

A Mythological Analysis of the Significance of Agriculture and Animal Husbandry in Indian Economy:

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ABSTRACT:

The economy of the early Vedic period was primarily based on agriculture and animal husbandry. Much like animal husbandry, agriculture played a pivotal role in improving the standard of living of the people. Cattle rearing was a major occupation, and the Aryans regarded the cow as a source of wealth and economic prosperity. Agriculture transformed primitive humans into a civilized, organized, and economically advanced society. In the mythological and ancient eras, agriculture served as the foundation of human life, shifting the focus away from hunting toward permanent settlements, crop rotation, irrigation, and animal husbandry. The Vedas and various scriptures contain references to the plow, organic manure, seed selection, and advanced agricultural techniques. Agriculture and animal husbandry fostered economic prosperity, shaped social structures, and facilitated the development of civilizations. In human history, the emergence of agriculture coincided with the domestication of plants and animals, a development that eventually supplanted the practice of hunting and gathering. Those communities that pioneered agriculture and animal husbandry transitioned from a nomadic existence to a sedentary lifestyle. These settled communities enjoyed numerous advantages over those still engaged in hunting and gathering, a disparity that ultimately led to the decline of hunter-gatherer societies. The inception of agriculture and animal husbandry occurred across several distinct regions, including Mesopotamia, Central America, China, South America, and West Africa. The earliest forms of agriculture emerged in Anatolia and the Middle East. The transition to agriculture resulted in an abundance of food, which, in turn, triggered a rapid surge in population growth. Furthermore, a sedentary lifestyle fostered technological advancements; in ancient India, agriculture was not merely a means of subsistence but served as the very cornerstone of civilization. From the Indus Valley Civilization to the Gupta period, the system of agriculture and animal husbandry underwent continuous advancement and organization.

Key Word: Animal husbandry economic prosperity, social structures, and civilizations.

Introduction:

Some scholars who have chronicled the economic history of ancient India hold the view that agriculture had already reached a stage of full development during the Rigvedic period itself. In support of this contention, Narayan Chandra Bandyopadhyaya argued that the terms 'Krishi' (Agriculture) and 'Charshani' (Cultivators) appear in the plural form when referring to the Rigvedic Aryans. According to him, agriculture and animal husbandry constituted the primary occupation of the Rigvedic Aryans; consequently, the Aryans offered numerous prayers in the Rigveda for rainfall, as well as for the rivers to enhance the fertility of the land. However, many scholars do not concur with Bandyopadhyaya's perspective. They assert that numerous terms related to agriculture are found predominantly in the first and tenth 'Mandalas' (Books) of the Rigveda—sections that are considered to be later compositions. According to these scholars, during the initial phases of the Rigvedic period, the Aryans' primary occupation was animal husbandry; It was only during the latter stages of this era that they began to devote significant attention to agriculture. From a chronological standpoint, the latest sections of the Rigveda reveal that the Aryans practiced farming using ploughs drawn by oxen. While later Vedic texts depict the 'Vratyas' as a group that did not engage in land cultivation, there remains no room for doubt that they possessed the knowledge of farming. Therefore, the

condemnation of the 'Vratyas' for their failure to engage in farming merely implies that these non-Aryan peoples did not practice agriculture according to the specific methods employed by the Aryans. References to various agricultural activities including ploughing, sowing, harvesting with sickles, threshing, and winnowing are found in the first and tenth 'Mandalas' of the Rigveda. This suggests that by the final phase of the Rigvedic period, the agrarian economy had become significantly more robust than before. India is renowned for its history and diverse cultures, and it also shares a deep-rooted connection with agriculture and animal husbandry. From the plains of the Indus Valley Civilization to the terraced fields of the southern peninsula, agriculture has consistently served as the bedrock of Indian civilization. The evolution of agriculture has paralleled every facet of life grounded in the fundamental human ideals of labor and collective effort; it remains an integral component of India's rich and dynamic culture and civilization. Agriculture plays a pivotal role in enhancing the nation's health and economy. Traditional knowledge—passed down through generations and across cultures over centuries—has formed the very foundation of ancient Indian agricultural techniques. Texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and Puranas offer invaluable insights regarding seasonal calendars, agricultural practices, and a deep reverence for nature. The concept of "ritualistic agriculture"—wherein agrarian deities were propitiated through ceremonies and rituals—underscores the spiritual dimension of agriculture.

Archaeological excavations conducted at Mohenjo-daro, Rakhigarhi, Lothal, and Harappa have revealed that, within the Indus Valley Civilization, wheeled carts and tools such as plows were utilized to boost the production of various crops, including wheat, barley, rice, maize, and millet. The majority of the population not directly involved in agriculture focused their efforts on developing horticulture in the vicinity of the major urban centers. It would be appropriate to characterize the Harappan Civilization (3500–1500 BCE) as the "Era of Irrigated Agriculture." Archaeological excavations clearly demonstrate that animal husbandry and agriculture coexisted. Cattle had already been domesticated as early as the pre-Harappan levels at Kalibangan in western Rajasthan. The origins of 'Moong' (green gram) and 'Mash' (black gram) are believed to lie in India. During the Vedic and Post-Vedic periods, 'mash' significantly enriched the Indian diet, cuisine, and religious rituals. Rice—which is cultivated globally today and serves as a staple food—is believed to have originated in India, Burma, or Indo-China. Thus, the discovery of agriculture, horticulture, botany, and animal husbandry constituted one of the pivotal achievements of the Neolithic Revolution. Furthermore, Vedic texts indicate that farmers of the Vedic era possessed a profound understanding of subjects such as soil fertility, seed selection and treatment, sowing and harvesting seasons, crop rotation, and other agricultural practices—including the application of manure to enhance crop productivity. The 'Taittiriya Samhita' notes that the same field was utilized to sow pulses during the winter season and rice during the summer season. During the Buddhist era, the populace maintained a keen interest in agriculture. People also possessed a thorough understanding of the utility of animals. Improvements in horticultural practices were closely intertwined with the development of Buddhist monasteries and temples. During the Mauryan period, immense importance was also accorded to the promotion of agriculture, forest products, pastures, cattle, horses, and elephants. Veterinary care facilities were made available to the general population, leading to significant advancements in the field of animal husbandry. The ancient Indian scholar Kautilya, also known as Chanakya, authored the 'Arthashastra' A comprehensive treatise on economic policy, governance, and state administration. It contains invaluable information regarding the agricultural practices prevalent in ancient India. Kautilya established precise regulations for agricultural management, recognizing the pivotal role that agriculture played in sustaining the nation's economy. A fundamental principle outlined in the 'Arthashastra' was the equitable distribution of land among farmers. The concepts of 'Kshetra' (land) and 'Kraya' (sale) were central to agricultural administration. Kautilya prescribed severe penalties for individuals who failed to fulfill their responsibilities regarding the maintenance of irrigation canals, thereby emphasizing the critical importance of fertile land and efficient irrigation systems. The 'Arthashastra' mentions a variety of crops, including 'Shali' (Rice), 'Varichi' (Rice), 'Tila' (sesame), 'Masha' (Black gram), 'Masura' (red lentils), 'Yava' (barley), 'Godhuma' (wheat), 'Atasi' (flaxseed), and Sarshapa (mustard). During the Mauryan and Kushan periods, horses were primarily fed Masha lentils. Furthermore, the Arthashastra includes provisions for the construction of granaries (Koshthagriha) to preserve surplus crops and ensure food security during times of need. This proactive approach to agricultural management reflects the ancient Indian thinkers' acute awareness of economic challenges. During the reign of Ashoka (273–232 BCE), tree plantation and horticulture received extensive encouragement. In the Ashokan era, veterinary hospitals were state-run institutions that operated throughout the empire. Following the Mauryas, India was ruled by the Shungas. During this period, brick wells and improved iron agricultural implements were found in abundance. Rice and

coconut were cultivated on a large scale. Alongside a renaissance in science, literature, and the arts, there was also a tremendous surge in agricultural growth. However, during the Gupta period, land taxes were exceptionally high; conversely, as land taxes increased, taxes related to trade and commerce gradually decreased. The King levied taxes ranging from one-fourth to one-sixth of the produce. In addition to all this, whenever the royal army passed through rural areas, it was mandatory for the local people to provide them with food.

Economic Life of the Vedic Period:

In the Rigveda, agriculture and animal husbandry are regarded as the "noblest occupations." During this era, the use of the plough (langala) and oxen increased. In the Rigveda, fertile land is referred to as urvara, while barren land is termed aratna. The early lifestyle of the Rigvedic Aryans was semi-nomadic; consequently, animal husbandry held greater significance in their lives than agriculture. Among animals, the cow was the most important; cows were counted as wealth. The cow was also referred to as aghanya (one that must not be killed) and ashtakarni (one with pierced ears or bearing eight marks on its ears), among other names. Apart from the cow, the horse was the other principal animal, used primarily to draw chariots. The Rigveda mentions an ox, a female buffalo, a male buffalo, a sheep, a goat, a camel (ushtra), and a sacred female dog named Sarama. In contrast to the Indus Valley Civilization, the Rigveda contains no mention of tigers or elephants. In the Rigveda, agriculture occupied a secondary position compared to pastoralism; out of a total of 10,462 verses in the Rigveda, only 24 refer to agriculture. Three significant terms—udara, dhanya, and vapanti—are found in the core context of agricultural activities. The term yarshini was used to denote agriculture or farming. Arable land was called kshetra, while fertile land was termed urvara. Land was divided into fields, separated by strips of uncultivated land known as khilya. The term khilya was also applied to various types of land, such as fallow or barren tracts. The furrows or channels created by the plough were called Sita. The term sthana is found for the plough, and vrika for the ox, while the sickle used for harvesting was referred to as kivasha. The Rigveda mentions only one grain: yava, or barley. Manure was referred to as shakam or karisha, while the threshing floor was called khala. Long before the era of the Ramayana, the Aryans of the Vedic age were already leading a settled life, organized under a structured social system. By this time, their civilization had evolved significantly. Society had become refined and cultured; learning, the arts, and various skills had reached their zenith. References found in the Rigveda also suggest that the Aryans utilized fire to clear forests, thereby rendering the land suitable for agriculture. Compared to the evidence regarding animal husbandry, the linguistic evidence pertaining to agricultural practices among the Rigvedic Aryans is relatively sparse. The term Krishti is mentioned 33 times in the Rigveda, yet it is employed in the sense of 'people' or 'community.' The usage of the word Vraja also points to the pastoral lifestyle of the Rigvedic people, although in later periods, Vraja came to be predominantly used in the sense of 'pastures.' In its various grammatical forms, this word appears 45 times throughout the Rigveda. In one particular hymn of the Rigveda, the sage Kavasha Ailusha—while condemning the act of gambling—admonishes: "Do not play with dice; instead, engage in farming, and find contentment in—and enjoy—the wealth derived from it." The Rigvedic Aryans had even conceptualized a deity known as Kshetrapati (the Lord of the Field).

Economic Life in the Ramayana Era:

Even during the Ramayana period, the state's perennial and enduring industries—agriculture and animal husbandry—served as the universal means of livelihood. During this time, the significance of agriculture, animal husbandry, and trade had grown to such an extent that they began to be classified under Trishah Vidya (a category equivalent in status to the three Vedas and Dandaniti, or the science of governance). The Vaishyas were referred to as Krishni-Goraksha-Jivin—meaning, those who sustain their livelihood through agriculture and animal husbandry. The agricultural sector was under the protection of the state. It was the duty of the state to redress the grievances of farmers and herdsmen, and to facilitate the means for their happiness and prosperity. The episode in which King Janaka discovered Sita while plowing the sacrificial ground with a plow clearly demonstrates that Kshatriyas, too, were not barred from engaging in agriculture. The earth was bountiful, laden with ripened grain and all manner of medicinal herbs. Rainwater played a crucial role in agricultural irrigation; nevertheless, artificial means of irrigation were also developed. The primary sources of irrigation included large reservoirs, small ponds, rivers, and wells. The Kingdom of Kosala was characterized by an abundance of ponds. Within the Kosala Empire, irrigation facilities were available in ample measure. During the monsoon season, the rivers in this region would swell and flood, thereby enriching the soil and rendering the land fertile. The alluvial plains along the Gomti River were utilized as

pastures for grazing livestock. Although the King was the ultimate owner of all land, the fact that the subjects paid taxes to the state served as an indicator of the state's proprietary rights over the land. Agricultural fields were referred to as Kshetra or Kedar. Plowing commenced only after the fields had been cleared of bushes and undergrowth. For their agricultural tasks, farmers utilized a variety of tools, including Kaj, Kalash, axes, hoes, Kumbh, sickles (Kshur and Datra), digging tools (Khanit), chisels (Thank), Parshu, Piyak, plowshares (Phal), and plows (Longal). Agriculture and animal husbandry were mutually complementary occupations. Villages where animal husbandry was the primary activity were known as Ghosh. In the Ramayana, the combined mention of Ghosh (pastoral) and Gram (agricultural) settlements indicates the close proximity of these two types of communities, as well as the mutual interdependence between agriculture and animal husbandry. The Kosala region was teeming with livestock; references are made to millions upon millions of cows. From an economic perspective, cattle rearing held immense significance. Oxen were utilized for plowing, tilling, and transportation. Following cows and oxen, horses occupied a prominent position in the economic life of the era. Cottage industries were sustained through the materials derived from livestock. In rural areas, the cottage industry of manufacturing dairy products was widely prevalent. The economic potential of forest produce was fully harnessed; those who derived their livelihood from the forests were known as Vanajivanah (forest-dwellers).

The Mahabharata Period:

Following the era of the Ramayana, a new epoch dawned in Indian history one known as the Dvapara Yuga. In terms of livelihood and economic development, the society of this region during this period was self-reliant and all-inclusive. Broadly speaking, the society of that time was agrarian in nature. It provided for distinct crafts, industries, and professions tailored to people of various social classes and castes. Nevertheless, agriculture and animal husbandry remained the primary sources of livelihood for the populace. Agricultural practices and implements had undergone significant development. Trade and commerce also constituted major avenues for earning a livelihood. In the realm of social life, the division of Varnas (social orders) was based upon individual merit (Guna) and deeds (Karma).

A defining characteristic of the economic life of the time was the existence of well-developed village institutions. Within this framework, every individual was a proprietor of land. The only recognized limitation on an individual's ownership of land was the obligation to pay a tax or tribute to the State through the village headman. The State's permissible share—which the village headman would measure out and collect ranged from one-sixth to one-twelfth of the total agricultural produce. The King held proprietary rights over unclaimed lands (Agotra) as well as uncultivated or fallow lands and assets. Due to the absence of a Zamindari (landlord) system, the rural landscape was dominated by a large number of small-scale farmers who enjoyed equal social standing. The responsibility for ensuring village security and administering justice rested primarily with the Sabha (village assembly). The Sabha itself undertook numerous public welfare initiatives, such as the construction and maintenance of irrigation systems, roads, rest-houses (Dharmashalas), community assembly halls, and similar amenities. Apart from agriculture, numerous industries and trades served as the foundation of economic life. Significant progress was made in this regard. Eighteen major crafts of this period have been enumerated. However, the local castes—who held dominion over the land—were not completely wiped out.

Thus, it is concluded that the Bhars and other similar tribal groups emerged from the insalubrious refuges of the inaccessible forest regions of the North and South around the 7th century and established their dominion over this territory. The jurisdiction of these tribal populations was divided into various principalities. The boundaries of each dominion were demarcated by natural physical features, such as tracts of wilderness and major rivers. Each region was independent of the others. Each chieftain exercised authority over his own distinct territory and community (caste-group); none of them acknowledged the leadership of another. The territories occupied by these tribal groups were protected by fortifications and dense forests. The defensive perimeter of such safeguards ranged in depth from a few furlongs to several miles. Thus, in terms of security, these regional principalities were self-sufficient. Initially, these communities were republican in nature, having no kings. However, prior to their displacement by the Rajputs, they had fragmented into smaller feudal estates (Jagirs), ruled over by kings and military commanders. Undoubtedly, these pre-medieval tribal polities provided the essential foundation for the emergence of medieval communities.

The Impact of agriculture and animal husbandry on the Indian Economy:

It is impossible to overstate the significance of agriculture and animal husbandry in the ancient Indian economy. A profound understanding of the terrain, climate, and available natural resources defined India's ancient agricultural practices. Ancient Indian farmers employed organic and sustainable farming methods to preserve the long-term fertility of the soil and ensure the health of their crops. These practices included crop rotation, the use of organic manure, and irrigation techniques such as the digging of wells and canals. These traditional agricultural methods not only helped sustain the population but also generated a surplus yield. This surplus production had a profound impact on the Indian economy. Agricultural surplus served as the very foundation of trade and commerce. Excess crops were exported to other nations and exchanged within India itself, thereby generating substantial revenue. Thus, the foundation of trade and commerce rested upon an agricultural surplus, which played a pivotal role in fostering the development of thriving markets and trade routes. Cities such as Ujjain, Taxila, and Pataliputra were inextricably linked to their hinterlands—regions characterized by high agricultural productivity—and owed their prosperity to this very connection. Furthermore, the surplus generated by agricultural production stimulated the growth of flourishing artisanal industries, including metalworking, weaving, pottery, and various handicrafts. Specialized craft towns emerged where artisans honed their skills and produced goods for both trade and local consumption. This intricate web of interdependence across various sectors of the economy fostered economic growth, creativity, and innovation. A crucial component of traditional Indian agriculture was the sustainable utilization of resources. Farmers employed ecological insights, seasonal calendars, and indigenous knowledge systems to maximize resource efficiency while minimizing environmental degradation. Moreover, the development of tools such as the plough, the bullock cart, and other agricultural implements revolutionized farming practices by enabling farmers to cultivate larger tracts of land and till the soil with greater efficiency. These technological advancements not only boosted agricultural output but also laid the groundwork for handicrafts and rural enterprises, thereby driving economic growth and innovation.

Furthermore, the surplus in agricultural production played a significant role in the expansion of other industries as well. For instance, the abundance of grains and other agricultural produce served as a source of raw materials for the textile industry, thereby fostering growth in the textile trade. Concurrently, the abundance of agricultural output accelerated the expansion of cities and towns, as it necessitated the construction of warehouses, transportation hubs, and markets for the trade of agricultural products. Overall, India's traditional agricultural practices were instrumental in sustaining the country's population, boosting trade and commerce, and stimulating the development of other sectors of the economy. These activities not only contributed to the economic growth of ancient India but also laid the foundation for the country's modern agricultural industry.

Conclusion:

The economic and social fabric of modern India remains influenced today by the agricultural practices of ancient Indians. Traditional methods of agriculture and animal husbandry embody concepts such as sustainable resource management, economic self-reliance, technological innovation, and social equity. These principles offer crucial insights for addressing contemporary challenges such as food insecurity, climate change, and rural poverty. Even today, India's agriculture and animal husbandry sector remains of paramount importance to the national economy. It accounts for approximately 16% of India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and 13% of its total export earnings. Moreover, it provides a livelihood to over 620 million people across the country and employment to 52% of the workforce. India's traditional agricultural practices established a robust foundation for the agricultural industry—a foundation that serves as a primary pillar of the nation's economy today. With the evolution of civilization, human life became centered on agricultural activities, and agriculture emerged as the fundamental basis of economic sustenance. As cultural development progressed, agricultural practices evolved as well, eventually attaining the status of a full-fledged industry. In the contemporary era, whether directly or indirectly, the fundamental necessities of human life are met through agricultural products. From the past to the present—spanning both material and scientific epochs—agriculture remains the bedrock of human existence.

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