
An exploration into the economic conditions of Harshvardhan period

Monu,

Research Scholar (M.Phil),

Registration no : 17UAH7,

Department of Ancient Indian History Culture and Archaeology,

Kurukshetra University Kurukshetra

Email: monuthory@gmail.com

Abstract

The cornerstone of the economic system of Northern India during the Gupta rulers and Harshavardhana period was the same resource that was prevalent in the entire society since ancient times. Land tax was an important source of income in the Gupta and Harshavardhana empires. During this period, a maximum amount of land was donated, which shows its important role from both economic and religious points of view. In ancient India, the first Maurya emperor presented the outline of a purely administrative system, which naturally had an impact on the economy of that era. Harshavardhana the greatest of the Vardhan dynasty succeeded in partially restoring the glories of the Guptas. Although Harshavardhana gained control of most of northern India from Gujarat to Bengal his empire was feudal in structure. During the period under review trade and commerce were in a flourishing condition. Not only was there a coasting trade between different parts of India, but regular mercantile traffic was carried on between India on the one hand and the Eastern and Western countries on the other. Ships plied between ports on the Bay of Bengal and those in Further India, islands in the Indian Archipelago, and China. Tamralipti, represented by modern Tamluk in Bengal, was a famous port, and we read of many voyages to it from the Chinese ports. The people of Kalinga and the Tamil states had also a great share in this traffic, and there was constant communication between the eastern coast of India and the Indian colonies beyond the sea. Similarly, there was a brisk trade between the western coast of India and the western countries such as Western Asia, Africa, and Europe.

Keywords: Trade, Commerce, Flourishing, Mercantile, Communication, Port.

Introduction:

Harshavardhana, the younger son of Prabhakaravardhana, belonged to the Pushyabhuti family who ruled in Thanesar. north of Delhi. He ascended the throne in AD 606 in difficult circumstances at the very young age of 16 years. Prabhakaravardhana had a daughter, Rajyashree, who was married to Grihavarman. the Maukhan King of Kanauj. After Prabhakaravardhana's death, the King of Malwa. Devaguptu attacked Kanauj, killed Grihavarman, and took Rajyashree as a prisoner. His elder brother, Rajyavardhana, who had succeeded his father to the throne, attacked the Malwa king to restore Kanauj and free his sister. Rajyavardhana was killed in the battle and it was later Harshavardhana who defeated Devagupta and his allies and reclaimed Kanauj. As his brother-in-law Grihavarman had no heir to the Kanauj throne, Harshavardhana merged it into his kingdom. He later moved his capital from Sthaneshwar to Kanauj. He established a strong empire in Bengal, Malwa, eastern Rajasthan, and the entire Gangetic plain up to Assam, Under Harshavardhana, North India was reunited briefly, but neither the Guptas nor Harsha controlled a centralized state, and their administrative styles rested on the collaboration of regional and local officials for administering their rule rather than on centrally appointed personnel. However, he was successful in consolidating all the North Indian feudal states, which had emerged because of land grants after the fall of the Gupta Empire, under his sovereignty. By the end of his reign, Harsha's Empire extended from

groups were engaged in these occupations.³ It is important to realize that certain changes to the harshavardhana period had started taking place in the pattern of economic production and consequently in relations between different social groups.

Mercantile Organisations

Numerous seals, discovered in the ruins of the ancient city of Vaisali, bear the names of a large number of traders, bankers, and merchants, and refer to their corporate organization. Dr. Bloch who discovered them concludes that "something like a modern Chamber of Commerce existed in Northern India, at some big trading center, perhaps at Paṭaliputra". Similarly, the merchants of southern India were also distinguished for their corporate organizations. We read about the "organization of 505 merchants", and "an assembly of merchants from 18 sub-divisions of 79 districts meeting together in a conference". The Baṇaṅja Community had a most powerful organization embracing merchants of different classes from distant parts of India. They are frequently referred to, and sometimes highly praised, in contemporary records. We learn from one of them "that they were brave men born to wander over many countries, penetrating regions of the six continents by land and water routes, and dealing in various articles such as horses, elephants, precious stones, perfumes and drugs either wholesale or in retail." Some of the trade-corporations enjoyed large prerogatives and political rights.

Land Revenue system

Under any administrative system, land tax was considered to be the salary of the king on behalf of the subjects. Tax has been accepted as a means of income for the state. At the time of Harsha, the foundation stone of the economic system of Northern India was the same resource that had been prevalent in the entire society since ancient times. The system was perfect and Harsha adopted it as it was. Harsha had made a good arrangement related to land tax during the time of Guptas that all land tax was determined based on observation and measurement and the extent of fields. Most of the government income was spent on public welfare works. In the Gupta period, agriculture was the very basis of the economy and thus an important source of revenue.

The principal tax was bhaga or the share of produce. Two other revenue terms kara and uparikara are perhaps the principal and subsidiary tax. The tax called udranga is often taken to denote a tax on permanent subjects. The land grant of the Gupta period mentions certain other terms like halikakara, ditya, meya, tulyameya, and dhanya. Revenue terms like dhanya in western India and halikakara in central India must have meant imposts on agriculturists.

The word ditya which occurs in the Surat plates of the Traikutaka king Vyaghrasena, literally means that which is to be given. The expression is sarvadyavishtipariharena meaning exemption from all dues and forced labour. This may mean that data denoted all taxes except forced labor and thus appears to have a wide connotation. The tax in cash was called Hiranya which may have been realized from the nonagrarian sectors of the economy. The practice of imposing a levy on salt production continued in this period. The commercial sector yielded tolls and customs or sulka, the saulkika, or the officer in charge of the collection of sulka figures in several inscriptions.

Epigraphic materials strongly suggest that agricultural taxes were numerically superior to those from crafts and industries. One part of the income was spent on economic and government works, the second part on public officials, the third part on giving awards to scholars, etc., and the fourth

³PushpaNiyogi, Contribution to the Economics History of Northern India, Calcutta, 1962, p.221

part on charitable works. Harshavardhana donated money to the treasury every fifth year, yet the treasury was never empty. The society during the Harshavardhana period was advanced. Therefore, the king has the right over a part of the land production. This land tax is called Bhag. Even in the Harshavardhana period society, some taxes were imposed on the entire public.

During Harsha's time, the state used to collect taxes on agricultural land, which was one-sixth of the production. Apart from this, the tax was also levied on milk, fruits, pasture, etc. At this time, tax was imposed on the goods sold from grain markets based on weight and measurement. In the times of Harshavardhana, 'feel' was taken from the ghat also. The person collecting this tax was called Shaulkink. When the land was donated to any person, that land was exempted from the Udang tax and Begar tax.

Other Revenue

There is mention of 'Tulameyabhogkarhiranyadi' in Harsh's Madhuban and Banskhedha copper plates. There is a description of 'Tulyameya', Bhaag, Bhog, Hiranya, etc. At this time, other taxes like 'Udrang' and 'Uparikar' taxes are also mentioned. Apart from this, the word 'Dronamapak' for the officer who collected land tax in the Gupta period itself confirms the fact that grains were filled with "Dronas" (grain measuring vessels).²⁹ Apart from this, granaries or storehouses are found in the states where the grains received as land tax were stored. It was supervised by government officials who made arrangements for the evacuation of the grain before it was destroyed. The word 'Bhaag' used for land tax also indicates the fact that it was a part of the 'produce'.⁴

Booty in War

Gains of victory in the form of wealth of the losing nation comprised the prime source of public finance. Salvatore claims that there are specific terms used and references made to the explanations provided by various scholars that the share of the booty taken by the king after winning a war was one of the main sources of revenue. During Harsha's time collected tax by the king.

Bali

This word has occurred very frequently in Rig Veda, which primarily means 'an oblation, a gift or offering (usually religious)' according to VS Apte. According to him, it is the offering of a portion of a daily meal (of rice, grain, ghee, etc.) to all creatures, one of the five daily yajnas to be performed by a householder; it is usually performed by throwing up into the air, near the house-door, a portion of a daily meal before partaking of it. Kalidasa uses it as a tribute to the king, which was procured by the king for the well-being, happiness, and prosperity of the subjects. UN Ghoshal interprets Bali "as the exclusive designation of the Indo-Aryan king's receipts from his subjects, as well as from the conquered king."⁵

It is possible that Bali was the first type of customary contribution payable by the subjects that did not depend solely upon their free choice. However, Salvatore does not agree with this view. He cites various references from different texts and, quoting Manusmriti, concludes that Bali was first taken as a religious offering, and then as a tax on religious performances, as proved by Manu, Panini, and Kautilya. It was essential in the sense that it was not only an offering to the gods, but also a tax on some kind of religious sacrifices that Kautilya used the term Bali when he

⁴Jha, D.N, Revenue System in Postmaurya and Gupta Time, Calcutta, 1967,p.97

⁵Chandra, Bhavesh, Harsha period governance, Kala Prakashan Varanasi, 2016,p.333

mentions it- as one of the sources of revenue from the Kingdom (Rashtram). During Harsha's time, the state used to collect taxes on Bali.

Bhaga

Bhaga was the next source of revenue in ancient Indian society. Bhaga has been interpreted as octroi duty or land tax by some scholars, and for some of them, it meant the share or portion of the produce payable to the state. Harshavardhana period prescribed three distinct rates, viz., 1/6, 1/8 and 1/10. The commentator Haradatta takes these rates to apply to different types of lands. This shows quality of land was an important consideration in assessing land revenue.

The word bhaga first occurs in the Arthashastra. Khirasvamin, the 12th-century commentator of the Amarakosha also quotes the view of the Arthashastra to define Bhaga as the king's 1/6th share of produce. Apart from bhaga, there were other contributions paid by the cultivators. The occurrence of the term 'sakarukarosadeyameyo' i.e. taxes ordinary and extraordinary with its income fixed or proportional' in the Karle Buddhist cave inscription of the time of VasishthiputraPulumavi bears witness to the existence of taxes other than bhaga.

Kara

The other important source of state revenue in ancient India was called Kara. The term Kara does not figure in Vedic literature. Kara usually meant a general land tax, as well as movables. Differentiating between the terms, Sharma surmises that Bali stands for voluntary offering, religious or otherwise; the term Bhaga shows that the king was entitled to his share and the term Kara shows that he collected taxes from the people. At all times the basic tax was that on-land, usually called Bhaga or share, which was a fixed proportion of the drop.

Shulka

Shulka was also one of the main sources of revenue in ancient India. Apte defines it as a toll tax, a customs duty particularly levied at ferries, passes, roads, etc.

Internal Trade and Routes

Harshavardhana empire was vast, covering present-day India, Nepal, and parts of Pakistan. Internal trade in his kingdom was carried out through a well-organized network of roads, waterways, and ports. The main commodities traded were textiles, spices, perfumes, precious stones, and metals. Harsha's empire had a well-developed system of internal trade and commerce. The most important internal trade routes were the Ganges and Yamuna rivers, which provided easy transportation for goods and people. The riverine network was supplemented by an extensive road network that linked major cities and towns across the empire. Internal trade during Harsha's reign was primarily conducted through markets and fairs.

These markets were known as "Hatthas" or "bazaars" and were held at regular intervals in different parts of the country. These markets were important centers of trade where merchants from different regions would come to sell their goods. Harsha's government encouraged trade and commerce by providing incentives and protection to merchants. The emperor himself was known to be a patron of the arts and a generous supporter of trade and commerce. The city of Kannauj, which was the capital of Harsha's empire, became a major center of trade and commerce during his reign. Other important trading centers included Mathura, Varanasi, and Ujjain.

The Trans-Himalayan Trade Route: The Trans-Himalayan Trade Route was another significant trade route during the HarshaVardhana period. This route connected India with Tibet and was mainly used to trade wool, salt, and other commodities. Harsha maintained friendly relations with the Tibetan ruler, and this led to an increase in trade between the two regions. The rivers in

Harsha's kingdom were also used for transportation, and boats were used to transport goods and people along the Ganges, Yamuna, and other rivers.

External Trade Routes

Harshavardhan's kingdom had extensive trade relations with neighboring countries and beyond. The external trade was primarily carried out through the ports located on the eastern and western coasts of India. The major trading partners were China, Tibet, Persia, Arabia, and the Roman Empire. Harsha's empire was also connected to the wider world through its external trade routes. The most important external trade route was the Silk Road, which connected China with the Mediterranean world. Harsha's empire was located at the eastern end of the Silk Road and therefore was well-positioned to benefit from the trade and commerce that flowed along this route. The trade with Persia and Arabia was in spices, perfumes, and precious stones. These trade links were facilitated by the extensive network of ports and harbors that existed along the coast of the Indian Ocean. The trade routes with China and Tibet were through the Silk Road, which started from present-day Xinjiang in China and passed through Central Asia and Tibet before reaching India. Indian merchants traded spices, textiles, and precious stones with these countries, and the Indian Ocean was an important source of pearls, which were highly valued in the markets of the time.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Indian history has earlier been written only on the ruling class, but at present, the concept of history has changed a lot in practice. Now history is not merely a description of the activities of kings but has become associated with the field of work of the common man and his social development. By studying the economic situation during the Harsh period, it becomes known that after the Gupta period, Harsh Vardhan played an important role in the ancient history of North India. Because after Harsha (647 AD), there was a change in the politics of North India, which affected the religious and economic conditions of all sections of the society. Harsha's time was very important from the point of view of Indian history.

References :

1. Aggarwal, V.S, India as known to Panini, Lucknow, 1953
2. Khare, Amitava, Economic and Social History of Ancient India, Delhi, 1986
3. Satyaketu, Vidhalankar, Early Middle Ages Rajput Period of Indian History, New Delhi, 2011
4. Goyal S.R, HarshaShiladitya, Meerut, 1987.
5. Thapar, Romila, History of India, New Delhi, 1975
6. Thakur, V.K. Urbanization in Ancient India, New Delhi, 1981. 9. Watters: On Yuan Chwangs Travel in India, 1904.
7. Jha D.N, Feudal-social formation in ancient India, Delhi, 1987.
8. Prakash, Om, Economic and Food in Ancient India, Delhi, 1987