

Skilled Communities and Occupational Activities in Ancient Indian Perspective – A Critical Review

Dr. Mohd Talib Siddiqui

Assistant Professor (History), Department of Law
Aligarh Muslim University Centre Murshidabad, West Bengal

Abstract

Since time immemorial, starting from 1500 BC. India had abundant mineral resources. The metallic minerals included mainly Iron, Copper, Bronze, Silver, Gold, Tin, lead, etc. Minerals were mostly under state monopoly and were normally operated by hired skilled and unskilled labourers and craftsmen. Classical writers mention mining activities and assert that metallurgy was fully developed in India at that time. Works in metal included blacksmiths (Lohkara), Coppersmiths (Tepukuttaka), goldsmiths (Swarnakaara), workers in lead (Siskara), and workers in Tin (Tipukara). Metal-based industries provided Lohkara-made tools and implements to farmers for cultivation. They also supplied arms and weapons that strengthened the state's military power, along with domestic household utensils in a number of varieties.

Key words: Blacksmith, cultivation, metallurgy metallic, mining activities and household utensils.

1. Introduction

Ancient Indian history represents testimony to the fact that Indian Civilizational values reached the peak of glory in the old days, starting before the Christian era. Progressive trends have been greatly augmented to ensure continuity and survival in the fields of art, literature, science, medicine, philosophy, and economic prosperity. While notable achievements were made in religious philosophy and other branches of knowledge, such as spiritualism and meditation, the material side was not ignored. They had also excelled in various crafts, agricultural operations, trade, and commercial activities through their continuous efforts across successive generations. Writers, observers, philosophers, and visitors in ancient India made notable remarks that depicted the image of the Indian people: the agrarian rural economy was flourishing, with the majority of the population engaged, and there was splendid mastery of various arts and technical crafts. Evidence is available in several Vedic Texts, allied texts, the Arthashastra of Kautilya, and even Greek and Chinese Sources.

It is also stated further that so much progress was to a great extent the benedictions of the system of Varna and Castes, which by virtue of its occupational monopolised structure made specialisation in particular arts and crafts possible and helped in the passage of such knowledge from one generation to the next

successive generation of the human population. It is well known that ancient Vedic society was stratified into four Varnas: Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Sudras. This system of Chaturvarga owed its origin to the colour and racial prejudices and a sense of self-imposed divinity of the Aryans. Initially, the Indian society was divided into two broad categories, mentioned as Arya and non-Arya, being dark-skinned Indigenous people, usually supposed to be enemies of the Aryans. But *Purusha Sukti* of the Rigveda (10th Mandal) defined the anatomical framework, in which self-imposed divinity for occupational activities is explained in detail, including a four-stratified structure (Varna system) in the Ancient Indian Social order. Consequently, the upper two elite class Brahmanas or Kshatriyas excelled in education and protection, respectively. While the other two specialised in their respective productive, skill-based occupational activities. Metallic and other crafts received top priority, as demanded by the states and people, for domestic and agricultural work.

Metal based occupation

India had abundant mineral resource and people knew well how to exploit these natural resources. Minerals included iron, copper, silver, gold tin, lead, zinc, bronze etc. Minerals were mostly under the state monopoly and were normally worked by hired and convicted labourers. Classical writers refer to mining activities and assert that metallurgy was fully developed at that time in India¹. The Milindapanho refers to seventy-five crafts, of these seven were associated with profession related to metal of iron, gold, silver, copper, lead tin and brass². Workers in metal included blacksmith (*Lohakara*), coppersmith, (*Tamarkuttaka*) goldsmith (*Suvarnkara*), needle maker (*Sudhikara*), workers in tin (*Tipukara*). Workers in glass and lead (*Siskara*) and workers in brass (*Thattakara*)³. The word '*Kammara*' was applied to a worker in any metal like the word '*Vaddhaki*' which covered all kinds of wood craft including cart making and ship building⁴. There is evidence of high excellence of blacksmith art which stand on more solid ground. He (*Lohakara*) not only supplied tools to the cultivators, carpenters, wood cutters but also armed the state with military weapons. (*Diodorus*) stated that it was on him to win the war and hence state provided protection to him⁵. They were exempted from the taxes also. But during the Gupta period these smiths at least in the Andhra region regularly paid taxes as revealed by Vilavatti inscription⁶. From this fact, it is inferred that Gupta period witnessed better condition of smithy and hence they paid regular tax. The Mehrouli iron pillar inscription of king 'Chandra' itself shows the high watermark of craftsmanship in iron work⁷. Another great achievement of ironsmith was to have set-up the famous iron pillar at Dhar, the capital city of Parmaras. Though, now broken, length of original pillar at the time of its installation was nearly fifty feet⁸. It means Iron made implements, tools, weapons, household utensils of various kind were in regular use during the ancient period. Some important iron made objects may be classified in following ways:

Tools and Implements⁹:

Parasu (axe), Vasi (adze), Vasiparasu (combination of axe and adze), hammer, fisher hook, bill hook, spade, auger, crowbar, grass cutter, knife.

Domestic Utensils and Tools¹⁰:

Iron vessels, iron jar, bucket, boxes, needle, razor, fork.

Weapons:

The manufacture of arrows is described in the Mahajanaka Jataka, and a small sword called "Illi" and a high-quality sword called "Sikya-Samaya" were also known. Dasranaka was famous for the high quality of its swords. Herodotus describes the Indian army as armed with iron-headed arrows, spears, swords, armour and iron helmets. These weaponry items could be corroborated with the Allahabad pillar inscription where SamudraGupta is reported to have his body marked with the wounds caused by iron, arrow, spear, sword, battle axe, javelin, barbed darts and many other weapons¹¹. Ibn Haukal mentions the city of Debal in Sindh as famous for the manufacture of swords¹³. The Yuktakalpataru, while giving the list of sword-making regions, mentions that the swords manufactured at Benaras and Saurashtra were of the best quality¹⁴.

There is no evidence that swords and arrows, two major weapons, were made by the same blacksmith; only the Agni Purana talks about swords and arrows being made separately. In the post -Gupta phase with political disintegration, the frequency of war has swelled the demand for arms expanding further the scope of specialization in this profession. 'Vakpati' alludes to soldiers' armour on the battlefield, which indicates another heavy industry or the production of armour's¹⁵. He also refers to the creeper-like chains of iron designed to chain criminals, which would again suggest yet another industry: chain production. The arms-making factories were generally maintained by the king and were not the public concern. The 'Sukraniti states that the mechanics who could make swords, bows, arrows, light machines, spears, etc., were regarded as useful servants of the king¹⁶. Here, these references clearly suggest the flourishing state of the arms and weapons industry, engaged with the labour of technical workers and craftsmen.

Apart from this, skilled workers were employed in carving metal images and installing them, sometimes for religious purposes. The process of making jewels, especially by goldsmiths and silversmiths, and costly domestic utensils was also known during this period. In royal households, most household utensils were made of gold and silver. Kalhan refers to a gold pitcher used to store water for the king¹⁷. Allusion is made to a gold and silver tray for fetching the food and 'Bhringra' (small gold pitcher) for water studded with jewels¹⁸. But copper, bronze, and brass wares were commonly used by the common people of society. Copersmith (Tamrakuttaka), workers in glass and lead (Sisakara), workers in brass (Thattakara), and workers in tin (Tipukara) are mentioned as making various metallic objects of different shapes and designs¹⁹. Different kinds of vessels and pots made of copper and brass, such as a spoon, a handle, a bell, and deep bowls, have also been unearthed in the excavation²⁰.

The profound love and craving for jewellery among commoners and royal families alike further accelerated the art of jewellery design and shaping by goldsmiths and silversmiths. Kautilya contemplates appointing a separate superintendent and treats gold and silver separately from other metals²¹. The 'Lalitvistara' refers to a skilled goldsmith (Suvarnakara) catering to the tastes of a variety of jewels²². The goldsmiths were quite adept at the art of purifying gold and making various kinds of ornaments. Asvaghosa described the process of purifying gold²³. An elaborate description of the king's golden lion throne, cups, and dishes made of gold and silver is mentioned in Manasollasa²⁴. The grandeur and magnificence of the Indian king, enhanced by the jewel items, have been noticed in the account of a foreign observer. The king of India is accustomed to wear an ear-ring of precious stone mounted in gold. They also wear high-value necklaces, and pearls are held in high esteem. It is said that when Jaipal was defeated and taken prisoner, he wore a necklace worth 2,00,000(Two lakhs) dinars. But the twice of this value was taken from the necklaces of those who were stained or imprisoned²⁵. Similarly, Rajshekhar refers to different kinds of

jewels, such as emerald anklets, bracelets, necklaces, and earrings²⁶. The families of the common people, especially affluent section also used jewels, it is noted that when Mahmud invaded India, Hindu females sold their jewels to furnish resources for the war²⁷. Apart from the references to ornaments, jewels, arms, and weapons stated earlier, images of different Gods and Goddesses, sometimes of the king, were also carved in metal during this period. A remarkable copper statue of Buddha from Sultanganj is a powerful symbol of the metallurgical artistic skill of the people of India. Huin Tsang refers to a gigantic copper colossus of the Buddha, about 80 feet in height. An inscription of the great temple at Tanjore mentions the gift of images along with ornaments of gold and silver whose recorded weight reaches a very high figure²⁸. Kalhan refers to idol made of gold and silver in a temple of Kashmir which were appropriated by the rulers to meet financial exigencies²⁹. It was expensive and fantastically carved from metal images that attracted foreign invaders in the early medieval period. It was a gold image of Shiva in the Somnath temple that attracted the attention of Mahmud of Ghazni.

Conclusion

These references quoted in favour of metallic images carving of costly design prove to this fact of high skill of the Indian craftsmen. Mention of mining industries, purification process of the metals, *Kautilya's* mention of industrial administration, epigraphic records and symbolic representation of Indian art in the form of *Mehrauli* iron pillar suggest flourishing condition of metallurgical industries during this period. Broadly speaking metal based industries provided tools and implements made by ironsmiths (*Lohakara*) to the farmers for cultivation, workers engaged in metal industries supplied arms and weapons, thereby strengthened the military power of the state along with providing domestic household utensils of bronze copper, brass, and sometime of gold and silver vessels. Jewels making and image carving industries based on gold and silver metals also absorbed sufficient number of craftsmen. In all, metal based industries were fully developed and well advanced and large number of such skilled communities were employed in these industries, supporting and up keeping the society and state.

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