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POVERTY DURING THE BRITISH RULE

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ABSTRACT

Historically, there is ample evidence in ancient literature to suggest that the phenomenon and pains of poverty were not unknown to Indians. However, due to the absence of systematic and authentic record of economic conditions in ancient India, opinions among economic historians about the nature of 'material' life enjoyed by the people reflect wide divergence. Historians like M. A. Buch (1922)¹, N. C. Bandhopadhyay (1925)² and S. K. Das (1929)³ have opined that economic conditions in ancient India were better than those of their own times. Ghosals made a serious study of the taxation systems of India from the Vedic age to AD 1200 and stated that 'there is little, if any positive evidence, to prove that the burden of taxation in ancient and medieval periods was so heavy as to leave the cultivator a bare margin



for subsistence.⁴

KEYWORDS: ancient literature , economic conditions , ancient and medieval periods.

INTRODUCTION:

In another study, "The Agrarian System in Ancient India" Ghoshal states... the glimpses which the observations of the foreign travelers furnish into the actual condition of the people generally indicate a happy and contented peasantry".⁵ Following the publication of the full text of Arthshastra of Kautilya in 1909, nationalist historians have regarded the ancient period of Indian history as one of

considerable prosperity and general contentment. Altekar while analyzing the rural economy of Western India in the early centuries before and after the Christian era asserted, "The people were better off than they are present"⁶. Morris and Stein contended these opinions and observed that the patriotic bias (in the writings of nationalist's historians) often resulted in an exaggeration of the self-sufficiency of the early Indian village out of all proportions and greater emphasis on the socially productive aspects of the corporate institu-

tions (Caste included) of the Pre-British India than warranted by available historical evidence.⁷ Basu also arrived at the identical conclusions when he emphasized "they (nationalist historians) often tried to cover up the social inequalities characteristics of the early Indian society by vague philosophical platitude."⁸ In contrast to the nationalist historians, Bose has tried to show that "all was not well with the ancient economic system and that according to Jataka stories the peasants were exploited by the princes".⁹ Observations of R. S. Sharma (1958) on early Indian feudalism that, "the economic essence of Indian feudalism, like that of the European, lay in the rise of landed intermediaries leading to the enserfment of the peasantry through mounting tax burdens, increasing obligations to perform forced labour and evils of

subinfeudation",¹⁰ have lent powerful support to the ideas that peasantry in India during the early period was not free from exploitation. Besides absence of growth factors was noticed in the village communities of ancient India when as early as 1817 James Mill asserted that Indian Society has remained substantially unchanged since its inception.¹¹ Maity also concluded that as regards the material life of the common people, the Gupta period was not a golden age.¹² For the subsequent period, Pushpa Niyogi does not find any evidence to prove that the population as a whole was prosperous.¹³ L Gopal in one of his studies covering the period AD 700-1200 repeatedly suggests that the common people were far from happy and economically well off.¹⁴

Opinions regarding economic conditions of the common people during the Mughal period reveal that the prosperity of the nation was, by the large, maintained throughout the rule of Akbar, Jahangir and Shahjahan, but it came to a standstill when in Aurangzeb's reign, the incessant wars and the loss of human life, paralyzed agriculture, industry and trade. According to Hamilton, "in the best days of the Mughal Empire there was indeed a greater degree of prosperity than that of the previous era as also of the days which witnessed that decline of its power".¹⁵ It is widely believed that with the closing years of the reign of Aurangzeb, the economic prosperity of India deteriorated as a natural sequel to the disappearance of peace and order. Thus ensued, observes the historian of Aurangzeb, "a great economic impoverishment of India, not only a decrease of the 'national stock' but also a rapid lowering of mechanical skill and standard of civilization, a disappearing of art and culture over wide tracts of the country"¹⁶. Majumdar and others observed, "It is certain that there was no golden age of opulence for the common people under the Mughals, because though the prices of articles were cheap, their average income was proportionally low or perhaps lower. They did not, however, grovel in misery and smart under discontent as their needs were few and the problems of life were not so complicated as those of the present days".¹⁷

These historical accounts unmistakably reveal that India has attained high level of development and the people under normal circumstances were not grinding under poverty and misery. Report of Indian Industrial Commission (1918) has lent support to this view by recording, at a time when the west of Europe, the birth place of the modern industrial systems, was inhabited by uncivilized tribes; India was famous for the wealth of her rulers and for the high artistic skill of her craftsman. And even at a much made their first appearance in India, the industrial development of this country was at any rate, not inferior to that of the more advance European nations".

POVERTY DURING BRITISH RULE

With the British dominance over India, parasitical symbioses got established between an advanced trading (later on industrial) nation and a vast agrarian state. In such a symbioses British became strong and prosperous while as India was reduced to the status of weak and poor country. This observation is supported by the terribly poor conditions of nourishment in India as against Britain in 1938-39 as summed up by RC Desai in the following table 1.¹⁹ India's expenditure structure with spending on food was twice as high as in England and about one half on housing indicated palpably low living standards in the country. Further, investigation of the expenditure made by Desai from 1931-32 to 1940-41 at 1938-39 prices showed that living standard in India was declining. During these years the standard of living showed clearly a falling tendency from Rs. 49.15 an average of first four years to Rs. 48.80, the average of his subsequent three years. (refer table2.) Absolute misery of industrial workers is also evident as per Desai investigation, which shows that so far as food conditions are concerned prison inmates are better off than the free industrial workers. It is indeed a poor reflection of the Indian economy that an industrial worker in textile industry of Bombay and Madras could manage to have daily consumption of food estimated at 1.54 and 1.37 British pounds respectively as against 1.69 and 1.87 British pounds authorized for Indian inmates in the prisons of Bombay performing light and heavy work respectively. Similarly calorie intake of industrial workers in Bombay and Madras calculated at 2,435 and 2,176 respectively is much less than the calorie intake of Indian prisoners estimated at 2,772 and 3,026 for light and heavy work respectively. (refer table3 &4).

Another proof of growing poverty in India is found in historical records with show that the major industry of the country viz., Agriculture during the British rule was stagnant or even deteriorating, threatening to drive

down the population below the Malthusian limit of subsistence. The progressive decline in the value of agriculture output per acre, per worker and per head of population as shown in the table5, lends powerful support to the rampant poverty of masses in rural India.

It is apparent from Table5 that the value of agriculture output per acre, per worker and per head of population declined from Rs. 28 to Rs. 6, Rs. 105 to Rs. 103 and Rs. 26 to Rs. 22 respectively during 1900-1945. Similarly, the value of food grain output per acre and per head of population recorded a fall from Rs. 26 to Rs. 22 and Rs. 20 to Rs. 15 during the same period. These negative trends amply support the contention that poverty was rampant and wide spread of India during the British rule.

Dr. Banerjee has aptly summarized the poverty of Indian masses as follows:-

“Ill-fed, ill-clad, ill-lodged, the mass of the people of India leads a dull and dreary existence. The want of proper subsistence impairs the vigor and vitality of the people, who fall easy victims to the attacks of various kinds of disease. Having no reserve to fall back upon in difficult times, they suffer untold misery, whenever there is slight disturbing cause such as drought or failure of the crops. The children of weak and unhealthy parents become weaklings and being themselves ill fed and ill-bred, swell the number of the worthless members of society. Thus, the physical deterioration of the people goes on increasing from generation and with the progress of physical degeneration their moral stamina also trends to become less and less strong”.²¹

Many thinkers, while commenting on the economic condition of people during the British rule have convincingly proved that the policies and programmes had inhibitive effects on development and impoverishment of the masses was increasing. Analyzing the impact of Permanent Settlement and freedom of trade, Ram Manohar Roy observed:

“In so far as these causes had operated to bring about an increase of wealth, it was confined to landlords and dealers in commodities. What was too evident was the extent of over whelming poverty throughout the country (towns and their immediate vicinity excepted...). It is well known that within a circle of hundred miles in any part of the country, there are to be found very few, if any (besides proprietors of lands) that have the least pretension to wealth or independence, or even that common comforts of life”.²²

He had also come to the conclusion that whatever the system of land tenure- Permanent Settlement or Ryotwari System – “the condition of the cultivators was very miserable”. Under the former they were placed at the mercy of the Zamindars avarices and ambition and under the latter, they were subjected to the extortion and intrigues of the surveyors and other government revenue officer’s, Joshi and Dadabhai Naoroji examined the profile of a dependent and colonial economy of India with a great deal of perception and sophistication and pointed out that poverty in the country was not only deep but also deepening. Dadabhai Naoroji vibrantly expressed the exploitative aspect of the Indian economy in his characterization of the “two India’s” – the two separate worlds that existed in the same country. Dadabhai estimated the per capita income of India at Rs. 20 per annum around the year 1870 and added, “The mass of the people could not get this Rs. 20 as the upper had a larger share than the average, also this Rs. 20 per head included the income or produce of foreign planters or producers in which the interest of the natives did not go further than being mostly common labourers at competitive wages. All the profits of such produce are enjoyed by and carried away from the country by the foreigners”.²³ It was against this dismal background that Dadabhai spoke of two India’s as follows:

“In reality there are two Indians – one the prosperous, the other poverty stricken. The prosperous India is the India of the British and other foreigners. They exploit India as officials, capitalists in a variety of ways and carry away enormous wealth to their country. To them, India is, of course, rich and prosperous. The more they can carry away, the richer and more prosperous Indian is. The second India of the Indians – the poverty stricken India”.²⁴

Romesh Chander Dutt has sought an explanation from the British rule as to why “the poverty of the Indian people was unparalleled in any civilized country” and why “by a moderate calculation, the famines of 1877, 1878 and 1900 has carried off 15 million populations, equal to half of England.”²⁵ While discussing the evil economic consequences of Age of Imperialism, Dutt mentioned “It was not gratifying to know that a country possessing a rich and fertile soil, and frugal and industrious population was still subject to recurring famines after

a century and half of the British rule". There were no signs of increasing prosperity and greater distress – the recurrence of famines was more frequent and desolation caused greater".²⁶ Inexorable continuity and increasing intensity of India's poverty were indicated by the low per capita income of 2 pounds as against 48 pounds in Canada and 42 pounds in Great Britain".²⁷

Foregoing discussion lead to an inevitable conclusion that under British rule India was getting economically impoverished continuously and therefore, poverty was deepening year after year. Situation on the eve of Independence was thus aptly described as, "India was a rich country but inhabited by poor people".

Table No.1
Distribution of Expenditure (Percentage)

Group	India (1938-39)	England (1938)
a)Food	60.5	30.1
b)Housing	6.0	11.5
c)others	33.5	58.4

Source: Desai, R.C.-"Consumer Expenditure in India, 1931-32 to 1940-41", Journal of the Royal Statistical Society Series, vol.CXI, Part 4, 1948, p.277.

Table No.2
Per Head Consumption Expenditure
(At 1938-39 prices)

Year	Rupees	Year	Rupees
1931-32	49.9	1936-37	49.6
1932-33	49.1	1937-38	48.4
1933-34	48.7	1938-39	47.4
1934-35	48.9	1939-40	45.6
1935-36	48.4	1940-41	46.3

Source: Desai, R.C.-"Standard of living in India and Pakistan "Bombay, 1953, p.284.

Table No.3
Daily Consumption of Food per Adult Male
(English Pound)

Food Stuff	Industrial Worker (Textile Worker)		Indian inmates in the prisons of Bombay with	
	Bombay	Madras	Light Work	Heavy work
Cereals	1.29	1.13	1.38	1.50
Pulses	0.09	0.07	0.21	0.27
Meat	0.03	-	0.04	0.04
Salt	0.04	0.05	0.03	0.03
Oils	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.03
Food adjuncts	0.07	0.09	-	-
Total	1.54	1.37	1.69	1.87

Sources: Kuezynaki, Jurgan: Conditions of Workers in Economic History of India 1857-1956; Edited by Singh, V.B., Allied Publishers, Pvt.Ltd, New Delhi, 1965, p-617

Table No.4
Daily Calorie Intake per Adult Male

Food Stuff	Industrial Worker (Textile Worker)		Indian inmates in the prisons of Bombay with	
	Bombay	Madras	Light Heavy work	work
Cereals	2036	1774	2292	2452
Pulses	174	112	333	427
Meat	16	-	21	21
Salt	-	-	-	-
Oils	81	126	126	126
Food adjuncts	128	164	-	-
Total	2435	2176	2772	3026

Source: Table 3 converted into calories

Table No.5
Value of Agricultural Output (Rupees)

Period	Per Acre			Per Agricultural Worker	Per Head of Population	
	Av. Food	N.food	food		Total	Food
1900-05	28	26	38	105	26	20
1910-15	27	25	33	97	27	20
1920-25	26	23	36	93	25	18
1930-35	26	23	38	103	25	17
1940-45	26	22	41	103	22	15

Source: Sinha, J.N. - "Demographic Trends in Economic History of India". Ed. Singh, V.B, p-116

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