UNIT 5: SOCIETY, ECONOMY, RELEGION AND ART IN THE MAURYAN EMPIRE

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5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

After going through this unit, you will be able to-

- discuss the social and economic life in the Mauryan Empire,
- analyse the religious condition in the Mauryan Empire,
- trace the cultural development in the Mauryan Empire.

5.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit we have already discussed the rise and fall of the Mauryan Empire with particular emphasis on King Asoka, the greatest Mauryan king. You have learnt about the political condition of India and the related developments that led to the foundation of the great Mauryan Empire. In this unit we will deal with the socio-economic and cultural and religious aspects of the empire that enable you to learn about the most significant role played by the great Mauryan Kings like Chandragupta and Asoka in the ancient history of India. The following sections will provide comprehensive

understanding of the Indian society in ancient times in its different dimensions.

5.3 SOCIETY AND ECONOMY IN THE MAURYAN EMPIRE

In this section we are going to deal with the society and economy of the Mauryan period. Without discussing the social and economic condition of India during the Mauryan period, our study about the Mauryan Empire will not be a complete one.

5.3.1 Mauryan Society

In the Mauryan period, the social organisation based on ***Varna*** and ***Ashrama*** which had begun in the Vedic age, reached a definite stage. In this period the Brahmanas regained their lost position in the society. Megasthenes divides the Mauryan society into seven divisions - philosophers, farmers, herdsman, artisans, soldiers, magistrate and councillors. They have been interpreted as castes because no one was allowed to marry outside his own division or change his profession. Let us discuss them in detail-

The philosophers consisted of Brahmanas and Shramanas. The Shramanas included ascetics, monks and the followers of various sects. The philosophers did not pay tax. The farmers included the land owners, the Shudra cultivators and the labourers working on the land. The herdsmen were probably the pastoralists who comprised a significant section in the Mauryan population. The status of the artisans depended on his particular craft. For instance, metal workers were given a higher status than the weavers and potters. The soldiers were the largest class in the society. Besides Kshatriyas, lower castes were also appointed as infantry men, charioteers and attendants. Magistrates and councillors were an important part of the administrative system and were appointed either from the Brahmanas or the Kshatriyas. However, the social

compositions as suggested by Megasthenes might not be as simple because if we consider Brahmanical texts and Buddhist texts, we find different views regarding the caste division.

In the Mauryan Empire, women were employed in various activities. They were appointed as king's body guards, spies and performers. Poor and widowed upper caste women, deserted wives and ageing prostitutes were provided with some work. We also have instances of a few female ascetics. Kautilya insisted that tax should be collected from the prostitutes, it suggests that they were large in number in the Empire. From the textual sources it can be assumed that the majority of women had to follow the wishes of the men in their family in a patriarchal society.

5.3.2 Mauryan Economy

The Mauryan economy was mainly dependant on agriculture. A large part of the government income came from land revenue. Therefore, importance was given on efficient collection of revenue. The farmers or landowners had to pay a variety of taxes to the state. Gradually, private ownership of land was allowed. A vast area of wasteland and crown lands was cultivated under the supervision of the state. From the account of Megasthenes we come to know that it was the responsibility of the state to clear new areas or deserted land and to settle the shudra cultivators. These cultivators were initially exempted from paying tax, but once they started working on the land, a tax was imposed.

There were two types of land revenue. The first one was rent for the use of land and the second was based on the assessment of the produce. The assessment varied according to local condition or the productivity of the soil. The sources mention a range from one sixth to a quarter of the produce of the land. We find mention about different types of taxes. One such was ***Pindakara*** which was collected jointly from a village. Pastoralists also had to pay tax on the number of animals and also on their produce. One

unique kind of tax was *Visthi* which was paid in the form of free labour to the state. Taxes were also levied for providing irrigation.

Besides agriculture, craft and trade were also two important economic activities of the Mauryan Empire. Some artisans were employed by the state and they were exempted from tax. Armourers and shipbuilders came under this category. Others, who worked in state workshop, had to pay taxes. The rest of the artisans worked either individually or as part of a guild called *Shreni* or *Puga*. These associations helped the state in tax collection.

The state controlled trade and industry. The working of mines and forests, the construction and security of trade-routes and the establishment of market towns were all under the state. It also supervised the sale of goods and the superintendent of commerce fixed the prices of the goods. Merchants had to pay a toll tax which was one-fifth of the value of the goods. In addition, there was a trade tax of one-fifth of the toll. Merchants were forbidden to make excessive profits. The collection of revenue from commercial sources was varied according to Mauryan control over an area or a route.

We also find the mention of organized money lending. Money could be given as loan from the treasury on interest of 15 percent per annum. However, in less secure transactions like long sea voyages the interest rate could be higher.

The remains of the urban centres which belonged to the Mauryan period suggest that the standard of living was high. Brick, stone and wooden buildings were found during excavation. The discovery of a large number of iron goods suggests extensive use of iron in this period. The distribution of ***Northern Black Polished Ware*** as far as South India is an indication of the expansion of trade.

It was possible that the punch-marked silver coins were the imperial currency of the Mauryas. Most of the punch-marked coins discovered have the symbols like crescent-on-arches or hills, the tree-in-railing, the sun symbol and the circle with six arrows like

extension. These coins were used for collection of taxes and payment of officers.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1: Name the seven divisions of the Mauryan society.

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Q. 2: Who were Shramanas?

. . . . . .

Q.3: Who formed the largest class in the Mauryan society?

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Q.4: Name the two types of land revenue.

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Q.5: Who controlled trade and industry?

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Q.6: What was the standard of living in the Mauryan period?

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Q.7: Choose the correct answer:

a) Magistrate and councillors were appointed from

i) Brahmanas or Kshatriyas ii) Kshatriyas or Vaishyas,

iii) Vaishyas or Brahmanas iv) Vaishyas or Shudras.

b) The currency of the Mauryan period was

i) Copper coins ii) Punch marked silver coin

iii) Round shape gold coins iv) none of the above

5.4 RELIGION AND CULTURE

Religion and culture constituted an important part of the life of the people in the Mauryan period. We are now going to study in this section the religious condition and cultural development of India in the Mauryan period.

5.4.1 Religious Condition of the Mauryan Empire

Several religious sects existed in the Mauryan period. Brahmanism was an important religion during the Mauryan period. Along with this, Buddhism and Jainism began to play an important part in the religious life of the people. Some distinct religious sects namely, *Ajivika*, *Shramanas*, and *Nirgrantha* were also followed among some communities. The *Ajivikas* were the ardent followers of Mahavira Swami. They lived like the naked saints. The *Shramanas* were also the followers of Mahavira Swami. They were content to live on fruits picked up when they dropped on the ground. The *Nirgrantha* were those who had broken the worldly ties.

Among these religions, Buddhism became a predominant religion under the patronage of Asoka. Still Brahmanism continued to prevail in the society. The Vedas did not completely lose its hold on the people. Kautilya praised the Vedic way of life. In the *Arthasastra*, we find reference to the worship of several deities. The worship of the deities consisted of prostration before the idol and offering gifts in the form of flowers and incense.

Several changes were brought about in Brahmanism in the Mauryan period. Krishna, Varuna, Indra, Agni and rivers like the Ganga and Yamuna were worshipped. Many of the devotees abandoned their homes for a life of an ascetic. A new class of religious philosophers called the *Lokayatas* emerged. They were opposed to the priestly class. They maintained that there existed neither paradise, nor the ultimate liberation.

It appears that diverse religious ideas and practices existed in the vast Empire of the Mauryas. While Buddhism flourished remarkably. Brahmanism had retained its position. But Jainism failed to make much progress. Most importantly, religious toleration prevailed in the Mauryan period inspite of there being different religious sects.

5.4.2 Cultural Development of the Mauryan Empire

Under the Mauryas, great progress was made in the field of art and architecture. There were palaces, stupas, pillars, etc during the Mauryan rule. The Mauryan art and architecture mainly developed under Asoka and he is credited for being the patron of the cultural development that took place in the Mauryan period.

The **palaces** made during the time of Asoka were mainly made of stone. They speak of the highly developed art and architecture. Excavations at Pataliputra have discovered the ruins of these buildings. The most wonderful of these is the hundred-pillard hall. The buildings, palaces and the monuments of the time of Chandragupta Maurya were mainly made of wood and had mostly perished away.

Stupas are another great form of Mauryan art. It has beautiful gateways decorated with rich sculpture. They enshrined the relics of Buddha. It is said that Asoka built 84,000 stupas in India and Afghanistan. The stupa at Sanchi is believed to be most prominent among the stupas. Hiuen-Tsang, the Chinese pilgrim, said that Asoka built stupas at many places like Taxila, Kapilavastu, Prayaga, Srinagar, etc.

Figure 5.1: Sanchi Stupa



Source: *Google Images*

Beautiful pillars were also constructed in the Mauryan period during the time of Asoka. The number of Asokan pillars is not definitely known. The pillars were free standing columns and were not used as support to any structure. The pillars were very magnificently polished. The four lions sitting back to back at Sanchi and Sarnath pillars show the high skill of craftsmanship that prevailed in the Mauryan age.

Figure 5.2: Sarnath Pillar



Source: *Google Images*

Rock cut caves were also found of the Mauryan period. The caves were built by cutting the rocks and their walls were polished nicely. The rock cut caves of Asoka and of his grandson Dasaratha constructed for the residence of monks are wonderful specimens of art. The Barabar hill caves, the Nagarjuni hill caves, the Sudama caves, the Karna Chauper cave, etc are the remains of the cave architecture of the Mauryan period.

Figure 5.3: A Rock Cut Cave



Source: *Google Images*

The Mauryan **pottery** consisted of many types of wares. The black polished type found in North India is one of the most beautiful specimens of the Mauryan pottery. It has a burnished and glazed surface.

Jewellery making was also known in the Mauryan period. During the excavation at Taxila, some ornaments of the Asokan period were found. Those ornaments show the artistic skill of the goldsmiths of the Mauryan period.



ACTIVITY - 5.1

Make a list of the stupas and pillars constructed during the Mauryan period.

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CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.8: Fill in the blanks:

a) The Ajivikas were the ardent followers of ..... Swami.

b) ..... were the religious philosophers.

c) Stupas are great form of ..... art.

d) Asoka built 84,000 stupas in .....and .....

Q.9: Write a note within 50 words on the cultural development of the Mauryan Empire.

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5.5 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit you have learnt that-

- In the Mauryan period, the social organisation was based on ***Varna*** and ***Ashrama***. In this period the Brahmanas regained their lost position in the society.
- The philosophers consisted of Brahmanas and Shramanas. The philosophers did not pay tax.
- The farmers included the land owners, the Shudra cultivators and the labourers working on the land.
- In the Mauryan society, women were employed in various activities. They were appointed as king's body guards, spies and performers.
- The Mauryan economy was mainly dependant on agriculture.
- Besides agriculture, craft and trade were also two important economic activities of the Mauryan Empire.
- The state controlled trade and industry.

- In the religious field, Brahminism, Buddhism and Jainism were the main religious sects practiced by the people.
- Tremendous progress was made in the field of art and architecture in the Mauryan period. There were palaces, stupas, pillars, etc. The Mauryan art and architecture mainly developed under Asoka and he is credited of being the patron of the cultural development that took place in the Mauryan period.



5.6 FURTHER READING

1. Majumdar, R.C., Raychaudhuri, H.C., Datta, K. (1986). *An Advanced History of India*. New Delhi, Macmillan India Ltd.
2. Thapar, Romila. (2002). *The Penguin History of Early India from The Origins to A D 1300.* New Delhi, The Penguin Group.
3. Tripathi, Ramashankar. (1999). *History of Ancient India*. Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd.



5.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answer to the Question no.1: Philosophers, Farmers, Herdsman, Artisans, Soldiers, Magistrate and Councillors.

Answer to the Question no.2: Shramanas were ascetics, monks and followers of various sects.

Answer to the Question no.3: Soldiers were the largest class in the Mauryan society.

Answer to the Question no.4: Rent for the use of land and assessment of the produce.

Answer to the Question no.5: The state controlled trade and industry.

Answer to the Question no.6: The standard of living in the Mauryan period was high.

Answer to the Question no.7: a) Brahmanas or Kshatriyas, b) Punch Marked Silver Coin

Answer to the Question no.8: a) Mahavira, b) Lokayatas, c) Mauryan, d) India, and Afghanistan

Answer to the Question no.9: Tremendous progress was made in the field of art and architecture during the Mauryan period. Asoka was the main patron of this cultural development. Many beautiful palaces, stupas, pillars, etc were made in the Mauryan period. Sanchi stupa, Sarnath and Sanchi pillar, Nagarjuni hill caves, etc are some fine specimen of Mauryan art.



5.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) VERY SHORT QUESTIONS (Answer each question in about 50 words)

Q.1: What do you know about *Pindakara?*

Q.2: Who were *Ajivikas?*

Q.3: What was *Visthi?*

Q.4: Into how many divisions did Megasthenes divide the Mauryan society?

B) SHORT QUESTIONS (Answer each question in about 150 words)

Q.1: What was the condition of society in the Mauryan period?

Q 2: Write a note on the religious development in the Mauryan period?

Q.3: Write a short note on the Mauryan Pillars.

C) LONG QUESTIONS (Answer each question in about 300-500 words)

Q.1: Describe the socio-economic condition of the Mauryan period.

Q 2: Describe the economic measures undertaken by the Mauryan rulers. Was their economic policy successful?

Q 3: 'The Mauryan age had a glorious cultural development'. Discuss

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