
UNIT 7 ECONOMY AND SOCIETY IN THE POST-GUPTA PERIOD*

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7.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we are going to explain to you the economic and social changes in the post-Gupta times. After reading this Unit, you should be able to learn about:

- origin and economic implications of land-grants;
- process and consequences of the gradual decline of cities, the nature of villages and village economy;
- nature of agrarian relations and agricultural production; and
- different forces which led to modifications in *varna* hierarchy, emergence of new castes, and position of women in society.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The post-Gupta period was characterized by certain changes in Indian economy.

*This Unit has been adopted from EHI-02, Block-9.

- 1) Many important cities (such as Taxila, Kaushambi, Pataliputra) ceased to exist after the Gupta period. This decline of urban settlements was not an isolated phenomenon; it seems to have been quite widespread.
- 2) Trade activities also suffered a setback because of various reasons. This is perhaps most clear from the fact that minting and circulation of coins were on a much more limited scale than before.

It may be noted that many of these changes had begun in the Gupta period itself. What we see is the emergence of a predominantly agrarian economy. Large-scale land grants; decline of trade, commerce and urban life; paucity of money; agrarian expansion and growing agrarian character of society; and the emergence of relatively closed local units of production and consumption were the chief characteristics of the economy. On this basis evolved a social structure broadly characterised by a sizable ruling landed aristocracy, intermediaries and a large body of impoverished peasantry. New social groups emerged, along with the proliferation of new castes, the hardening of caste relations and the acculturation of the tribes. There emerged a much more complex society in which social differentiation, represented by different groups like peasants, *brahmanas*, craftsmen, merchants, rulers etc. was present.

7.2 ECONOMY

Economy in post-Gupta period witnessed changes in its character. How does one explain the changes in economy? According to the assessment of some historians the crucial element in the chain of developments was the system of land-grants. Land-grants grew in number in the Gupta and especially post-Gupta times and became widespread throughout the country. Land grants were made to *brahmanas* and religious establishments like temples and monasteries on a large scale by kings, chiefs, members of the royal family and their feudatories. From the 5th century onwards not only were the revenues of the donated lands transferred to the donees but the mines and minerals in the said area were also transferred. The donated land, village or villages were exempted from the interference of soldiers and royal officials. Finally, kings and princes made over to the *brahmana* donees even the right to punish all offences against family, private property and person, with the privilege to enjoy the fines thus received.

Contemporary *Dharmashastra* literature recommended the grant of land or of revenues therefrom to state officials, in lieu of their salary. Among other things, land-grants also had a bearing on the question of land rights, the socio-economic conditions of the peasantry, the right to free enterprise of craftsmen and traders in the donated towns and the emergence of a relatively closed economy.

The attachment of peasants, artisans and merchants to their respective settlements and restrictions on their movements created an atmosphere in which the emergence of a closed economy was the natural result.

7.2.1 Decline of Trade

Commercial decline set in during the Gupta period, and it became more pronounced by the middle of the 6th century CE. The inflow of Roman coins into India stopped after the early centuries of the Common Era. The emergence of the Arabs and the Persians as competitors in trade did not augur well for Indian

merchants. Silk and spices were important items in the Indo-Byzantine trade. The Byzantium, however, learnt the art of growing silk worms in the middle of the 6th century CE. Consequently, the silk trade was badly affected. Whatever little remained of the contacts with Central Asia and Western Asia were completely wiped off by the Huna invasions.

It is said that the coastal towns of India carried on some trade with countries of South-East Asia and China. However, this interaction does not appear to have been of any intense kind.

Decline of trade was just not limited to foreign trade. Long-distance internal trade, too, suffered owing to the weakening of links between coastal towns and the interior towns and further between towns and villages.

This, however, is not to deny that trade in basic necessities such as salt, iron artefacts etc. continued. Moreover, some long-distance trade went on in prestigious, expensive luxury goods such as precious stones, ivory and horses. It, thus, seems that for quite a few centuries large-scale, organised trade was replaced by itinerant petty traders, pedlars and trickle trade.

7.2.2 Paucity of Coins

Decline of commerce is demonstrated by the paucity of coins in the post-Gupta period. Gold coins which were so abundant during the periods of the Kushanas and of the Guptas went out of circulation after the 6th century. The absence of silver and copper coins also attracts attention. The gold content of the later Gupta coins was only half of that of the Kushana coins. The coins of Harshavardhana are too meagre and the Rashtrakutas and the Palas who came to power in the Deccan and Bengal respectively in the 8th century issued no coins. Metallic currency was absent in most parts of northern India, Bengal, Odisha, Central India and the Deccan. What was true of these regions also holds good for South India.

It has been argued by some historians that earlier, coins served the purpose of currency in later period and rendered the issue of fresh coins unnecessary. However, the period under discussion was characterized by unprecedented agrarian expansion and this alone would have normally necessitated more metallic money. Further, coins were an expression of sovereignty. Unless the compulsions were serious enough, no ruler would have willingly forgone the privilege of minting coins in his own name. The decline of trade and the grant of land to high functionaries in lieu of money payments did away with the need for coins. Moreover, there is evidence for barter and the use of cowries as a medium of exchange in daily transactions.

7.2.3 Decline of Towns

Decline in trade, paucity of coins and absence of coin moulds and commercial seals indicate economic decline. The pre-Kushana and Kushana towns in northern India and those associated with the Satavahanas in the Deccan began to decay from the middle of the 3rd or the 4th century. What was true of northern India, Malwa and the Deccan was equally true of southern India. The sites such as Sanghol, Hastinapur, Atranjikhara, Mathura, Sonkh, Shravasti, Kaushambi, Khairadih, Chirand, Tamluk etc. in the Upper and Middle Gangetic plains

experienced decline. Early prosperous centres such as Ujjain, Nagar, Pauni, Ter, Bhokardan, Nasik, Paithan etc. spread over Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Maharashtra witnessed similar trends. Arikamedu in Tamil Nadu and the Satavahana urban centres in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka were no exception to this phenomenon. The second phase of urban decay set in after the 6th century and these centres ceased to be towns thereafter.

The decline of towns and cities is reflected in contemporary literature and inscriptions as well. Up to the 6th century, inscriptions and seals refer to the importance of artisans, craftsmen and merchants in the life of the towns. After this such information stopped. The decline of Buddhist towns in northern India is attested by the account of Hiuen Tsang who visited India during the time of Harshavardhana. Unlike the robust urban life so vividly depicted in Vatsayana's *Kamasutra*, post-Gupta literature such as the *Kuttanimatam* of Damodaragupta (7th century) is concerned with life in the countryside.

All settlements, however, were not rural. In the post-Gupta period non-agriculturist settlements appeared as seats of administration, military garrisons and religious or pilgrimage centres. Military camps are referred to as *skandhavana* in inscriptions of the 5th-8th centuries. There is evidence to suggest that certain towns continued to survive as a result of their conversion to centres of pilgrimage. All these non-agriculturist settlements, variously known as *pura*, *pattana*, *nagara* and *rajadhani*, were centres of consumption and not production.

7.3 AGRARIAN STRUCTURE

The patronage extended by kings, princes and chiefs to agriculture, improvement in irrigational facilities, increasing knowledge of agricultural sciences etc. were some of the causative factors which strengthened rural economy. Decline of towns may have led to the migration of a number of skilled artisans into the countryside. Land-grants in tribal frontiers brought virgin land under cultivation.

About 50 ruling powers were in existence in the 5th to the 7th centuries in the Deccan and Central India. They were spread over Maharashtra, eastern Madhya Pradesh, Andhra, Odisha and Bengal. The various new ruling dynasties in this region issued their own land-grants. Each of these states depended on revenues from land and agriculture. In fact, in post-Gupta times agriculture constituted the basis of the state. Thus, the rise of states in such areas in which states were absent earlier presupposes agrarian expansion and the spread of village economy.

The above-mentioned developments took place in rural settlements in early medieval India. *Grama* was the usual term for villages. However, all rural settlements were not of the same kind. We come across other terms denoting different types of rural settlements. *Palli* normally meant a tribal village. The expression *Pataka* stood for a part of a village. It was a kind of a hamlet with a name of its own but actually formed a part of a larger village. Settlements of herdsmen were called *ghosas*. However, it may be remembered that these terms representing different types of settlements were not always unchangeable categories. With the spread of agriculture and Brahmanical culture, tribal hamlets, too, changed in character.

A large number of copper-plate charters of the post-Gupta period while recording land-grants describe various types of land which include cultivated, uncultivated,

high, low, water-logged, marshy, grassy and forest land. Villages which were donated to and inhabited by the *brahmanas* were *Brahmadeyas*. *Agrahara* villages, although they were inhabited by *brahmanas*, were associated with non-*brahmanas* as well. The proprietary right of such villages, however, belonged to the *brahmanas* only. In South India such villages were also known as *mangalams*.

7.4 AGRARIAN RELATIONS

We shall now discuss the main features of agrarian relations which developed in the early medieval period.

7.4.1 Obligations of the Peasants

The donee was entitled to collect all kinds of taxes. He could collect regular and irregular taxes and fixed and unfixed payments. The donees enjoyed these exceptional advantages in addition to such regular taxes as *bhaga*, *bhoga*, *kara*, *uparikara*, *hiranya*, *udranga*, *halikakara*, etc. The Pallava records specify 18 to 22 kinds of taxes. By the turn of the 1st millennium CE the number of taxes increased enormously.

7.4.2 Feudal Land Tenure

Yajnavalkya and *Brihaspati*, authors of *Smriti* works, mention four grades of land rights in the same piece of land. According to them, holders of rights of different grades were:

- the *Mahipati* (king),
- *Kshetrasvamin* (master of the land),
- *Karshaka* (cultivator) and
- the sub-tenant.

Land-grants led to hierarchical rights over land and sub-infeudation. The practice gave rise to a hierarchy of landlords, which lived off the surplus produced by the actual cultivators. From the Pallava period onwards temple servants were remunerated through assignments of land. The implications are obvious. Religious establishments became landed beneficiaries and, in turn, they gave plots of land to their dependants such as petty officials, artisans, musicians, attendants etc. Such assignments could be subleased to the actual tiller of the soil. Likewise, temple land was leased out to tenants for cultivation.

7.4.3 Growth of Closed Economy

Early medieval Indian economy experienced the rise and growth of a number of rural settlements which were not linked to exchange networks and long-distance trade. Local needs came to be met locally. The movement of soldiers for wars, pilgrims to religious centres and *brahmanas* for the acquisition and enjoyment of land grants were possibly the only forms of spatial mobility. All this fostered strong local identity. The growing sense of localism and the self-sufficiency of the villages is reflected in expressions such as *gramadharama*, *gramacara*, and *sthanacara*: all referring to village or local practices in contemporary Puranic literature.

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Discuss briefly the decline of towns and trade.

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- 2) Discuss the main features of agrarian relations during the early medieval period.

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7.5 SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Land-grants and the emerging landed intermediaries wielding economic power and political authority modified the *varna*-divided society. The new social groups did not fit in with the four-fold *varna* system. The unequal distribution of landed property created social ranks which cut across social status based on *varna* considerations. The inclusion of the foreign ethnic groups and indigenous tribal chieftains in the *Kshatriya varna* as part of the ruling aristocracy, and the acculturated tribes in the *Shudra varna* not only swelled their ranks but also transformed the *varna*-divided society. Moreover, the earlier distinction between *Dvija* (twice born) and *Shudra* began to be modified in the period.

One's position in society did not simply depend on the *varna* to which one belonged. His social rank came to be connected with his position as a landholder among different categories of landholders. These tendencies began in this period and got accentuated in the 9th-10th centuries. From the 9th-10th centuries, the *Kayasthas*, traders and members of the rich dominant peasantry were also conferred titles such as *ranaka*, *nayaka* and so on. They constituted a part of the upper section of the society and ruling landed elite.

New *jatis* (castes) emerged. The increase in the number of new castes affected the *brahmanas*, *kshatriyas*, *kayasthas* and *shudras*. The number of mixed castes and untouchable castes increased. The transformation of craft guilds into castes as a result of the decline of trade and of urban centres and the localised hereditary character of the crafts helped the process of the formation of new *jatis*.

7.5.1 Lords and Peasants

It has already been pointed out that in the agrarian system of this period there were different grades of landlords as distinguished from the peasants. Terms such as *bhogi*, *bhokta*, *bhogapati*, *mahabhogi*, *brihadbhogi*, etc. were used for

the landed beneficiaries. The upper crust of landlords included such dignitaries as *ranaka*, *raja*, *samanta*, *mahasamanta*, *mandalesvara* and so on. The king, similarly, had many high-sounding titles, connoting his lordship and ownership of land.

The peasantry itself was not a homogeneous community. They were known by various names such as *karshaka*, *krishivala*, *kinasa*, *kshetraji*, *halika*, *ardhasiri*, *ardhika*, *kutumbi* and *bhurnikarshaka* among others. What is common to these expressions is that they seem to have nothing to do with control over land. However, they refer to different categories of tillers of the soil – dependent peasants, share-croppers, field labourers etc. – none of whom were in absolute, independent control over their holdings.

7.5.2 Proliferation of Castes

While a number of castes came to be incorporated within each *varna*, there are also examples of earlier cohesive communities breaking up into many *varnas* and *jatis*. The Abhira tribe provides a good example as it fragmented into Abhira *brahmanas*, Abhira *kshatriyas* and Abhira *shudras*.

Brahmanas

The number of castes which emerged among the *brahmanas* was considerable. *Brahmanas* who “commercialised” their priestly services, those who came in contact with the aboriginals or those who could not entirely avoid physical labour stood degraded in the eyes of the *srotriyaagrahara-brahmanas* “who did not engage in manual labour”. The migration of *brahmanas* to various regions for the enjoyment of land-grants also accelerated the process of caste and sub-caste formation within the *varna*. *Brahmanas* who stood close to political power and held high state offices were a different section. The eminent position held by such *brahmanas* led to the formation of different ranks within the *brahmana varna*. The same process was true also of the *kayasthas*.

Kshatriyas

Among the *kshatriyas*, proliferation of caste was caused by the emergence of new ruling houses from among the local tribes and the incorporation of foreign ethnic groups, wielding political power, into the mainstream of society. Among the foreign ethnic groups, the Bactrian Greeks, Shakas, Parthians, Hunas etc. were accommodated in the *varna* system as second class *kshatriyas*. The *kshatriya* castes multiplied from the 5th-6th centuries when many tribal chiefs were transformed into “Hinduised” *rajasthas* through the approval of the *brahmanas* whom they patronized and the performance of Vedic sacrifices. The heterogeneous origins of the ruling dynasties and their desire for social acceptance explain the proliferation of castes in the *kshatriya* community.

Shudras

Endogamous groups coming from various communities and regions vastly expanded the base of the *shudra varna*. Petty peasant castes, rich peasants, share-croppers and artisanal castes, with unequal access to economic power were included in the *shudra varna* in Gupta and post-Gupta times. Tribes became castes as a consequence of their gradual transformation as peasants and these peasant groups were incorporated into the brahmanic society as *shudras*. This considerably added to the number and variety of *shudra* castes.

7.5.3 Growth of *Kayasthas*

The scribe or the *kayastha* community was a product of the socio-economic forces of the times. Land-grants involved the transfer of land revenues and land to *brahmanas*, religious establishments and officials. This and other complex administrative functions created the need for a body of scribes and record keepers who were employed to draft assignment of land and keep details of land transfer including various items of revenue. The Gupta period witnessed the beginning of fragmentation of land. The maintenance of proper records of individual plots was very much necessary for settling disputes. This difficult job was carried out by a class of writers who were known variously as *kayastha*, *karana*, *karanika*, *pustapala*, *chitragupta*, *aksapatalika* etc. The *kayasthas* were only one group of the community of scribes. However, gradually the scribes and record keepers as a community came to be known as *kayasthas*. Initially, the educated members from the upper *varnas* were called upon to work as *kayasthas*. In course of time the scribes recruited from various *varnas* began to limit their social interaction to members of their profession and started practising community endogamy and family exogamy. That completed the process of caste formation among the *Kayasthas* (endogamy and commensality are the two basic traits of the caste system).

7.5.4 The Untouchables

The “impure” castes or the untouchables had assumed a definite shape by the early Common centuries. Nevertheless, they were numerically small. From around the 3rd century CE onwards the practice of untouchability appears to have intensified and the number of untouchables registered a rise. Katyayana, a *Dharmashastra* writer of the Gupta period, was the first to use the expression *asprishya* in the sense of untouchables. By the turn of the 1st millennium CE hunters, fishermen, butchers, executioners and scavengers appear as untouchables. Kalidasa, Varahamihira, Fa-Hsien, Bana and others have given a vivid account of the social disabilities imposed on them. The *Chandalas* were only one section of the untouchables, although the lowest in the social ladder.

It is difficult to explain the phenomenal growth in the number of untouchables during this period and later. However, Brahmanical and Buddhist sources suggest that most untouchable castes were originally backward tribes. It has been argued that their backwardness and resistance to the process of acculturation and “Brahmanization” may have prevented them from being absorbed within the society and pushed them to the position of untouchables. They may have been dispossessed of their lands and made to settle outside the villages.

7.5.5 Crafts and Castes

During this period several groups of artisans and craftsmen lost their earlier status and many even came to be regarded as untouchables. To some extent this may have resulted from the decline of urban centres where craftsmen were in great demand. Craft guilds became transformed into castes and this transformation effectively sums up the changes in the nature and organization of craft production. Various castes such as the *svarnakara* (goldsmith), *malakara* (garland maker), *chitrakara* (painter), *napita* (barber), etc. emerged out of the numerous crafts (practiced by different groups). Weavers, dyers, tailors, barbers, shoemakers,

ironsmiths, washermen and others were reduced to the position of untouchables by the turn of the millennium.

7.6 DECLINE OF *VAISHYAS* AND RISE IN THE SOCIAL STATUS OF THE *SHUDRAS*

The *Dharmashastras* and similar literature suggest that a major change was taking place in the social structure within the framework of the four *varnas*. A sizable section of the *shudras* were rising in social and economic status after their association with agriculture, and sections of the *vaishyas*, particularly those at the lower end, were descending to the level of the *shudras*. Thus, there was a change in the relative positions of the two lower *varnas*. The *shudras* were no longer slaves and servants; they emerged as tenants, share-croppers and cultivators. Urban decline too forced many *shudra* artisans to take to cultivation.

During the heyday of Indian foreign trade in the post-Mauryan times the *vaishyas* got identified with urban occupations and towns. In a predominantly agrarian setting of the post-Gupta period, the *vaishya* traders and merchants suffered economic loss and social degradation. The distinction between the *vaishyas* and the *shudras* got blurred as the differences in their occupations and standards of living faded away.

7.7 POSITION OF WOMEN

The impression that one gets about women's position in society during this period is that of progressive decline. The law-books provide for the marriage of women at an early age, pre-puberty marriage being preferred. Formal education was denied to them. Women and property came to be bracketed together with adverse consequences for women's status. They were generally denied property rights. However, in the case of widows there was some improvement in proprietary rights. It may be pointed out that the provision for *stridhana* (which literally means: wealth of women) actually did not amount to much, for it did not extend beyond rights to personal jewels, ornaments and gifts. The joint references to women and *shudras* in contemporary literature such as the *Brihat Samhita* amply demonstrate the plight of women. They were debarred from various sacrifices and ceremonies. The practice of *Sati* (self-immolation by wife on the funeral pyre of her dead husband) gained social acceptance during this period. The change of women's *gotra* upon marriage can be dated to the period after the 5th century CE. This constituted an important development because it marked the curtailment of their rights in their parental home and symbolised the final triumph of the patriarchal system of male-dominated society.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) How were the main features of the status of untouchables in the post-Gupta period?

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- 2) Discuss the changes in the *Vaishya* community with reference to their economic decline.

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- 3) Discuss the position of women during this period.

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- 4) The proliferation of castes was an important development in the Gupta and post-Gupta period. Explain.

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7.8 SUMMARY

The different dimensions of change in economy and society from about the middle of the 1st millennium CE have been considered. These changes were extremely significant in so far as they brought the ancient period to an end and marked the beginning of a new stage in Indian history. The ways in which the new stage marked a departure from the ancient period can be seen in the major changes themselves. The Gupta and post-Gupta times were characterized by the emergence of a class of landlords and a class of subjugated peasantry in an agrarian economy which was predominantly rural and agrarian, conspicuous decline of trade, decline of towns and the paucity of metallic money.

However, the period was also characterized by immense dynamism. It is in this context that such changes as appeared later have to be appreciated: the growth of new crops, the construction of irrigational facilities, the increasing awareness about plant and animal diseases, the improvements in other aspects related to agriculture, the growth in the size of some settlements which emerged as meeting points in the midst of rural clusters and the re-emergence of exchange networks, fairs and trading centres.

The post-Gupta period was characterized by important social changes. The structure and character of *varna* hierarchy as they are known from *Dharmashastra* literature, were radically transformed. In northern India the *vaishyas* became hardly distinguishable from the *shudras*. In eastern India, the Deccan and the south there were mainly the *brahmanas* and the *shudras*.

7.9 KEY WORDS

Acculturation	: adapting to a new culture. Here we mean Brahmanic culture.
Autochthonous	: indigenous, native, aboriginal.
Barter	: exchange of goods for other goods.
Benefice	: gifted landed property held by <i>Brahmanas</i> etc.
Beneficiary	: receiver of benefits.
Caste-peasant base	: referring to early settled agricultural society whose members were socially classified along caste lines.
Charter	: deed conveying grant of rights.
Commensality	: eating and interacting together as a group for mutual benefit.
Donee	: recipient of gift.
Endogamy	: the practice of marrying within one's own group.
Exogamy	: marriage outside one's own group.
Exotic	: something expensive and introduced from abroad
Itinerant	: travelling from place to place.
Patriarchal	: families governed by paternal rights.
Pedlar	: travelling salespersons were socially classified along caste lines.

7.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) See Sub-section 7.2.1 and 7.2.3
- 2) See Section 7.4

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) See Sub-section 7.5.4
- 2) See Section 7.6
- 3) See Section 7.7
- 4) See Sub-Section 7.5.2

7.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

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