

PASSAGE TO EARLY MEDIEVAL PHASE: EMERGENCE OF TEMPLE CENTRED SOCIETY IN EARLY BIHAR

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Post Mauryan historiography of ancient India suggests two important factors, i.e. (i) foreign invasions and (ii) shift of the political and cultural centre from the lower Ganga valley to Central India as well as upper Ganga valley. This had effected the ancient glory of Pataliputra and its people a lot. Its whole gamut of economic as well as political dominance over other parts of the country started declining from the period of 2nd cent. B.C. onwards. Loss of its position as epi-centre for political activities denied the mercantile community of Pataliputra advantages which these people had enjoyed for not less than four-five centuries. State patronage for a long period of time made the business community of Pataliputra more dependent on state power rather than trade or business equations. The people of Magadha were having one more advantage that was Pataliputra's geographical location. Being situated on the bank of the Ganga and connected with the 'Uttarapatha' and 'Dakshinapath' was also very helpful for trading activities. But the change of political fortune left its impact on this region. As a consequence of the loss of patronage from state the mercantile community of Bihar were less prepared to face stiff challenges posed by the mercantile communities from other regions. In the post-Mauryan period there are stray references about traders of Magadh trading with the people of Benaras.¹ In *Milinda-panho* there are references that traders from Magadh were carrying on business in far away Sialkot;² but the volume of the trade started decreasing as compared to the earlier period. Faded references for trade are themselves indicative of the deterioration. The Kusana³ two gold coins and few copper coins from two or three places supplement the idea. The situation further deteriorated during the pre Gupta era. Frequent foreign invasions and decline in the Indo-Roman trade left the overall economic condition in a very miserable state. Political instability as well as economic insignificance seem to have compelled the people of Bihar to concentrate more on rural areas. The trade situation was not conducive as compared to the agrarian economy, which was yielding good results. The main reason for development in the field of agriculture was probably the fertility of the soil and the infrastructure provided by the Mauryan empire. The horizontal expansion of rural settlements continued during the Sunga and Kanva rules. Political unrest and upheavals throughout the period were causing impediments for any sustained mercantile activity in this region. In these circumstances Brahmanical religious reform movement and the reaction against the dominant Buddhist ideas also flourished.⁴ Probably this was not confined to state politics only, but also spread among the masses and the aggressive form of Brahmanism found its route. Performance of *yajnas* (sacrifices) by the rulers⁵ was one of the obvious markers of the situation.

The dynastic history of Bihar from the post-Sunga period till the rise of the Guptas in early 4th century A.D. is undocumented and therefore very sketchy. After the establishment of the Gupta empire the economic condition of Bihar does not seem to have changed. The economy of Bihar during the Guptas was also predominantly rural. Land became the main source of sustenance. Two spurious plates of Samudra Gupta— suggest that peasants and artisans were confined to their respective villages so that their self sufficient economy might not be disturbed.

In this socio-economic situation people were left with sufficient surplus time for intellectual as well as religious activities. The horizon of Buddhists was widened by the philosophical ideas of Aryadeva, Vasubandhu, Buddhaghosa and Dinnaga. Inscriptions and seals found in various places of Bihar testify to the phenomenal growth of Vaisnavism, Saktism and Saivism during the Gupta age. In the period under survey there was also a restatement of the values of life and affirmation of the Puranic values, which never denied the authority of the Vedas and held the *Sruti* as the infallible source of religion. An outcome of the greater intellectual activity was the controversies between the rival religious

movements and philosophical schools.⁷ Steps taken by the Gupta Kings strengthened the growth and spread of Brahmanical religion among the masses.⁸ Inscriptions of the Gupta period suggest that people of Bihar during this age were well acquainted with Vedic and Puranic myths. The powers and qualities of the king have been expressed through Puranic analogies. In one of the inscriptions Samudra Gupta has been described as equal to the Gods Dhanda, Varuna, Indra and Antaka and who was the very axe of the God Krtanta.⁹ The inscriptions of the Maukharis who ruled in the Gaya region in the first half of the sixth century A.D. frequently alluded to the Puranic deities.¹⁰ The personal religion of Gupta rulers i.e. Budha Gupta, Narasimha Gupta, Kumara Gupta III and Vinaya Gupta whose royal seals have been found at Nalanda, must have helped to increase the influence of Vaisnavism in Bihar. The Basarh seals prove the popularity of Vaisnavism in North Bihar.¹² Popular during the period was the *Avatara* concept of Vaisnavism.¹³ This *Avataravada* may be taken as an example of religious conflict and accommodation, because believers in this theory were trying to incorporate Buddha into their own faith. Whether it was the Buddhist *Dharmachakra* or the debate over the worship of the footprint of the deity, the believers of Brahmanical religion have their argument that these forms of worship were adopted by Buddhism from Vaisnavism. The practice of worshipping foot print first started with the worship of the foot print of Vishnu at Vishnupada temple of Gaya since the 4th century A.D.¹⁴ Not only Vaisnavism but other branches of Brahmanical religion were equally popular in contemporary Bihar. Aniconic and iconic forms and representations of Siva have been found in a number of places like Basarh, Bhagalpur, Nalanda and Gaya. Other than these Saktism is known from the inscriptions and images in Barabar hills. There is clear evidence for Sun worship from various places i.e. two seals from Basarh,¹⁵ image of Surya from Barauni,¹⁶ etc. The existence of the votaries of the Sun in Gaya, Shahabad and Bhagalpur, a temple of the Sun at Deo-Barunanak and Nalanda are enough to prove the popularity of Sun God among the masses.

Besides these forms of worship by the common people, the idea of *Bhakti* was also prevalent among them. Reference to the veneration of the foot-prints of Vishnu and Siva at Gaya, Basarh and Baiskaran are available. Ridge from Baiskaran, a place near Bhagalpur, show the influence of the doctrine of *Bhakti*. The cult of *Bhakti* meant that the universe was a fraction of God and human beings should earn His grace by complete surrender.¹⁷ References opposing this concept are also available during this period as Buddhist scholars like Aryadeva, Bhavaviveka and Chandrakirti who flourished in Bihar during the Gupta age have criticized the Sankhya, Vaiseshika and Mimamsa schools.¹⁸ Hsuan Tsang's account reveals that Brahmanical temples were more numerous in Vrji (Vaisali) and Kajangala (Rajmahal) areas.¹⁹ He found nearly fifty Buddhist monasteries as compared to some tens of temples in Magadh.²⁰ From these two references by Hsuan Tsang it is clear that temple construction in Bihar started during the Gupta period. Hsuan-Tsang's account could be taken as attestation for the idea of sectarian rivalry between the followers of these two popular religions of the period. Involvement of state in this religious rivalry is not found. Rather being believers of the Brahmanical faith Sunga rulers were responsible for the erection of railings at Sanchi and Gupta rulers donated lands to the Nalanda Monastery. It was the common people and intellectuals who were responsible for the competitiveness although it did not give place to intolerance.

Further in the post Gupta era urban economy deteriorated, trade and currency network were marginalized in the newly emerging structure of society. In this period we have enough evidence to prove the emergence of feudalism. Land grants were gifted to the Brahmanas and many restrictions were imposed on the peasantry.²¹ We have definitive evidence of extensive royal grants to Nalanda monastic establishment both by the later kings of the Gupta dynasty and Harsha.²² It is also claimed that the later Gupta King, Damodara Gupta who ruled in the 6th century A.D., created 100 *agraharas*.²³ Similarly, a prosperous village was given to Goddess Bhavani²⁴ another village was granted to some priests.²⁵ The number of land grants apparently proliferated by the end of the 8th century A.D. due to the extension of Pala rule in Bihar. Many villages were granted according to the *Bhumichidranayaya*, which has been suggested as a tenure of bringing virgin land

under cultivation.²⁶ The overall pattern of agrarian economy did effect the nature of contemporary urban economy as well. The existence of towns in early medieval Bihar seems to have been well rooted in the contemporary milieu. Towns being a super structural manifestation of the techno-economic base, underwent a decisive transformation in their prime features, a development which was in consonance with the new economic pattern. Earlier urban centres of Bihar declined or disappeared by the beginning of the 7th century A.D. Pataliputra started losing its importance during the Gupta period²⁷ primarily due to its disassociation from mercantile activities.²⁸ The new towns that emerged during the period had a distinctive nature compared to earlier urban centres. These transformed towns now revolved round two functions, political and religio-educational. An attempt to identify such centres in different parts of Bihar underlines either their ecclesiastical or politico-administrative basis, they were either religion centred or fortified administrative nuclei.²⁹

Trade primarily due to the new social context was sought to be localized, a development well articulated with the popularity of *hattas* (local market). They were periodical in nature and near the religious centres. An inscription on a bronze image from Nalanda refers to *Devapaladevahatta* near Nalanda and another seal from Nalanda refers to *Sri Nalanda Sri Dharmahatta*. An inscription on the image of Avalokitesvara found in the Sun temple at Bargaon near Nalanda refers to another *hatta* named *Talahatta* (Tal is the region where Nalanda is situated) in Nalanda.³⁰

In these economic and social circumstances religious centres developed, which further led to the construction of temples by the rulers as well as by the locally powerful communities. It must be noted that these temples were not as gigantic or of great artistic value either as compared to the Buddhist monasteries of contemporary Bihar. The reason behind this was probably the fact that the Buddhist monasteries were either built by the state or supported directly by them as well as patronised by the rich business community. On the contrary few of the Brahmanical structures were getting these advantages and they were having support of the local followers. From the various excavation and exploration reports by archaeologists temple structures of this period have been reported very often. But the ancient historiography of Bihar obsessed with the Buddhist, Jaina and other heretodox monuments, has tended to just ignore it. The question why such a large number of temples came up during this period which are spread over the whole of modern Bihar, particularly near the important Buddhist sites, was never posed. Moreover, the question why the Pala rulers who were known for their Buddhist inclination later extended critical support to Brahmanas has also remained unaddressed.

As far as the temples are concerned they were not concentrated in one pocket of Bihar but spread over a wide area starting from South Deo-temple at Aurangabad, Vishnupada temple at Gaya, Apshed near Nawada, Sun temple of Bargaon, near Nalanda, temple of Siva and Vishnu at Valgudar, Deo-Barunarak near Ara, Bhagirath at Munger, Mundesvari temple of Rohtas to Vatesvarasthana near Patharaghata, adjacent to Vikramsila. The situation in North Bihar seems to be not different from the South. Many temple structures are reported i.e., Dumra, Akaur, Uchhaitha, Kopagarh, Kapilesvara, Mangrauni Balirajgarh, Andhra Thari and Rajnagar in Madhubani and Darbhanga districts.³¹ Pandavgarh³² in Samastipur, Naulagarh and Jaimangalagarh³³ in Begusarai district and Bangaon in Saharsa district provide evidence for temples.

The above mentioned temples of early medieval Bihar were not constructed only in this period, but the construction activities started from the Gupta period itself.³⁴ Constitution of the fief or the free holdings as private domains of governmental jurisdiction and autonomous units of surplus production took place by the end of 6th century A.D. In the religious sector, these developments seemed to motivate the substitution of old sacrificial liturgy by the temple based sectarian units. The construction activities continued on a large scale during the post-Gupta period and subsequently this resulted in *Tirthayatras*. The people of Bihar during the early medieval period were quite familiar with this idea. Particularly Gaya and Rajgriha developed as centres for *tirtha* as early as 4th century A.D. people started going to these places for *Sraddha*.³⁵ References

regarding local markets near these temples are examples of economic activities being carried out at these places. The growing importance of *Tirthayatras* succeeded to some extent in establishing a worthwhile contact between the other centres of the contemporary period. Religious centres were well connected to each other by the land and river routes. Majority of these centres were situated on the ancient trade routes of Bihar i.e. Mithila-Rajgriha, Mithila-Kapilavastu, Mithila -Champa, Mithila-Tamralipti, Pataliputra-Champa, Rajgriha-Gaya and Pataliputra-Gaya. A survey of early medieval temples of Bihar thus reflects the significant changes in the social structure. Society became rural and the surplus from the agrarian economy was invested in religious activities because the contemporary economic structure was not attracting investments. In the agrarian structure, the big land-holding class had developed and possibly these were the people, influenced by Puranic ideology and the *Bhakti* cult, who were responsible for the construction of temples in various regions of Bihar. The rulers and the feudal lords also immensely contributed in this process.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Milindapanho*, in SBE, XXXV ed. by Maxmueller, p.2.
2. *Ibid.*, p.244.
3. Two later Kusana gold coins were found at Pataliputra during 1912-1913, Ratan Tata excavation and kept in Patna Museum, but unfortunately it was stolen in a later period. Their stock nos. are 2091 and 2092 respectively.
4. B.P. Sinha, 'Political History of South Bihar, c.187-30 B.C.', chapter XX, *Comprehensive History of Bihar*, Vol.I, KPJRI, Patna, 1974, p.784.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *EI*, XXV, no.9, 1.9, C II, iii, no.60, II. 12-4.
7. *Bodh Gaya Inscription of Mahanaman*, yr. 269/588-89 A.d., *CII*, III, pp.276-277.
8. The Bihar Stone Pillar Inscription of Skandagupta, *EI*, XXIV, p.285.
9. *CII*, III (Text) pp.49, 51.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *MASI*, No.66, pp.64-67.
12. *ASIAR*, 1903-4, pp.110-111, Seal No.31.
13. *ASIAR*, 1913-14, pp.126, 133, Seal No.54 & 191.
14. D.C. Sircar, *Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol.IV, p.130.
15. *ASIAR*, 1903-04, No.9, pl.XI; 1913-14, p.149, No.607.
16. Found by Prof. R.K. Choudhury, presently the image is kept in G.D. College, Begusarai Museum.
17. *Bhagvatgita*, X, 42.
18. Vidhushekhara Bhattacharya (ed.), *Catuhstaka of Aryadeva*, Visva-bharati, pt.11, 1913.
19. T. Watters, *On Hsuan-Tsang's Travel in India*, Vol.II, pp.63, 81, 178, 183.
20. *Ibid.*, pp.86-87.
21. V.K. Thakur, *Historiography of Indian Feudalism: Towards a Model of Early Medieval Indian Economy: c.A.D. 600-1000*, Patna, 1989, p.87.
22. In the first half of the 7th century A.D. the monastery of Nalanda was maintained by the revenue of about 100 villages. S. Beal, *Buddhist Records of the Eastern World*; London, 1906, p.112. While in the second half of the same century this number rose to 200. J. Takakusu, *A Record of the Buddhist Religion as Practised in India and Malaya Archipelago, 671-695 A.D.*, New Delhi, p.65.
23. J.F. Fleet, *CII*, Vol.III, no.42, 11.8-10.
24. *Ibid.*, no.501.9.
25. *Ibid.*, no.46, 11.6-7.
26. R.S. Sharma, 'Social and Economic Condition: A.D. 550-1200', *CHB* Vol.I. Pt. II, p.370.
27. A.S. Attekar and V.K. Mishra, *Report on Kumhar Excavations*, 1951-55, p.11.
28. V.K. Thakur, *Urbanisation in Ancient India*, New Delhi, 1981, p.261.
29. Anil Kumar, *Trade in Early Medieval Eastern India*, Patna, 2001, p.17.
30. *Ibid.*, p.51.

31. Survey was done by Dr. D.K. Chakrabarti and the Directorate of Archaeology, Bihar in 1991.
32. Excavation by KPJRI, Patna, 2001.
33. As reported by Prof. R.K. Choudhary.
34. T. Watters, *op.cit.*
35. P.N. Pathak "Development of the Ritual of *Sraddha* in Early Smritis and Puranas" Paper presented at 39th session of Indian History Congress, Hyderabad, 1978.