



**ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER**

**History**

**A Discussion on the Economic Development and Change During Buddha Period in Early India**

**KEYWORDS:** Buddha, Economic, Urbanization, North India, State.

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**ABSTRACT**

The mode of economic changes appears during the Buddha period in North India has been discussed by a number of scholars. Authoritative works on economic pattern and change by A. Ghosh, R.S. Sharma, D.K. Chakrabarti, Romila Thapar, and others also include a discussion on the mode of economic changes. Most of their works devoted to particular aspects behind the change in entire economic pattern during the Buddha period which throws valuable light on the economic changes. In the present paper a humble attempt has been made to assess the mode and direction of social and economic changes in North-Indian society during Buddha period. Some fresh questions have been formulated and answered as far as possible with a view of examining various issues from different angles. An effort has made to identify significant changes which have taken place in the notion and pattern of society and economy in between B.C. 600 to B.C. 400.

The main characteristics of the mode of economic change during this period, for the sake of convenience may be summarized as follows –(i) Growth of towns and town-life owing to further industrial development (ii) Definite establishment of direct commercial intercourse with many of the nations of western Asia. (iii) the importance of the guilds which exercised a worth mentioning influence upon the industrial organisation, trade and other aspects of commerce and other aspects of economic life including wide circulation of metallic currency and the introduction of the Karsapana coinage. About the political division and the area of North India colonized by the Aryans, we derive our information from the Buddhist canonical literature, Jain literature, the sutras of Panini and other ancient Indian works. Panini's information as regards the country is confined to the Northern and Western part of India. The early Pali books mention the sixteen great division of India (the solasa-Mahajanapadani) among them the fifteen Mahajanapadas were located in the Northern part of India except Ashmaka, which is mentioned at many places in Pali literature with minute differences.

Buddhism arose and nourished in eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, in the kingdoms of Magadha and Kosala. The Buddha spent most of his time in Bihar, and after his death three councils were held successively at Rajagaha, Vais'ali and Pataliputra. The primary factor that revolutionized the material life of the people around 700 B.C. in eastern UP and Bihar was the beginning of the use of iron in its second phase. One carbon-14 date shows the advent of iron at Atranjikhhera in Etah district in western UP around 1000 B.C., but in any case iron implements were used in the Gandhara area around 900 B.C. and in western UP around 800 B.C. Their use gradually spread to eastern UP, and iron slugs found in Rajghat suggest that iron ore was brought here for the manufacture of implements around 700 B.C. Similarly the NBP phase in Prahadpur in the district of Varanasi marks the advent of iron possibly around 500 B.C. We have evidence of iron in Chirand in the district of Saran in Bihar in the seventh-sixth centuries B.C, and many iron slugs and about five implements, mostly unrecognizable, have been found in Vaisali and can be ascribed to the sixth century B.C. In Sonpur in the district of Gaya in the uppermost levels of the pre-NBP phase associated with black-and-red pottery, lumps of iron ore and slugs have been discovered. 1 This is the earliest association of black-and-red ware with iron in south Bihar. The NBP phase at this site contains many iron implements such as lances, spearheads, arrowheads, daggers, axes, nails, chisels, blades, etc. Many iron slugs have been found in Bhagalpur at the old site of Campa, and belong to the early levels of the NBP which has been found in very large numbers there. All this shows that there was considerable advance in iron metallurgy in the sixth to fifth centuries B.C. Plough agriculture, possibly with the iron ploughshare, began in western UP around 600 B.C. or later. An iron share belonging, to the last phase of the PGW (perhaps middle of the first millennium B.C. or even later) has been found at Jakhera in Etah district. Another share belonging to the NBP level

has been found at Kausambi. As the new agriculturists advanced further they spread their knowledge in eastern UP and Bihar around 600-300 B.C. as shown earlier, the literary texts of pre-Mauryan time contain several terms indicating 'iron share'. 2 The Vinaya Pitaka, which is rather late, talks of it in more specific terms. The use of the iron axe, share, sickle and other implements led to the clearance of the jungles and foundation of large-scale settlements, and introduced new agricultural techniques, but the existing social and ideological make-up of eastern UP and Bihar did not favour these developments. Much preparatory work had to be done for the adoption of the new ways of agriculture by primitive people, who lived in sparsely inhabited upland areas and practised hoe agriculture. 3

It is stated that a person who lives on cattle rearing should be identified as a cultivator. The concern of the early Pali texts for plough agriculture can be inferred from the details given about cultivating and sowing. The farmer (gahapati) is taught to prepare the ground carefully, to sow seeds in a well thought out manner, and to supply water to the land on time. The importance of agriculture is also evident from the following simile which is used by Buddha in course of his religious discourses given to farmer' Bharadvaja:

Faith is the seed, and rains the discipline.  
Insight for me is the plough fitted with yoke,  
My pole is conscience and sense-mind the tie,  
And mindfulness my ploughshare and my goad

In one context the functions of a peasant are considered as forming an allegorical model to be followed by a monk. A peasant householder well cultivates his field, makes its soil suitable quickly, plants seedlings quickly, supplies water and takes it out quickly. These are his three urgent duties. Similarly a monk is advised to undertake training in higher morality, higher thought and higher insight. Further, when the peasant householder's paddy field is ripe, he quickly reaps it, harvests it, puts it in stokes, treads it out, pulls off the stalks, winnows away the chaff, collects the rice, threshes it out and removes the husks. Thus his crops reach perfection. The Aryan disciple is also advised to be similarly active and alert for his spiritual growth and final freedom from fetters. 4 These similes show that the Buddhists considered agricultural operations to be extremely important.

The Buddhist rejection of animal sacrifice and emphasis on non-injury to animals assumed a new significance in the context of the needs of new agriculture. A faint protest against sacrifice is found in some later Vedic references. 5 In the Rig Veda the term aghnya or 'not to be killed' is mostly used for a milk-giving cow, and it generally occurs in later portions of the text. The same term is also used for cattle at several places in the Atharvaveda, which also gives considerable evidence of agriculture, but numerous references to cattle sacrifice suggest that normally the killing of

animals, including numerous cattle, was approved of by the Vedic ideology. In sharp contrast to this Gautama Buddha asserts that animal sacrifice does not produce any merit. He favours a sacrifice which does not involve violence. According to him to dispense charity is the greatest yajna. Gautama Buddha pointedly and specifically attacked Vedic sacrifices in which animals were killed.

The most emphatic protest against animal sacrifice is registered in the early Pali texts. The earliest Buddhist text, the Suttmapata, considers non-violence to be the greatest virtue that has to be inculcated among the lay devotees or the upasakas. Next to it is the virtue of not accepting anything which has not been given by somebody, in other words respecting private property.

The emphasis on protection of cattle was certainly revolutionary teaching at a time when cattle were slaughtered either for food and religion or both. Protection of cattle is regarded as one of the important functions of the householder (gahapati), and brahmanical emphasis on goraksa is possibly derived from Jain and Buddhist teachings. In the early Pali texts cow-keeping appears as an important function of the gahapatis and kulaputtas, and as many as eleven qualities of a cowherd are enumerated in the Majjhima Nikaya. A cowherd is supposed to be well versed in material shapes, skilled in distinguishing marks, is able to remove flies eggs, and knows how to attend to sores and can perform fumigation. He has to be familiar with fords, watering places and pastures, and has to be able to spot the bulls that can lead the herd. Cattle wealth had to be preserved for agriculture but dietary needs had also to be met.

Agriculture based on the use of the iron share, sickle, spade, etc., led to the Production of surplus, a scale which could not be attained with stone or copper implements. This prepared the ground for the rise of urban settlements in north-eastern India around 600 B.C. The Pali texts speak of twenty towns, six of them being associated with the death of the Buddha. Archaeology shows a large number of towns in the middle Ganga basin during this period. At least ten urban sites such as Campa, Rajagraha, Patali-putra, Vaisali, Varanasi, Kausambi, Kusinagara, and Sravasti are attested not only by the early Pali texts but also by archaeology. 6 In addition we may mention Chirand, Sringaver-pur, Piprahwa and Tilaurakot. The remains of Lauriyandangarh also show that it was a town. Whatever may be the origin of a town, it eventually became a market. Obviously artisans and traders called sethis accounted for a large proportion of the city population and were engaged in trade and industry. Trade was facilitated by the use of punch marked coins which are stratigraphically ascribed to fifth century B.C. and may have appeared earlier. 7 More than three hundred hoards of punch marked coins are known and many of these have been found in the middle Gangetic zone. 8 Although certain terms in later Vedic literature are interpreted to suggest the use of coins, actual coins are not found before the age of the Buddha. A new kind of pottery, called Northern Black Polished Ware; glossy, shining pottery with its very fine fabric suggests that it was used by well-to-do sections of society. It may therefore have been an item of trade. 9 Slugs discovered suggest that iron tools were made at various urban sites, and may have been an important factor in the improvement of transport and other aspects of trade and manufacture.

The Vedic attitude towards trade, as known from the Dharmasutras, was not helpful. The earliest law-books prescribe trade and agriculture for vaisyas. In times of distress the brahmanas are permitted to trade, but this is of a limited nature. Anthropologists attribute the art of coastal navigation to the Dravinians, but sea voyage is condemned as a sinful practice by Baudhayana. 10 In contrast to this the early Buddhist texts record several instances of sea voyage with a sense of approval. Trade involved the use of money, which led to money lending and usury. The idea of debt is found in the Vedic text but the idea of interest does not appear clearly. At any rate in the absence of money there could be no money lending in Vedic society; at best niskas or golden necklaces may have circulated as prestige objects among tribal chiefs and their priests. But with the advent of metal money in the sixth century B.C. there began the practice of usury. 11

However the existing social ideology did not favour lending money on interest. An early lawgiver, Apastamba, lays down that the brahmanas should not accept the food of a person who charges interest and of those who live on the labour of persons held as mortgage, presumably in return for interest on the loan. Some authorities lay down that no interest should be charged by the lender for one year; this shows that the introduction of interest was only grudgingly approved. The Pali texts repeatedly refer to debtor, creditor, debt and interest. Speaking of her previous birth a nun complains that born as a girl in a carter's family she was much oppressed by creditors. Because of the large amount of interest that had accumulated a caravan-leader dragged her off from her family house. The Vedic texts mention loans in the context of games of dice, but the Pali texts show that loans were taken for setting up business. A person could promote his business with a loan; pay off the old debt and also save surplus to maintain his family. Significantly enough money lending is not condemned in Buddhist texts. 12 The Buddhist I canons define right livelihood and right action by prescribing a number of don'ts, but the list does not include usury. On the other hand the Buddha advises the householder to repay his debts and bars admission of a debtor to the sangha. A person free from debt is shown as enjoying his food, which implies that people were encouraged to clear off their debts. The Digha Nikaya indicates that paying off debts brings a sense of great relief. Free from debt, an ideal caravan leader roams in the world like a brave conqueror. Of various types of pleasures recommended for a householder is the one derived from freedom from indebtedness. If a person owes neither little nor much to anybody, he enjoys pleasure and mental peace. 13 The fact that a separate sutta is devoted to the virtues of freedom from indebtedness implies the necessity of paying off debts. The Buddha therefore emphasizes not only payment of debt but also that of interest. Thus Buddhism gave implicit support and also direct encouragement to lending money on interest which was discouraged and even condemned by the Vedic law-books.

In certain respects the behaviour pattern of an ideal trader is recommended in Buddhist teachings as a model for a monk. The first Papanika Sutta states that the shopkeeper who neglects his duties in the morning, at midday and in the evening does not prosper, and the same is true of the monk who does not follow a similar kind of daily routine. More importantly, early Buddhist teachings seem to recommend a number of tips for success in trade. 14 A trader needs three qualities—vision, shrewdness and ability to inspire a confidence. Such a shopkeeper soon becomes great and wealthy. The monks are also advised to emulate these qualities of a shopkeeper so that they may understand the nature of misery, acquire proficiency in dhamma, and take good care of the monks who arrive from outside. In all these respects the small trader or the shopkeeper is held as a model for the monk, although the former is fully absorbed in worldly affairs and the latter is a renouncer.

The urban setting in the age of the Buddha gave rise to certain features of town life which did not find favour with the Vedic outlook conditioned by a simple agricultural society. Eating houses, a common trait of town life, were not considered to be desirable. People of higher classes were advised by Apastamba not to eat food prepared in shops, although some items were made the exception; this shows some prejudice against the new shopping class and the mode of life in urban settlements in general. But the Buddhist texts do not exhibit such an attitude. 15 The use of iron weapons revolutionized military equipment is added to the political importance of warriors in contrast to that of priests. They naturally claimed a position of equality in other fields. The conflict between the interests of brahmanas and ksatriyas is evident in many texts. This partly explains the ksatriya origin of Gautama and Mahavira, and also the fact that even the older Buddhist texts accord the first place to the ksatriyas and the second to the brahmanas. The ksatriya rulers could be maintained only by regular payment of taxes. Both the Buddhist and brahmanical texts of the age of the Buddha justify the royal share of the peasant's produce on the ground that the king gives protection to the people. But the Buddhist canonical text Digha Nikaya seems to have been the earliest Indian source to give a reasoned justification

for the origin of the ksatriya ruling class by painting in detail a state of misery brought to an end through the establishment of the ksatriya rule. The ksatriya is clearly stated to be the protector of fields which were occupied by individuals in north-eastern India in the age of the Buddha. 16 Ability to pay taxes is considered by the Buddha as one of the five fruits of wealth and is meant to serve the political order based on regular taxes.

The new agriculture, trade, and the advent of coins naturally enabled both rulers and traders to accumulate wealth and gave rise to economic inequalities. Persons possessing eighty koti of wealth are frequently mentioned in the Buddhist birth-stories. Buddhism suggests some remedy for poverty. In the Digh Nikaya a prince is advised not to appropriate something which is not given to him. It is said in this text that if the poor are not able to produce wealth, it leads to poverty, which is at the root of immorality, theft, falsehood, violence, hatred, cruelty, etc. To eradicate such crimes the Buddha advises that farmers should be provided with grain and other facilities, traders with capital, and labourers with adequate wages. These measures are recommended by the Buddha for eradicating poverty from the life of a person in this world. 17 In the next world also prospects are held for the poor. It is said that if the poor give alms to monks they are re-born wealthy. Finally, we might consider the code of conduct prescribed for monks and their followers. Rules were laid down to regulate the conduct of individual monks as well as their collective functioning in the sangha. This code seems to have been determined by the material background during the sixth-fifth centuries B.C. in north-eastern India. The code imposed restrictions on the dress, food, housing and sexual behaviour of the monks. Gautama Buddha lays down detailed rules about the clothing of the monks.

The rules and teachings meant for the lay followers of Buddhism took full account of the new changes and ideologically strengthened them. Gautama Buddha attaches the greatest weight to the practice of non-violence in the day-to-day conduct of the upasaka. It is said that the lay devotee should perform five sacrifices, to relatives, guests and ancestors, king and the gods. In addition to this the house holders asked to support his clan, family, friends, slaves and hired labourers and to protect himself. Learning of crafts is repeatedly recommended as an important duty of the householder; one of the earliest references is found in the Mahamangala Sutta of the Suttanipda. The Buddha lays down the economic functions of the housewife too. Girls and brides when they go to their husband's houses are asking to honour parents, sramanas and brahmanas. They are advised to pursue the crafts, involving cotton or wool, produced by their husbands. Further, they are asked to acquire full proficiency in the crafts, implying weaving and spinning, and they are instructed to lend their full cooperation in organizing them. They are also asked to be fully posted with the activities of the servants of their husbands. Since Buddhist teachings were propagated by puritan monks they made a greater impact on the common people. 18 So although the code of conduct was prescribed for the monks was different from that meant for lay men. The two together basically served the same purpose, the stabilization and promotion of new elements in the material life of people in middle Gangetic plains during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.

Undoubtedly the objective of the Buddha's teachings was to secure the salvation (nirvana) of the individual. Accustomed to the old ways of life some individuals found it difficult to adjust themselves to the break-up of the old tribal society caused by view material conditions which gave rise to gross social inequalities. Buddhism boosted the new forces of production and supported the resultant polity and society, which could spare sufficient alms for subsistence.

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