

Agriculture in Ancient India as depicted in Buddhist Texts Buddha-Charita and Saundarananda of Ashwaghosha (Circa 200 BC-100 A.D.)

Abstract

Buddhist Bhikshu Ashwaghosha was a great thinker, Poet, Writer and Musician. Buddhist literatures 'Buddha-Charita' and 'Saundaranand'² mention their Poet's name in last line as Bhikkshoracharya Bhadanta Ashwaghosh. He was born at Saket and his mother's name was Arya Suvarnakshi.³ According to Chinese and Tibbatan Buddhist literatures he was called as Punyaditya, Punyasri, Matrchet and Shura.⁴ According to Samuel Beal⁵ Ashwaghosha was contemporary of great Buddhist scholar Nagarjuna of first century A.D.⁶ Seng-Ying⁷ mentions that Ashwaghosha was born after 500 years of Mahaparinirvan of Lord Buddha.⁸ According to Sri R.C. Temple Burt⁹, Winternitz,¹⁰, G.K.Nariman¹¹, A.B.Keith¹² and Vardachari¹³ Ashwaghosha was contemporary of great Kushan king Kanishka of first century A.D.

Keywords: Buddha-Charita, Buddhist, Saundaranand

Introduction

Buddha-Charita is the great artistic epic (Mahakavya) on the life and Dhamma of Tathagata Buddha. The great poet Ashwaghosha mentions its objective was to present the reverence to Buddha and to popularize his Dhamma among people for their happiness and welfare.¹⁵

It was composed in twenty eight Sargas (Chapters) and in Chinese and Tibbatan versions it has been found in all 28 Sargas, which was firstly translated in English by Samuel Beal in 1883.¹⁶ Saundaranand was the second epic composition of Ashwaghosha and it is known as for poetic power-style of the great poet. Dr. Har Prasad Shastri firstly published it in 1910 on the basis of manuscript found in Nepal.¹⁷ It was composed in 18 Sargas in which the poet described the beautiful woman named Sundari and his lover husband named Nanda.¹⁸ Nanda was enlightened from The Teaching of Dhamma by Tathagata Buddha and he adopted Buddha Sangha by giving up his blind love with his Wife. Actually, Ashwaghosha elaborated all the teaching of Lord Buddha by putting forward examples in simple manner in this composition so that Buddhist philosophy and Dhamma could be spread out among the people. Observing the poetic beauty of this epic all scholars have agreed that Saundarnanda was composed after Buddha-Charita.¹⁹ But Keith, Winter-Nitz and Johnston don't agree to these views and according to them it was the first composition of Ashwaghosha.

Though the objective of composition of both the epics was the elaboration and propagation of the teachings of Tathagata Buddha, but we find the different aspects of life of the people and their economic activities at that times. Apart from Buddha Charita and Saundaranand on the basis of other writings and inscriptions of Kushana Period comparative study of the agriculture of India may clearly be placed. Hence this paper intends to explain the agricultural activities of the people of ancient India as mentioned in said Buddhist literatures. At that time agricultural land was called 'uddhan Bhoomi'²¹ and the agricultural activities was known as 'krisi Karmant'.²² The Land was cultivated by driving plough with oxen.²³ The plough was called as 'Seera'.²⁴ The ploughing lines in the fields were seen as waves of water.²⁵ The peasants were used to work in the fields everyday²⁶ and they were seen blackish due to sunshine and wind-dust.²⁷ According to Epigraphia Indica the contemporary Inscriptions throw light on the donations of hundreds of ploughes and cows which were really related to agriculture.²⁸ Saundaranand mentions that selected super fine seeds were used (Vapati) in the well ready fields by ploughing for more crops

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Saundaranand mentions that selected super fine seeds were used (Vapati) in the well ready fields by ploughing for more crops. Contemporary literatures mention that two methods³⁰ were applied in using seeds in the fields after selecting them.³¹ Firstly, seeds were used in fields in the lines (Seera) made by plough-share and secondly, they were spread all over fields.³² The means and sources of irrigation were rivers,³³ ponds, wells,³⁵ etc. Buddha-Charita mentions that dams (Setum) were built on the rivers for that purpose³⁶. Contemporary and post period inscriptions also support that very facts³⁷. We find informations of built dams on the rivers like Suvarnasikata and Palashani of Girinar from Girinar Inscription of Rudradaman.³⁸ Sometimes the dams on the rivers were broken due to heavy rain and water course.³⁹

In both epics many information regarding the cereals and food stuff are mentioned. Buddha-Charita mentions paddy produced in the fields as 'Shali'⁴⁰ and other kind of Paddy known as 'Nivar' was naturally found in the forests.⁴¹ Rice from Shali was used by the people but Nivar was mainly consumed by the Ascetics.⁴² Contemporary literature Divyavadan gives the details of food grains of that time like mustard (Sarshapa), barley(yav), wheat (godhum), kidney-bean(mudrag), sesame (Til), etc.⁴³ Besides the cereals people used to produce the green vegetables known as 'tharit kalapak'.⁴⁴ Saundarananda mentions the production of sugar-cane as 'Ekshu', which was crushed in the sugar mill by oxen and crushed 'sugar-grass was dried in the sun and utilised in making fire.⁴⁵

Animal husbandary was of great importance at that time for agriculture and other economic pursuits. Oxen were used in draving ploughes⁴⁶ and carts known as shakat and chariots.⁴⁷ The chariots were also drawn by horses, which are mentioned as 'shighra vahana' in Saundaranand.⁴⁸

Cows were respectable due to giving milk and giving birth of calf oxen.⁴⁹ Besides cows and oxen the she-buffaloes⁵⁰ (mahishi), he-buffaloes⁵¹ (mahisha), pigs⁵² horses⁵³, rabbits⁵⁴, camels⁵⁵, elephants⁵⁶ and sheep⁵⁷, etc. are mentioned in both epics. Though all the peasants used to domesticate the above said animals but those people who were highly engaged in animal husbandary was known as 'Gopa'.⁵⁸

Thus in both epics we find an elaborative descriptions relating to agriculture, agricultural food grains, sources of irrigation and animal husbandary.

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