

# Rural Life as Depicted in Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra*

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## Abstract:

India is a vast country with a majority of its total population living in the villages. The Indian society is predominantly divided into two divisions like the rural and the urban society. Villages have always been an integral part of society in India. No specific timeframe can be mentioned about the conception of villages in India. However, the concept of the village was not present there in the ancient period. The Indus Valley civilization is so far known to be the ancient civilization in India and it mainly comprised two cities of Harappa and Mohenjodaro. However, the concept of the village seems to be absent during this era. The history of Indian villages, in fact, goes back to the Vedic era when the villages were a cluster of houses and the surrounding land was cultivated by the villagers. The concept of villages in India flourished during the late Vedic era or during the reign of the Mauryas. The Maurya dynasty was founded by Chandragupta Maurya during 323 BC and the villages were a predominant part of the Indian social system at that time. The most reliable source to know about Mauryan era is Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra*. The *Arthaśāstra* is a text on political science and is not primarily concerned with society and its organization.

This paper will focus on the Rural Life as depicted by Kauṭilya in his *Arthaśāstra* after discussing the Kauṭilyan outlook of settlement and formation of the villages, the daily life of the people, particularly how they lived in the villages, what they ate and drink and how they spent their leisure.

**Key Words:** Rural life, Ancient India, Kauṭilya, *Arthaśāstra*.

## Introduction

The village has been from its inception, one of the primary units in which human activities are socially arranged. Throughout the Indian history, average people of ancient India were a countryman.<sup>1</sup> It is known to be a great antiquity, and came into existence when agriculture became the economic basis of subsistence of group life, which archaeological evidence shows, first began in the Neolithic age. The earliest archaeological evidence of a village in the Indian subcontinent is at Mehrgarh as early as 6th millennium BC.<sup>2</sup> The Indus Valley civilization is so far known to be the ancient civilization in India and it mainly comprised two cities of Harappa and Mohenjodaro. Many settlements have been brought to light in archaeological explorations and excavations. However, the concept of the village seems to be absent during this era. The history of Indian villages, in fact, goes back to the Vedic era when the kingdoms comprised a major city and several villages. The villages were a cluster of houses and the surrounding land was cultivated by the villagers. The *Rgvedic* people led a pastoral-cum-agricultural life. A Vedic village generally comprised a group of families of a single clan.<sup>3</sup> Villages were situated close to each other and some far apart. Each family lived

in a separate house within a village. The system of the individual ownership of land and inheritance of private property had come into vogue, though community landholding also existed. More details about village and village life are available for the early historical period in early Buddhist literature and in the Vedas, which conform to the presence of a large number of village settlements in northern India, particularly in the Ganges valley.

The concept of villages in India flourished during the late Vedic era or during the reign of the Mauryas. The Maurya Dynasty was founded by Chandragupta Maurya where the villages were a predominant part of the Indian social system at that time. The most reliable source to know about Mauryan era is Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra*, a representative work on the socio-economic and political realities of ancient India, which was written about 3rd century B.C.E by Kauṭilya. *Arthaśāstra* is not only an omnibus of Indian state, society, and administration but also comparable to the state-craft literature of other countries of the world. Whether analyzed from any point of view like Political science, Economics, Sociology, Public Administration, International Relations – the usefulness and significance of *Arthaśāstra* is proved. The *śāstra*, no doubt, does not lay down rules in social matters as it does in political matters; yet it was bound to take notice of the facts of social life as it found them. Keeping that in mind this paper considers the village life with all its complexities and manifold varieties at the time of Kauṭilya. According to scholars, Village Life is a far more important question than Village Government because after all, Government of a country is the reflection of its people's life and character. This paper shall at the outset consider the question of the village settlement, its broad features, and peculiarities according to *Arthaśāstra*. Then it shall consider the village life particularly how they lived in the villages, what they ate and drink and how they spent their leisure.

## Settlement of new Villages

Villages were formed by a number of families residing at one place. Most villages came into existence as a result of movement of members of a family, tribe or clan to a particular site because of such factors as pressure on land or inimical atmosphere in the habitat, or bad location of the houses, or availability of better amenities and facilities at the place of migration. In the beginning, only a few members would migrate to a new place and lay the foundation for a village. Later, other migrants from the same village or even from some other villages would join them and extend the area of the habitation. A new village with well-defined boundary could also be founded on the initiative of the state. Kauṭilya advises that the king shall populate the countryside by creating new villages on virgin land or by reviving abandoned village sites. Settlement can be affected either by shifting some of the population of his own country or by immigration of foreigners by inducement or force. Villages consisting each of not less than a hundred families and of not more than five-hundred families of agricultural people of *sūdra* caste, with boundaries extending as far as a *krosa* (2250 yards) or two, and capable of protecting each other shall be formed. Kauṭilya welcomed the *sūdra* peasant family for settling in newly created villages, as they were hard-working and submissive, and cultivated the fields themselves. Besides agriculturists, people of other professions such as smiths and carpenters would also migrate to new settlements. The evidence in the *Arthaśāstra* has been interpreted by some as indicating that the *sūdras* were ordered to migrate to new settlements, while others came voluntarily in the hope of better economic prospects.<sup>4</sup> According to scholars like Pran Nath argues that *grāma* which was used by Kauṭilya in the discussion of settlement of country is to be understood not in the sense of a village but in that of an estate or a big farm. But that

cannot be accepted by R. P. Kangle.<sup>5</sup> Boundaries shall be denoted by a river, a mountain, a forests, a stretch of pebbles, sands etc., a cavern, an embankment, or by trees such as *sālmalī* (silk cotton tree), *śamī* (Acacia Suma), and milky trees like *aśvattha* etc.<sup>6</sup>

The king shall avoid taking possession of any country which is liable to the inroads of enemies and wild tribes and which is harassed by frequent visitations of famine and pestilence. He shall also keep away from excessive expenditure.<sup>7</sup>

He should establish a *sthānīya* i.e. a fortress of that name [provincial headquarters] in the centre of eight-hundred villages, a *dronamukha* [a divisional headquarters] in the centre of four-hundred villages, a *kārvatika* [a district headquarters] in the middle of two-hundred villages and *saṃgrahaṇya* [the headquarters of a sub-district] in the midst of a collection of ten villages. On the frontiers, he shall construct fortresses under the command of *Antapāla* [frontier chief] to guard the entrances into the kingdom. The area between the frontier forts and the settled villages shall be guarded by *Vāgurikas* [trap-keepers], *Śabarās* [archers], *Pulinda* [hunters], *Chandālas*, and *Aranyakarās* [forest-dwellers].<sup>8</sup>

He should grant lands to priests, preceptors, chaplains and Brahmins learned in the Vedas as gifts to Brahmins, exempt from fines and taxes, with inheritance passing on to corresponding heirs, and to heads of departments, accountants and others like to *Gopas* [record keepers], *Sthānikas* [divisional officers], elephant-trainers, physicians, horse-trainers and couriers, lands without the right of sale or mortgage.<sup>9</sup>

Lands prepared for cultivation shall be given to *karada* [tax-payers] only for life. Unprepared lands shall not be taken away from those who are preparing them for cultivation. Lands may be confiscated from those who do not cultivate them; and given to others; or they may be cultivated by *Grāmabhrītaka* [village laborers] and *Vaidehaka* [traders], lest those owners who do not properly cultivate them might pay less to the government. If cultivators pay their taxes easily, they may be favorably supplied with grains, cattle, and money. The king shall bestow on cultivators only such favor and remission as will tend to swell the treasury, and shall avoid such as will deplete it. A king with depleted treasury will eat into the very vitality of both citizens and country people. Either on the occasion of opening new settlements or on any other emergent occasions, remission of taxes shall be made. He shall regard with fatherly kindness those who have passed the period of remission of taxes.<sup>10</sup>

No ascetic other than a *vānaprastha* [forest-hermit], no company other than the one of local birth, and no guilds of any kind other than local cooperative guilds shall not settle in these newly settled villages.<sup>11</sup> Ascetics who live in *ashramas* and *Pāśandas* who live in reserved areas shall do so without annoying each other; they shall put up with minor irritations. Those who are already living in an area shall make room for newcomers; anyone who objects to giving room shall be expelled.<sup>12</sup>

There shall be no grounds or buildings intended for recreation in the new settlements. Actors, dancers, singers, drummers, professional story tellers or minstrels shall not create any disturbance to the work of the villagers; for helpless villagers are always dependent and bent upon their fields. Consequently, there will be increase in the supply of labor, money, and commodities, grains and liquids follows.<sup>13</sup>

Kauṭilya also advises that, when making a settlement, land with the following qualities should be preferred – with water, capable of sowing two crops specially grains, with elephant forests and trade route on land. If a tract is difficult to settle because of heavy expenditure or losses, the king is advised to sell it first to someone who is likely to fail in the attempt to settle it and then reacquire it.<sup>14</sup>

### Promotion of Economic Activity after settling the Village

According to Kauṭilya, a king shall augment his power by promoting the welfare of his people; for power comes from the countryside which is the source of all economic activity. He shall build forts, because they provide the security to the people and the king himself; waterworks since reservoirs make water continuously available for agriculture; trade routes since they are useful for sending and receiving clandestine agents and war material; and mines for they are the source of war material; productive forests, elephant forests and animal herds provide various useful products and animals.<sup>15</sup>

The king shall protect agriculture from the molestation of oppressive fines, free labor, and taxes.<sup>16</sup> After settling the new countryside, a king not only shall concentrate to keep in good repair productive forests, elephant forests, reservoirs and mines created in the past, but also set up new mines, factories, forests, elephant forests and cattle herds and shall promote trade and commerce by setting up market towns, ports and trade routes, both by land in water.<sup>17</sup>

He shall also construct reservoirs filled with water either from natural spring or drawn from some other source. Or he may provide with sites, roads, timber, and other necessary things those who construct reservoirs of their own accord. Similar help shall be given to those who build shrines and sanctuaries. Whoever stays away from any kind of cooperative construction shall send his servants and bullocks to carry on his work, shall have a share in the expenditure, but shall have no claim to the profit. The king shall exercise his right of ownership with regard to fishing, ferrying and trading in vegetables in reservoirs or lakes.<sup>18</sup>

He shall not only clear roads of traffic from the molestations of courtiers, of workmen, of robbers, and of boundary-guards, but also keep them from being destroyed by herds of cattle.<sup>19</sup>

He shall allot land for cattle pastures on uncultivable land and shall protect the herds from thieves, tigers, poisonous creatures and cattle-diseases.<sup>20</sup> Brahmins shall be provided with forests for *soma* plantation, for religious learning, and for the performance of penance, such forests being rendered safe from the dangers from animate or inanimate objects.

A forest as extensive as the above, provided with only one entrance rendered inaccessible by the construction of ditches all round, with plantations of delicious fruit trees, bushes, bowers, and thorn less trees, with an expansive lake of water full of harmless animals, and with tigers, beasts of prey, male and female elephants, young elephants, and bison's—all deprived of their claws and teeth—shall be formed for the king's sports. On the extreme limit of the country or in any other suitable locality, another game-forest with game-beasts; open to all, shall also be made. In view of procuring all kinds of forest-produce described elsewhere, one or several forests shall be especially reserved. Manufactories to prepare commodities from forest produce shall also be set up. Wild tracts shall be separated from timber-forests. In the extreme limit of the country, elephant forests, separated from wild tracts, shall be formed.<sup>21</sup>

The king shall show special favors to those in the villages who do things which benefit the people, such as building embankments or road bridges, beautifying villages, or helping to protect them.<sup>22</sup>

## The Daily Life of the Village People

While the *Samāhartsṛ* [Collector General] with the help of *Pradeṣṭā* [Chancellor] was responsible for administering the vast countryside after dividing into four divisions with its best, middling and lowest categories of villages and pastures, empty tracks and forests as well. Though the *Pradeṣṭā* also had under him *Gopas* [record keepers] and *Sthānikas* [divisional officers], his control would have been much looser. Both Collector General and Chancellor relied much more on the secret services.<sup>23</sup>

A lot of responsibility, therefore, fell on the *Grāmika* or *Grāmakūṭa*, the village headman and the *Grāmavṛddha*, the village elders. The elders were responsible for looking after temple property, holding in trust a minor's property until he came of age,<sup>24</sup> arbitrating disputes regarding fields,<sup>25</sup> and overseeing the sale of immovable property.<sup>26</sup> In the absence of a creditor from the village, a mortgagor could deposit the redemption money with the elders and reclaim his property.<sup>27</sup>

The village headman was responsible for maintenance of the village boundary pillars,<sup>28</sup> controlling grazing,<sup>29</sup> and ejecting undesirables from village.<sup>30</sup> He could also give asylum to a woman who had run away from home.<sup>31</sup> Each villager had to take his turn in accompanying the headman whenever he went on official business.<sup>32</sup>

Usually all the people in a village shall contribute their share of the community work and costs of festivals and entertainments. Anyone who does not contribute his share of the cost of production of a performance shall not be allowed to see it; his family shall also be banned. Watching or listening to it secretly is a punishable offence. The people of a village shall obey the orders of anyone who proposes any activity beneficial to all. They shall not conspire against such a person to attack or harm him.<sup>33</sup> The village shall organize a hierarchy of its society, from the Brahmin downwards. Brahmins, the people of a locality, a caste, a family or group shall not be obliged to take part in any festivities if they don't want to.<sup>34</sup>

The king should enforce discipline on slaves, persons kept as pledges and kinsmen who do not obey their masters. The king shall provide the orphans, the aged, the infirm, the afflicted, and the helpless with maintenance. He shall also provide subsistence to helpless women when they are carrying and also to the children they give birth to. When a capable person other than a *Patita* [apostate] or mother neglects to maintain his or her child, wife, mother, father, minor brothers, sisters, or widowed girls, he or she shall be punished with a fine of twelve *panas*. When, without making provision for the maintenance of his wife and sons, any person renounces to become an ascetic, he shall be punished; likewise any person who converts a woman to ascetic. Whoever has passed the age of copulation may become an ascetic after distributing the properties of his own acquisition [among his sons]; otherwise, he will be punished.<sup>35</sup> Cremation grounds shall be created outside of the habitat. It shall be designated for the higher *varṇas* in the northern or eastern part and for the lower *varṇas* in the southern part.<sup>36</sup>

There was tremendous disparity of wealth at the time of Kauṭilya. Apart from the king whose wealth was all the surplus wealth of the state, there were high officials earning 48,000 *panas* per annum without counting the perquisites of office.<sup>37</sup> The lowest government salary was only 60 *panas* a year.<sup>38</sup> The lowest monetary fine was one-eighth of a *pana* for making the road dirty and the highest 5000 *panas* levied on a courtesan disobeying an order to attend on someone.<sup>39</sup>

## Eating and Drinking Habits

The average food consumption can be deduced from the ration prescribed for an *Arya* male for one meal: one *prastha* [about a kilo] of rice, a quarter of a liter of broth, one sixteenth of a liter of butter or oil and a bit of salt.<sup>40</sup> Attendants of elephants were given a liter of boiled rice, a cupful of oil, 160 grams of sugar, 800 grams of meat and salt.<sup>41</sup> An annual salary of 60 *panas* was equivalent to one *ādhaka* i.e. four *prasthas* of grain a day, enough for four meals. We must note that the ration suggested for an *Ārya* male was the highest. The lower classes male got the same quantity of rice and salt, but only two-third of the quantity of broth and half the oil. Women received three-quarters and children half the quantities for the corresponding male of their category.<sup>42</sup> There are some food taboos in the time of Kauṭilya because he imposed restrictions on some food items and prescribed punishments for the higher caste.<sup>43</sup> But it is not clear why elephant doctors, unlike other attendants, were not given meat.<sup>44</sup>

A wide variety of commodities were used for cooking: different kinds of rice, cereals like wheat, barley and millets, a variety of beans and lentils, butter and ghee, vegetable oils from sesame and mustard, sugar, honey, treacle and molasses, vinegars and fruit juices from tamarind, lemon and pomegranate, milk and yoghurt, spices including pepper, ginger, coriander, cumin seeds and anise, fresh and dried meat and fish etc.<sup>45</sup> *Arthaśāstra* contains rules for management of slaughter houses and for preserving meat.<sup>46</sup> It mentions not only ingredients, but also their quantity for cooking meat.<sup>47</sup>

We know of the existence of public eating houses where different kinds of cooked food was sold because secret agents often disguised themselves as food vendors; e.g. as the agents of the Chancellor<sup>48</sup> for liberating hostages<sup>49</sup> and for poisoning enemy troops.<sup>50</sup> The owners were prohibited from giving lodging to strangers.<sup>51</sup> There were separate vegetarian and non-vegetarian eating places, bakers selling bread, sweetmeat sellers and broth makers. *Koṣṭhāgārāddhyakṣa* [Superintendent of Warehouses] disposed of broken grains left over from milling grain by selling them to broth makers and cooked food vendors.<sup>52</sup>

The manufacture and sale of alcoholic drinks was a state monopoly, private manufacturing being very limited and strictly controlled.<sup>53</sup> Alcoholic drinks were widely sold in many places in the city and villages as well.<sup>54</sup> Kauṭilya gave details about how the drinking halls look like.<sup>55</sup> Only persons of good character could buy and take away small amount of liquor; others had to drink it on the premises. Moving about while drunk was prohibited<sup>56</sup> but on the festive occasions permission to manufacture and enjoy liquor was granted.<sup>57</sup>

## Means of Recreation

There is a great deal of material in the *Arthaśāstra* about how the people spent their leisure and entertained themselves. Villagers had a good sense of humor and loved songs and dance, and sang even while doing various chores. It was normal to throw a feast on ceremonial or auspicious occasions like birth or marriages. Anyone giving a large fest was asked to make special drainage arrangements for washing.<sup>58</sup> Hunting was the pastime for the rich, particularly for the royal family. Gambling and betting was strictly controlled by the state. Gambling is described as wagering with inanimate objects such as dice; betting appears to have involved challenges and was concerned with cock fights, animal races and similar contests. However, placing bets on literary or artistic challenges was not covered by the regulations. Painting and recitation are referred to among the arts.

There is a long list of public entertainers in the *Arthaśāstra*: actors, dancers, musicians, mimics, story tellers, acrobats, jugglers and conjurors. There were shows during the day and at

night. Some shows were entirely by female performers and others only by males.<sup>59</sup> The cost of putting on shows was shared by the villagers.<sup>60</sup> To prevent the attention of the people of the new settlements being diverted from work, no buildings were to be erected for lodging entertainers, who are enjoined not to obstruct the work.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps for the same reason, entertainers were prohibited from moving from village to village during the monsoon.<sup>62</sup>

## Notes and Reference:

1. A. L. Basham, *The Wonder that was India*, p. 189.
2. G. L. Possehl, *The Indus Age: The Beginnings*, p. 642.
3. U.N. Ghosal, *The Agrarian System in Ancient India*, p. 2.
4. D.D. Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in its Historical Outline*, p. 149.
5. R. P. Kangle, *The Kauṭilya Arthaśāstra*, Part III, p. 168.
6. R. P. Kangle, *The Kauṭilya Arthaśāstra*, Part II, Book 2, Chapter 1, line 1-3; hereafter Aś. 2.1.1-3.
7. Aś. 2.1.36.
8. Aś. 2.1.4-6.
9. Aś. 2.1.7.
10. Aś. 2.1.8-18.
11. Aś. 2.1.32.
12. Aś. 3.16.33-36.
13. Aś. 2.1.33-35.
14. Aś. 7.11.3-40.
15. Aś. 7.12.2-28.
16. Aś. 2.1.37.
17. Aś. 2.1.19, 39.
18. Aś. 2.1.20-24.
19. Aś. 2.2.38.
20. Aś. 2.2.1; 2.2.37.
21. Aś. 2.2.2-6.
22. Aś. 3.10.46.
23. Aś. 2.35.8-14.
24. Aś. 2.1.27; 3.5.20.
25. Aś. 3.9.11, 15.
26. Aś. 3.9.3.
27. Aś. 3.12.12.
28. Aś. 3.10.20.
29. Aś. 3.10.25-34.
30. Aś. 3.10.18-19.
31. Aś. 3.4.9.
32. Aś. 3.10.16.
33. Aś. 3.10.35, 37-41.
34. Aś. 3.10.43-45.
35. Aś. 2.1.25-31.

- 36. Aś. 2.4.21.
- 37. Aś. 5.3.3.
- 38. Aś. 5.3.17.
- 39. Aś. 2.36.26; 2.27.19.
- 40. Aś. 2.15.43.
- 41. Aś. 2.32.17.
- 42. Aś. 2.15.44-46.
- 43. Aś. 4.13.1-2.
- 44. Aś. 2.32.17.
- 45. Aś. 5.3.
- 46. Aś. 2.26.
- 47. Aś. 2.15.47-49.
- 48. Aś. 4.4.3.
- 49. Aś. 7.17.45.
- 50. Aś. 12.4.8.
- 51. Aś. 2.36.8.
- 52. Aś. 2.15.61.
- 53. Aś. 2.25.36.
- 54. Aś. 2.25.1.
- 55. Aś. 2.25.11.
- 56. Aś. 2.25.5.
- 57. Aś. 2.25.36.
- 58. Aś. 3.8.8.
- 59. Aś. 3.3.21.
- 60. Aś. 3.10.37.
- 61. Aś. 2.1.33-34.
- 62. Aś. 4.1.58.

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