diseases¹⁰. Beside that the state was to undertake the task of preparing and developing new resources for progress in productions. The Rajkosh or treasury has been described as the backbone of the state by Kautilya, hence every effort to develop and strengthen it was envitable. Weak treasury was to make the state weak, which was a threat to its very existence. Hence the state was expected to improve it by the available resources of the state. State revenue was major contribution in the state treasure, which was collected by levying taxes on various products & their resources. Heavy taxation may increase the burden on the tax payers, which was more to create dissention among countrymen. The solution was thus to increase the production, as by doing so, neither the tax payer would feel uneasy nor the state will find it difficult to collect tax. Thus by increasing the resources, both were benefited, the state and the tax-payers.

The state was to protect already existing forests, to keep the smooth supply of the forest-products. It was its responsibility to plant new one for each cut down for produces. It has been stated that Asoka has planted trees even on roads, implies simply that the task of cultivation of the trees got extended for the shade to travelers too. He also planted mango gardens and rest houses for the shake of the travellors¹¹. State was to protect the forest, irrigation works and mines that were established in the past and to maintain them in good condition, so that they can be used according the need of the times¹².

Maintenance of the law & order has been the primary work of the state from the very beginning of the statehood; Mauryans were no exception to that, they also took up the task seriously. As it obvious, the Mauryan state was the largest ever state in Indian subcontinent before, they were more serious about it than any other state of the times. Larger states were always prone to internal disorders than the other, the smaller one. Hence their internal security was strict and always on the high alert. Under such a harsh environment created due to the security measures, people were expected to suffer on various occasions. To avoid the discomfort a number of serving officers and an efficient network of the spies was established, which was so energetic and deep rooted that anything that had occurred against the will of the king, being informed to the king within hours if was far and in minutes if was nearer to the king. The classical writers have maintained a class of the officers, can be called the overseers of the Episkopoi, who "overlook what is done throughout the country and in the cities, and make report to the king where the Indians are ruled by the king, or the magistrates where the people had a democratic government"¹³." Strabo calls this class of men, the Ephori or the inspectors. "They are", says he, "entrusted with the superintendence of all that is going on, and it is their duty to report privately to the king The best and the most faithful persons are appointed to offices of the inspectors."¹⁴ Thus, the king generally used to appoint his most trusted men to execute the function of the supervision of the administrative officers, who themselves were the people of high quality and ability, only got appointed after getting successful in a series of tests especially formulated to check them. The two kind of the spies were classed into the *Samsthah*, or the stationary spies consisting of the secret agent styled *Kapalika* (Fraudulent disciples), *Udashita* (Recluses), *Grihapatika* (Householders), *Vaidehika* (Merchants) and *Tapasa* (Ascetics); and the *Sancharah*, or the wandering spies including emissaries termed *Satri* (Classmates), *Trishna* (Firebrands).¹⁵ The post of the *Samahatri* was for taking care of the city. Who was helped by the officers like *Gopa*, *Sangharika* and *Sthanika* etc. The post of *Samahatri* was much similar to the post of the District Collectors in the period of the British India, who used to be the whole in-charge of the district administration.

There were the municipal regulations that every new construction should be fully furnished with proper drainage system. It was punishable if once water collects in the housing area or in area surrounding others house. Throwing dirt or causing mud and water to collect on roads was punished with fines and the fine was doubled in the case of royal road. Again throwing inside the city the dead bodies of snakes, and animals like cat, dog or mongoose was punished with a fine of three Panas; in case of larger animals like an ass, camel, mule or horse, the fine was doubled, while in the case of human corps, the fine was 50 Panas. Carrying dead bodies along roads or through gates other than prescribed ones was punished, while the guards, who connived at that offence were also fined. The cremation or burial of dead bodies in places other than the prescribed ones was similarly punishable.¹⁶

It was be left some open space between two houses, there were regulations that there should not be windows of the houses facing to one and another. And if it had happened and caused inconvenience to neighbor then there was fine prescribed for it.¹⁷

It is obvious to say that the physicians of those days were known about the causes of the dreaded epidemics like malaria etc. There were regulations to stop negligence by the physicians who are said to had punished severe punishments like cutting off their limbs if any patient found dead (due to Karmaparadhena).¹⁸ There were fire regulations also in cities; as it is clear that the houses of the Mauryan period were mostly built by wooden material¹⁹ hence the probability of the spread of fire was very prone in the housing areas.

III. CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

Evidences of the Arthashastra of Kautilya ensure that the Mauryan administrative machinery was highly developed and efficient. In light of which it can be stated that welfare activities could have implemented easily. The welfare of the subjects has been on priority for kings of the monarchial systems. But it is difficult to confirm the rate of success. The sacred texts never allowed equal rights to all sections of the society. The society was strictly divided into Varnas. The king himself was the sole protector of the Varnashrama Laws. Under the circumstances it was impossible dream for the king to implement ful fledged welfare activities equally to all sections of the society. Various administrative laws and systems during the reign of Mauryas prepare platform for welfare state. The Mauryan kings decided to establish the same as they had the required infrastructure. Asoka utilized the available infrastructure and made it more suitable by changing the powers of various officers and creating new officers. He never hesitated to make laws that came in to conflict with the existing Varnashrama Laws. Mauryan kings faced the social challenges without fear which is evident from their activities.

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