

Social Stratification at Chandraketugarh

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Abstract: Chandraketugarh is a well-known archaeological site of west Bengal. And it took an important role in ancient Bengal history. In Brahmanical texts and Buddhist texts, the society is stratified in various ways. In Brahmanical texts, society is divided by Varṇas and Jāti and in the Buddhist texts; society is stratified by Kula, kamma and sippa/sīlpa. The lack of proper textual evidence, the society of Chandraketugarh is not possible to stratify depending on Varna -Jāti system. It is easy to stratify depending on the economic stability of the people.

Keynotes: Chandraketugarh, society, varṇas, Brahmanical texts, Buddhist texts, division of society, economic layout

1. Introduction

Man is divided in various groups by his economic, social and religious status. From Vedic age (1200 BCE to 600 BCE); he was divided by economy, society and religion, even by his color. In Vedic age, there are two Varṇas-Āryavarṇa and Dāsa/ Dasyuvarṇa. They were divided in two groups by their color/skin and speech. The Purushasūkta in the ṚigVeda (X 90) narrates that Brāhmaṇas, Kshatriyas, Vaiśyas and Śūdras came from the mouth, arms, thighs and feet of primeval Beings (Purusha). Dharmasāstra narrates that those four varṇas have four definite occupations and those varṇas are divided by birth. But those varṇas will be not divided by occupations and birth. In multiple texts, those Varṇas did not maintain their own occupations. Higher varṇas attended many lower occupations. In Buddhist texts, those varṇas should define by man's own character not his birth. To maintain the purity of Varṇas was sought to be ensured by Savarna marriage (same Varṇas) and otherwise the marriage between unequal varṇas resulted varṇasamkara (admixture of Varṇas). Those varṇasamkara was identified as a mixed Jāti. A multiple Dharmasāstra narrates that the Brāhmaṇas could take the occupations of Kshatriyas and Vaiśyas, but they do not choose all the occupations of Kshatriyas and Vaiśyas. Brāhmaṇas should not sell perfume, wine, leather of deer, milk, ghee, flower, fruit, medicine, meat, etc. In Buddhist texts, the people were divided a two-folded class by his kulas (family), kamma (profession) and sippa (craft). They are divided in ukkatṭha (high) and Hīna (low). But in multiple episodes of Jātakas, Buddha was born as a Brāhmaṇas. In Buddhist texts, Brāhmaṇas and Kshatriyas are referred, but Vaiśyas and Śūdras are ignored. Das/ Dāskarmakāras and Gahapati took an important role in the Jataka stories.

A writing text is rare at Chandraketugarh, but there are a lot of inscriptions that are unable to give a complete picture of Varna-Jāti system of the society. In spite of Varna-Jāti system, the society could be divided in other various ways. To discuss the social stratification, we should depend on archaeological sources that were discovered by University of Calcutta from Chandraketugarh. Most of the inscriptions have deciphered by B. N. Mukherjee in his book *Kharoshṭī and kharoshṭī-Brāhmī inscriptions from West Bengal*. A lot of archaeological sources were published in Indian Archaeology - a review (a yearly published book and many scholars' writings). Those archaeological sources were

preserved at Asutosh Museum of the Art, University of Calcutta and state archaeological museum, Kolkata.

There are a multiple artifacts which have been found at Chandraketugarh, represent a clear picture of the society. In many writings inform us that the existence of Brāhmaṇas remained at Chandraketugarh. Dr. Suchandra Ghosh has presented the existence of Brāhmaṇas depending on the six inscriptions. A temple has been found at Chandraketugarh and the existence of Brahmanical gods and goddesses (Indra, Vishnu, Lakshmi, and Saraswati) and local goddesses (Dhānyajī and Jirambi) have been found. Those evidences tells that the people of Chandraketugarh were worshipped and those practices were done by Brāhmaṇas. Though Brāhmaṇas used to exist there, other three Varṇas were not referred in inscription. Without any evidence, we could not speak that four varṇas (Brāhmaṇas, Kshatriyas, Vaiśyas and Śūdras) remained there. Depending on the existed evidences, the society could be stratified in two-folded by their economy i.e. One is higher class and other is low. Some terracotta plaques indicate the economic stratification of the society at Chandraketugarh. Those terracotta plaques have preserved at Asutosh Museum of Indian Art, University of Calcutta and State Archaeological Museum, West Bengal. Some terracotta plaques are the hand of some people (Gourisankar De and Dilip Kumar Maite).

A multiple wares have been found at Chandraketugarh that has been referred in *Indian archaeological a review* and the writings of many scholars. Rouletted wares, Northern Black Polished wares, black slipped wares, unpolished gray wares and various types of wares have been found at Chandraketugarh. There are two layers of society on the basis of that ware. In many different types of writing, Rouletted wares, locally manufactured, went to north India for trading purpose. Economically higher class used Rouletted wares and Northern black polished wares. But other class used low quality different types of wares.

A terracotta plaque (1st century BCE) has been found at Chandraketugarh. This plaque gives a complete picture of a family who was economically prosperous. In this plaque, a man, a woman and a child have been seen with their pet. The elder male character, is the head of the family, is wearing ear-rings, bangles and fine costumes seating on the well decorated chair. The female character is wearing ear-rings, bangles, fine costumes with heavy jewellery and their child is also well decorated. They are in the two well decorated

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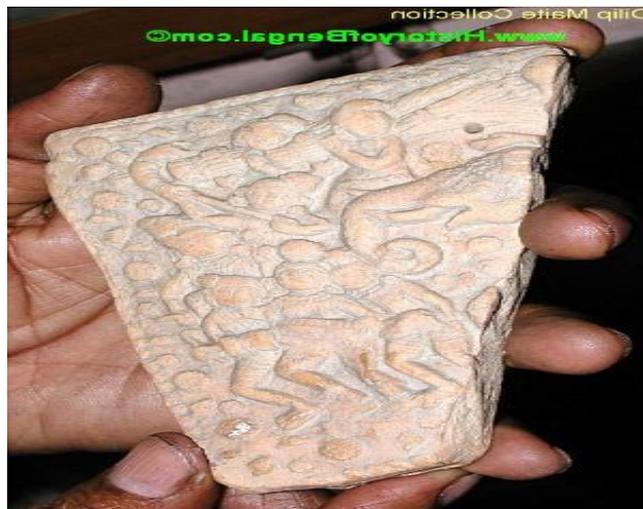
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pillars (Picture 1). On the other hand, a terracotta plaque was discovered at Chandraketugarh. The scholars are identified it as a picture of Harvesting Festival. In this depiction, some people are wearing Dhuti with ornaments. They are dancing with their musical instruments. Two of them are holding the harvesting crops. A well decorated elephant is existed in this plaque (picture 2). The depicted family was richer than the people of harvesting festival who had no upper-part costumes. Those two types of contrasting images dignify two layers of society. Some of the depicted ornaments and cosmetics have been found at Chandraketugarh. Ivory bangles, shell bangles, conch bangles, beads of glass, terracotta beads, bone beads, ivory beads, chalcedony beads, carnelian beads and other ornaments have been found there. Those semi precious stones, imported from other sites of India, were used by the high-class people. In daily life, some essential things were used by the people, which is costly to buy for the general one. The copper tools (a copper awl, copper bowls, and copper cup) were used by the people. For daily purpose, the people used earthen wares in spite of some economically higher class used copper tools in their daily life. The woman always adorns herself to represent elegant to the people. So they ornament themselves using some decorating tool like combs, cosmetic sticks etc. Ivory cosmetic sticks have been found at Itkhola of West Bengal. Those sticks were used as a decorative tool by the rich woman. On the other hand, rich urban person is called Nāgaraka who used to drink wine in their daily life. A copper cup and spouted cups, have been found, were used by those rich one.



Picture 1: A wealthy family, Metropolitan museum of Art (New York)



Picture 2: Harvesting festival, Google

There are two types of houses were existing at Chandraketugarh. After excavation, one type of those houses was made by well-baked bricks with mortar and tiles and other one is 'kachcha house' made by earthen ill-baked tiles and soil. Those two types of houses clearly indicate the high and lower class people of the society. In spite of that, terracotta pipes were found at Chandraketugarh. Those pipes (2 feet 3 inch) were used in draining system. The quantity of the pipes is scarce that denotes that the needy people of the society were unable to use it their draining system. Those pipes were very costly because those pipes had repaired frequently in spite of newer one.

Depending on the archaeological sources, two lays of economic classes have been identified. From Chandraketugarh, a multiple inscriptions have been found, which is published in *Kharoshṭī and kharoshṭī-Brāhmī inscriptions from West Bengal* written by B. N. Mukherjee. Those inscriptions also take a great role to classify those types of economic classes. 'Koḍihālika' word has been found in an inscription that was discovered at Chandraketugarh. According to B. N. Mukherjee, Koḍihālika means one who has many ploughs or one who employ many farmers. Generally, one person himself could not involve ploughs and he appointed more than one labour. So he used to employ one farmer per one plough. More than one plough denotes that that person has more agricultural land or he let out his ploughs for a rent or both of these were predicted having more ploughs to a person. In Jataka story, a Brāhmaṇa employed one thousand farmers to cultivate his land. On the other hand in the Somadatta Jataka, a poor farmer failed to cultivate his land because his ox was expired before. Apropos, three sickles with men have been found in a broken plaque that is discovered from Chandraketugarh. Those people are cropping their ripe paddy tree. Had those farmer been had this cultivated land? It is impossible to identify the land owner on the basis of this plaque. But it is possible that those people came here as a daily worker. So it is clear that two types of people existed here.

To get prosperous life people always worship the God and Goddess. Economically higher class gets a lot of opportunities from the society. That's why the people involved many professional deeds that boost to improve their better economical condition. Lakshmi, Yaksha, Jakshi

and Kubera were worshipped here. Those Brahmanical and local Gods and Goddesses take prosperous life of human beings.

2. Conclusion

In ancient India, Varṇa-Jāti system was unable to resist taking the profession of the people. Some people went forwards earning plenty property. That gave a breakthrough in the society. The economic division of the society was seen in the every time in ancient India. The discussion on social division at Chandraketugarh was very critical on the basis of archaeological remains. On the basis of their houses, daily life style, worshipping gods and goddesses and inscriptions, the social stratification has been seen in two strata- high and low.

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