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BEGINNINGS OF PEASANT MODE OF PRODUCTION IN EARLY INDIA : A NOTE (C. 600 BCE – 300 BCE)

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the beginnings of the peasant mode of production in early India (c. 600 BCE–300 BCE), focusing on the middle Gangetic plains. It examines the transformative role of iron technology in agriculture, particularly the use of iron ploughshares, which facilitated land clearance and improved cultivation techniques, enabling the expansion of rice farming and other crops like mustard and sugarcane. The study highlights the emergence of private land ownership, taxation, and social differentiation linked to settlement patterns. Key actors in this agrarian economy, such as the gahapatis (peasant proprietors) and kutumbins (householders), are analyzed for their roles in production, labor exploitation, and interactions with the state and Buddhist sangha. The paper also discusses the stratification of rural society, the use of servile labor (dasa-kammakaras), and the limited surplus generated during this transitional phase. By integrating literary and archaeological evidence, the study situates this period as foundational for the later consolidation of the peasant economy in ancient India.

Keywords: Agrarian economy, peasant mode of production, early India, iron technology, Gangetic plains, *gahapatis, kutumbins*, rice cultivation, social stratification, *dasa-kammakaras*, Buddhist texts, private land ownership, taxation, settlement archaeology, urbanization.

INTRODUCTION

The middle Ganga plain as a "transitional region" ($24^0$30'N $27^0$50'N and $81^0$71'E $87^0$50'E) is a large physical area (1,44,409 km^2.). It has immense human cultural and economic significance that makes the region heartland of India. It is a region of moderate to fair rainfall (100-150cms.) except in the western fringes (where it is less than 100cms.). Towards the north and the east, the amount of rainfall increases gradually. The region has broad alluvial soil cover. The soil contains moisture and heavy clay which are ill-drained.[1] The middle Gangetic plains have a thick vegetation cover on account of heavy rainfall. Settlement on the plains was not possible without clearance which was quite difficult in the clayey area and less in the

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loamy and sandy area.

Ancient settlement founded on the banks of the rivers- Ganga, Gandak, Saryu and Rapti- are well known, but much needs to be explored about settlements situated on the banks of the lakes. Rampurva, Nandangarh and Areraj, where Asokan pillars have been found, are located close to the *char*.[2] Similar is the case with the Pandavgarh and Manglagarh in Samstipur district and Jayamanglagarh in Begusarai district; at all these sites NBP sherds appear above the surface. Jayamanglagarh is situated on the bank of the Kaber Lake which 12 kms long and 3 kms wide.[3] In Muzaffarpur district Katragarh, where the beginnings of settlement is dated to the third century BCE, is situated on the JogNala, an old bed of the river Bagmati.[4] These instances may indicate that the earliest settlements in the alluvial tracts appeared not only on the river banks, but also on the boundaries of the lakes. The alluvial soil found in the water-logged areas is very fertile. But it was difficult to break the *kewal* soil. Though found in abundance in south of the river Ganga, the term *kewal* is also used in some parts of north Bihar. Tillage could not be carried on effectively or extensively with wooden ploughshares. The large amount of clay in soil makes it sticky when wet and hard when dry.[5] The hardness of the soil in the char areas is indicated by the local adjectives *chikat, sakkat* and *kumhrauli* applied to it.

From the middle of the 2nd millennium BCE, one notices a gradual but perceptible, process whereby numerous but separate primitive communities inhabiting the Indo-Gangetic plains were broken down and the foundation was laid for a new society.[6]The beginnings of this social formation can be dated to 600 BCE. Private ownership of land and payment of taxes demarcate this period as one in which peasant economy is evident.[7] A significant feature of this period is the tremendous expansion in agrarian economy. R.S. Sharma[8] analyses the various elements that helped the emergence of a "burgeoning economy" and helped the dissemination of the material culture of the new agrarian economy.[9] Both literary and archaeological evidences suggest the appearance of a new agricultural technology,[10] based mainly on the use of iron to clear land which 'democratized agricultural' and iron ploughshare. This enabled better ploughing, which was required for cultivating crops like mustard, sugarcane and paddy seedlings.[11] The Pali texts detail the process of cultivation and the techniques of irrigation.[12] The large range of crops mentioned in the texts testify to the improved skills and the increase in the botanical knowledge pertaining to agriculture. So common was the practice of agriculture that there are repeated references to it as similes in the teachings of Buddha, thus, references to ploughing, sowing and repeating this as common motif in the sermons. This manifests a typical example of contrasting the advantages of an agricultural society over pastoral one.[13]This does not mean that cattle rearing lost its importance. The importance of cattle for an agricultural economy in terms of the need for draught animals, ensured that cattle rearing remains an intrinsic part of an agricultural economy. The *gopaka* is a familiar figure in the Buddhist texts.[14]Classifying the lands according to the quality of the soil, [15]irrigation and practice of keeping land fallow[16] mark a distinct improvement. Different seasons and *naksatras* were prescribed for sowing different crops and observing agricultural festivals. [17]Above all there was awareness of the importance of time, a reference to the need to perform certain agricultural tasks for success in agriculture.[18]

The expansion of agriculture in the Ganga Valley was essentially a rice cultivation phenomenon, since the area was geographically suitable and congenial[19] for surplus production of rice. For the first time the Buddhist texts[20] suggest the transplanting of paddy indicating thereby intensive cultivation of rice virtually led to a demographic revolution.[21] A definite relationship between rice growing areas and the incidence of high fertility has been suggested since the consumption of rice allows children to be weaned away from mother's milk earlier so that the mother becomes ready to conceive again.[22] Equally important is the fact that rice cultivation is more labour intensive; a Jain text describes careful preparation of the beds and then the transplanting of rice seedlings two or three times.[23] The expansion of agriculture was accompanied by the extension of settlement, not only rural but also urban. The extension of settlements in the mid-Ganga plain is supported by archaeological evidence.[24] The sharp increase in the number of settlements is manifestation of the increase in the number of towns. Literary texts suggest a variety of settlements from *gama*, the smallest unit, to *nagara*, a more complex and frequently fortified unit of settlement, and the *mahanagara*, the largest unit of settlement in the kingdom.[25] The Buddhist texts' suggestion of heavily populated areas as a sign of prosperity is significant.[26] The kingdom of Magadha is described as flourishing as it contained 80,000 *gamas*, indicating a heavily settled rural area even if figure should not be taken literally. These references do reiterate that a crucial demographic development became possible through the use of iron technology and rice transplantation.[27] All these factors paved the way for the emergence of a new relation of production.

Many of the new settlements especially the urban area associated with the use of high grade deluxe pottery, the Northern Black Polished Ware. The Buddhist texts attest to the existence of considerable contact both between the rural and urban centres, and between different urban centres. There were certain well-travelled route *vanipathas* and along with these a number of market towns grew up forming contact points with the regular flow of traffic passing through them.[28] Works done on settlement archaeology in the western peripheries of the middle-Gangetic plains[29] underline the unequal sizes of settlement. But irrespective of their sizes privileged groups appear in those settlements which are advanced in production. These interest groups play the main role in the formation of a stratified society, though chiefs of larger settlements may have subjugated those of the smaller ones. To what extent the social differentiation is linked to settlement sizes in the middle Gangetic plains needs to be worked out. The package of changes in settlement patterns and in the economy has been regarded as constituting what is described as the second urbanization in the age of Buddha. As a consequence of the expanding economy the other factors of the second urbanization were the diversity of craft production, use of metallic money, and corporate and individual activity[30] along with its adjunct borrowing, interest and investment.[31] The texts are also familiar with metallurgy, stable settlements and very wide range of goods implying considerable specialization.[32]

The expansion of the economy, of urbanization, of increased craft production and of commercial activity must be situated in the more extensive and intensive pursuits of agriculture. This resulted in changes in the patterns of landholding. Fields were now regarded

as a very important economic asset.[33] Individual holdings of land definitely appeared by the time of Buddha,[34] and most of the land was being farmed in this manner, at least in the monarchical kingdom as is evident from the *Aggama Sutta*[35] in which kingship originates with the emergence of separate fields under private holdings. According to it, the violation of rights to ownership of the field leads to the intervention of the king. The idea of private land property is reiterated in a parable which decided the fate of a man who neglects his own fields but thinks of weeding the field of his neighbors.[36] The existence of private owners referred to a *khettapati* and *khettasamika* ('owner of a field' and 'owner of cultivated land') is seen during the period.[37] The *Jatakas* provide substantial data relating to small private plots. In likelihood the owners cultivated their land themselves helped only by their family.[38] A *Jataka* refers to restoration of ownership, bypassing right judgement,[39] to a person, who had earlier been deprived of it by a wrong judgement. The *Milindapanho* gives us at least one method by which the rights over land originated. It says when a man clears the land and prepares it for cultivation he establishes rights over it.[40]The statement represents a very important principle in relation to private property in association with that of labor. It suggests that a person becomes entitled to the land primarily because he has invested his labor into it.[41] While a considerable amount of land was in possession of peasant proprietors which according to Rhys Davids represented the bulk of the holdings,[42] the king also appeared to have been in direct control of it. This probably consisted of all the wastelands, forests and mines.[43] From this category of land the kings of Kosala and Magadha began to grant *brahmadeya* lands to the *brahmana*s which is obvious from the Pali texts.[44] Such a view is also supported by Radhakrishna Chaudhary, who argues that *brahmadeya* lands were granted out of the royal domain or the crownlands and they had nothing to do with the lands held by cultivators.[45] The commentary on the *Majjhima Nikaya* explains *brahmadeya* as *setthadeya,* the best gift that could not be taken back.[46] Baudhayana suggests that land is among the main kinds of gift. The pattern of landholding is crucial for understanding of the emerging a new mode of production.

The early Pali texts indicate a mode of production in which the peasants work their fields themselves.[48] The peasant community in essence constitutes a transitional form, from the communal mode of production of the primitive tribal community to small commodity production system which has also been called a peasant mode of production. Certain peasant families had come to possess land at the cost of others, which they had to cultivate with the help of hired laborers, a category which does not exist in the Vedic texts. Laborers were paid in cash or in kind on daily basis, for which it was necessary to measure their labor time. This may have been facilitated by the knowledge of *tithi* or the thirtieth part of a lunar month, of rather its extent over 27 days, which first appears in the *Grhyasutras*. This mode of production can be called peasant mode of production[49] in which the peasant meets the subsistence needs of his household and then provides sufficient surplus for the support of superstructure, this term can be used to describe and analyze the system of production that prevailed in pre-Mauryan times. In the analysis of this mode of production, the *gahapati* and *kutumbika* may provide a clue.

The quantitative distribution of *gahapati* in the early Pali texts attests its importance. The *Digha Nikaya* mentions of *gahapati* 38 times, the *Majjhima Nikaya* 47 times, *Samyutta Nikaya* 47 times, the *Anguttara Nikaya* 88 times, the *Udana* 2 times, the *Itivuttaka* and the *Sutta-Nipata* only once.[50] A notable feature of the term *gahapati* is that it is enumerated as one of the seven treasures of the king and as the symbol of sovereignty.[51] The *gahapati* appears in the list of seven jewels (*ratna*) that belong to a person with thirty-two extraordinary marks when this person becomes a *cakkavattin,* not a Buddha. The *gahapati ratna* is always part of the list.[52] The *gahapati* was clearly regarded as being intrinsic to kingship. Why the *gahapati* was regarded as a crucial element in the king's sovereignty is evident from a symbolic narrative where the king requires the *gahapati* to provide him with wealth for the kingdom.[53] The narrative makes it obvious that the king cannot get this wealth without the effort and the direct participation of the *gahapati*. In another passage various signs indicate that *gahapati* is the most important social group in relation to the king.[54]

An essential concomitant of a *gahapati* was his possession of property. There are many specific references to the management and control of property by the *gahapatis.*[55] Similarly, the relinquishing of control over the property indicated that one can no longer be addressed as a *gahapati*.[56] Individual *gahapati* are often shown as travelling in order to transact business connected with the management and control over their property.[57] Apart from the possession of other assets, such as cattle, gold and silver (mostly in the case of the wealthy *gahapatis*) he is associated with grain and cattle but most fundamentally with land. In this capacity, as owner of property and controller of the land, the *gahapati* was the pivot of the economy and, therefore, the major tax payer. Apart from the implicit representation of the *gahapati* as the source of the king's treasury and the actual locator and provider of wealth in the symbolic narrative referred to earlier, there is also an explicit reference to the *gahapati* as tax payer. The *gahapati* is described here as "one who pays taxes and thus increases the king's wealth."[58] There also occurs the term *brahmana-gahapati* who is the product of the *brahmdeya* grant. The *brahmana-gahapati* performed similar functions in the *brahmana gamas* as the *gahapati* in the rural economy, and they were associated directly with agriculture at least as a manager of agricultural operation. That in this capacity he paid taxes to the king is evident from the *Mahasudassana Sutta* of the *Digha Nikaya* where *brahamanas* and *gahapatis* are described as tax payers.[59] In the oligarchies the position of the *Khattiyas*, though they are not directly involved in agriculture,[60] is the same as that of the *gahapati* in the monarchical system. Thus, the *gahapati* is the foundational economic position in the transformed agrarian economy centered on rural areas now supplying the cities and other developing conurbation. This position makes sense only in the relation to the urban areas even if it is economically centered in the agrarian areas. Whatever his spatial location, he would not have remained untouched by the process of urbanization.

It is significant to demarcate the precise function of the *gahapati* within the larger context of the economy. An important reference describes the *gahapati* as one who cultivates the land and pays taxes, and thus increases the king's wealth.[61] This definitive and unambiguous

association of the *gahapati* with agriculture as cultivator is reiterated in a number of other general references to *gahapati* as agriculturists based on land and performing various cultivating tasks. The *gahapati* is depicted as carrying on various tasks irrigating his lands.[62] The *Milindapanho*,[63] also identifies the *gahapati* with agriculture, with ploughing, sowing and then filling his granary. Mendaka, one of the well-known *gahapatis* of the Buddhist texts, is definitely located in agriculture, and his entire family, including the *dasa*, possesses psychic powers related to the requirements of a land-based agriculture household.[64] Another text tells us that Mendaka's granddaughter, Visakha, was given plough, ploughshares and other farm implements along with cattle at her marriage to the son of another *gahapati.*[65]

The *gahapati* was never described as a *varna* or *jati*, whereas depending upon circumstances, usually in situations where the brahmanas are being addressed, brahmanas and *khattiyas* were described in these terms. The Buddhist themselves use the term *kula* to stratify social groups into high and low. The *gahapati* is always regarded as of a high *kula* (*uchcha kula*). But the most important aspect of the use of the term *kula* for *gahapati* is that as of a social group, their ranks are not yet frozen. In contrast to *brahamanas* and *khattiyas* who claim inherent status based on birth, ranks of the *gahapati* were open. A clan holding of land broken down and a process of an agrarian economy based on individual family holding intensified, there would be new entrants into the ranks of the *gahapati* would swell further. The development of agriculture in the mid-Ganga plain itself may be attributed to the *gahapati*, therefore, the *gahapatis* were key actors in the process of agrarian expansion and consolidation.

Kutumbin or *kutumbika,* like *gahapati*, suggest more or less the same thing that is a house. The *grhapatik* and *kutumbika* can literary be translated as household and one having a household (or one owing a household) respectively. Such terms are often associated with land and agricultural activities, indicating thereby that the two terms essentially denoted peasant in the context of his family unit. The *grhapatik/gahapati* and *kutumbika* seem to have been distinguished from a tiller of the soil, variously called *kinasa*, *krsivala* and more frequently *karsaka*. [66]In fact *kutumbin/kutumbika* is a typical example of an early Indian peasant in preference to *gahapati*. [67]A resident of Dhenukakata, (*kutumbin*), Usabhanka is expressly described as a ploughman (*halakiya*) and mentioned along with his wife and son. [68]It suggests the family unit of the peasant householders. The father's epithets *kutumbika* and *halakiya* are meant for highlighting his social category and his occupation. The son *kutumbika* Usabhanga is called *gahapati* Nanda. It suggests that these terms are synonymous. Fick's suggestion is appropriate that almost in the same sense of *gahapatis* is the expression *kutumbika* used.[69]

The *kutumbikas/kutumbins* figure regularly in the *Jataka* stories.[70] The *Salaka Jataka* narrates that the Buddha was born in one of his previous births in the family of *kutumbikas* or peasant householders and earned his livelihood by selling corn (*kutumbikakule nibbativa vayapatto dhanna vikkayenajivikam vappesi*).[71] The word *dhana* or *dhanya* may stand both paddy and crop in general. The *Jataka* story may be illustrative of the case of a peasant reaching the market. The *kutumbika* may have found it advantageous to diversify his occupation to

that of a corn-dealer, the peasant in *Salaka Jataka* is also described as a trader (*vanija*). The expression *vanija* is obviously used here as a synonym of the corn-dealer. The term *kutumbika* here not only covers the idea of a peasant producer, but also embraces the concept of a merchant selling crop.[72]

The *Satapatha Jataka*[73] highlights another important aspect of the *kutumbika's* function. A *kutumbika* is said to have lent a handsome amount of money to a person, but died without recovering the debt. The wife of the deceased *kutumbika* herself in her advanced years urged upon her son to forthwith collect back the said money, as she apprehended non-repayment of the money by the debtor. It suggests the possibility of the practice of money-lending by peasants. Other Jataka stories viz., the Kakkatta,[74] the Suchchha[75] and the Godha,[76] narrate similar stories of a peasant, accompanied by his wife under-taking a distant journey to recover his loans. All the three *Jatakas* provide a stereotyped but significant information, the *kutumbika* was a resident of Savatthi,[77] one of the major urban centers of early historical India. The *Jatakas* impress upon the fact that these peasants had become urban dwellers. This is particularly evident in the description of his journey to the countryside (*Janapada*) which is clearly distinguished from the urban center. It is plainly visible that some peasant house-holders left their rural milieu with which, however, they maintained regular contacts for material reasons from their urban residences, At least some resourceful peasants were in a position to augment their prosperity by engaging in trade in crops and money lending, in addition to their primary occupation with land, All these may have prompted some rich peasants to prefer a more prestigious urban habitat than a rural settlement. One *Jataka* describes a *kutumbika* as possessing eight crores of wealth.[78] This is an epithet typical of a wealthy merchant (*setthi*). This characteristic function of the *kutumbin* is similar to the *setthigahapati* who represents a person who combined in himself the function of agriculture and accumulated capital, possibly thereof through profits from it, which he then invested in business. There are more references to *setthigahapati* and this might suggest that most moneylenders combined the management of agriculture with usury, that even when they were city based they retained their association with land.[79] It is significant to note that two *brahmana kutumbins* intended to purchase a plot of land as suggested by a late inscription.[80] Thus, the *gahapatis* and *kutumbins* were the owners and controllers of primary means of agriculture production in the form of land, the primary tax payers as well as one of the elements of sovereignty, having individual holdings of land and engaged in agriculture production as manager.

The most important question is that whose labor was exploited in performance of agriculture. That many *gahapatis* actually labored on their own lands is evident from repeated references to *gahapatis* who plough, sow and seed.[81] The typical association of those who perform all these functions, i.e., to begin one agricultural cycle and complete it, is with the category of the *gahapati*. The *gahapati* is linked both with control over the land and with laboring on it. Based on the above characteristic, the *gahapati* could be linked with the peasant. The Pali texts refer to the *khattiya, brahamana* and the *gahapatis* as *mahasala.*[82] It is clear that in the post-Vedic period some princes, priests, and *gahapatis* came to occupy large stretches

of land.[83] In the Pali texts, there are at least two examples of big farm, one each in Magadha and another in Kashi both owned by *brahmana gahapatis.*[84] It is evident from the numerous references in the Pali texts that the *gahapatis* were the lay supports of the Buddhist *Sangha* and are associated with tracts of agrarian lands.[85] These are apparently references to wealthy peasant *gahapatis* and *brahmana gahapatis* who never labored for others. Are they employers of labor of others? Undoubtedly, such a concentration of land entrails additional use of labor. It suggests that this group was well above the level of subsistence holdings compared to the peasant type *gahapatis* who cultivated through family members.

With the breakdown of tribal system due to continuous wars, spread of metallic money and some degree of market economy made many people to sell their labor in order to live. In a predominantly agrarian economy dominated by the *brahmana gahapatis*, *gahapatis* and *khattiyas*, the agrarian activities were carried by *the dasa, kammakara* and *porisa*.[87] According to Gautama, agriculture, trade, and usury are lawful for a *brahmana* provided he does not carry on the work himself .[88] The existence of *dasa, kammakara* and *porisa (dasakammakaraporisa)* is well known but it is notable that they frequently appear with *gahapatis* as their masters. All references to those who plough are to *gahapatis, dasa* and *halikas.*[89]Many references in the early Pali texts speak not of the sudras as such, but of the *dasas* and *kammakaras* as being employed in agricultural operation. In the republican states, the *khattiya* landholders abstained from manual work and exploited the *dasa-kammakaras* instead. It was this category of servile labor that worked the land for their masters, as in evident from the following expression, "It is necessary to get the land tilled, and then have it irrigated…Once the crop is ready it is necessary to get it harvested and get the grain winnowed from the chaff."[90] Chanana has pointed out that these instructions are in the causative and therefore, represent the *khattiya* as supervising work done by others.[91]

Mendaka outlines the internal organization of the larger production units. The narrative mentions that the wife of Mendaka cooked and served food to the *dasa-kammakaras*, the son paid them wages in cash, the daughter-in-law paid them their wages in kind, the *dasa* attached to the household ploughed the lands and Mendaka collected the produce. From the reference to the *dasa-kammakars* being fed and paid wages in cash and kind it is clear that it is they who actually labored.[92] While Mendaka's family is involved with the management of the producing unit, the hard labor is performed by the *dasa-kammakaras*. There is a recognition by one *gahapati* that rather than using the 'surplus' to feed the *bhikkus*, he ought to have given it to the *dasa-kammakaras* who presumably were entitled to it as its generators.[93] The slaves and hired laborers worked even on smaller holdings[94] but often on larger plots. In the early Pali texts there are at least two examples of big farms in Magadha, each of a thousand *karisas,*[95] and another field in Kasi being ploughed with five hundred ploughs,[96] all owned by *brahmans*. Five hundred or thousand may be conventional numbers, but they provide an indication of the tendency towards consolidation of holdings, which reached its climax with the state control of agriculture in the Mauryan period. It is obvious that larger holdings could not have been worked without a considerable number of *dasa* and *kammakaras*. A labor force,

thus, was created in the middle-Ganga basin because of the emergence of households that needed additional hands in order to exploit the resources which were beyond the capacity of the family labor.[97]

In this connection the crucial question to explore is the division of labor within the household in terms of working the land on the basis of gender. We have very few references to actual agriculture tasks being performed by women, whether from among the *gahapatis* or the *dasis* or the *kammakaris*. All references to those who plough are always men *gahapatis, dasas* and *halikas*.[98] Obviously women did not plough. References to sowing, weeding, and transplanting are general and were likely to have been performed by both sexes among those who constituted the ranks of services labor and hired workers. One direct reference describes a *dasi* keeping watch over the ripening fields, and a category of *dasis* is called *vihi-kottika-dasi*, i.e. *dasis* who husked the rice.[99] On the basis of a reference to *dasis* who were loaned out to work for others[100] and were paid wages which they had to turn to their permanent masters, it would be reasonable to conclude that at peak times in the agricultural cycle all hand would be required, and *dasis* and *kammakaris* would be certainly involved in many agricultural tasks. Buddhaghosa's definition of *dasi-bhoga* as work in the fields is important in this context.[101] Alongside the *dasis*, who husk rice, are *dasis* who grind corn and a close association is evident between the *dasi* and the pestle, the mortar and the grinding stone,[102] because when offered a gift a *dasi* asked for a new pestle, mortal and grinding stone.[103] Apart from these more directly visible association with the processes of agricultural production, are the tasks of contributing less visibly to the agrarian economy. An important aspect of the labor team which works on the land is that their food was often in the hands of *dasis*; indeed the *dasi's* drudge labor is frequently concentrated in the kitchen and drawing and hauling water.[104] All these indicate that women were associated directly with the agricultural cycle as well as the total production process. This is apart from their all important contribution to the reproduction of the labor required to keep going the agrarian production itself. Women's participation in the agrarian production are mainly with regard to the *dasis* and *kammakaris*. At the other end there is the example of the prosperous *gahapati* family of Mendaka where two women are involved in organizing production; the wife of Mendaka feeds those who labor and the daughter-in-law maintains and disburses grain from the store. A *Jataka* reference describes a woman, wife of the owner, as overseeing the sowing of the fields. It is only in the case of the ordinary *gahapati* that we have no clear references. However, given the different forms of association of women in the production process at the two extreme ends of the agrarian hierarchy, in each case with women doing more or less what men of their class or social group were doing, it is more likely that the women folk of the ordinary *gahapati* were involved in agricultural production, roughly in the same capacity as the menfolk. It is significant to note that the suggested exclusion of ploughing and limitations imposed by child bearing and rearing upon women during their reproductive years would make continuous labor on the fields difficult during these years. Given also the considerable importance assigned to reproducing the family as a unit of labor, such a division of labor between the fields and the ancillary units was likely to have existed.

On the basis of Buddhist texts, it may be argued that there is a triadic relationship between the *gahapatis*, the state, and the *sangha*, with *gahapatis* functioning as the pivot on which the other two rest. It is in this context that the *gahapati*'s enumeration as one of the seven treasures of the *chakkavatti* or the ideal ruler of the world becomes significant.[105] The *Anguttara Nikaya* mentions only five treasures but even here *gahapati* is included.[106] The seven treasures of the *chakkavatti* appear to be symbols of sovereignty which implies that *gahapati* was regarded as being intrinsic to kingship. The symbolic narrative of the king in *the Mahasudassana Sutta* of the *Digha Nikaya*[107] and the *gahapati* getting treasure from the river makes it clear that it is the *gahapati* who locates the treasure and provides wealth to the king. The king cannot get it except through the effort and direct participation of the *gahapati*. In the course of this long *sutta* there is ample evidence of the *gahapati* being a major asset to the king along with the king's royal treasures and is intrinsic to his sovereignty,[108] the *gahapati* was one of the components of society with whom the king had a close relationship. There are numerous references to the king dealing righteously with the *brahmana*s and *gahapatis* of his territory. Just as a father is dear to his sons, the king is loved by the *brahmana*s and *gahapatis* and is popular with them.[109] The *Lakkhana Sutta* of the *Digha Nikaya* lists the various signs that signify a *chakkavatti* and it depicts the large number of *gahapatis* possessing extremely valuable assets.[110] The fact that the state had a despotic face is evident from references to the coercive powers of the state and its regular exercise in terms of the imposition of heavy punishment for offences. The *gahapatis*, however, seem to be privileged.[111] Since the early state, as presented in the Buddhist texts, was still formulating its social base, it carefully built an alliance with the *gahapatis*. Their existence as social group also moderated the direct impact of the coercive potential of the state upon the *dasa-kammakaras*, whose labor was responsible for at least some of the king's revenue. In turn, ultimately it was with the protection of the state that a section of the *gahapatis* became transformed into prosperous landholders with varied economic interests.

The relationship of the *gahapatis* with the *sangha* was also close. The Buddhist texts depict *bhikkus* who were ill or on their death- beds as being visited by the Buddha and given succor in their afflictions. The custom seems to have been largely restricted to *bhikkus* apart from some very rare exception invariably relate to *gahapatis*. Thus, the *gahapati* Nakulpita was visited by Buddha when he was ailing.[112] Similarly, Anathapindika asked for Anand when he was ill and was visited and reassumed by him.[113] The *gahapati* Sirivaddha and Mandinna also called for Anand when they were ill and specially enquired about their respective future after death.[114] Their possession of wealth and high social status, along with their position as the largest donors to the *sangha*, gave them privileges which clearly belonged to the most important category among the disciples of the *sangha*. The *gahapatis* were major supporters of the *sangha,* feeding the *bhikkhus,* gifting land and residence for them and maintaining them in other ways. But they did this as lay supporters from outside the *sangha* while pursuing their roles in the economy without joining the *sangha* as others did.[115]

As an institution, the *sangha* is unthinkable without the support it received from the *gahapatis*. At the same time the patronage of Buddhism through a support of a *sangha* by

the *gahapatis* became a crucial input for the stratification. By patronizing a new cultural and social order that put a relatively high premium on their capacity to give gift to the pious Buddhist *bhikkus* and appropriating the symbolic resources of this new order for themselves, the wealthier *gahapatis* could mark themselves off from the number of cultivators including the self-exploiting *gahapatis* and others in the countryside. The more settled *gahapatis* were the major supporters of the *sangha* because of their ability to give the *sangha* a portion of their share in "surplus". The early Pali texts suggest that there was only a fixed surplus available in any household, which was placed in the hands of the *samana-brahmana*. The *Samyutta Nikaya* indicates that the share gifted to the *samana-Brahmana* could have gone instead to the *dasa-kammakaras*. A *setthi-gahapati* of Savatthi is described as giving alms to *samana-brahmana* but subsequently regretting his action and arguing that he should have given it to the *dasa-kammakaras* instead.[116] This opposition between *samana-brahmana* on the one hand and the *dasa-kammakaras* on the other, in relation to the *gahapatis* is also noticeable in the *Singalovada-sutta*. The *samana-brahmana* is placed at the zenith (*uparimadisa*) and *dasa-kammakaras* is placed at the nadir (*hatthimadisa*) in a structure of relationship in which the *gahapati* is the nodal point.[117] This appears to imply an opposition based on the principle that *dasa-kammakaras* provided labor and thereby formed the base of the productive system and of society. While the *dasa-kammakaras* produced the surplus, the *gahapati* collected and redistributed it. Buddhism, despite its humanistic ethic, was unable to break the exploitative relationships between *gahapati* and *dasa-kammakaras* constrained by their own status as non-producer.

In the republican states such a contradiction was obvious between the *khattiya* clan holder of the land and their *dasa-kammakaras*.[118] According to Radhakrishna Chaudhary, Kautilya's reference to *vairajaganas* indicates societies where notions of mine and thine were not observed.[119] This would, however, apply to *khattiya* clan members in relation to each other, who collectively exercised power. The only major difference that existed was between the *khattiya* clan members, who jointly held the land, and the *dasa-kammakaras* who jointly worked the land. The sharp differentiation between the two categories created the beginnings of social tension. The *Vinaya Pitaka* refers to the *dasa- kammakaras* of the Sakyas attacking their masters' womenfolk as an act of revenge when the women were alone in the woods.[120] The consciousness about exploitation had seemingly emerged. The *Majjhima Nikaya* relates a very significant incident,[121] i.e. how a *gahapati* called Vaidehi under the strain of an incident, physically assaulted the *dasi*, Kali. It indicates the inner tension that existed within the *gana-sangha*, while there are numerous references to the *dasa-kammakaras* in the Pali texts, this is only example we have of their having resorted to violence against their masters. This attack on the Sakyas is itself an indication of the group consciousness of the *dasa-kammakaras* in relation to their Sakya masters. Since the *dasa-kammakaras* worked as a group on the land of their masters, they took collective action against their joint masters. The group consciousness itself was possible not only because the *dasa-kammakaras* shared the same material interests but because it was possible to translate this into a "We feeling" in a situation in which they

and their masters both represented antithetical collective units in relation to each other. The antagonism suggests that the primary means of production was in the hands of the *gahapatis*, the *brahmana gahapatis*, the *khattiya* and the *kutumbins*.

From the above discussion it becomes evident that the *gahapatis* and the *Kutumbins* were internally stratified in terms of those who possessed land and agriculture tools but did not hire labor of others, and those with all primary assets employing labor of others. While the *dasa-kammakars* were situated on the two extremes of the scale of agrarian relations characterized by exploitation. The emerging peasant mode of production was strengthened by their proximity to the state. But, this emerging peasant mode of production was yet to stabilize. It has been pointed out on the basis of the Pali texts that the surplus generated by this economy was not yet sizeable because the number of *dasa-kammakaras* was small[122] and the *gahapatis* had very often cultivated their lands themselves. It is still debatable as to what extent the household economy is 'surplus' oriented. In the communities with the weakest subsistence base practically every family has to work on the land, and anything which they have in the way of non-agricultural goods or services, i.e. minimum requirements, has to be provided through their own part-time efforts. As production rises, it is possible to sell some of the agricultural output in exchange for imports from a distance or to employ a certain number of full-time craftsmen.[123] On the eve of state formation in early India, the number of taxes was not numerous. In pre-Mauryan times, a more frequently used term in the *Jatakas* is *bali* and not *bhaga.*[124] But Gautama uses the term *kara*[125], while Panini is more emphatic about the words.[126] The punch-marked coins suggest payment in cash but its unavailability in the rural areas indicate its limited use. The Buddhist texts suggest that the payment was made in paddy in north eastern India.[127] Surplus rice could be used in exchange in much the same way as cash, in the first place to buy animals and plough and sometimes to pay additional labor for the harvest or to rent additional land.[128] Remains at Pandurajar Dhibi indicate that domestication and hunting of animals was still prevalent. The supplementation of the rice by vegetables, fish, etc. makes it clear that a considerable number of people in the contemporary society must have been very close to the subsistence level.[129] Evidence of iron agricultural tools is not forthcoming and recent archaeological excavations suggest that the NBP sherds of the mid-1st millennium BCE are fewer than that of the Mauryan phase.[130] A recent study of the excavated NBP sites identifies 32 sites with early NBP culture and 57 sites with late NBP culture.[131] It has also been suggested that it was only after *c*. 350 BCE that iron technology played a decisive role in the transition from pastoral agrarian economy to an established and full-fledged peasant economy.[132] Thus, the period from *c.* 600 BCE to 300 BCE is marked by a process of the gradual strengthening of the peasant mode of production.

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58. *Dīgha Nikāya,* Vol. I, p. 53; also see *Dialogues of the Buddha*, Vol. I, p. 77.

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72. *ibid.*

73. *ibid.* Vol. II, p. 388.

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109. *ibid.* Vol. II, p.136.

110. *ibid.* Vol. III, pp. 110-38.

111. Chakravarti, Uma, *op. cit.,* pp.68-69.

112. *Anguttar Nikāya,* Vol. III, p.19.

113. *Samyutta Nikāya,* Vol. IV, p.329.

114. *ibid.* pp. 152-153.

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116. *Samyutta Nikāya,* Vol. I, p.91.

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