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GAJAPATI ERA: A STUDY ON SOCIAL LIFE

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Abstract
Change and continuity became the way of social life in ancient and medieval Odisha. Society and social condition are permanent structures of a society. The society of Odisha was balanced under the Gajaptis. The social structure did not remain the same throughout the period. The emergence of numerous castes and sub-castes broke the social fabric into pieces. But in spite of that the society remain stable, peaceful and coherent. As literature considered as one of the social documents, the legendary work of Odia literature Sarala Mahabharat written by Sarala Das also critically analysed to assess the social scenario. Here it is an attempt to study and analyse the society, social condition and changes in social life during the Suryavamsi Gajapati period.

Keywords: Gajapati period, social life, medieval Odisha, History

The glorious rule under the dynasties in the history of Odisha contributed a lot to preserve the social structure of the land. The Gajapati period ushered a new era in Odisha history by political expansion, cultural development and economic prosperity. Three important rulers like Kapilendra Deva, Purushottama Deva and Prataparudra Deva of this period claimed their origin from the mythical solar dynasty. Further the period is significant in history because after the Gajapati rule political strength and stability of Odisha started to decline.

Society underwent many changes during ancient and medieval Odisha. As earlier the broad division of medieval society into four castes like Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra was known. In the long course of social evolution, it became clear that each of the caste got divided into a number of sub-castes, communities and sub-communities each of which had its own distinctive character.[1] The Gajapati period witnessed a large-scale geographical expansion due to the expansionist policy of Kapilendra Deva, the first ruler and the founder of Surya dynasty. This resulted in the growth of population, admixture of various castes and communities which in many ways affected the social caste structure. It is found that the old rigid caste system gave its way to the emergence of other sub-castes, communities and sub-communities in a greater way. The rigidity in the brahmanical caste system faded out and the concept of four varnas in the society became fluid.[2] The changing politicoreligious scenario brought change in the social structure.

Among all the classes in the society, it is assumed that the Brahmanas occupied a prestigious position in the field of learning and administration. They were the custodian of religion for which they hold the highest position in the social hierarchy. They performed various religious rites and received royal favour. The practice of land grants which started from the period of the Matharas in Odisha also continued during the Gajapati period. The Chiruvroli grant of Hamvira Deva dated 1461 A.D. records the grant of a village called Chiruvroli to several brahmanas.[3] Several examples are there to substantiate this grant of land by the rulers to brahmanas. The land was granted along with the right to enjoy water, land fish, tortoises and forest. The land granted was made free of taxes and other customary obligations to the State. The brahmanas also

shared the administrative powers of the rulers by acting in high administrative posts. The administrative power and authority resulted in the increase of their position and social status in the society.

Brahmanas of the period were divided into many divisions according to their functions. Their functions in the society determined their status and position. The brahmanas performing priestly functions were regarded as superior class whereas brahmanas of lower profession like agriculture and trade were considered as inferior brahmanas.[4] Brahmanas were divided into various groups according to their gotras. The gotra denotes an 'eponymous' group which is reputed to descend in its entirety a common ancestor who should properly be a Rishi, a legendary priest or a saint.[5] Accordingly, brahmanas used various titles, which found mention in contemporary inscriptions.

Besides priestly work, brahmanas also enjoyed prestigious position due to their scholarship and learning. Narasimha Mishra Vajapei, a profound scholar was appointed as a justice by the ruler Gajapati Kapilendra Deva. Narasimha revived Advaitavada of Sankara by his writing. Balabhadra Mishra, son of Narasimha Mishra was the Rajguru of Purushottama Deva and Prataparudra Deva. Many more instances are there to show that brahmanas occupied a prestigious position both in the field of administration and learning under the patronage of the Gajapati Kings.

Creation of brahmana ‘Sasana' was a special feature of the period. Sasana was exclusively a brahmana village. Such Sasanas like Purushottampur, Bira Pratappur etc. are still present in Puri district which were established by the Ganga and Gajapati rulers. The Provincial Governors and high officials following the examples of rulers granted lands and villages to brahmanas. The growing brahmanic centres,sasana villages in the imperial kingdom created a situation of brahmanical dominance under a state protection.[6]

Besides religious and scholarly works the brahmanas were also engaged in works relating to agriculture, trade and other professions. Sarala Dasa in his monumental work-Mahabharata, has narrated vividly about this. Establishment of brahmana Sasana and land grants to the brahmanas of various functional groups had a direct effect on the socio-economic field in medieval Orissa. The land grants to brahmanas might have led to the emergence of an intermediary class in the agrarian society. In a positive way the land grants helped in the expansion of education and Vedic culture in the state. On the other hand, the surrender of the fiscal and administrative power to the brahmana donees must have been a serious blow in the future to the royal authority. The influence of the donees increased in the society. So much that they started to behave like feudal lords. At times they went to the extent of throwing off their allegiance to their master.[7]

As prescribed in the Smruti Sastra, the Kshatriyas were placed next to brahmanas in social order. They earned reputation for their valour in the battle field. The Pallavas of Viragottam, the Matsyas of Oddadi, the Chalukyas of Elamanchili were the Kshatriya feudatories under the Gajapatis.[8] The Kshatriyas in general associated themselves with administration and militarism which included fighting in war and governing in peace.

During the medieval period, a large number of tribals were recruited in the military service. The rulers granted them land in lieu of their service. During the Suryavamsi Gajapati rule, as also later, the militarist-cum- agriculturist castes were regarded as Kshatriyas with special designation as Paikas and Khandayats. As a result of this many feudatory chiefs began to claim Kshatriya origin.A noteworthy feature of the Kshatriya caste was its relation with the brahmanas. The relation between the king and the brahmana was religious in nature. The king was expected to field supreme power in the physical and administrative sphere. But the inner source of this power was held to be spiritual and the Brahmanas represented that authority.[9] The Suryavamsi Gajapati rulers paid due respect to this dictum.

Next to Kshatriya caste the Vaisyas are placed in the social hierarchy. According to A.L. Basham the Vaisya varna originated in the ordinary peasant tribals of the Rig Veda. A Vaisya should be well-versed in making any kind of merchandise to augment the growth of economy. As business had been the main profession of the Vaisyas since ancient period, literature of medieval Odisha throws some light on the community. Sarala Dasa in his work Mahabharata narrates the characteristics of the Vaisya community. By trade and commerce, the Vaisyas made the country economically prosperous. The rulers of the period patronized the Vaisya community by liberally granting lands to them. During Kapilendradeva,as is revealed from Sarala Mahabharata, class conflict had taken place as the epic describes the conflict between the brahmanas and chandalas belong to the lower strata of life.

Under the system of Chaturvarna, the Sudra caste is placed at the lowest level of the society. According to traditional view Sudras were not allowed to study the Vedas, Smruti Sastras and Puranas.[10] But the Sudras of medieval Orissa occupied an important place in the sphere of education and learning. Sarala Dasa, a Sudra farmer composed Mahabharata in Odia language. Balarama Dasa, another Sudra composed Odia Ramayana. The Appearance of Pancha Sakha (five comrades - Balarama, Jagannath, Achyuta, Ananta and Jasobanta) during Gajapati period contributed to great change of social life of the period. They were prolific writers and being drawn from the lower stratum of society used the language of the masses, advocated social equality and challenged the authority of the priests. Panchasakha literature gave a blow to the predominance of the brahmins in the society and preached about a harmonious society where difference among all the castes would vanish.

During the period of Prataparudradeva,Sri Chaitanya and his neo- vaisnava movement also brought set back to Brahminism to a greater extent and it was not possible to preserve the Varnashrama Dharma by the king.[11] Advent of Chaitanya during the reign of Prataparudra Deva profoundly influenced the social structure of the state. An exponent of Bhakti cult Chaitanya stayed at Puri from 1515 to 1533 A.D. His long stay in Odisha tremendously influenced the socio-religious life of contemporary Odisha. His followers were from all grades and castes of Society and he believed in social equality which undermined the position and status of the priestly class, the Brahmanas. He introduced a type of mass prayer or chanting the name of Krishna accompanied by music and dance, known as Kirtan.There is no social restriction and obstacle in practicing Kirtan or Sankirtan. This point of social equality was further strengthened by the advent of Chaitanya during the period of Gajapati Prataparudra Deva. Further the cult of Jagannath, which gathered momentum from the period of Ganga rule, was a powerful force during the Gajapati period. In a word Jagannath stands as a unique symbol of the great flexibility and dynamics of Hinduism, of its capacity to absorb, integrate and remodel its tolerance and magnanimity.[12] Thus, it can be said that the advent of neo-vaisnavism of Chaitanya and the popularization of Jagannath cult in a great way checked the brahmnical supremacy in the society and opened the way for social mobility, social progress and social advancement.

The literary texts function as social documents because they preserve the value, attitudes, conflicts and ideologies of their time. The contemporary writer Sarala Dasa in his book Mahabharata and Chandi Purana throws a flood of light on the position of women during medieval period in Odisha. He has depicted all women as the embodiment of Goddess in his work Chandi Purana. From a study of contemporary literature, it is presumed that women are often regarded as deities but in actual practice they were in a disgraceful condition and were treated as slaves and attendants.[13] Though the custom of Sati was not popular, instances of the practice of Sati is noticeable in the Mahabharata of Sarala Dasa. In several donative records in the epigraphs, the name of the mother is almost on all occasions was recorded in the epigraphs and while making gifts to Gods, it is noticed that people offering such gifts prayed for the welfare of their mothers and wives.[14] This shows that women were held in high estimation in the society. Polygamy was known in royal and higher-class families. The concubinage system was practised in the society. A reference can be made in this matter to Gajapati Purusottamadeva who was the son of a concubine of Gajapati Kapilendradeva.[15] The practice of Devadasi undermined the position of women in society. However, in general women enjoyed high position in the society.

As regards the food habits of the society it was found that the recipe of the period comprised several items offered to the deities in the temples. The common people were both vegetarian and non-vegetarian in their food habits. Rice, pulses, vegetables and fruits were liked and used as food by all sections of the society. In the temples, the deities were also offered various items at the time of bhoga like rice, dal, curry, curd and betel. Drinking coconut water was prevalent throughout Odisha especially in coastal regions. Beverage prepared with jaggery was a common drink throughout the period, consumed by the people of various castes. Drinking of wine is known to the people.

The common people as well as the wealthy persons of the society were interested in using various kinds of ornaments. The use of ornaments and jewellery well depicted in Odishan sculptures found mention in contemporary literature. People of both sexes expressed eagerness to decorate their body as also the bodies of Gods and deities with fine ornaments made of precious and semi-precious stones and metals. Both rich and poor used ornaments. The execution of various ornaments clearly shows the high standard of craftsmanship and artistry achieved by the goldsmiths of the period. The jewellers made ornaments as to the taste of the time. The art of jewellery was a notable craft.

The Gajapati period is also remarkable for the development and growth of regional language and literature. The system of grant made to temples and the agrahara expedited the progress of education and learning during the period that vernacular literature began as one of the forces bearing on the lives of the masses in India. Sarala Dasa, during the period of Gajapati Kapilendra Deva is famous for his work Mahabharata, Chandi Purana and Vilanka Ramayana, all written in Odia language.[16] The post-Sarala period is also remarkable in Odia literature due to the emergence of Pancha Sakha and their literary contributions. Changes and continuity in the social life of Odisha was the general features. Thus, the stabilised social structure in ancient and early medieval Odisha dwindled away giving away to a more flexible society towards the later part of the medieval Odisha. In conclusion the Gajapati era witnessed a period of social harmony and cohesion in the society.

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