

# A study of caste based agricultural system during Gupta period.

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## Abstract

This paper takes a look into agrarian structure and its association with caste system developed during Gupta period and what implication it had on society. It is believed by scholars that Gupta Sovereign did not create any system of their own, what they proposed was nothing but evolved version that of the *Nagas* and *Vakatakas*, therefore it is imperative to study contemporary society of Gupta period. Caste structure evolved during this time and its biggest ramification was on agricultural activities. Gupta era was prosperous, it is evident from flourished agriculture record of the time and harmonious nature of society. Agrarian structure was uniform throughout the empire and single system of rates prevailed. Study of caste hierarchy and agrarian structure of the Gupta time important because it gives us valuable insights about contemporary society and a system which lasted in the society till the arabs invasion of India. Apart from that this paper will contemplate on other dimensions of society associated with caste system.

**Keywords:** Ancient India, Agriculture, Seasons, Caste system, Gupta reign, Society.

## Introduction

Gupta dynasty ruled for more than two centuries<sup>1</sup> and their rule marked a great era in terms of prosperity, agricultural development, life standard and architecture. Gupta dynasty starts with Sri Gupta, he was succeeded by Ghatotkacha<sup>2</sup>. Modern scholars believe that Chandra-gupta I was the real founder of the dynasty<sup>3</sup>. He assumed title of *Maharajadhiraj*, a title which highlights the mighty power of Chandra-gupta I. Chandra-gupta I married *Licchavi* princess Kumaradevi, to whom later Samudragupta was born to. Samudragupta was powerful ruler he subjugated many small kingdoms through his expeditions and established a powerful empire<sup>4</sup>. Samudragupta was succeeded by Chandra-gupta II who was the most powerful king of the dynasty, during his reign Gupta dynasty reached to its zenith. He was succeeded by Kumargupta and Skandgupta was the last important ruler of Gupta dynasty. He was successful in throwing off *Hunas* (a barbaric tribe) out of Indian territories.

## Agriculture system during Gupta's time

Information about Gupta period agricultural

system found from inscriptions, land grants and literature such as Narada and Brihaspati smritis, Kalidas work and Varahmihir work etc. Gupta era witnessed peaceful time and there was no major war took place during Gupta period (except Samudragupta north and south expedition). From the circulation of coins it appears that economy was healthy and expanding. Trade centers were well established and both internal and external trade was flourishing at the time. Society was divided as per Hindu laws and many different castes emerged during this time due to pratiloma marriages<sup>5</sup>. Agriculture was the mainstay of Gupta economy since it not only provided subsistence to farmer but it shared largest contribution into state treasury. Agriculture was driven by *varna-system*. Among the four varna only last two which were *vaisyas* and *sudras* involved in agriculture related activities, they were known as producing community. Land utilization for the purpose for agriculture was known and it was divided into many categories. Amarkosha mentioned 12 types of lands. Ownership of land was exclusive affair of state, *paharpur copper plate*<sup>6</sup> inscription of *Buddhagupta* mentioned ownership of land by the state. Since

people were aware about the monsoon winds they used to plan ploughing and seed sowing accordingly. Rainfall was quantified in terms of Drona<sup>7</sup>, Modern value of 1 Drona varies from 5.1cm to 6.4cm<sup>8</sup>. varahmihir presented Quantity of rainfall in his Brihatsamhita chapter 23 in following words<sup>9</sup> –

हस्ताप्यसौम्यचित्रा पौष्ण धनिष्ठासु षोडश द्रोणाः।  
 शतभिषगैन्द्रस्वातिषु चत्वारः कृत्तिकासु दश ॥६॥  
 श्रवणे मघानुराधाभरणीमूलेषु दश चतुर्युक्ताः।  
 फल्गुन्यां पञ्चकृतिः पुनर्वसौ विंशतिर्द्रोणाः ॥७॥  
 ऐन्द्राग्न्याख्ये वैश्वे च विंशतिः सार्पभे दशत्र्यधिकाः।  
 आहिर्बुध्न्यार्यम्णप्राजापत्येषु पञ्चकृतिः ॥८॥  
 पञ्चदशाजे पुष्ये च कीर्तिता वाजिमे दश द्वौ च।  
 रौद्रेष्टादश कथिता द्रोणा निरुपद्रवेष्वेते ॥९॥

English Translation:-

“If there should be rain in any one of the asterisms, viz, Hasta, Purvashada, Mrigasira, Chitta, Revati and Dhanishta, the quantity of rainfall in the season will be 16 Dronas; in Shatabhisha, Jyeshtha and Swati, it will be 4 Dronas; in Kritika, 10 Dronas; in Sravana, Magha, Anuradha, Bharani and Moola, 14 Dronas; in Purvaphalguni, 25 Dronas; in Punarvasu, 20 Dronas; in Visakha and Uttarashadha, 20 Dronas; in Aslesha, 13 Dronas. In Uttarabhadra, Uttaraphalguni and Rohini, it is 25 Dronas. In Purva- bhadra and Pushya, it is 15 Dronas; in Aswini, 12 Dronas; in Ardra, it is

13 Dronas. These quantities will hold good, provided the asterisms are not hurt in any way.”

Irrigation facilities were also available to provide water in hinterland where monsoon was weak (western region)<sup>10</sup>. State had the full responsibility to help its subjects in case of calamity (Junagarh inscription of king Rudradaman) pre-Gupta period is silent on ownership of land by ruler and there is difference of opinion among ancient writer. Kautilya *arthasastra* talks about control of agriculture land by king but it does not talk about ownership right.<sup>11</sup> Land rights sometimes conferred upon group as well, there was system of renting the land for cultivation. In case of religious donation of cultivable land King must inform learned person of the village. Agriculture was not protected from natural calamities Varahmir Brihatsamhita mentioned many natural disasters such as earthquakes, flooding, draughts, pesticide attack, locust attack etc. however state was responsible for protecting people from such distresses. New forest lands were cleared for agriculture in order to increase revenue of state and to bear the demands of food and other agriculture produce. Market for agricultural produce was

there and they were regulated by Guilds, state share was fixed to one forth of agricultural produce and rest were left for the cultivator, both internal and external trade was carried out by Guilds and trade centres were created for this purpose. Agriculture revenue helped Gupta ruler to remain powerful and focus well on administration and other cultural activities for which Gupta dynasty is known for.

### **Social practices affecting nature of social base of the time**

It is very well known that Gupta kings were supporter of Brahmins and patronized them in administration. Since religious scripture of time gave them highest place in social hierarchy resulting in their supremacy in administration. Prestige that Brahmins had gained can be best understood by Fa-hien testimony when he said that “king had to remove his crown while making offering to Brahmin.<sup>12</sup> During this period whenever a piece of land given in this manner large number of peasants need to be associated with the land for the purpose of cultivation and crop production. Caste system aggravated the problem of land utilization since most of the land grants were either given as Agrahara to

Brahmins or as Devdana for temple maintenance. There was a pattern in society during this period, equality among people marred by practices such as untouchability which was the direct outcome of caste system. Caste system initially was so rigid that if one was born to Sudra he had no option but to follow the profession of his father. Marriage types especially Pratiloma marriages were further increasing castes in strength at that time. The social abnormality prevalent during this time was because of many structural issues such as lack of access to sacred books among sudras, not being able to challenge authority of Brahmins, social disability imposed by scriptures of the time, all these affairs complicated the fabric of society. Kings were not liberal towards their subjects. Nature of land grants by kings was superficial and purely for the purpose of gaining popularity and acknowledgement of his rule. For example few of the lines in Damodarpur copper plate inscription reads-

15. स विष्ठया कृमिभू रत्वा पितृभिः सह पच्यते ॥ \*  
षष्ट वर्ष-सहनानि स्वो मोदति भूमिदः ।
16. शक्षप्ता चानुमन्ता च तान्येव मरके वसेत. ॥

Trans. - “the donator of land enjoys in the heavens for sixty thousand years and the

confiscator along with the abettor to this confiscation rots in hell for a similar number of years”.

With more and more such land grants given, the position of sudras was further degraded because they were attached to such land grants. Slavery was another form of social abnormality reflected in the form of *visti* mentioned in *bhagvata Purana*. Sometimes people were fined to work as *visti*. Gupta society was progressing society and demarcation of castes was essential in understanding social nature of the time. If we closely observe norms of the society we find out that they were created in such manner which supports upper class progress. Marriage forms were an important indicator in this regard, progeny of inter-caste marriages never sanctioned by orthodox members, these people were not given higher status, though they involved in activities which were important for state treasury. Another social practice prevalent was *devdasi system* in which women were attached to give service to temple from the very young age. This system not only hampered their education but devoid them of any other opportunities in life.

## Effects of social base on

## agriculture

If we closely look into Gupta state of administration we observe that entire state machinery was dependent on the taxation levied upon numerous professions. Vatsyayana's *kamasutra* mentioned professions in 64 types of art forms<sup>13</sup> and state had share in almost all types of profession. Since profession was demarcated clearly on the basis of caste there was no fluidity in profession except in the time of emergency. Later on during gupta period sudras were given access to have education and allowed to read and listen to sacred literature such as Vedas and puranas. This might have affected agriculture to some extent. We have references where *vaisya* also took to agriculture. Most of the people involved in the cultivation of food and cattle breeding and products of both are used for various ceremonial activities, availability of these products need to be maintained throughout the year so that continuity in rituals ensured. There was migration among peasants and artisans which was either because of economic distress or to get rid from their old professions. Mandsaur inscription throws light on the migration of silk weaver from *latadesa* (modern Gujrat) to *daspura*

(modern mandsaur), it is witnessed through the inscription that migration of silk weaver was due to attractive virtues life of king (kumargupta I) this inscription further highlights that many of these people later on took different profession some of them become good archer, many accepted life of religiosity and gave sermons. This proves that there was a quest among people to gain social mobility. Brahmin whose profession was priest-ship enjoyed great status in society and all the religious activities cannot be done without their presence, Brahmins were highly revered during Gupta period and they were given land grants by Gupta rulers as a part of their religious donation. Nalanda and Gaya copper<sup>14</sup>plate inscription of Samudragupta mentioned religious donation being given to Brahmins -

- 6 Ēvañ=ch=āha vidita[m]m=bō<sup>13</sup> bha[va]tv=ēshau<sup>16</sup> grā[m]au [mayā m  
=ātmana[ś=cha puṇy-ābhivṛddha]yē Jayabhaṭṭi-svāminē-
- 7 .....[s-ōparika]r-ō[ddēśēn=āgrāharatvēn=ātisṛiṣh]ṭah<sup>1</sup>  
yushmābhīr=a[s]ya
- 8 cha ttr[ai]vidyasya śrōttavyam=ājñā<sup>18</sup> cha kartavyā [sarvvē cha sam  
[ma\*]-pratyāyē[na] hira[n]y-ādayō dēyā[h\*] [i\*] na ch=aitāh=pra-
- 9 bhṛity=anēna ttraividyēn=ānya-grām-ādi-karada-kuṭumbi-kā[rūk-āda]y  
pravēśayī[ta]vyā [n-ā]nyathā niyatam=āgrahār<sup>19</sup>-ā[kshēpah]
- 10 [sy]ād=iti — — — — —<sup>20</sup> Sambat<sup>21</sup> 5 Māgha-di 2 nibaddha[m\*] [i\*]

Trans.

“Be it known to you! for the sake of augmenting the spiritual merit of (my) parents and of myself, these two villages have been granted by me as *agrahara*, with the assignment of *uparikara* ... to jayabhatta swamin...

You should therefore listen to this *traividyā* (conversant with three Vedas) and be obedient of his command, and all dues in accordance with the customary law of the village should be paid such as ( the find of ) gold and so forth. And from this time forth, the tax-paying cultivator, artisans, etc. Of other villages should not be allowed to enter by this *traividyā*; otherwise there would be a forfeiture of *agrahara* “.

- 8 tkaushabhyām=āha | Eva ch=ārtha[m\*] viditambō(m=vō) bhavatv=ēsa(sha)  
grāmō mayā mātāpitṛrōr=ā-
- 9 tmanas=cha puṇy-ābhivṛddhayē Bhāradvāja-sagōttrāya Va(ba)hvrīchāya sav[r]ja  
(bra)hmachā-
- 10 riṇē vrā(bra)hmaṇa-Gōpadēvasvāminē<sup>13</sup> s-ōparika-ōddēśēn=āgrahāratvēn=āti-
- 11 sṛiṣṭah [i\*] tad=yushmābhīr=asya śrōttavyam=ājñā cha kartavyā sarvvē cha<sup>14</sup>  
sa<sup>15</sup>muchitā grāma-pra-
- 12 tyayā mēya-hirany-ādayō dēyāh [i\*] na chē(ch=ai)tat-prabhṛity=ētat-āgrahāri-  
kēṇa(n=ā)nyad-grā-
- 13 m-ādi-karada-kuṭumbi-kāruk-ādayah pravēśayitavyā ma(a)nyathā  
niyatamā(m=a)gra-
- 14 hār-ākshēpa[h\*] syād=iti [i\*] **Sama(mva)t<sup>21</sup> 9 Vaiśākha di 10 [i\*]**

Trans.

“And Be (this) matter known to you! for the sake of augmenting the spiritual merit of (my)



parents and of myself, this villages has been granted by me as an *agrahara*, to a religious fello student brahmana Govaswamina of the Bhardvaja gotra (and) the Bhavaricha (sakha).

You should therefore listen to him; and (his) command should be obeyed. And all dues in accordance with the customary law of the village should be paid such as can be measured in gold and so forth. And from this time forth, the tax-paying cultivator, artisans, etc. Of other villages should not be allowed to enter by this *agraharika*; otherwise there would be a lapse of *agrahara* “

These land grants created a feudalistic society in which forest tribes were incorporated as a new caste resulting into caste proliferation. It is evident from both these inscriptions that *agrahara* grants gave rise to regionalism because other villagers and artisans not allowed to work inside that land. This would definitely have created division among peasants and artisans to remain at place where social life was much more difficult. Land was important commodity, control on land stands higher social order and higher rights and privileges in the society. State policy was to increase cultivation land and in order to do so new forest land was converted into agriculture

land and tax was levied on it, increasing revenue of the state. Loan was given for cultivation and interest rates were varied Varna wise from 24 percent to 60 percent annually, highest rates for sudra and lower rates for Brahmin varna. There were provisions for punishment for non-repayment of loan. Also these loans were provided by moneylender after checking economic status of village in which the person living. System of land division after the death of the head of family was well established and generally the land was divided among Brahmin sons of owner excluding sudra sons from inheriting property, this might have resulted into fragmentation of land and reduction of land size for next generation causing immense stress on land for extra yield Land grants such as *nividharma* provided perpetuity in ownership without sharing its produce to state. Since the agriculture was an important source of taxation and all the progress we see in this period is derived from agricultural share of state. Hence agricultural produce acted as a sole backbone of allied activities. To make agricultural manpower sustainable castes were made in such way that lower caste continue to involve in cultivation of field. The higher caste exercised control over them by

citing religious superiority over them given in religious scripture such as smirities and dharmasastra.

## Conclusion

Gupta society was highly regulated society in which caste and its linkage with agriculture oriented activities has certainly benefitted king and certain higher caste specially the Brahmins. If we remove agriculture and caste division which was prerequisite for any social order of the time in India we hardly imagine any progress in society. If *sudras* had refused to do what they do, if *vaishyas* had refused to what they do then certainly we would have witnessed social disorder and chaos all over the ruled land of Gupta kings. Agriculture played well in keeping state exchequer full and keeping social order intact but due to its very nature of being rented to someone else rather than the utilized by the owner itself created discrimination and kept the so called caste system binding in society.

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