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## PRECIOUS ITEMS OF TRADE: GLEANINGS FROM THE BRIHATSAMHITA

Anil Kumar

The *Brihatsamhita* in astrological parlance is nothing but an encyclopedia of astrological and other subjects of human interest. It is also mundane astrology with many scientific topics and other subjects in which human beings have an abiding faith. Hence the *samhita* can rightly be termed a work of social science. This work holds a mirror to social conditions and the cultural heights attained by India in the author's time. Most of the arts and crafts were practiced and encouraged by the rulers and the ruled, for example, architecture, sculpture, iconography, manufacture of cement, perfumes, cosmetics, medicines, umbrellas, ornaments etc. along with construction of chariots, cots, which were practiced with consummate skill. Metallurgy, weaving, painting, music, dancing, aerobatics, leather work, book making, etc., had reached a high standard of perfection. According to the author, the people were highly cultured and enjoyed a good life.

Although the *Brihatsamhita* is mainly an astrological text, but whenever the author refers to the socio-economic condition of his times, he provides some data pertaining to trade and other related economic activities. The high level of culture and the enhanced standard of living of the rich were impossible without a well developed trade network. It is an established fact that from the Gupta period, trade had started falling on bad days. Although external trade was on the verge of decline, internal trade was in good shape. It decline markedly only after the Gupta period. By the sixth century A.D., localized economiformations started taking shape and this resulted in the decline of long distance trade. This shifting pattern of foreign trade admitted of a typical feudal nature. By the Gupta times, it became luxury oriented, a fact attested by the frequency of references to such items in the *Brihatsamhita*.

In tune with this emerging pattern, Varahamihira, while referring to precious stones enumerates 22 kinds of gems, out of them the four most important being diamond, pearl, ruby, and emerald.<sup>1</sup> Then he marks a detailed study of the diamond – type specific to a region. Diamonds brought from the banks of the Vengi River are of the purest kind, those found in Kosala have the luster; those of Saurashtra, a reddish luster; those of Supara- country are dark in color; those of Himalaya

region, slightly reddish: those of Matanga country have the colour of the valla blossoms; those of Kalinga are yellowish; and those of Paundra are black. These were the places where diamonds were found and it is clear that these places were spread all over the country. It is certain that without a developed transportation network it would have been difficult for the whole country to use it. The author also writes about the price of diamonds. A diamond weighing 20 rice grains is valued at two lac karsapana, one weighing 18 grains is worth a lac and a half karsapana, one of 16 grains of 1.33 lacs karsapana, one of 14 grains one lac karsapana, one of 12 grains 2/3 lac of one of 10 grains 40000, one eight grains, 200 karsapana of silver. Varahamihira also gives a table of weights for weighing and assessing gems. 80 copper coins make one panna and 20 panas make one karsapana.<sup>2</sup> Prices of diamonds depend on quality, there were variations. The price of diamonds with any imperfection was one eight less of the given prices.<sup>3</sup>

Varahamihira also provides interesting information about pearls. According to him, the different sources of pearls are (1) elephant (2) serpent (3) pearl-oysters (4) conch shells (5) clouds (6) bamboo (7) whales (8) and logs, but the best quality pearls are those coming from pearl-oysters.<sup>4</sup> He describes eight centers of pearls, i.e. (1) Ceylon (2) Paraloka {Travancore} (3) Saurashtra (4) Tamrapani river {in Chennai} (5) Parasava {Persia} (6) Northern country (7) Pandya-Vakatka and (8) Himalaya.<sup>5</sup> In ancient times, Ceylon and the tiny islands around it were the great pearl producing centers. This is recorded by the Chinese pilgrim, Fa-hien (399-414 A.D.) Parloka is identified with Purali in Kerala. By Saurashtra is meant the Gulf of Cambay. The Pandya country lay in the southern most part of the Indian peninsula. In yet another verse the author provides a description of various categories of pearls coming from different places. If we keep in mind of the location of these centers, which included foreign countries like Ceylon and Persia, we can conclude that contemporary society knew of external trade, although its nature was limited and it was mainly confined to luxury items. The author refers to a centre in India that catered to the whole sub-continent, i.e. Kerala. This is illustrative of both internal trade and systematic transportation.

Varahamihira gives further details of the prices of pearls. The price fixed for a pearl of good lusture and quality, weighing four maskas is 53000, karsapanas. The price of pearls weighing 3.5, 3, 2.5, 2 and 1.5 maskas in order or 3200, 2000, 1300, 800, and 353 karsapana of silver. A pearl weighing one maskas is worth 135 karsapana of silver (five rattis make one maskas).<sup>6</sup>

The above is the price fixed for the various collections of pearls of good quality weighing one dramma. The price of inferior quality of pearl was reduced to one third of the price of the superior one.<sup>7</sup> In a latter verse the author describes various ornaments made of pearls. Altogether seventeenth varieties of pearl-necklaces are mentioned here, the bigger and heavier ones being meant for Gods and demi—Gods as well as Kings.<sup>8</sup> The author seems to be most fond of pearls, since he has devoted 36 verses to their praise. He has not paid so much attention to diamonds, though he has given it place of pride.

In another chapter, the author gives similar description of rubies according to him, these were made of sulphur, kuruvinda, and crystal.<sup>9</sup> While highlighting its astrological importance Varahamihira says that “a king who wears such serpent gems will never have troubles arising from poison and diseases. Indra will always be pouring good rains in his realm, and as a result of the intrinsic power of gem he will annihilate his enemies.”<sup>10</sup> The price of a single ruby weighing a pala (i.e. 4 karshas) has been fixed at 26000 silver kasapanas; one of three karsas is worth 20000 silver pieces; one of half a pala or two karsa, 12,000 silver pieces; one of the karsa, 6,000 silver pieces; one of eight masas or ratti is 3000 silver pieces; one of four masas, 1000 silver pieces. The price of rubies of intermediate weight must be calculated proportionately, and win due regard to their being of inferior or superior quality. A ruby deficient in colour will fetch half the usual price. One lacking brilliance its eight parts; one with few good and many bad qualities will fetch only 1/20 or the standard prices. A ruby some what dusky, with many holes (or scatches) and few good features will fetch 1/200 of its usual price.<sup>11</sup>

Travels are referred too. Thus in a verse the author gives a vivid picture of a man, who arrives by ship.<sup>12</sup> He writes about the eight quarters, east, south, south-west, west, north, north-west and north-east, in the context of travels.<sup>13</sup> In another verse the author prophesizes that if Jupiter is in the 4<sup>th</sup> division from the south-east corner, one will recover one’s lost property and a traveller will reap whatever fruit has been laid down in respect of journey.<sup>14</sup> If it is in the right south, the purpose of one’s journey will be achieved, and one will get peacocks, buffaloes, and cock, if in the second division therefrom, one will come in contact with bards, actors, dancers and like, enjoy auspicious things and have satisfaction.<sup>15</sup> Further he writes, if the *omen* is in the west, the man concerned will get marine products, gems, beryl or jeweled articles; if in the next division, he will come in contact with foresters, hunters or thieves, and get meat.”<sup>16</sup>

These specific predictions made by the author do not underline astrological combinations that were fruitful for an ordinary journey and also implies the conditions that made successful the journeys of caravans and trades. In a later verse there is a reference to a merchant. Varahmihira writes that if a human eclipse occurs in the north, the person concerned will obtain curds, rice or fried grains, and meet a brahmana, if in the next he will come by wealth and meet a merchant.<sup>17</sup> In this verse, the author has given emphasis on the word merchant, which implies their prosperity and wealth. Caravan trade is also mentioned by the author in a separate verse. Thus, it can be concluded that the pattern of trade during this period changed and it came to be confined mostly to luxurious items, which is clearly a sign of its feudal nature. The items mentioned by the author for trade were only precious things. Although being an astrologer, he always laid emphasis on astrological positions and from the nature of the items mentioned we can get an idea of the quantum of contemporary internal and external trade. As is well known, by the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., external trade was gradually declining though it was going on with south-east Asian countries. Internal trade was also not in good position, though there are some examples of traders or merchants having a sound economic base. It can be concluded on the basis of this text that this mechanism of trade was such that only few merchants could prosper. The growing compulsions of the contemporary economic formations imbedded trade in utilitarian commodities but did sustain trade in luxury items. It is obvious that these items of trade were costly and out of reach of the common people or small traders. Only a limited number of persons were in a position to trade in these precious items.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. *Ibid.*, LXXX, 12-13.
3. *Ibid.*, LXXX, 16.
4. *Ibid.*, LXXX, 1.
5. *Ibid.*, LXXXI, 1-2.
6. *Ibid.*, LXXXI, 10-11-12.
7. *Ibid.*, LXXXI, 18-19.
8. *Ibid.*, LXXXI, 30-36.
9. *Ibid.*, LXXXII, 1-2.
10. *Ibid.*, LXXXII, 6.
11. *Ibid.*, LXXXII, 7-11.

- 12 Ibid., LXXXIV, 73.
- 13 Ibid., LXXXVI, 75.
- 14 Ibid., LXXXVII, 5.
- 15 Ibid., LXXXVII, 6.
- 16 Ibid., LXXXVII, 10.
- 17 Ibid., LXXXVII, 14.