**Social And Economic Life of North-West India in 6th Century BC**

The sixth century BC marked an important stage in the Indian history as far as the development of new religions is concerned. Numerous religious sects arose in the mid-Gangetic plains as a result of an upheaval of new ideas and the resulting rise of new philosophical tenets. These ideas were so diversified that the philosophical speculations based on them varied from religious speculations to the search for the Truth which the Upanishads had emphasized. The efforts in this direction brought about results in this century. In this period, we notice a growing resentment to the ritualistic orthodox ideas of the Brahmanas. In other words, the old Vedic religion had ceased to be a living force. The spiritual unrest and the intellectual stimulation led to the rise of various heterodox religious movements. The religious sects were based on regional customs and rituals practiced by different people living in north-east India. Of these sects, Jainism and Buddhism were the most important and they developed into most potent well organised popular religious reform movements.

Sixth century BC also witnessed many religious movements in different parts of the world. Heraclitus in Eoinia Island, Socrates in Greece, Confucious in China, Zoroaster in Persia, Isaiah in Babylon preached new ideas. These widely separated parts of the world displayed a wave of discontentment with the traditions of Kingships, priesthood and ritualistic sacrifices. People were waking up to find answers to their questions regarding salvation and the ultimate Truth. At the same time, Brahmanism by this time had made its influence so widely spread on Indian soil that people started realizing that the degeneration in Indian society was mainly because of the evils of Brahmanism. Brahmanism was associated with perverted values. The emphasis on sacrifices, rituals and the dominance of Brahmanas had vitiated the original doctrines of Brahmanism. Society was largely guided by Brahmanism which was firmly established by now and priesthood had also become predominant. It was against this background of exploitation of the masses by the Brahmanas and discrimination among people on the basis of caste system that Mahavira and Buddha revolted. They came forward as reformers very much determined to clean Hinduism of its innumerable evil practices and evils. They did not want to start new or independent religions but drew their inspiration from the teachings as embodied in the Upanishads. They provided a rational approach to handle the problems that had crept in the Indian society as a result of the prevailing complexities. They did not approve the costly religious rituals and bloody sacrifices. There was hatred against the prevailing social order which led to pitiable conditions of the low born. The changing features of social and economic life, such as the growth of towns, expansion of the artisan class and the rapid development of trade and commerce also focused on the necessity to bring about changes in society and religion. The new ideas brought about by the reform movements challenged the established social order particularly the caste-system, the religious rituals and sacrifices, the supremacy of the Brahmanas, particularly by the Kshatriyas, and all the dead customs of the society. Outwardly, this spirit of the age was against the existing organization of the society and inwardly against the caste system. It was based on elevation of man individually and spiritually. It emphasized personal liberty and purity and claimed that every individual had the right to attain Nirvana. These new religious ideas emerged out of the prevailing socio-economic and religious conditions of the times.

Post-Vedic society was clearly divided into four varnas: Brahmanas, Kshatiryas, Vaishyas and Sudras. Each varna was assigned well-defined function. Though varna was based on birth, the two higher varnas captured power, prestige and privileges at the cost of the two lower varnas. The Brahmanas who were allotted the functions of priests and teachers, claimed the highest status in society. They demanded several privileges, including those of receiving gifts and exemption from taxation and punishment. The next in hierarchy were the Kshatiryas who lived on the taxes collected from the cultivators. The third category thrived on agriculture, cattle-breeding and trade. They were the main tax payers. All these three classes were considered Dvijas or twice born. The Sudras formed the lowest rung of the social order and were meant to serve the upper three castes as domestic slaves, agricultural labourers etc. in post-Vedic times. They were the down-trodden class because of the varna. This varna-divided society generated frustration among the adversely affected people. The Vaishyas and the Sudras were not satisfied with the division of society on the basis of birth but we do not have evidence of their open resistance. The reaction came in strongly from the Kshatriya class because Mahavira and Buddha, both belonged to Kshatriya clan.

However, the real cause of the rise of these new religions lay in the spread of a new agrarian economy in north-eastern India. The primary factor that revolutionized the material life of the people around 700 BC in eastern UP and Bihar was the beginning of the use of iron. Iron implements were made and used for agricultural purposes which resulted in enhancement of agriculture land and its production. Increased agriculture production led to the growth of trade and commerce. It resulted in the growth of cities where the population of traders and artisans was concentrated. It required changes in society and certain well entrenched traditions. The Vaishyas, having accumulated wealth and property, were gaining higher social status. The trading and commercial communities i.e. Vaishyas wanted their private property to be secure and social and religious sanctions for foreign trade and sea-travelling which, by then, was not sanctioned by the Vedic religion. These economic conditions necessitated changes in the society as well. The newly emerged financially strong class wanted changes in their status but the Kshatriyas took advantage of utilizing this opportunity to gain more importance and abolish the supremacy of the priestly class. That is why the preceptors of both Jainism and Buddhism, which came forward as reform movements and later became most popular religious movements, were Kshatriya princes. On the basis of the support that they acquired from Vaishyas and Sudras, the Kshatriyas opposed the supremacy of the Brahmanas, the prevalence of caste system, the complexities of rituals and sacrifices and desired change in caste according to Karma and not according to birth. Both these religious sects, therefore provided grounds to bring about changes in the social and economic set up. It was for this reason that Jainism discarded agriculture but did not protest against trade and Buddhism exhibited favourable opinion towards sea-voyages.

Prof. R.S. Sharma in his article on class formation and its material basis in the upper Gangetic Basin(1000-500 BC) says that northern India entered into a full-fledged iron age by the sixth century BC. In the second phase of iron associated with the NBP levels (500-200 BC) we encounter lot of agricultural implements. The use of iron led to the urban settlements in UP, Magadha and Bihar. Now, the village was not the neolithic village growing essentially in isolation, nor the chalcolithic village with restricted trade and inter-relationships. It was the prosperous iron using village, whose prosperity increased with easier access to both iron ore and more land for cultivation and this led to surplus production. Thus, this became the stable base for the growth of towns. This urbanization of the Gangetic valley is often referred to as the sacred urbanization with iron technology as its crucial factor. Surplus produce and specialisation of crafts, increase in trade based on production as well as improved communication (both by land and through the use of river navigation) all combined together to make urbanisation possible. This in turn produced the characteristics associated with urban centres the building of fortified cities, the introduction of script, the use of coinage (punch marked coins), a wide range of intellectual and metaphysical speculation (from the Carvakas to the Ajivikas), some of which reflected the requirement and aspirations of the new urban groups , the artisans the merchants and the traders.

The Jaina canonical writings mention different kinds of urban centres in the age of Mahavira. Taking the country as a whole nearly sixty towns are assigned to the period 600-300 BC. The big cities like Sravasti were 20 in number and 6 of them were important enough to be associated with the passing away of Gautama Buddha. These were Champa, Rajgriha, Saketa, Kaushambi, Benaras and Kushinara. Thus, from Buddha’s time onwards, a remarkable beginning of town life in north-eastern India seems to have taken place.

Trade was both the cause and effect of increasing urbanization. The Jatakas, the Buddhist birth stories, make numerous references to caravans with 500 or 1000 carts going from one place to another. One such group of 500 carts is mentioned as passing by a street where Gautama Buddha was meditating. Iron technology by helping to clear jungles facilitated the process of moving from place to place.

Trade, on an increasing scale, led to the birth of money economy i.e. coinage. The earliest coins discovered cannot be dated beyond the time of Buddha. These coins were issued by the merchants and bore punch-marks. The use of coins in this period seems to have became fairly common and even the price of a dead mouse is stated in terms of money.

Diverse arts and crafts developed. Apart from such service occupations as those of the washerman and dyer, the painter, the barber, the tailor, weaver and the cook, several manufacturing crafts (reed-working pottery, vehicle making, needle-making, gold smithery, metal smithery, carpentry, ivory-working garland-making and silk manufacturing) are mentioned in the early Buddhist writings. The existence of so many crafts implies increasing specialization in the field of commodity production.

Now, the artisans and craftsmen were often organized into guilds. Later, Buddhist works refer to the existence of 18 guilds in Rajgriha, though the names of only four, wood workers, smiths workers, leather workers and painters are specified. Each guild inhabited a particular section of the town. This led not only to the localization of crafts and industries but also to their hereditary transmission from father to son. Every guild was presided over by a head(Jetthaka). The Setthis, who also sometimes headed the guilds, handled trade and industries. They generally lived in towns but those among them who were granted revenues of villages for their maintenance (bhogagama) by the king had to keep links with the countryside. The Setthi was in some sense a financier or banker and sometimes also head of a trade guild. He was treated with respect even by absolute and despotic kings. All this implies that in towns, artisans and Setthis were emerging as important social groups.

In the countryside also, a new social group was coming up to the forefront by virtue of its wealth. The greater part of land came to be owned by gahapati (peasant-proprietors). In the earlier period, the word gahapati (literally the lord of the house) stood for the host and principal sacrificer at any considerable sacrifice. But in the age of the Buddha, it came to mean the head of a large patriarchal household of any caste who got respect primarily because of his wealth, which in the post-vedic period was measured not so much in cattle as in land. References to several affluent gahapatis occur in the early Buddhist writings. The gahapatis Mendaka is described as paying wages to the royal army, as donor he is said to have instituted 1250 cow herds to serve the Buddha and his samgha. Anathapindika, another gahapati is said to have paid a fabulous price for Jetavana, a plot of land which he donated to the Buddha. Sometimes, the gahapatis are also represented as lending money to promising shopkeepers. The emergence of the gahapatis from the Vedic householder to a comparatively wealthy head of the household may indicate the growing disparity of wealth within the society. Common people, slaves and laborers, seem to have coveted his wealth and wished his harm; often he is depicted as keeping a bodyguard to protect himself.

Accustomed to the old ways of life some individuals found it difficult to adjust themselves to the breakup of the old tribal society caused by new material conditions which gave rise to social inequalities. Whatever may have been the ultimate objectives of Buddhism, ordinary people, whose support really mattered to the new religion, were certainly attracted towards it because of its successful response to the challenge posed by the social developments generated by the material conditions created by the use of iron, plough agriculture, coins and the rise of towns in eastern UP and Bihar.

Many aboriginal non-Aryan tribes, which remained unaffected by the knowledge of iron-technology lived at a very low level of material culture. The cultural lack of the aboriginals, living mainly as hunters and fowlers in contrast to the Varna-divided society, which possessed the knowledge of implements and agriculture, perhaps led in the post-Vedic period to the growth of untouchability.

The newly developed features of the social and economic life of people did not fit in with the Vedic ritualism and animal sacrifice. The conflict between the Vedic religious practices and the aspirations of the rising social groups led to the search of new religions and philosophical ideas which would fit with the basic changes in the material life of the people. Thus, in the sixth century BC, in the Gangetic valley there emerged many new religious teachers who preached against Vedic religion. Ajita Kesha Kambalin propagated a thorough going materialistic doctrine called annihilationism (uchchaedavada). From this, the Lokayata or Charvaka school of philosophy is believed to have derived a great deal. Pakudha Katyayana, another religious leader, held that just as the earth, water, air and light are primary indestructible elements, so are sorrow, happiness and life. It has been suggested that from his ideas, the later Vaisheshika school originated. Purana Kassapa, the third contemporary preacher, which regarded the soul as distinct from the body laid the foundations of what later came to be known as the Sankhya school of philosophy. But of all the sects prevalent in northern India around the 6th century BC, only Jainism and Buddhism came to stay in India as independent religions.

Also, the urban setting in the age of the Buddha gave rise to certain features of town life which did not find favour with the Brahmanical society. The urban surroundings and breakup of the old tribal family created a class of alienated women who took to prostitution as a source of livelihood. So prostitution, characteristic of urban society, is tolerated by Buddhists but not by Brahmanas.

The use of iron weapons revolutionized military equipment and added to 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 the Brahmanas and Kshatriya is evident in many texts. This partly explains the Kshatriya origin of Mahavira and Gautama and also the fact that from the beginning of Buddhism texts accord the first place to the Kshatriya and the second to the Brahmanas. As the Kshatriya rulers could be maintained only by regular payment of taxes, so both Brahmanical and Buddhist 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 (contract). In this way, with the change from nomadic pastoralism to settled agrarian villages, tribal identity was extended to territorial identity as is reflected in tribal names being given to geographical areas. This, in turn, gave rise to the concept of the state with both monarchical and non-monarchical form of government and woven into this concept were the institutions of caste and property, as already pointed out. With the rise of city life in the Ganges valley, a new pattern developed in the sub-continent, the cultural dominance of the Ganga region – the Hindustan of later centuries –exerted itself over all the regions.