

ANCIENT INDIAN MATERIALISM AND WESTERN MATERIALISM A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract: Material means the matter from which something is or can be made – having to do with physical things rather than the mind or spirit.

Materialism is a strong interest in material possessions and physical comfort, rather than in spiritual values.

Materialism, in the economic sense, may be described as acquiring material possession which functions as a central life goal, with the belief that possessions are the key to happiness and that success can be judged by people's material wealth.

Ancient Indian Materialism can best be understood by making an attempt to illustrate the gradual development of the economic conditions from earliest times – that is from The Palaeolithic Age, The Neolithic Age, The Copper Age, The Rig Vedic Age, The Brahmana Period, The Age of Gautama Buddha, The Maurya Period, The Andhra Kushana Period, The Gupta Period until The Age of Harsha.

Western Materialism refers to the theory that physical matter is the only reality and that everything, including thought, feeling, mind and will, can be explained in terms of matter and physical phenomena. It is noted that Western Culture embodies Western Materialism.

This study attempts to make a comparison between Ancient Indian Materialism and Western Materialism. The study also characterises the important features of Materialism of Ancient India and the Western World.

It is observed that whereas Western Culture is backed by religion, Indian Culture has no religion. The actions of the Indian people are not backed by belief, but inherited and reproduced from generation to generation.

The Socio-economic structure of Ancient India was based on a system of village communities. Villagers had a sufficiency for their simple needs. In Ancient India charity was understood along with wealth acquisition. Justice, equality and social security was ensured to the common man.

Western system was characterised by Class conflict in which the Capitalist produces keeping in view not the needs of the people, but his margin of profit.

Thus the study reveals that the Ancient Indian system was primitive in nature and based on traditions whereas the Western system was modern and based on philosophical monism which directed all human activity towards material interactions.

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Economic Development of Ancient India – Ancient Indian Materialism:

The Palaeolithic Age: Primitive man enjoyed in an earthly paradise a golden age free from sin, sorrow and want. The earliest men in India or elsewhere were rude savages, cowering for shelter under rocks or trees or roughly housed in caves and huts. He did not know how to pasture cattle, he did not know agriculture or manufactures. He lived by hunting in the forests or fishing in the rivers or by acquiring fruits, etc., which grew wild and so he had great difficulty in getting a regular supply of food. He knew no private property in land and little division of labour. He was ignorant of any metal and even of pottery. He was dependent for tools or weapons of all kinds on sticks, stones and bones.

The Neolithic Age: Stone weapons and utensils were a special characteristic of this Age. The Neolithic people used hand-made pottery at first and later turned on the potter's wheel. They kept domestic animals and cultivated the land. They were still ignorant of metals except gold. Gold mining was also known in this Age. Varied sources of wealth were through mining of metals or precious stones and pearl fishing.

The Copper Age: The Neolithic age gave place to an age of copper. Copper implements were discovered in large numbers such as spearheads, axe-heads and swords. There was the presence of silver ornaments. This development of industry takes regard to the condition of currency that may have prevailed in this country before the advent of the Aryans.

No form of currency existed in the earliest stage of civilisation, that is, the Hunting Stage. In the next, Pastoral Stage, the animal itself became the unit of value (cow mentioned in the Rig Veda). With the Agricultural Stage, a number of agricultural products came to be used as currency. In this Stage, Commerce developed and a greater number of objects were found capable of being used as measures of value (currency) such as garments, goat-skins, mineral products and so on.

Pre-historic symbols were found on the punch-marked coins, which established the fact that five thousand years ago the people of Sind and the Punjab lived in well-built cities and were in possession of a relatively mature civilisation with a high standard of art and craftsmanship and a developed system of writing.

The Rig Vedic Age: The Aryans of the Rig Veda were pastoral tribes. The Agricultural Stage referred to agriculture and hence to land ownership. Joint family system existed. Besides agriculture there was preservation and utilisation of forests. The metal industry was in a highly developed state. The leather worker and the tanner were mentioned. High development in the various arts and crafts led to the immense volume of trade of the products of these industries – trading voyages of Indians through samudras is mentioned. The presence of Indian products found in the tombs of Egypt shows India's trade relations with the land of the Pharaoh's.

The earliest Indian weights and measures may be traced to Babylonian origin. In the Vedic Age all exchange was by barter. An important feature of trade of these days was the haggling over prices. Persons clever and not clever, first dispute and then they only receive what is finally settled at the time of actual sale. The Vedic expression for a merchant is 'pani' which occurs several times in the Rig Veda.

As early as the Rig Veda, traces are to be seen of Nishkas as a sort of currency – not simply a currency but a coin (Nishka denoted necklace). Besides coins, unstamped metallic currency was also known in this period.

Rig Veda gives numerous references of the wealth of this period – forts and castles of the inhabitants. Kings made gifts of cows, buffaloes, camels, etc..

Brahmana Period (Before 600 B.C): This was a period marked by the knowledge of towns and a developed city-life. In this period, individual ownership of land was common. There is a mythical

account which states, "Manu divided his property for his sons". Property is divided in the father's life-time. Nevertheless, the king was the owner of land. The country was governed by the king through local officers. "The leader of the host" has become the village headman who was the king's revenue-collector.

In agriculture, progress was doubtless made. Rice, barley, wheat, beans and corn were grown along with sesame from which oil was extracted. There were two seasons of harvest. The king is represented as boasting of his kingdom abounding in corn.

Dairy farming was carried on in this period. The villages of milkmen were prosperous and famous for their milk, butter, etc.. Cows were well grazed and cared for. Forest products were prevalent.

There was great development of industrial life and consequent subdivision of occupations. There was improvement of art and luxury in this age. Architecture and town planning were known.

The wealth of this period was in gold, silver and jewels; in other metals like tin, lead, iron, copper and so on; in cars, horses, cows and slaves; in houses and fertile lands. An idea of the immense wealth of the period can be gathered from the gifts bestowed by the kings on the Brahmins, such as, white horses, elephants, cows, padas – gold coins, slave girls and so on.

The Age of Gautama Buddha (600 B.C – 321 B.C):

The economy of India during this period was mainly rural, based on a system of village communities of peasant proprietors. Collective initiatives reveals a relatively advanced sense of citizenship in the village. Agrarian laws were strict, yet good and reasonable. Unenclosed land was used by all for grazing cattle, obtaining firewood, gathering flowers and getting fruits. Those to be exempted from taxation were a learned priest, a servant, those without protectors, infants, very old men, students, widows who have returned to their families, unmarried girls and wives of servants. The king administers the property of widows and minors.

Agrarian laws were strict, yet good and reasonable. Unenclosed land was used by all for grazing cattle, obtaining firewood, gathering flowers and getting fruits. In agriculture there were two harvests – the winter and the summer one. Rice, millet, wheat and barley and seven other grains are mentioned. Sugarcane was also cultivated. Frequent mention of parks indicate that horticulture was in a high state of efficiency.

Town planning and architecture were known. There was a very flourishing ship-building industry.

There was brisk trade in India at this time, both inland and sea-borne. Trade existed in cinnamon and other perfumes between India and Greece. The people of Punjab had some share in the trade

between India and the Western world by the Persian Gulf route. Barter was not uncommon and it was also permitted in special commodities by Gautama. Besides the regular currency, there were a large number of instruments of credit.

Wealth was hoarded either under the ground in brazen jars under the river bank or deposited with a friend. The nature and amount of wealth thus hoarded was registered on gold or copper plates.

The national wealth of India in this period was immense. For example, Bodhisatta wore a kasi robe worth 1000 pieces of gold. Nevertheless living was very cheap. For example, a copper coin was enough for ghee or oil for one man.

The Maurya Period (321 B.C – 186 B.C): Socio-economic structure of ancient India was based upon the village. The head of the village was the headman who was helped by the village elders (syndic). Villagers undertook works of public utility on a co-operative basis. They had a sufficiency for their simple needs.

Towns were numerous. The houses were generally of wood and of two or three storeys. There were Royal Palaces.

The chief industry was agriculture. According to Megasthenes, “ India abounds in vast plains, highly fertile,.....Even the worst war does no harm to the farmers, crops, cattle, trees, etc.. The Indian peasants are laborious..... Agriculture flourished under an efficient administration, fair and just laws and secure life and property ”.

The Indians were skilled in the arts... The soil too had numerous veins underground of all sorts of metals, such as gold, silver, copper, iron, tin and other metals which were employed in making articles of ornament and the implements of War. The weaving and silk industry were prominent.

Maurya architecture exhibited human interest and human expressions. The status of artisans was very high – Capital punishment was inflicted on any person who impaired the efficiency of a craftsman by causing the loss of a hand or an eye.

An idea of the wealth of the period can be gathered from Kautilya's Arthashastra. In the towns lived a large number of rich merchants and middlemen. The royal court of Pataliputra was maintained with splendour. Gold vessels were used. The king was either carried in a golden palanquin or mounted on an elephant with gorgeous trappings. He was clothed in fine muslin, embroidered with gold.

The Andhra Kushana Period (200 B.C – 300 A.D): This was the age of Andhra's of the South and Kushana of the North, which witnessed equal economic development. The villages were autonomous. The king did not interfere so long as the villagers paid the revenue, assessed by the king's officer.

Pattinappalai mentions golden carts of children as toys and heavy ear-rings of women. Trade was carried on with China during this period. Trade attained a high stage of development. Adulteration was forbidden and cheating was punished. In Ancient India, charity was understood along with wealth acquisition – “the old prosperity of India was based on the sound principle which is that, after clothing and feeding your own people, then of your surplus abundance, give to the stranger”.

The elaborate rules regarding interest, taxes, trade and wages of labourers all go to show that the economic organisation of India in this period was as complete as ever.

The Gupta Period (320 A.D – 500 A.D): This was the Golden Age in which remarkable economic development occurred in the country. The economy of India was based on a system of village communities. There was immense development of trade. Pearl fishery was a very flourishing industry. Jewellery was also in a highly developed condition. The three closely allied arts of architecture, sculpture and painting attained an extraordinary high point of development.

A very new and interesting feature of the rules regarding the labourers of this period is the existence of rules regarding bonus, leave and pension and something approximating to Provident Fund.

Law prohibited exactions and undue enhancements of payment from the master in the shape of increased wages or salary, from merchants in the shape of augmented excise and customs and from the subjects in the shape of exorbitant revenues. Rates in all these cases should not be increased by threat of physical violence or by crafts of diplomacy.

Value was determined for a commodity based on (i) Cost of production. (ii) Utility or want satisfying power.

There is notable evidence of State intervention in Industry. The seller of adulterated food was punishable like a thief.

The result of this Gupta Period was the growth of the proverbial wealth of India and “those great monuments of art which India was enabled to erect after clothing and feeding her own people”.

The Age of Harsha (600 A.D – 647 A.D): During this period there was considerable economic development and trade. The enormous growth of trade and industries led to growth of city life. Nevertheless bulk of the people lived in villages and the king was the ultimate owner of the soil. The chief industry of the people was agriculture. The weaving industry was in a very flourishing condition. Metal industries were highly developed.

Pearl fishing and salt industry flourished. Jewellery in the form of ornaments of kings were extraordinary. There were evidences of foreign trade – brisk trade

went on with China, Japan and Ceylon in this period. Yuan Chwang found India prosperous.

India was virtually independent of foreign nations in respect of the necessities of life, while the ideal of simple living and free thinking must have rendered the secondary wants of the mass of the people very limited in number.

Thus, India has been for many Centuries the final depository of a large portion of the metallic wealth of the world.

Western Materialism: Western Materialism is a form of philosophical monism which holds that matter is the fundamental substance in nature and that all phenomena, including mental phenomena and consciousness, are the result of material interactions.

Karl Marx (1818-1883), the 19th Century Western thinker spoke of 'Asiatic mode of production'. The system had village communities, where the kings did not have control over the lives of people.

Marx was the first great thinker who laid stress on the economic factor. Marx logically discussed the Theory of Class Struggle for the first time. His discussion brought Class consciousness and working classes, which were ignored till then came to light.

Marx gave the evergreen slogan, 'Let the workers of the world unite'. His approach was convincing and appealing to the working class. Even Capitalists began to tremble before his philosophy. He represented problems in a rational way. It is logical to say he was a scientific thinker.

It is observed that one-third of the world has accepted the ideas of Marx both as a creed as well as a way of life. Marx's philosophy is the only ray of hope for millions exploited by the Capitalists.

Comparative Account of Ancient Indian Materialism and Western Materialism: The Ancient Indian system was primitive in nature and based on traditions whereas the Western system was modern and based on philosophical monism which directed all human activity towards material interactions.

Ancient Indian materialism features a system where kings took care of the needs of people, whereas Western materialism features a system where Capitalist produces keeping in view not the needs of the people, but his margin of profit.

In the Indian context, economic organisation was complete. In the Western system Class conflict prevailed.

Ancient Indian Materialism ensured justice to common man. Under Western Materialism Class struggle brought Class consciousness to the Working class.

Ancient Indian Materialism was characterised by collective initiatives which revealed a sense of citizenship. On the contrary, problems of Depressed Classes could not be solved individually under Western Materialism, but that these shall be solved collectively.

In Ancient Indian materialism charity was understood along with wealth acquisition. In contrast Western Materialism featured Class struggle.

Ancient Indian Materialism featured relief to needy citizens and exemption from taxation. There was fair, yet strict treatment of the labour force. On the other hand, Western Materialism featured the existence of Depressed Classes and that the Working Class may take revenge on the Capitalist Class.

Ancient Indian Materialism was characterised by Indian culture and has no religion. Actions are not backed by belief, but inherited and reproduced from generation to generation. On the contrary, Western culture embodies Western Materialism and is backed by religion.

Equality and Social security prevailed for the common man under Ancient Indian Materialism. Such were absent under Western Materialism.

Conclusion: Wealth is the means of all pursuits. Man should try to acquire that by good ways and means, such as good learning, good service, agriculture, art, etc.. "Man is the slave of wealth, not wealth of anybody; so one should always labour for wealth. Through Wealth men get virtue, satisfaction and salvation".

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