

Economic, Social, and Cultural History of Ancient Bengal

Man is a social being. Living in a society is his nature. This needs cooperation. That is why man is required to develop different economic, political, and other social institutions. Three things are necessary for the survival of man such as food, clothing, and shelter & and then man pays attention to education, science, art, and law for their development to lead a beautiful life. The unified form of these activities of man in the development of social life is called culture. Before the arrival of the Aryans, the people of ancient Bengal formed a social and cultural life. This is, indeed, the most ancient form of Bengal Socio-culture. The people of Bengal have achieved a trait of respective arms and organs as a result of a variety of exchanges and integration for many years.

The economic condition of Ancient Bengal

Bengal has always been an agricultural country. Most of the people of Bengal in ancient times lived in villages. They would all together build up villages & and maintain their families by cultivating the surrounding lands of the villages. Those who cultivated lands or used lands by any means had to pay some specified taxes. There were mainly three types of land such as habitable lands with houses, cultivable fertile lands, and fertile but unused lands. In addition to these three types of land. They are meadows, marketplaces, infertile lands, forests, and lands for transport. Bengal was famous for agriculture from the ancient time. So, the economy of the country was built up depending on agriculture. Paddy was the main crop of Bengal. Besides, Bengal is famous for jute, sugarcane, cotton, indigo, mustard, and betel cultivation. Fruit-bearing trees were mango, jackfruit, coconut, betel-nut, pomegranate, banana, lemon, fig, dates, etc. Domestic animals were cows, goats, rams, poultry, dogs etc. Salt and dried fish were produced in some parts of the country. Cardamom, cloves, etc. were also produced in Bengal. All things necessary for village people were produced in the village itself.

Ancient Bengal was very rich in cottage industry. Things made of iron were choppers, axes, spades, spuds, small spuds, plow, etc. Besides, water and fighting weapons like arrows, spears, swords, etc. were produced. Things made of earth included pitchers, small pitcher-shaped water pots, large pots for cooking, dishes, etc. The gold industry and gems and jewels industry developed very much for luxury things. The wood industry was also very developed. Different types of boats to move in rivers and big boats and ships to move in the sea were made of wood. Though is an agricultural country, different kinds of industrial goods have been produced from ancient times. Bengal would conduct business with many countries of the world in the ancient time. Export-oriented products of Bengal such as cotton and silk cloth, sugar, molasses, salt, cassia and other spices, rice, coconut, betel-nut, plants for producing medicine, different types of diamonds, pearls, etc. were worth mentioning.

Bengal became famous for its textile industry in very ancient times. Famous Muslin cloth has been produced in Bengal from very ancient times. Bengal was also noted for sophisticated and delicate cloth made from cotton and silk. Agricultural and industrial goods were in plenty in Bengal. Again, these goods were in great demand in different regions of India and many countries of the world. Bengal was specially developed in foreign trade at that time. With the development of industry, trade, and commerce of Bengal widely expanded. Commercial exchanges were done through both road and waterways. Trades were conducted with China, Nepela, Bhutan, Tibet, and Middle Asia by road. Bengal conducted an exchange of goods with other regions of India through roads and waterways. That is why big cities and commercial ports were established in many places in Bengal. These are Nabyabashika, Kotibarsha, Pundrabardhan, Tamrolipto, Karnasubarna, Saptagram etc. Of course, in addition

to cities trade and commerce would be conducted in village markets. In these village markets, daily necessities produced in the villages were bought and sold. Maybe, there was a custom called 'Binimoy Pratha' (custom of exchange of goods) for sale and purchase, and trade and commerce. As a result of industrial development and expansion of trade and commerce, the riches and wealth of Bengal increased tremendously. Probably, before the 4th century BC usage of currency started in Bengal.

Social & and Cultural Life in Ancient Bengal

Before the Maurya rule no political identity grew up in the people of Bengal in a broader sense. During this time society was divided into different classes. Before the Aryans, some religious thoughts spread into Hinduism in the later periods. Among them remarkable are Karmafal (consequences of one's actions especially of previous birth that governs one's weal and woe), belief in rebirth, practice of yoga, etc. The influence of many customs and manners of this age was noticed in Hindu society in the later periods. For example, giving the guests betel and nuts, singing for Shiva, anointing turmeric on the body in marriage, putting on 'dhuti-shari' (white cotton sari with a narrow border of any color put on by widows of Hindu society or by Brahmins or worshippers) and using vermillion in the forehead of married women, etc. The caste system was a very essential part of Aryan society. As a result of their living here for a long time, this system was also introduced in Bengal. There were four castes in Bengal in ancient times. They are Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Sudra. In the later periods, more varieties of crossbred people originated. Every caste in society had a particular occupation. Studying, teaching, and performing religious activities were the jobs of the Brahmins. They would get the highest dignity in the society. The occupation fighting. Trade and commerce were done by the Vaishyas. The Sudras of the lowest class would generally do agricultural work, fishing, and other lower jobs. People of all other castes except they would associate with one another. Generally, marriage would take place within the same caste.

Women of Bengal girls became famous for their good qualities. The girls would receive an education. In those days there was no system of putting on veils. Men could keep more than one wife. A widow had to take food without animal protein (fish and meat) and give up luxury. The husband being dead, the wife would also be roasted to death along with her husband. This system is called 'Satidaha Pratha'. Women did not have any right to wealth and property. We can know about the good moral character of the Bengalees from the ancient religious scriptures of Bengal. But it cannot be said that there was no corruption and obscenity in the social life of the Bengalees. All types of fish were available. In the East Bengal Hilsa and dried fish were very popular foods. Vegetables such as brinjal, gourd, pumpkins, Kakul, etc. were produced. Fruits such as mangoes, jackfruits, Palams, coconuts, and sugarcane were available. In the matter of dresses, there was no pomp and gorgeousness except kings and rich people. Men and women in Bengal would put on 'dhuti' and sari respectively. There was an arrangement of special dress for different occasions. There were arrangements of different types of sports and amusement in those days. But singing and dancing were more in vogue. Vina, flute, dhak dhol, and even earthenware were used as musical instruments. Wrestling, hunting, exercise, boat racing, etc. were very popular with men. Amusement like gardening and swimming was also in vogue among women. 'Annoprashon' (when a baby eats rice for the first time), marriage, obituary, etc. social occasions were in vogue in those days. There were thirteen parabens (programs) in twelve months. On these occasions, there were arrangements of festivals and amusements. Like the present time, 'Nabanno, Rathjatra Astomisnan, Holi, Dashhara', 'Akhyatritia', 'Gangansnan' (bathing in the Ganges as a religious ritual), etc. are familiar programs which were in vogue also in those days.

After birth, some programs like naming the baby, 'annoprashon' etc. usages would be held. The influence of the religious scriptures on the daily life of the people of ancient Bengal was very strong. The rules on which hour food is prohibited, on which hour fasting is suitable, and which time is auspicious for marriage, starting of education of child, going abroad, pilgrimage, etc. were strictly followed. The main form of transport for the people of ancient Bengal was a cart drawn by oxen and boats. People would cross canals by small bridges made of bamboo. As an agricultural country, the people of Bengal lived in villages. The life of the people was happy, after all. The main power was in the hands of the high class of people i.e. the Brahmmanas. At this time, only the Brahmmanas could practice the knowledge of the scriptures. The oppression of the Brahmmanas was intolerable to the general people. This oppression was more exercised upon the Buddhists. General people were very displeased at the oppression of the Sena rulers in the later stages. During the Sena regime distress descended on Buddhist society and culture. At the last stage of ancient Bengal, the foundation of the Muslim society started to grow up in this disordered condition. The Middle Ages came into being through the establishment of Muslim society. During this time the form of society and culture of Bengal got changed.

Religious Conditions of Ancient Bengal

Nothing exact can be known which religion was in vogue in ancient Bengal before the establishment of the Aryan religion. Because of the history of the religious activities of those primitive settlers in the history of worship, fear and devotion, beliefs and prejudices of the people of small ethnic communities of country Bengal confined in Janapadas. Then the nature of religion was not the same throughout the country. Rather differences were noticed in religious activities with the differences of castes, classes, Janapad, etc. All the same, their ancient religious beliefs, prejudices, and methods of worshipping were transformed and mixed with the Aryan religion. Still today, tree worship, the use of mango leaves in worshipping, grass, banana, betel-nut, coconut, small pitcher-like containers, and vermillion.

In-vogue among village women in Bangladesh is derived from the people of small communities. Thus the worshipping of Manasa, Kali, Banadurga, Shosti, etc. bear the identity of the religious activities of the small communities. People of different Kaums such as Khasia, Munda, Sautal, Rajbangshi, Buno, and Shabar worship trees, stones, mountains, birds and animals, fruits and roots as Gods and Goddesses like their primitive forefathers. As a result of the patronage of Barma and Sena rulers Vedic religion spread further in the eleventh and the twelfth century. Almost all of the kings and the Maharajas believed in the Brahmin religion. Then Buddhism was damaged to a great extent. New Gods and Goddesses were the Gods and Goddesses depicted in the Purana's and epics. So, this religion is called Pouranic Religion. Various types of superstitions appeared as parts of religion.