

Rural Life, Economic Activities, Social Organization, and Governance in Ancient India: A Study Based on Kautilya's Arthashastra

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Abstract

In ancient India, the village was not merely a residential or administrative unit, but the fundamental basis of social, economic, and cultural life. The history of the village begins in the Vedic period and developed into a mature form during the Mauryan period. In this context, Kautilya's Arthashastra is the most reliable source for understanding village life during the Mauryan era. Although the Arthashastra primarily deals with the state and administration, it provides a detailed account of village settlement, agriculture, taxation, labor system, and social discipline. This research paper first describes the origin, settlement, and boundaries of the village, including the policy for establishing new villages, the number of families, and the role of Shudra farmers and other professionals. Following this, an analysis of the village's economic structure, land distribution, agriculture, animal husbandry, water resources, and forest resources is presented. The role of the Gramika (village headman) and Gramavridha (village elders) in village administration, dispute resolution, and social discipline is highlighted. The daily life of the villagers, their food, drinks, consumer goods, festivals, entertainment, and cultural activities are also examined. This research presents village life as an indigenous knowledge system (Indian Knowledge System – IKS),

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demonstrating the integration of economic, social, and cultural aspects. Thus, this study illuminates the complete structure of ancient Indian village life and its historical and ideological relevance.

Keywords: *Kautilya, Arthashastra, Village, Rural, Economy, Administrative, Society.*

1. Concept and Evolution of Village Life in Ancient India

The most basic unit of any country is the village. A village is a social, economic, and political unit where human communities first began organized efforts and activities in various fields. The first archaeological evidence of the village's origins in Indian history dates back to the Neolithic period. Excavations at Mehrgarh in Baluchistan reveal evidence of settlements dating back to approximately 8th millennium BC. The excavations were conducted by a French team under the direction of J.F. Jaridge. Similarly, the urban civilization that developed in the Indus Valley was also the result of these rural settlements spread across (about 1500 settlement) the Baluchistan region, which provided the foundation for the cities and ensured the availability of raw materials and other resources [1]. In his studies, G.L. Poshel identified several sites that were small and scattered around the Harappan cities, which, based on their material culture, have been identified as rural settlements [2]. However, the clear concept of the village dates back to the Vedic period. In the Vedic period, villages were places where houses were clustered, and the surrounding land was used for agriculture [3]. However, the Rigvedic people often placed a greater emphasis on animal husbandry, which reflects their mixed lifestyle. Various milk products from Vedic texts reveal the importance of cows and the economic significance of animal husbandry. These were generally produced by groups of families belonging to the same clan [4]. During the Vedic period, villages were spread both near and far, and their residences were also diverse. This led to the introduction of individual land ownership and the system of inheritance of private property. However, in the early Vedic period, the tradition of communal land ownership was more prevalent. Early Buddhist literature, especially the Jataka tales, are a major source of information on rural life after the Vedic period. The Jataka tales reveal that a large number of rural settlements of varying sizes and types existed in the Gangetic valley region at that time [5]. The objective of this paper is to analyze aspects of rural life based on Kautilya's Arthashastra, based on

social qualities such as collectivism, participation, self-reliance, and discipline. This paper aims to identify these qualities in rural life during the Mauryan period, which are considered key elements for the development of culture, civilization, and humanity. During the reign of Chandragupta Maurya, the village was seen as a key component of various systems, including social, economic, and administrative systems. The Arthashastra is considered the most important and reliable text for understanding Mauryan history. It was composed around the third century BC. The discovery of its manuscripts is attributed to R. Shamshastri, who discovered it in 1909. While the name Arthashastra appears to be a book focused on economic aspects, it is a unique work that provides guidance on aspects of the state, society, and governance, and is comparable to other political literature in the world. While the Arthashastra primarily addresses political issues, it also discusses various aspects of social life. In Arthashastra, there is a beautiful discussion of village settlement, its general characteristics, lifestyle of the people, food habits, etc., which also reveals the economic prosperity and social role of the people living in the rural community of the Mauryan period, how they lived and how they spent their lives [6].

2. Village Settlement and Rural Planning in Kautilya's Arthashastra

In Indian history, villages evolved beyond mere geographical units to become social, economic, religious, and administrative entities. The development of these villages was not a sudden event or a result of abrupt socio-economic changes. Rather, it was a continuous process stemming from the efforts of hunter-gatherer communities to meet their food needs. This led to the gradual domestication of animals and plants, and by the Neolithic period, an agriculture and animal husbandry-based culture had developed throughout the Indian subcontinent. The development of agriculture brought stability and initiated the process of village formation. While the basic structure of Indian villages remained consistent, they also underwent various changes and developments over time. By the Mauryan period, villages exhibited considerable complexity. In chapter 1 of book 2 of his Arthashastra, Kautilya presents principles regarding the establishment of new villages by the king in his Janapadas (districts).¹ This theory of village establishment proposed by Kautilya clearly illustrates the concept of systematic and planned rural development in Indian political thought. Kautilya considers the

1. वाचस्पति गैरौला, कौटिल्य अर्थशास्त्र, तृतीय संस्करण (वाराणसी: चौखम्बा विद्याभवन, 1984), पृ 77 ।

migration of families, clans, and tribal groups as the main basis for the establishment of villages. This migration was based on the availability of better facilities and natural resources in specific locations. These factors driving migration and settlement demonstrate that an understanding of the environment and harmony with nature existed in Indian society from its beginnings up to the Mauryan period. Kautilya describes the significant role of the state in establishing new villages. According to Kautilya, the state should develop new agricultural land, revive abandoned villages, and settle a manageable population in those villages.² Such instructions regarding village settlement present a remarkable example of the planned and scientific thinking of the ancient Indian administrative system. Kautilya also specified the population size of villages, stating that villages in the janapadas should have a minimum of 100 houses and a maximum of 500 houses “शूद्रकषकप्रायं कुलशतावरं पञ्चशतकुलपरं ग्रामं कोशद्धिक्रोशसीमानमन्योन्यारक्षं निवेशयेत्”³ Kautilya’s method of determining the population of these villages and defining their boundaries using rivers, mountains, forests, and trees reflects a deep understanding of Indian geography and ecology, as well as resource availability and utilization [4]. Kautilya stipulated that the distance between new villages should be one or two krosas (a unit of distance), enabling them to assist each other during times of disaster. This demonstrates that the villages were interconnected and mutually supportive. Since agriculture was the primary basis of these villages’ economy, Kautilya emphasized settling these new villages with members of the farming community and other hardworking classes [4]. The presence of blacksmiths, carpenters, and other artisans in addition to farmers in these villages during the Mauryan period clearly indicates the self-sufficient economic structure of the villages. Kautilya also presented regulations regarding land grants, stating that priests, teachers, and accountants were eligible for such grants. He further mandated that land should only be given to farmers who could cultivate it effectively. If farmers performed well, they were to be encouraged through provisions of seeds, livestock, and financial assistance. This land distribution policy, tax system, and temporary exemptions demonstrate a harmonious and balanced economic relationship between the state and the farming community, highlighting the concept of balancing revenue and production in ancient Indian economic

2. कौटिल्य, अर्थशास्त्र, अधिकरण 2, अध्याय 1, श्लोक 1-4, वाचस्पति गैरोला अनूदित, तृतीय संस्करण (वाराणसी : चौखम्बा विद्याभवन, 1984)।

3. Kautilya Arthashastra, 2.1.2

thought. Kautilya instructed that external undesirable social influences, entertainment activities, and unregulated organizations be restricted in the new villages [4]. This indicates the importance placed on maintaining a disciplined work culture and social stability within the villages. Furthermore, the management of essential elements such as water sources, trade routes, and double-cropping arable land for these villages provides evidence of the practical application of advanced ancient Indian rural planning. Thus, the approach to establishing new villages presented by Kautilya represents an advanced perspective on village planning, embodying a scientific and practical consciousness that sought to establish a balance between nature, economy, society, and administration.

3. Socio-Economic and Welfare Dimensions of State Power in Kautilya's Arthashastra

According to Kautilya, the power of the state is not based solely on military strength and political dominance, but also on the state's welfare policies, economic prosperity, and the systematic management of rural resources. Thus, Kautilya revealed that the true foundation of the king's power rests on his entire populace, especially the rural areas, which were the mainstays of economic prosperity. Rural areas were centers of various economic activities, possessing numerous sources of economic wealth, which is why Kautilya advised the king to focus his attention on the development of these areas. This perspective proposed by Kautilya demonstrates that governance considered the protection and promotion of socio-economic structures as a crucial duty, alongside maintaining control and administrative order. Kautilya suggests that the king should first construct a defensive structure within which forts should be built. According to Kautilya, these forts would not only provide protection against enemies but also strengthen the political stability and administrative control of the state. Since agriculture was the cornerstone of the Mauryan economy, Kautilya considered the development of reservoirs and water management systems as crucial undertakings for its advancement. These reservoirs ensured a continuous supply of irrigation and helped increase agricultural production by addressing water scarcity, thereby strengthening the rural economy. Kautilya's ideas reflect a significant awareness of the conservation and utilization of natural resources in ancient governance. Furthermore, Kautilya emphasized trade routes and their protection, as

these routes played a vital role in economic exchange and other key activities of the state. Kautilya believed that mineral resources, forests, elephants, and livestock constituted the state's major economic assets.⁴ These economic resources proved crucial in agriculture, warfare, and industry. Additionally, Kautilya placed special emphasis on the protection of agriculture, considering it the state's foremost obligation, and deemed increased extrtemed taxation, punitive fines, and forced labor detrimental to economic prosperity [5]. Kautilya instructs that the state's objective should always be to increase productive capacity, not to collect excessive taxes by causing hardship and exploiting the people. In the conservation and enhancement of natural resources, Kautilya considers the development of forests, reservoirs, and mines to be crucial, and emphasizes the collaborative efforts of the state and society in the construction and maintenance of these water resources. In this context, Kautilya advises the king that if any individual or community expresses a desire to construct a reservoir, they should be encouraged and provided with the necessary assistance [5]. These principles clearly reflect the spirit of social responsibility and collective labor, which aligns with the fundamental concepts of public welfare, reciprocity, and cooperation in the Indian cultural tradition. In addition to reservoirs, Kautilya also suggests developing barren land into pastures and protecting livestock from disease, wild animals, and theft.⁵ Furthermore, Kautilya mentions various other public welfare activities at the village level, primarily including the construction of dams and bridges, village beautification, and security arrangements [6]. For these tasks, Kautilya advocates a policy of providing incentives and special rewards. This clearly demonstrates that these policies fostered collaboration between the government and society and nurtured a sense of local leadership. Thus, Kautilya's ideas embody the concept of a welfare state in the Indian system of governance, where the primary objective of state power was to ensure social balance and economic prosperity. Kautilya's policies present a multifaceted approach to governance, integrating security, agriculture, trade, environmental protection, and social cooperation. This perspective also resonates with the modern concept of sustainable development, as the Arthashastra emphasizes the balanced use of resources and the idea of collective responsibility.

4. Kautilya Arthashastra, 7.12.2-28.

5. Kautilya Arthashastra,2.2.37.

4. Administrative Structure and Socio-Moral Foundations of Village Life in Kautilya's Arthashastra

The concept of village life presented by Kautilya in his Arthashastra is clearly depicted as a well-organized unit of social and administrative structure. The village life described therein appears to be deeply concerned with the ethical obligations of governance and society. These rural units reflected a system of state control as well as a philosophy of life in which the functioning of society was based on the fundamental Vedic principles of dharma, custom, public welfare, and household duties. Kautilya recommends the appointment of *Samaharta* and *Pradeshta* to high positions in rural administration, with the objective of systematically controlling rural areas and developing an excellent structural system [6]. Kautilya further states that the *Samaharta* should appoint an officer called a Gopa and assign him to a center of five or ten villages. In addition to the Gopa, the Arthashastra also mentions positions like *Sthanika*, whose function was to smoothly manage the systematic tradition of land records and revenue management. These officers also utilized a system of espionage, which reflects the state policy that considered maintaining social discipline an essential duty of the state. In fact, the administration of the village was conducted at the local level by the Gramika and the village elders. The village elders were responsible for protecting temple properties, safeguarding the property of minors, and resolving land disputes. This indicates that the justice system in the village society was based on social consensus and moral responsibility. This was somewhat similar to the Vedic-era Sabha and Samiti, where decisions were made on the basis of collective participation. In addition, the village elders were also empowered with rights related to the buying and selling of property and debt relief, which linked economic transactions in rural society to social trust and responsibility [6]. The Gramika's role was to maintain both administrative and social discipline. The Gramika's main duties included ensuring the security of the village, controlling grazing of livestock, and expelling undesirable individuals, which shows that the Gramika played a crucial role in maintaining the economic stability and social balance of the village. Kautilya mentions that every person in the village should cooperate with the Gramika in his administrative duties.⁶ In addition, Kautilya presents

6. Kautilya Arthashastra,3.10.16.

ideas for community labor and cultural participation in village life. According to Kautilya, every villager should participate in festivals, entertainment, and community activities [6]. Importantly, Kautilya considers this mandatory and prescribes punishment for those villagers who shirk their community duties. These ideas of Kautilya demonstrate that the participation of every individual in the village's administrative and community affairs was essential to maintain social discipline and strengthen collective life. Kautilya considers the dissemination of a spirit of community cooperation through various cultural activities as crucial for maintaining social discipline. Kautilya also envisioned ensuring social protection and public welfare. In this context, Kautilya advises the king to make arrangements for the care of orphans, the elderly, the sick, slaves, and helpless women. These ideas of Kautilya establish the state as a protective institution. Furthermore, Kautilya pays special attention to the householder stage of life Grihastha Ashrama because the foundation of village life is the household; if there is no household life, it will certainly have a negative impact on various aspects of village life. For this reason, Kautilya prescribes punishment for those who renounce worldly life without fulfilling their duties as householders. This indicates that the Vedic-era Ashrama system was still being followed in a balanced manner. These rules also instilled in individuals a sense of spiritual and social responsibility. The society described in the Arthashastra was based on the caste system, the influence of which can be seen from birth to death rituals. In addition, there was a clear unequal distribution of wealth and income in society, although this distribution was based on work and position. In this system, high-ranking officials received higher salaries, while lower-ranking officials had limited income. The Arthashastra reveals that the penal system was also economic, with monetary fines determined according to the nature of the crime. For example, in chapter 2 of the third adhikarana (section), Kautilya states that if a village headman expels someone from the village other than a thief or adulterer, or if a young man who has left the village wishes to return and settle there, and the village headman prevents him from doing so, the headman should be fined twenty-four panas [6]. Conversely, if a villager fails to participate in community work, the prescribed fine is only one and a half panas. This system was a practical policy for maintaining state control and social balance. Overall, the above analysis reveals that the village administration described by Kautilya was built upon a foundation of administrative efficiency, social

discipline, economic organization, and moral responsibility. It clearly reflects an attempt to develop society as a self-reliant, cooperative, and duty-bound unit, where the government and society functioned in a mutually complementary manner.

5. State Regulation, Social Hierarchy and Economic Dimensions of Dietary System in Kautilya's Arthashastra

The dietary regulations described in Kautilya's Arthashastra demonstrate that the economic structure of contemporary society was governed by social hierarchy and the state system. The Arthashastra, a key text on Mauryan governance, advocates that diets should be standardized by the state. An example of this is the dietary regulations for the Aryan class, which state that they should consume 1 prastha (about 1 kg) of rice, a limited amount of broth, oil and ghee (1/16 L, approximately 62.5 ml), and a limited amount of salt. Furthermore, the larger portion of boiled rice, oil, sugar (160gm), and meat for attendants of elephants indicates that diets were not merely a means of subsistence but were also divided based on physical, mental, and social balance.⁷ Mental labor required a moderate diet and physical labor required a high-energy diet. The Arthashastra reveals differences in ration distribution, with lower-class men receiving the same amount of rice and salt, but reduced amounts of broth and oil. The Arthashastra reveals that three-quarters of the food was allocated to women and half to children. This description demonstrates that diet was determined by the controlled distribution of resources in society, appropriate biological needs, and social roles. Kautilya's prohibition and punishment of certain food items for the upper castes demonstrates that diet was not merely a means of subsistence in Indian tradition, but also a matter of morality, integrity, and social discipline. Kautilya also prohibited meat for elephant doctors, although the precise reason for this is not clear in the text. However, it appears that the motive behind this may have been the ideal of virtuous conduct associated with the medical profession. The Arthashastra provides information on various food items such as rice, wheat, barley, millets, beans, lentils, ghee, mustard oil, honey, fruit juice, dairy products, spices, meat, etc. The diversity of such a wide range of foods indicates that agriculture, animal husbandry, forestry, and commercial activities had created a developed economic

7. Kautilya Arthashastra, 2.32.17.

system. The management of slaughterhouses, meat preservation, and the quantity of ingredients used in food preparation, as documented in the Arthashastra, indicate that food production and distribution were controlled and systematic. The mention of public eateries indicates a healthy economic situation and a developed market-based economy. These eateries existed in both rural and urban areas, and spies were employed as vendors in disguise. This activity of spies in eateries indicates that eateries were not only a hub of economic activity but also of administrative and political activities, which were closely monitored by spies. Eatery owners were instructed not to shelter strangers, reflecting the importance of security policies. Descriptions of vegetarian and non-vegetarian eating places, bakers, sugarmeat sellers, and broth makers indicate the existence of occupational specialization in society. The Arthashastra provides valuable insights into resource conservation and reuse. Under this, Kocmhāgārāddhyakca is instructed not to waste broken grain but to resell it to broth makers and food vendors. Kautilya also presented several rules on alcohol consumption. He stated that maintaining a balance between social discipline and economic control requires the state to have a monopoly on the production and sale of alcohol. Since alcohol is believed to be the source of all undesirable activities, Kautilya established a rule that limited alcohol sales should be permitted in rural and urban areas. Only those with good conduct were allowed to take alcohol home in limited quantities, otherwise, everyone was required to consume it in drinking halls. Intoxicated individuals were strictly prohibited from attending social gatherings and events. Kautilya's descriptions of alcohol consumption demonstrate that alcohol was not completely prohibited, but was controlled within the framework of social discipline to avoid any inconvenience to the state and society. Therefore, the above comprehensive analysis shows diet, consumption, social structure and state regulation as a coordinated system. This gives a glimpse of the broad perspective of the Indian knowledge tradition, in which religion, economics, social discipline and state duties have been considered complementary elements.

6. Rural Entertainment in Kautilya's Arthshastra

Kautilya's Arthashastra discusses various forms of entertainment prevalent in rural communities. Kautilya's descriptions of entertainment reveal a multifaceted picture of the cultural, social, and administrative

nature of rural society at that time. Kautilya considers entertainment not merely a means of passing leisure time, but an important medium for articulating the structure and cultural expression of social life. The Arthashastra reveals that recreational traditions of song, dance, and humor were prevalent in rural society, and these songs were sung during daily activities, indicating a close connection between labor and entertainment. This situation illustrates the collective spirit and cultural vitality of ancient Indian rural life. The Arthashastra's descriptions of feasts and celebrations on occasions such as births and marriages, and the mention of proper drainage arrangements during grand feasts, indicate that society valued social unity and community participation, as well as an awareness of sanitation and public health. The Arthashastra also indicates social class divisions in the forms of entertainment. For example, hunting was considered a pastime of the wealthy and royal families and was associated with power, strength, and prestige. In contrast, for the working class, the general rural population, song, dance, and cultural events were considered paramount. According to Kautilya, gambling and betting were prohibited, which was necessary to maintain social discipline and economic stability under the Mauryan regime. The Arthashastra provides a list of various artists, including actors, dancers, musicians, storytellers, magicians, acrobats, and clowns. These artists provided public entertainment, indicating that entertainment had developed as an organized professional sector in Mauryan Indian society. Entertainment programs were held day and night, and separate programs for male and female are also available, reflecting the dynamic cultural life, gender structure, and social norms of the time. The expenses of these programs were borne collectively by rural communities, which fostered a sense of community responsibility, not individual responsibility, towards cultural activities. Since Kautilya considered entertainment to be a means to action, not a hindrance, he also mentions imposing certain regulations on entertainers and artists. According to him, residential buildings for artists should not be constructed in newly established villages so that they do not interfere with the work of the villagers. However, it appears that these restrictions were more important during the rainy season, when villagers were busy with agricultural work. Information regarding this also suggests that the movement of artists was prohibited during the rainy season and agricultural activities. These rules of Kautilya clearly demonstrate the importance the state placed on the

village's agrarian economy and gave top priority to rural production and labor. Thus, the details of entertainment known from the Arthashastra illuminate the cultural richness, social organization, community participation, and the regulatory and welfare role of the state in ancient Indian rural life. This strengthens the argument that entertainment in Mauryan society developed not for personal enjoyment but in coordination with social balance, cultural preservation, and economic discipline.

7. Conclusion

The village, as the most basic unit of the nation, emerged as a social, economic, political, and administrative entity. Beginning with Neolithic settlements like Mehrgarh, it developed through the rural foundations of the Indus Valley Civilization and became clearly defined in the Vedic period, with clustered settlements, agricultural land use, animal husbandry, and clan-based production systems. Early Buddhist literature and the Jataka tales further indicate the existence of diverse rural settlements in the Gangetic Valley, demonstrating the emergence of farming communities and social organization. During the Mauryan period, villages became a central part of the social, economic, and administrative system, as systematically described in Kautilya's Arthashastra. It outlines principles of village settlement, village planning, migration-based settlement, population regulation, identification of ecological boundaries, cooperation among villages, and a self-sufficient economic structure supported by a policy of granting land to peasants, artisans, and farmers. Kautilya described agriculture, irrigation, ponds, trade routes, forests, animals, and mineral resources as the foundations of economic prosperity and state strength. He emphasized welfare policies, environmental protection, and collective responsibility as essential components of governance. The administrative system, comprised of the Samaharta, Pradeshata, Gopa, Sthapati, Gramika, and village elders, demonstrated structured governance, land management, social discipline, justice based on social consensus, and community participation. The Arthashastra also highlights dietary regulations, standardized ration distribution, labor specialization, control over food production, public dining areas, and the state's monopoly on alcohol as mechanisms for economic regulation, social hierarchy, and moral discipline. Cultural life, recreational traditions, celebrations, and professional arts demonstrate the cultural strengths, gender structures, and community

responsibility of rural society, while regulatory policies ensured agricultural productivity and social stability. Thus, the Arthashastra depicts village life as a coordinated system encompassing social discipline, economic organization, cultural security, environmental balance, administrative efficiency, and welfare governance. It reflects the broader perspective of the Indian knowledge tradition, where religion, economy, state duties, and collective social responsibility serve as complementary elements in the development of civilization and humanity.

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