UNIT 3: PEASANTS, ARTISANS AND WORKERS UNDER THE MAURYA AND GUPTA RULE

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3.1 Learning Objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- Explain the role of peasants in the agricultural economy of the Maurya and Gupta periods.
- Describe the major crafts, occupations, and contributions of artisans and workers.
- Analyze the growth of trade and commerce and its impact on society and economy.
- Examine the land revenue system and its significance in state administration.
- Assess the nature and impact of land grants on agrarian relations and social structure.

3.2 Introduction

The Maurya (c. 322–185 BCE) and Gupta (c. 320–550 CE) periods occupy an important place in Indian history. These empires witnessed significant developments in

agriculture, crafts, trade, administration, and revenue systems. The economy of both periods was primarily agrarian, with peasants forming the backbone of production. Alongside agriculture, artisans and workers contributed to economic prosperity through various crafts and industries. Trade and commerce flourished both within and outside India, leading to urban growth and cultural exchanges. The state derived revenue mainly from land taxes and exercised varying degrees of control over economic activities. The practice of granting land to religious institutions and officials became increasingly significant, particularly during the Gupta period.

3.3 Peasants and Agriculture

Agriculture formed the foundation of the economy during both the Maurya and Gupta periods. The majority of the population lived in villages and depended directly or indirectly on farming for their livelihood. Agricultural production not only sustained the rural population but also generated the surplus necessary for the functioning of the state, the maintenance of armies, the growth of towns, and the development of trade and commerce. The prosperity and stability of both empires were therefore closely linked to the condition of the peasantry and the productivity of agriculture.

- **Agriculture under the Mauryas**

The Mauryan Empire (c. 322–185 BCE) was the first large-scale political empire in the Indian subcontinent. The rulers of this empire understood that a strong agricultural base was essential for maintaining administrative efficiency and political stability. Consequently, the Mauryan state adopted several measures to promote cultivation, improve irrigation, and ensure the collection of agricultural revenue.

State Supervision of Agriculture

One of the distinctive features of Mauryan agriculture was the active involvement of the state in agricultural management. The *Arthashastra*, attributed to Kautilya (also known as Chanakya), provides detailed information about agricultural administration. It mentions a number of officials responsible for supervising agricultural activities, maintaining records of land, assessing crop yields, and ensuring the proper collection of taxes.

The **Sitadhyaksha** (Superintendent of Agriculture) was responsible for overseeing cultivation, distributing seeds, organizing labour, and encouraging the cultivation of uncultivated lands. The state also undertook surveys of agricultural land and maintained records of ownership and productivity. Such measures enabled the government to estimate revenue accurately and regulate agricultural production.

Irrigation and Water Management

The Mauryan rulers recognized the importance of irrigation for agricultural prosperity, especially in regions where rainfall was uncertain. The state invested in the construction and maintenance of irrigation works such as canals, reservoirs, embankments, wells, and tanks.

One of the most famous examples of Mauryan irrigation was the **Sudarshana Lake**, constructed in present-day Gujarat during the reign of Chandragupta Maurya and later improved under subsequent rulers. This reservoir supplied water to agricultural fields and contributed significantly to local economic development.

The *Arthashastra* also refers to regulations regarding the use of water resources and penalties for damaging irrigation facilities. These measures demonstrate the state's concern for ensuring a reliable water supply for agriculture.

Expansion of Cultivation

Agricultural expansion was encouraged through the reclamation of wastelands and the clearing of forests. Newly cultivated lands increased food production and enhanced state revenue. The government often settled cultivators in newly opened areas and provided incentives to encourage agricultural development.

The expansion of cultivation was particularly important in regions along river valleys and fertile plains. The growth of agricultural production supported the increasing population and contributed to the economic strength of the empire.

State-Owned Lands

The Mauryan state possessed extensive tracts of land that were directly controlled by the government. These lands were cultivated by hired labourers, slaves, prisoners of war, and other dependent workers. Produce from such lands was deposited directly into the royal treasury and constituted an important source of state income.

State ownership of land enabled the government to maintain a stable revenue base and ensure food supplies during periods of scarcity. It also reflected the centralized character of Mauryan administration.

Major Crops and Agricultural Techniques

The fertile alluvial soils of the Indo-Gangetic plains supported the cultivation of a variety of crops. Important crops included:

- Rice
- Wheat
- Barley
- Millets
- Pulses
- Sugarcane
- Oilseeds
- Fruits and vegetables

Farmers used iron tools such as ploughshares, sickles, axes, and hoes, which improved agricultural efficiency. The widespread use of iron technology facilitated the clearing of forests and the cultivation of larger areas.

Condition of Peasants

Peasants constituted the largest productive group in Mauryan society. Most cultivators were free peasants who possessed customary rights over the land they cultivated. However, different categories of agricultural workers existed, including tenants, sharecroppers, hired labourers, and bonded workers.

Peasants were required to pay taxes, usually in the form of a share of agricultural produce. The most important tax was the **Bhaga**, generally fixed at one-sixth of the produce. Despite the burden of taxation, the Mauryan state appears to have taken measures to protect agricultural production. During times of natural calamity such as floods, droughts, or famines, tax relief could be granted.

The Greek ambassador Megasthenes observed that Indian peasants often continued agricultural activities even during periods of warfare, indicating the importance attached to cultivation and the relative protection extended to agricultural communities.

- **Agriculture under the Guptas**

The Gupta period (c. 320–550 CE) is often regarded as a period of economic prosperity and cultural achievement. Agriculture continued to be the principal occupation of the population and remained the primary source of state revenue. However, important changes occurred in agrarian relations, land ownership, and revenue administration during this period.

Agricultural Expansion and Settlement

The Gupta rulers encouraged the extension of cultivation into new areas. Forest lands, frontier regions, and sparsely populated territories were gradually brought under cultivation. The settlement of new agricultural villages contributed to the expansion of the agrarian economy.

Agricultural growth was supported by population increase and the migration of cultivators into newly developed regions. As cultivation expanded, more villages emerged as centres of economic production and local administration.

Growth of Private Land Ownership

Unlike the Mauryan period, where state control over land was relatively strong, the Gupta period witnessed the increasing importance of private landownership. Land could be bought, sold, inherited, and donated. Inscriptions from the period provide evidence of private individuals possessing and transferring land.

This development contributed to the emergence of a more complex agrarian structure involving landlords, tenants, and dependent cultivators. Wealthy landholders acquired greater influence in rural society.

Irrigation and Agricultural Technology

Agriculture continued to depend heavily on irrigation. Wells, tanks, canals, reservoirs, and embankments remained important sources of water supply. Local communities, religious institutions, and wealthy individuals often participated in the construction and maintenance of irrigation works.

The continued use of iron agricultural implements improved productivity. Better irrigation and farming techniques enabled farmers to cultivate multiple crops in some regions.

Major Crops

The Gupta period witnessed the cultivation of a wide range of crops, including:

- Rice
- Wheat
- Barley
- Millets
- Pulses
- Cotton
- Sugarcane
- Oilseeds
- Spices
- Fruits and vegetables

Cotton cultivation expanded significantly, contributing to the growth of the textile industry and commercial activities.

Rise of Land Grants and New Agrarian Relations

One of the most significant developments of the Gupta period was the increasing practice of **land grants**. Kings granted villages or agricultural lands to Brahmins, temples, monasteries, and government officials. These grants often included not only the land but also the rights to collect taxes and exercise administrative authority over the local population.

As a result, new intermediaries emerged between the state and the peasantry. The beneficiaries of land grants enjoyed considerable control over cultivators and local resources. This process gradually reduced the direct involvement of the central state in village administration.

Increasing Burden on Peasants

The position of peasants underwent important changes during the Gupta period. While many cultivators continued to enjoy access to land, they increasingly came under the authority of landlords and grantees rather than the state directly.

Peasants were required to pay various taxes, rents, and cesses. In addition, they were often compelled to provide **Vishti** (forced labour) for public works, transportation, agricultural activities, and services demanded by local authorities.

Land grant inscriptions frequently transferred labour obligations along with land rights. Consequently, peasants became increasingly dependent on landholders and religious beneficiaries. Some historians view this development as an early stage in the emergence of a feudal agrarian order in India.

Agriculture remained the backbone of the Gupta economy and supported urban centres, trade networks, religious institutions, and royal administration. However, the growing influence of landlords and land grantees transformed agrarian relations and altered the balance between cultivators and political authority.The increasing dependence of peasants, coupled with the expansion of land grants, contributed to significant socio-economic changes that would shape the character of early medieval Indian society.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.1: Which text provides information about Mauryan agricultural administration?
Q.2: Name the famous irrigation reservoir constructed during the Mauryan period.
Q.3: What was the term used for forced labour during the Gupta period?
Q.4: Which crop was cultivated during the Gupta period in addition to rice, wheat, and barley?

3.4 Crafts and Artisans

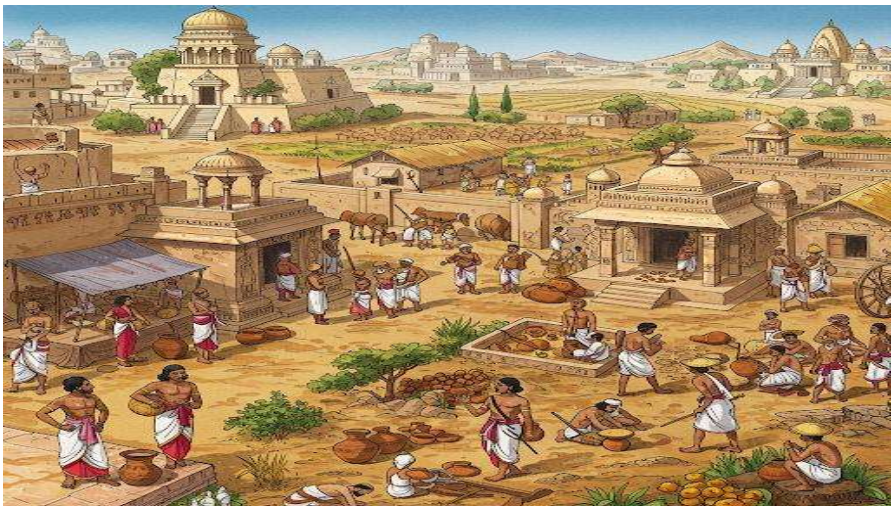
Craft production was one of the most important sectors of the economy during the Maurya and Gupta periods. Alongside agriculture, various industries and crafts contributed significantly to economic prosperity, urban growth, and commercial expansion. Artisans transformed raw materials into finished products that were used in everyday life, religious activities, and long-distance trade. The development of specialized crafts also encouraged the growth of towns and markets, creating employment opportunities for large sections of the population.

The increasing complexity of craft production led to the emergence of organized associations of artisans known as guilds (Shrenis), which played a crucial role in regulating economic activities and protecting the interests of craftsmen.

• Crafts under the Mauryas

The Mauryan Empire witnessed remarkable growth in industries and crafts. The large territorial extent of the empire, political stability, and efficient administration created favourable conditions for the development of manufacturing activities. The state recognized the importance of artisans and exercised supervision over several industries to ensure quality production and adequate revenue.The *Arthashastra* provides valuable information regarding various occupations, industrial regulations, and

state control over economic activities. It mentions officials responsible for supervising mines, forests, textiles, metals, and trade.



- **Textile Weaving**

Textile production was one of the most important industries of the Mauryan period. Cotton textiles were widely produced and used by different sections of society. Weavers manufactured cloth of varying quality, ranging from simple fabrics for common people to fine textiles for the wealthy classes.Important centres of textile production existed in different regions of the empire. Besides cotton, fabrics made from wool, silk, and plant fibres were also produced. Women played an important role in spinning and weaving activities, often working within household industries.Textiles constituted an important item of internal and external trade and contributed significantly to the economy.

- **Metalworking**

Metalworking was a highly developed craft during the Mauryan period. Skilled artisans worked with various metals such as iron, copper, bronze, silver, gold. Iron technology had advanced considerably by this time and was widely used for manufacturing agricultural tools, weapons, household utensils, and construction materials.The state exercised control over mining and metallurgy through specialized officials. Metalworkers produced swords, spears, axes, ploughshares, and numerous other implements essential for agriculture, warfare, and daily life.The famous polished stone pillars erected during the reign of Ashoka demonstrate the high level of technical expertise possessed by Mauryan craftsmen.

- **Pottery**

Pottery was another important craft industry. Potters manufactured a wide variety of ceramic goods required by both urban and rural populations.The most famous pottery type associated with this period is the Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW), known for its smooth surface and glossy finish. Such pottery was used by wealthy sections of

society and is considered an indicator of urban prosperity.Potters also produced: storage jars, cooking vessels, water pots, bowls and dishes, ritual objects etc. The widespread use of pottery reflects the growth of trade and urbanization during the Mauryan period.

Carpentry and Woodwork

Carpentry occupied a significant place in the Mauryan economy. Wood was extensively used in the construction of houses, palaces, gateways, carts, boats, furniture, and agricultural implements.The city of Pataliputra, the Mauryan capital, contained many wooden structures. Skilled carpenters were employed in both public and private construction projects.Woodworkers also manufactured:chariots, carts, furniture, agricultural tools and boats for river transport.

- **Stone Carving and Sculpture**

The Mauryan period marks a major development in stone architecture and sculpture. Stone cutters and sculptors displayed remarkable artistic and technical skills.

The best examples include:

- Ashokan pillars
- Rock-cut inscriptions
- Animal capitals
- Stone railings and monuments

The famous Lion Capital of Sarnath, which later became the national emblem of India, reflects the sophistication of Mauryan craftsmanship.

- **Jewellery Making**

Jewellery production was a highly specialized occupation. Goldsmiths, silversmiths, bead makers, and gem cutters manufactured ornaments for both men and women.Common ornaments included:Necklaces, Earrings, Bracelets, Anklets ,Rings, Decorative beads etc.Jewellery was made from gold, silver, ivory, precious stones, pearls, and semi-precious gems. The demand for luxury goods among the nobility, merchants, and urban elites encouraged the growth of this industry.

- **Guilds (Shrenis)**

One of the most important features of Mauryan craft production was the organization of artisans into guilds known as **Shrenis**.A guild was an association of individuals engaged in the same occupation or craft. Guilds functioned as economic, social, and sometimes even religious institutions.Guilds established rules regarding methods of production, quality standards, and professional conduct. These regulations helped maintain the reputation of craftsmen and ensured consistency in manufactured

goods.Guilds safeguarded the interests of their members by resolving disputes, providing assistance during hardships, and protecting craftsmen from unfair competition.Guilds often regulated prices of products and wages of workers. This contributed to stability within the craft sector and prevented excessive competition among artisans.Many guilds functioned as financial institutions. They accepted deposits, provided loans, and financed commercial ventures. Wealthy merchants and donors sometimes deposited funds with guilds, the interest from which was used for religious and charitable purposes.Guilds enjoyed legal recognition from the state. They possessed corporate identities and could own property, enter into contracts, and represent their members in legal matters.

Through these activities, guilds became important institutions in the economic life of ancient India.

3.3.2 Crafts during the Gupta Period

The Gupta periodwitnessed continued growth in craft production. Economic prosperity, expanding trade networks, and urban development encouraged the specialization of industries. Many crafts attained a high degree of artistic excellence during this period, often referred to as a "Golden Age" of Indian culture.Although agriculture remained the dominant economic activity, manufacturing industries played an important role in generating wealth and supporting commercial activities.

- **Silk Weaving**

Silk weaving emerged as one of the most prestigious industries of the Gupta period. Silk textiles were highly valued and were often used by the wealthy classes and members of royal courts.The famous Mandasor inscription refers to a guild of silk weavers, indicating the organization and importance of this industry. Silk fabrics were not only consumed domestically but also traded over long distances.

- **Cotton Textiles**

Cotton weaving remained a major industry. Indian cotton textiles enjoyed a reputation for quality and were exported to various parts of Asia.

Different varieties of cloth were produced for:

- Common people
- Merchants
- Aristocrats
- Religious institutions

The textile industry provided employment to large numbers of spinners, dyers, weavers, and traders.

- **Ivory Carving**

Ivory carving reached a high level of refinement during the Gupta period. Artisans created decorative and luxury objects from elephant tusks.

These included:

- Combs
- Decorative boxes
- Figurines
- Ornaments
- Furniture decorations

Ivory products were prized for their beauty and craftsmanship.

- **Goldsmithing and Jewellery**

The Gupta period is famous for its exquisite gold coins and luxurious ornaments. Goldsmiths produced a variety of jewellery for royal families, nobles, and wealthy merchants.The abundance of gold coinage issued by Gupta rulers reflects the prosperity of the period and the advanced state of metalworking techniques.

Metal Casting

Metalworkers excelled in casting bronze and copper images of deities and religious figures. They employed sophisticated techniques to create durable and aesthetically pleasing sculptures.One of the finest achievements of Gupta metallurgy is the *Iron Pillar of Delhi*, which demonstrates remarkable resistance to corrosion and reflects the advanced knowledge of iron technology possessed by Indian craftsmen.

- **Sculpture and Temple Architecture**

The Gupta age witnessed extraordinary achievements in sculpture and architecture. Skilled artisans produced elegant images of Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain deities.Temple construction increased significantly during this period. Stone masons, sculptors, architects, and craftsmen collaborated to create some of the earliest structural temples in India.These artistic developments reveal the growing demand for skilled labour and specialized craftsmanship.

- **Guilds during the Gupta Period**

Guilds continued to flourish and became even more influential than before.

They:

- Controlled production and trade.
- Managed collective resources.
- Financed religious institutions.

- Received donations from kings and merchants.
- Functioned as banks and investment agencies.

Guild inscriptions indicate that guilds accumulated considerable wealth and exercised substantial influence in urban economic life.

- **Workers and Labour**

Workers constituted an indispensable part of the economic structure during the Maurya and Gupta periods. While agriculture remained the primary occupation of the majority of the population, the functioning of the economy depended on the labour of numerous groups engaged in farming, craft production, construction, trade-related activities, domestic service, and state administration. Workers provided the manpower necessary for cultivating fields, producing goods, building infrastructure, and maintaining the administrative machinery of the state. Their labour generated the agricultural surplus and manufactured products that supported urban centres, commercial networks, and political institutions. The available literary sources, inscriptions, and archaeological evidence indicate the existence of diverse categories of workers with varying social and economic positions.

Agricultural labourers formed the largest section of the workforce. They were employed in ploughing, sowing, weeding, irrigating, harvesting, and processing crops. Some worked on their own small plots of land, while others were hired by wealthy landowners, religious institutions, or the state. Agricultural labour was particularly important during peak farming seasons, when additional manpower was required for cultivation and harvesting. Alongside cultivators, tenants, sharecroppers, and landless labourers played a crucial role in sustaining agricultural production. Since agriculture was the backbone of the economy, the livelihood of a large proportion of the population depended directly on agricultural labour.

Another important category consisted of craft workers and artisans who were engaged in the production of various goods. These included weavers, potters, carpenters, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, stone-cutters, ivory carvers, leather workers, and metalworkers. They transformed raw materials into finished products that met the needs of both rural and urban populations. Craft workers were often organized into guilds (*Shrenis*), which regulated production, maintained standards of quality, and protected the interests of members. The growth of towns and trade during the Maurya and Gupta periods created an increasing demand for manufactured goods, thereby enhancing the importance of skilled artisans in the economy.

Construction workers also occupied a significant position in society. The development of roads, bridges, irrigation works, palaces, temples, fortifications, and public buildings required the services of architects, masons, carpenters, stone-cutters, and ordinary labourers. Large-scale construction projects undertaken by the state not only improved communication and agricultural productivity but also provided employment to a considerable number of workers. The construction of irrigation facilities such as reservoirs, tanks, embankments, and canals was particularly important for supporting agricultural expansion and ensuring food security.

Domestic servants formed another section of the labour force. They worked in the households of kings, nobles, wealthy merchants, officials, and other affluent families. Their duties included cooking, cleaning, childcare, maintenance of household property, and personal assistance to employers. Domestic service provided employment to many individuals who lacked access to land or specialized skills. Although their social status was generally lower than that of landowners and merchants, domestic servants contributed significantly to the functioning of elite households.

The state itself employed a large number of workers for administrative and public purposes. These included clerks, record keepers, tax collectors, messengers, guards, artisans employed in royal workshops, irrigation workers, and labourers engaged in public works. State employees ensured the efficient functioning of government departments and helped implement policies related to revenue collection, law enforcement, transportation, and economic regulation. In large empires such as the Mauryan Empire, the administration required an extensive workforce to maintain control over vast territories.

Another important category consisted of slaves and bonded labourers. Although slavery in ancient India differed from the large-scale slave systems of the ancient Mediterranean world, various forms of servitude existed. Slaves could be acquired through birth, purchase, war captivity, debt, or other circumstances. They were employed in domestic service, agriculture, and state enterprises. Bonded labourers often worked under obligations arising from debt or dependence on powerful landowners. Their economic and social freedom was limited, and they occupied a lower position within the labour hierarchy.

During the **Mauryan period**, the state played an active role in organizing and employing labour. The centralized administration supervised numerous economic activities and directly controlled sectors such as mining, forestry, agriculture, and public construction. Labourers were employed on state farms, in mines, and in workshops producing goods for the royal administration. Large numbers of workers participated in the construction of roads, irrigation systems, fortifications, and public buildings. The *Arthashastra* provides evidence of state regulation of labour, wages, and working conditions, indicating the importance attached to productive labour in the Mauryan economy. Government-sponsored projects not only generated revenue but also facilitated agricultural and commercial development throughout the empire.

The **Gupta period** witnessed important changes in labour relations due to the increasing prevalence of land grants. Kings frequently granted villages and agricultural lands to Brahmins, temples, monasteries, and government officials. These grants often included not only rights over land but also rights over the peasants and labourers residing within the granted territory. As a result, cultivators and workers increasingly came under the authority of local grantees rather than the central state. Many inscriptions indicate that land grants transferred fiscal and administrative rights along with obligations owed by local inhabitants.

One of the most significant developments during this period was the increasing practice of **Vishti** or forced labour. Peasants and labourers were often required to

perform unpaid services for local authorities, landlords, or beneficiaries of land grants. Such services could include transportation of goods, maintenance of roads and irrigation facilities, agricultural work, and assistance during official activities. The growing burden of labour obligations reflected the strengthening of local landed interests and the gradual decline of direct state control over rural society.

The attachment of labour obligations to land grants also led to greater dependence of peasants and workers on local landholders. In some cases, entire villages, along with their inhabitants, were transferred to the beneficiaries of grants. Consequently, cultivators became increasingly subject to the authority of landlords, Brahmins, and religious institutions. Historians have viewed these developments as important indicators of changing agrarian relations and the emergence of more hierarchical social structures during the later Gupta and post-Gupta periods.

Thus, workers and labourers played a vital role in sustaining the economy of both the Maurya and Gupta empires. Whether engaged in agriculture, craft production, construction, domestic service, or public administration, their labour formed the basis of economic prosperity and state power. While the Mauryan period was characterized by significant state involvement in the organization of labour, the Gupta period witnessed increasing control of labour by local landholders and grantees. These changes had far-reaching consequences for the social and economic history of ancient India.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.5: What were the artisan guilds called in ancient India?

Q.6:Which type of pottery is associated with the Mauryan period?

Q.7: Name one important textile industry of the Gupta period.

Q.8: Which famous structure demonstrates the advanced metallurgical skills of the Gupta period?

Q.9: What was the main function of guilds (Shrenis)?

3.5 Trade and Commerce

Trade and commerce constituted an important component of the economy during both the Maurya and Gupta periods. The growth of agriculture, the expansion of craft production, and the emergence of urban centres created favourable conditions for the development of internal and external trade. Agricultural surplus produced by peasants and manufactured goods produced by artisans generated commodities for exchange, while improved transportation networks facilitated the movement of goods across regions. Trade not only contributed to economic prosperity but also encouraged urbanization, generated state revenue, and promoted cultural interactions between different parts of India and the wider world. Merchants, traders, guilds, and transport

workers played a vital role in connecting producers with consumers and integrating regional economies.

Trade and Commerce under the Mauryas

The Mauryan Empire (c. 322–185 BCE) witnessed significant growth in trade owing to political unification, administrative efficiency, and improved communication networks. The establishment of a large empire under Chandragupta Maurya created conditions of peace and security that encouraged commercial activities across vast territories. The state actively promoted trade and maintained strict supervision over markets, trade routes, and commercial transactions.

One of the most important factors contributing to the expansion of trade was the development of an extensive network of roads connecting major cities, administrative centres, and commercial hubs. The famous royal highways linked the imperial capital Pataliputra with distant regions such as Taxila in the northwest and ports in eastern and southern India. These roads facilitated the movement of merchants, goods, officials, and travellers. Rest houses, wells, and other facilities along trade routes further supported commercial activities.

The Mauryan state regulated trade through specialized officials who supervised markets, controlled prices, standardized weights and measures, and ensured the collection of taxes. The *Arthashastra* provides detailed information regarding commercial regulations and emphasizes the state's role in preventing fraud and maintaining fair trade practices. Taxes were imposed on goods transported within the empire, while customs duties were collected at important commercial centres and border points. Such regulations not only generated revenue for the state but also contributed to the orderly functioning of markets.

Trade flourished both within the empire and beyond its boundaries. Major trade routes connected northern India with Central Asia, facilitating exchanges with regions to the northwest. Commercial links also extended to the Deccan and coastal areas of the subcontinent. Urban centres such as Pataliputra, Taxila, Ujjain, and Tamralipti emerged as important centres of trade and distribution.

India exported a variety of goods that were highly valued in foreign markets. These included fine textiles, spices, precious and semi-precious stones, ivory products, perfumes, and luxury handicrafts. Indian artisans were renowned for their craftsmanship, and their products found markets beyond the subcontinent. In return, merchants imported horses from Central Asia, luxury goods from foreign lands, and various metals required for manufacturing and military purposes. The exchange of goods contributed to economic prosperity and strengthened connections between India and neighbouring regions.

Trade and Commerce under the Guptas

Trade continued to flourish during the Gupta period (c. 320–550 CE), which is often regarded as a period of economic prosperity and cultural achievement.

Agricultural expansion, flourishing industries, and political stability created favourable conditions for commercial growth. Although some historians have debated the extent of urban decline during this period, evidence suggests that both inland and overseas trade remained important components of the economy.

Indian merchants maintained extensive commercial contacts with regions across Asia and beyond. Trade links with Southeast Asia became particularly significant during this period, leading to the exchange of goods, ideas, and cultural influences. Commercial relations were also maintained with China through overland and maritime routes. Furthermore, Indian products reached regions around the Mediterranean through intermediary trading networks, demonstrating the wide geographical reach of Gupta commerce.

Maritime trade assumed increasing importance during the Gupta period. Ports located on the eastern and western coasts of India served as centres of international trade. Merchant ships carried textiles, spices, ivory products, precious stones, metal goods, and other commodities to foreign markets. In return, India received luxury goods, horses, silk, and other valuable products from overseas regions. Coastal trade also connected different parts of the subcontinent and contributed to the growth of port towns and urban centres.

Guilds (*Shrenis*) played a particularly important role in commercial activities during the Gupta period. Merchant and artisan guilds organized production, facilitated trade, and protected the interests of their members. Many guilds accumulated considerable wealth and functioned as financial institutions. They accepted deposits, provided loans, financed commercial ventures, and supported religious and charitable activities. In this respect, guilds performed functions similar to those of modern banking institutions and contributed significantly to the development of commerce.

The widespread circulation of gold coins issued by Gupta rulers provides important evidence of economic prosperity and commercial activity. Gupta gold coins, known for their artistic excellence and purity, facilitated long-distance trade and monetary transactions. The extensive use of coinage indicates a vibrant economy in which merchants and traders played an increasingly important role.

3.6 Land Revenue System

The land revenue system formed the backbone of the economy during both the Maurya and Gupta periods. Since agriculture was the principal occupation of the majority of the population, the state depended heavily on taxes collected from agricultural production for its income. Land revenue financed the functioning of the administration, maintenance of the army, construction of public works, and other activities necessary for the stability and prosperity of the empire. The organization of revenue collection, therefore, occupied a central place in state administration and reflected the relationship between the ruling authority and the agrarian population.

Land Revenue System under the Mauryas

The Mauryan Empire (c. 322–185 BCE) developed one of the most organized and centralized systems of revenue administration in ancient India. The Mauryan rulers recognized that a stable and efficient taxation system was essential for maintaining a vast empire. Consequently, the state exercised close supervision over agricultural production, land assessment, and tax collection. The *Arthashastra*, attributed to Kautilya, provides detailed information about the principles and practices of Mauryan revenue administration.

According to the *Arthashastra*, the king was entitled to a share of agricultural produce known as **Bhaga**, which generally amounted to one-sixth of the produce, although the rate could vary depending on local conditions, fertility of land, availability of irrigation, and other circumstances. In times of emergency or special necessity, the state could impose additional levies, while tax concessions might be granted during natural calamities such as floods, droughts, or crop failures.

To ensure effective revenue collection, the Mauryan administration appointed numerous officials responsible for surveying land, assessing productivity, and maintaining records. Detailed measurements of cultivated land were conducted to determine the amount of tax payable by cultivators. Officials kept systematic records of land ownership, crop production, and revenue obligations. Such administrative efficiency enabled the state to maximize revenue while maintaining control over agricultural resources.

The Mauryan government also derived income from sources other than agriculture. Taxes and duties were imposed on trade, crafts, mines, forests, fisheries, and various economic activities. State control over mines and forests generated substantial revenue, while customs duties and market taxes contributed significantly to the treasury. The centralized nature of Mauryan administration ensured that revenue from these diverse sources flowed directly to the state.

The substantial income generated through land revenue enabled the Mauryan rulers to maintain a large standing army, support an extensive bureaucracy, construct roads and irrigation facilities, and undertake public welfare measures. Thus, the revenue system played a crucial role in sustaining the political and economic strength of the empire.

Land Revenue System under the Guptas

The Gupta rulers (c. 320–550 CE) also relied heavily on land revenue as their principal source of income. Agriculture remained the foundation of the economy, and taxes collected from cultivators continued to finance state activities. However, important changes occurred in revenue administration during this period, reflecting broader transformations in the political and social structure of the empire.

Like the Mauryas, the Guptas imposed taxes on agricultural production, which could be collected either in kind or in cash. The increasing circulation of coinage and

the expansion of commercial activities enabled the use of monetary payments in some regions, though payment in agricultural produce remained common in rural areas. Various taxes, cesses, and levies were imposed on cultivators, contributing significantly to state revenue.

Village communities and local officials played an important role in assessing and collecting taxes. Unlike the highly centralized Mauryan system, the Gupta administration gradually delegated greater authority to local bodies and officials. Village headmen, local assemblies, and administrative officers assisted in maintaining records and ensuring the collection of taxes. This indicates a growing degree of local participation in revenue administration.

A significant feature of the Gupta period was the increasing practice of granting land to Brahmins, temples, religious institutions, and administrative officials. These grants often included the right to collect taxes from the land and its cultivators. As a result, a portion of the revenue that previously went directly to the state was diverted to the beneficiaries of these grants. Consequently, revenue administration became less centralized, and local authorities acquired increasing control over agrarian resources.

The growing influence of local landholders and grantees transformed the relationship between the state and the peasantry. In many areas, cultivators paid taxes not directly to royal officials but to intermediaries who possessed rights over revenue collection. This trend contributed to the gradual decentralization of political and economic authority during the later Gupta period.

Characteristics of the Land Revenue System

Despite differences between the Maurya and Gupta periods, several common features characterized the land revenue system. In both periods, land tax constituted the chief source of state income and formed the financial basis of government administration. Taxes could be paid either in kind, usually as a share of agricultural produce, or in cash depending on local economic conditions. Revenue officials maintained records of land, crops, and tax obligations to facilitate assessment and collection. The income generated from land revenue was utilized for maintaining the administration, supporting military establishments, constructing public works, and promoting economic development. Thus, the land revenue system remained an essential institution that linked agricultural production with state power and governance.

3.7 Land Grants

Land grants emerged as one of the most significant developments in the agrarian history of ancient India. Although the practice of donating land existed in earlier periods, it became increasingly widespread and influential during the Gupta age. Land grants reflected important changes in political administration, agrarian relations, religious patronage, and social organization. Through these grants, rulers transferred rights over land and its revenue to individuals and institutions, thereby creating new centres of local authority.

The Gupta rulers frequently granted land to Brahmins, temples, monasteries, religious establishments, and government officials. Such grants were usually made as acts of religious merit, rewards for services rendered to the state, or measures intended to promote settlement and cultivation in newly developed regions. Many of these grants are recorded in copper-plate inscriptions, which provide valuable information regarding the nature of the rights transferred and the privileges enjoyed by the recipients.

The beneficiaries of land grants often received not only ownership or control over the land but also the right to collect taxes and other dues from the cultivators residing on it. In several cases, grantees were granted administrative and judicial powers, enabling them to settle disputes, maintain order, and exercise authority within the granted territory. Such privileges reduced the direct involvement of the state in local administration and enhanced the influence of local elites.

One of the major objectives of land grants was to encourage the expansion of agriculture. Large areas of forest and uncultivated land existed in various parts of the subcontinent, and the grant of land to Brahmins, religious institutions, and settlers promoted the development of new agricultural settlements. The beneficiaries often organized the clearance of forests, the establishment of villages, and the cultivation of previously unused land. As a result, agricultural production increased and new regions were integrated into the agrarian economy.

Land grants also played an important role in the spread of Brahmanical culture. Brahmins who received grants often migrated to frontier areas and introduced religious practices, rituals, Sanskrit learning, and social institutions associated with Brahmanical traditions. Through this process, Brahmanical cultural influences spread into many regions of the subcontinent and contributed to cultural integration.

At the same time, the increasing practice of land grants had important political consequences. By transferring fiscal and administrative rights to grantees, rulers reduced the direct authority of the central government over certain regions. Local beneficiaries acquired substantial economic and political power and gradually emerged as influential landed elites. These developments weakened centralized control and encouraged the growth of regional centres of authority.

The strengthening of local landed interests also transformed agrarian relations. Cultivators who had previously dealt directly with state officials increasingly came under the authority of landlords, Brahmins, temples, and other grantees. In many instances, peasants were required to pay taxes and provide labour services to these local authorities. Consequently, new forms of dependence and hierarchy emerged within rural society.

Historians regard the proliferation of land grants during the Gupta period as a crucial factor in the decentralization of administration and the emergence of regional power structures. Scholars such as R. S. Sharma have argued that the transfer of fiscal and administrative rights through land grants contributed to the development of early feudal tendencies in Indian society. Although historians differ in their interpretations,

there is broad agreement that land grants profoundly influenced the political, social, and economic evolution of early medieval India.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q.10: What was the chief source of state income during the Maurya and Gupta periods?

Q.11: What was the Mauryan land tax on agricultural produce generally called?

Q.12:Name one important export item of ancient India during the Maurya and Gupta periods.

Q.13: Which institutions often functioned as banking organizations during the Gupta period?

Q.14: In what forms were taxes generally collected during the Gupta period?

3.8 Let Us Sum Up

1. Agriculture formed the foundation of the Maurya and Gupta economies, with the majority of the population engaged in farming. The Mauryan state exercised close supervision over agriculture through irrigation projects, land surveys, and revenue administration, while the Gupta period witnessed agricultural expansion through the settlement of new lands and villages.
2. Peasants constituted the principal productive classand were responsible for generating the agricultural surplus that sustained the state, urban centres, and trade. Although cultivators enjoyed certain rights over land, they were required to pay taxes and, during the Gupta period, often became increasingly dependent on landlords and land grantees.
3. Artisans and craftsmen played a vital role in economic developmentthrough industries such as textile weaving, metalworking, pottery, carpentry, jewellery making, sculpture, and architecture. Craft production expanded significantly under both dynasties and contributed to the growth of towns and commercial activities.
4. Guilds (Shrenis) emerged as important economic institutions that organized artisans and merchants, regulated production and quality, protected members' interests, and often functioned as financial and banking organizations. Their influence increased particularly during the Gupta period.
5. Trade and commerce flourished under both the Mauryas and the Guptas, supported by agricultural surplus, specialized crafts, and extensive trade networks. Internal and overseas trade promoted urbanization, generated revenue for the state, facilitated cultural exchanges, and enhanced the prosperity of merchants and artisans.
6. Land revenue remained the chief source of state income, while land grants became increasingly important during the Gupta period.The practice of granting land to Brahmins, temples, and officials encouraged agricultural expansion and

the spread of Brahmanical culture but also strengthened local elites, reduced direct state control, and contributed to the decentralization of administration and changing agrarian relations.

3.9 Further Reading

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3.10 Answers to Check Your Progress

Answer 1:*Arthashastra*

Answer 2: Sudarshana Lake

Answer 3: Vishti

Answer 4: Cotton

Answer 5:Shrenis

Answer 6:Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW)

Answer 7:Silk weaving

Answer 8:The Iron Pillar of Delhi

Answer 9:To regulate production and protect the interests of artisans

Answer 10:Land revenue

Answer 11:Bhaga

Answer 12:Textiles

Answer 13:Guilds (Shrenis)

Answer 14:In cash or kind

3.11 Model Questions

A) Very Short Questions

Q.1: What was the principal occupation of the people during the Maurya and Gupta periods?
Q.2: What was the name of the artisan guilds in ancient India?

Q.3: Which text provides detailed information about Mauryan administration and economy?

Q.4: What was the main source of state revenue during the Maurya and Gupta periods?
Q.5: What was the term used for forced labour during the Gupta period?

Q.6: To whom were land grants commonly made during the Gupta period?

B) Short Questions

Q.1: Explain the main features of agriculture under the Mauryan Empire.

Q.2: Discuss the role and functions of guilds (*Shrenis*) in the economic life of ancient India.

Q.3: Describe the major crafts and industries that flourished during the Gupta period.

Q.4: Examine the importance of trade and commerce under the Mauryas and Guptas.

Q.5: What were land grants? Discuss their significance in the Gupta period.

C) Long Questions

Q.1:Discuss the condition of peasants and the development of agriculture under the Maurya and Gupta rulers. Compare the agrarian policies and their impact on rural society.

Q.2:Examine the growth of crafts, industries, and guilds during the Maurya and Gupta periods. How did artisans contribute to the economic development of ancient India?

Q.3:Analyze the nature and significance of trade and commerce under the Mauryas and Guptas. Discuss the major trade routes, commercial centres, and the role of merchant guilds.

Q.4:Evaluate the land revenue systems of the Maurya and Gupta empires. Highlight their administrative features, methods of tax collection, and importance to the state.

Q.5:Discuss the origin, nature, and impact of land grants during the Gupta period. How did land grants influence agrarian relations, local administration, and the process of decentralization?