

LAND GRANTS AND ITS IMPACT ON AGRARIAN ECONOMY OF NORTHERN INDIA DURING EARLY MEDIEVAL PERIOD (c.A.D. 700-1200)

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ABSTRACT

India has primarily been an agriculture society ever since civilization activities are found in recorded history. Mahatma Gandhi said more than six decades ago that India lives in villages which still hold true as two thirds of the total population of the nation is still dependent on agriculture. Economist from very early times have recognised land as an important factor of production. The present paper aims to study the impact of land grants on agrarian economy of northern India during early medieval period. The present study is based mainly on primary source of information which is mostly in form of epigraphic evidences. Along with it secondary source of information is also used to supplement the study. It is clear from the study that land grants have played a very vital role in the socio economic history of northern India during the concerned period. They have been assigned a key role in historical transformation of ancient to the medieval period.

KEYWORDS: Land Grants, Agrarian Economy, Northern India, Early Medieval Period (c.A.D. 700-1200)

INTRODUCTION

Land is ever regarded a main source of wealth for an agricultural country like India. Land grants are supposed to be the legal document, providing the first hand information of historical economy. There are diverse views of the historians about the allotment, allocation, possession and impact of land grants on the life of people. However, there is a consensus of opinion among scholars on the point that assignment of land on a large scale was the common practice of the period. Inscriptions, mostly engraved on copper-plates furnish necessary details regarding the gift of land etc. Land grants are to be treated as indicators of changing socio-economic and political processes from 600 A.D onwards that led to the formulation of Indian feudalism according to many of the Marxist historians.¹ R. S. Sharma suggests that the origin and development of political feudalism is to be sought in the land grants made to brahmanas from the first century A.D onwards.² Their number becomes considerable in Northern India in the Gupta period and goes on increasing afterwards.³ But, land grants to non-brahmanas or non-religious grantees begin only from the tenth century.⁴ Land grants have played a very vital role in the socio-economic history of early medieval northern India and have been assigned a key role in historical transformation from ancient to the medieval period. Land grants by generating a landed aristocracy are supposed to have brought about the fragmentation of political power and subjection, degradation of the artisans etc.⁵

Thus in the present paper a humble attempt is made to study the impact of land grants on the economy or better to

1 Ranbir Chakravarti, *Exploring Early India Up to c A.D. 1300*, p. 315.

2 R. S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, 2nd ed., p.214.

3 bid.

4 Pushpa Prasad, *Sanskrit Inscriptions of Delhi Sultanate*, Introduction, p. xxiv.

5 Om Prakash refutes the above ideas of the scholars while explaining the nature of land grants. (*Early Indian Land Grants and State Economy*, Allahabad, 1988, p. 1).

say the agrarian economy of northern India during the the selected period.

OBJECTIVES

The present paper is meant to fulfill the certain specific objective. To study the nature, role and impact of land grants on agrarian economy of northern India during early medieval period.

METHODOLOGY

Historical and analytical method is used in the present study. The entire study is mainly based on primary sources. Among primary sources literary as well as inscriptional evidences have been utilised. Secondary data is also used to supplement the information gleaned from the primary sources.

DISCUSSIONS

If one looks back to medieval history of Europe we will find that they had a different mechanism of granting land which was connected to the service rendered. They used the term 'benefit' to describe the land granted in lieu of services rendered in particular vassal services. The grant of land in lieu of services was indeed, central to the feudalism in Western Europe.⁶ The king was regarded as the owner of all kinds of land much of which was led to barons on tenants in chief who in turn agreed to perform certain services to make some payments and supplies.⁷ Now let us examine the position in India on the issue of feudal formation. The main traits of feudal formation appear in India in between the sixth and twelfth century which was the time for the growth of European feudalism as well.⁸ Unlike Europe did not have systematically classified class system through which feudal practices were carried in relation to land grants. It is significant to note that the small scale peasant plots were not tied to the large scale land owner's plots legally and economically. Feudal lords in early medieval period did not directly interest themselves in organizing the cultivation of large stretches of land.⁹ In short it may be said that surplus in kind through superior rights in land and sometimes forced labour were the chief means applied by the feudal lords during the period.

Land can be classified into different categories such as cultivable, cultivated, barren, fallow, high, low, hilly, marshy, land fit for becoming house site and land reclaimed from river beds etc.¹⁰ According to D. C. Sircar, taking into consideration the rulers point of view the land of a country could be divided into the following categories : (i) state land, (ii) land under the occupation of tenants, who paid the king's dues according to agreed rates, (iii) land in more or less uninhabited and uncultivated areas, over which the effectiveness of state control varied under different circumstances.¹¹ Each of these could be further subdivided into different types.¹² Assignment of land to the donees was made not only by the king, but also by the members of the royal family such as princes, queens, king's mother, officers of high ranks, ministers, *samantas*, *mahasamantas* etc.

6G. C. Chauhan, *Economic History of Early Medieval Northern India*, p. 67.

7Ibid.

8R. S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, 2nd ed., p.223.

⁹Ibid., pp.223-24.

10D. C. Sircar, *Landlordism and Tenancy in Ancient and Medieval India as Revealed by Epigraphical Records*, Lucknow, 1969, p.03.

11Ibid.

12G. C. Chauhan writes that according to Sircar the state land could be divided into five categories. (*Economic History of Early Medieval Northern India*, p. 66).

Ownership and Possession of Land

There is a sharp division of opinion among scholars on the complicated question of the ownership of agricultural land in India. In an agricultural country like India possession of land was highly prized by the people sometimes resulting in land disputes.¹³ The various theories on the subject may be broadly divided into three distinct categories which emphasize, the claim of (i) the community,(ii) the king, or (iii) the peasant, as the owner of the soil.¹⁴ The main controversy is between state ownership and individual ownership. Communal ownership was thought of non-existing phenomenon after Mauryan period.¹⁵ As communal ownership is supposed to be a primitive practice when state power had not yet evolved. The existence of corporate ownership appears to have continued to a certain extent even in later period.¹⁶ Ashrafpur copper plate grant from east Bengal, of about seventh and eighth century records the grant of land at least to three parties.¹⁷ But the growth of individual occupancy rights in land among the donees at the cost of the communal agrarian rights was a significant development of the period.¹⁸ Almost all the scholars working on the socio-economic history of early medieval India have dealt with the theme of ownership of land either in detail or just a survey of the matter. Thus it seems needless to reproduce evidences from historical sources about the ownership of land. It can be deduced from the sources that there are evidences in support of both royal ownership and individual ownership. From Vedic period down to 1200 A.D the power vested in the hands of state. In the Vedic period the power was in the hands of tribal groups so various tribes ultimately formed the body controlling and distributing the lands. Later with the growth of the empire the emperor became the absolute owner. All kings, either independent or subordinate were regarded as the owner of the soil.¹⁹ Though, the king was theoretically the lord of land yet his position in respect of ownership of land was decreased due to the presence of land lords who were regarded as the primary lords of the land.²⁰ In some of the land grants the king appears to have transferred the right of punishing the offenders to donees. It is also clear that the king in the capacity of not only of a sovereign power but also the owner of the land, has the right to transfer the tenant along with the transfer of the land to the donee.²¹ Private ownership existed side by side, but king being the symbol of state acted arbitrary as stated above.

The purpose behind issuing the land grants apart from those of spiritual or religious nature, are not clear everywhere. Firstly, the king might have sincerely desired to bring uncultivable land under cultivation; secondly, he could exercise his power into far flung areas where royal authority was little felt²². In spite of all these suppositions the fact remains unaltered that the land was mostly granted in those areas where circulation of coins was either minimal or absent,

13 S.M. Devi, *Economic Condition of Ancient India*, p. 45.

14 V.A. Smith and following him J.N. Samaddar expressed the view that the soil was the property of the king. Others who support this theory are B. Brelover, Shamsastry, Hopkins and Buhler. Maine is the chief propounder of the view that agricultural land was owned and cultivated by men grouped in village communities. The theory of individual ownership has been advocated among others by Baden-Powell, K.P. Jayaswal and P.N. Banerjee. (Lallanji Gopal, 'Ownership of Agricultural Land in Ancient India' B. P. Sahu (ed.), *Land System and Rural Society in Early India* , p. 95 and f n. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11).

15 S. M. Devi, op. cit., p.48.

16 Ibid.

17 R. S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, 2nd. ed., pp.11, 43.

18 Ibid., p.95.

19 D. C. Sircar, *Indian Epigraphy*, p. 351.

20 D. C. Sircar, *Landlordism and Tenancy*, p. 1.

21 S. M. Devi, op. cit., p.71.

22 G.C. Chauhan, op. cit., pp. 66-78.

though it cannot be said in all cases that the secular land grants were made on account of the absence of coinage.²³ It might be due to the king's aspiration to bring more and more land under cultivation through donees.²⁴

Impact of Land Grants on State Economy

Regarding the impact of land grants on state economy and on the people as well it may be suggested that the practice of grants of land left both positive and negative effects on early Indian state and society. Like the question of ownership of land, scholars have diverse opinions about the impact of land grants on state and society. A group of scholars is of the view that land grants were not a drain on state economy²⁵ while the other group considers that the widespread donation of land generated a class of landed aristocracy and ultimately state suffered not only the loss of revenue but also its control over donated land.²⁶ The epigraphic sources of early India indicate significant changes in the relations of donor and donees and consequently its impact on the state. Inscriptional evidences bring to light that land grants of northern India were donated to brahmanas, monks, religious as well as educational institutions such as *viharas*, temples, *mathas* and also to servants and officers of state as tax free donation by the kings and private individuals, subordinate rulers and state officials in lieu of cash salary.²⁷ It is evident from the testimony of *Harshacharita* and Hsuan Tsang that during the seventh century the state officers were mostly paid in form of land grants, and most probably the practice continued during the whole of early medieval period.²⁸ D.C. Sircar wrote that landlordism of ancient and medieval India should not be confused with feudalism.²⁹ Although, he accepts the donee's right to unpaid labour but rejects the obligation of being feudal type by asserting that nobody was tied to the soil.³⁰ In fact he considers feudalism a misnomer in Indian context.³¹ Om Prakash argues that early Indian land grants were not a drain on state economy; in fact religious grants were also converted into sources of revenue through some kind of concessional rent imposed on them.³²

A large number of land grants depict various exemptions and different sources of state income were transferred to the donees.³³ Om Prakash refers only partially privileged grant but ignores fully exempted estates or land-grants.³⁴ Recently Prof. Chakravarti suggests that the thorough study of the epigraphic evidences has led Sircar to conclude that the granting of revenue transfer need not to be interpreted as detrimental to the economic interests of the king, since the person or the vassal or the administrative officer requesting for such a concession was to pay to the royal treasury a lump sum amount beforehand.³⁵ Analyzing from this point of view the disastrous consequences of land grants become doubtful.³⁶

23 Ibid., p.68.

24 Ibid., p.69.

25 Om Prakash mentions a special tax fixed on land grants, variously termed as *trnodaka*, *nikara*, *aruvana*, *agrahara-pradeyamsa*, *pindadana* etc. (*Early Indian Land Grants and State Economy*, Allahabad 1988, p. 2).

26 G. C. Chauhan mentions several new terms in the list of taxes which might be imposed in future. He quotes Lallanji Gopal that the overlords did not make any serious effort to stop the exactions of the feudal chiefs. (G.C. Chauhan, op. cit., p. 78).

27 G.C. Chauhan, op. cit., p. 75.

28 23K. K. Gopal, 'Assignment to Officers and Royal Kinsmen in Early Medieval India c. A.D 700-1200', B.P.Sahu (ed.), op. cit., p. 118.

29 D.C. Sircar, *Landlordism and Tenancy in Ancient and Medieval India as Revealed by Epigraphical Records*, Lucknow, 1969, pp. 33.

30 Ibid., p.48.

31 Ibid.

32 Om Prakash, op. cit., pp. 282.

33 G.C. Chauhan, op. cit., p. 76-77

34 Ibid., see also end note 77 on page no. 82.

35 Ranbir Chakravarti, *Exploring Early India from A.D. 600 to A.D. 1300*, p. 321. He wrote that the numerous

R. S. Sharma emphasises fragmentation of political power and synthesis and restricting of polity, society and economy on feudal lines.³⁷ While discussing the impact of land grants as an important means of bringing virgin soil under cultivation not only in Central India, Orissa, and Eastern Bengal but also in southern India land grants in his view provided the administrative mechanism for maintaining law and order in the donated areas, in which all such powers were delegated to the donees. The same practice also led to the brahmanisation and acculturation of the tribal people who acquired knowledge of script, calendar, art, literature and a new way of higher life.³⁸ Ranbir Chakravarti, concludes that land grants did not led to the dismemberment of polity and the emperor exercised his superiority over his subordinates.³⁹ No decline in the economy can thus be related to the issue of land grants.⁴⁰ The Marxist historians, according to him have been criticized for their inability to distinguish landlordism and tenancy in ancient India from feudalism.⁴¹ Sircar strongly upheld this position and contested the formulation of Indian feudal polity and economy.⁴² Sircar states that Indian landlordism is sometimes confused with European feudalism.⁴³ True it is that land grants issued on such a large scale led to a distinct class of landholders who would not normally cultivate the land themselves. A seventh century inscription from Bengal suggests a complex land system of at least three tiers – the owner, the enjoyer and the tiller of the soil.⁴⁴ The emergence of landed intermediaries is diagnosed as typical symptom of the Indian feudal economy while their role is hardly considered beneficial to the economic and political interest of the ruler; their growing strength seriously impoverished the peasant.⁴⁵ Lallanji Gopal observed that over lords had not seriously tried to stop exaction of feudal chief. As the central authority had declined considerably and had to depend on the levies sent by the feudal chiefs, it could not afford to interfere with their high handed exploitation.⁴⁶

CONCLUSIONS

From the above discussion it is quite apparent that the widespread practice of issuing land grants led not only to the loss of revenue to the state to some extent but also loosened its strict control over donated land.⁴⁷ On one hand land grants contributed to agrarian growth and on the other hand shaped the social configuration in the countryside.⁴⁸ The practice of granting land could also be seen as a factor for the shrinkage of the urban sector which resulted in conversion of the tax area into rent area.⁴⁹ If one has to mention the most important and beneficial role of land grant, it would undoubtedly be agrarian expansion. It may not eventually be denied that the increase of land grants in the early middle ages were actually instrumental in clearing hitherto uncultivable and unsettled areas into sedentary agrarian settlements.⁵⁰

instances of *karashasanas*, especially from early medieval Orissa, suggest the king's retaining his right to collect levies even from granted areas.(ibid.)

36 Ibid.

37 R.S.Sharma, *Early Medieval Indian Society*, pp.06-07.

38 R.S.Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, pp.222-23.

39 Ranbir Chakravarti, op. cit, p.322.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., p. 322.

43 D. C. Sircar, op. cit., p. 48.

44 Ranbir Chakravarti, op. cit., p. 316.

45 Ibid., p. 318.

46 Lallanji Gopal, *Economic Life of Northern India*, p. 253.

47 G.C. Chauhan, op. cit., p. 78.

48 R. S. Sharma, *Urban Decay in India*, p.175.

49 Ibid., p. 185.

50 Ranbir Chakravarti, op. cit., p. 314.

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