

Socio-Economic Life of Early Medieval Northern India as Reflected in Land Grants

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Abstract

This research work examines and analyse land grants in the early medieval northern India, and deals in socio- economic aspects. The period of Indian history witnessed the division of society in social stratification, privileges for the nobility, closed economy, and the dominant position of landed aristocracy, which hampered the development of society and restricted the development of town and enhancement of trade. It traces the economic as well as social life of the people through the examination of sources of land grants and try to define the land grant, its types, purposes, issuing authority and its impact on social, political and economic aspects.

Key Words: Tamra-Śāsna; land grant; copper-plate inscriptions; aristocrats; peasants; tamra-patta; devā-dayā; brahma-deyā; agarhara; secular land grants

Introduction

In this paper, we examine critically various aspects of land grants and their role in economic formation during early medieval northern India. The present research work is an attempt to make an effort in one of the significant field of land grants. It is the main critical phase of the Indian historical order because it deals with two major fields of the history; the first phase is the economic life and second phase is the social life. In the study of these two fields, there is ample historical material available in literary form but the main and authentic source of information is epigraphy. We have literary as

well as epigraphic evidences of land grants to study social and economic life of early medieval northern India.

What is a Land Grant?

Land means the tranche of lithosphere however, in the contest of research paper, the construal of land moves towards the form of settlement and agricultural goals. Land grant is a charter or a written document by the ruling king to the donee for his allegiance towards state during several occasions. Land grant signifies the part of land given to donee in the form of reward by the ruler for his accomplishments in consideration for the state. This might have helped in upliftment of his economic status. A Land or land grant provision was made because of paucity of funds with state or absence of currency in vogue.

Most of land grants were given in the form of a charter. The word *tamra-sāsna* is 'royal charter engraved on a copper-plate'. Ancient Indian rulers donated revenue-free lands in favour of a particular person, deities or religious establishments, and usually endowed them with a deed engraved on durable *tamra-pattara*, i.e. 'a copper plate'. The copper plate record various kind of rent-free land donations to the deities, Brāhmiṇs and were called devā-dayā and brahma-deyā or brahma-dayā respectively. In various copper plates, the word *agrāhara* was more popular in the sense of a rent-free village in favour of the Brāhmiṇs.

Major Types of Land Grants

Brahmadeya land was related to religious organizations or institutions. *Deve-dana* types of land was given in the name sake of the particular god and the third one was called *Agrahara* which was also given to the Brahmin for their settlements and temples, *mathas* or monasteries in the form of *sarvjanasamet* which means “with all people and living things” if any Brahmin got a village in the form of land donation, he bestowed the prerogative of whole village with all people and living beings coming under his dominance and nobody was allowed to migrate from that village to other village without the permission of the new donee. One form of land grant was reserved for the officials of the state due to their services for state official’s viz. secular land grant.

Classification of Land

Generally, Indian literary tradition reflects major types of classifications of land i.e. habitable, livable, wasteland, arable or pastureland¹, fellow, low, high, marshy merely². However, Kautilya suggests that there were so many varieties of land between the Himalayas and the ocean like forestland, land for habitat, mountains, plains, and state land. D.C. Sircar is of the opinion that there were mainly five categories of land like the personal land of the ruling king, royal family members and officials, state personal land, land was under the cultivation by ardhikas on the share of the produce, and the last category is waste land in all forms³. But in the charters of land grants there is no clear idea about the land whether that land was barren or not and further we can’t trace that barren land was brought under cultivation or not. However, some historians are of the view that through these lands more and more area was brought under agriculture, but there is no direct

information regarding this supposition. In the land charters or inscriptions there are mentioned of some terms which are not in proper use in general because on these terms thinkers are not unanimous like *pravanikara*⁴, *yamalikambali*⁵, *vimsatiathuprastha*⁶, *barabajhe*⁷, *kumaragadianaka*⁸. Gahadavala grants also still awaited further exploration and definition. Some undefined terminologies are yet to be exploited circa medieval era.

Land grants give the valuable information about the social as well as economic history of the donated land or area. This study is very typical in content of donated land grants.

Content of the Land Grants

These land grants are related to donor and the donee⁹, the state officials, financial implications, donated land or villages where the land was granted as well as the occasion and reason for donation of grants are mentioned in the charter of land grants. It is stated that land grants are not only the source of the development of the historical land survey, it also highlights the pattern of crops, crafts, trading activities, money system, development of taxation, and how local market and *hattas* were evolved into small towns and a cities. Irrigation patterns, migration of the people and especially of Brahmins and new ways of settlement. If we want to reconstruct the economic and social history through land grants, there is an urgent need to arrange a systematic investigation of land charters on the spatial basis or dynasty to dynasty.

Granting Authority

The power to issue land charter was vested with the state or ruling king but in few cases there are some information available about local individuals also who donated some land to the temples, *mathas* in the form of *Dev-*

deya land grants. Therefore, we cannot say directly that only the state had the monopoly to issue the land grants. Be if we talk about the royal charter at that place, the only the state or the king had the right to transfer the land rights. On the other hand, some inscriptions indicate that local people also donated their land to the temples or mathas.

On the basis of above findings here, the question arises that whether there were any right of ownership of land in ancient India. If no one had the right to property, then how the local people could donate the land? It is a debatable issue to look into this matter. There are different types of opinion regarding the ownership of land rights. The king or the other, in ancient Indian literary tradition reflects two school of thought one is Jaimini, Sabara¹⁰ other states that the king was not the owner of all land, but the state buy the taxes only. In addition, the second school holds that the king's responsibility was to protect his subjects he is the owner of all the *surva bhumer adhipatir- hisah*¹¹. A Greek traveler Megasthenes who visited in Mauryan India, claimed that "all property belongs to the crown and no private person was permitted to own land and farmers were cultivating land on the condition of paying ¼ of the production"¹². However, here we are only concerned to look into the important features of land grants and its significance for socio-economic history in the times of early medieval northern India.

Purpose of Land Grants

The literary reflection of the sources of land donation was religious as well as secular purpose.¹³ Early and later Vedic literature indicates that mostly grants were donated for religious persons and its institutional establishment. These evidences also mentioned in *Satapatha Brahmana*¹⁴, *Aitrareya Brahmana*¹⁵ and *Chandogya*

*Upanisad*¹⁶. These all sources are the witness of donation about religious benefits.

It is an important question to answer that what was the purpose behind to donate land. Some historians suggest that earlier theory of donating land was to bring religious and spiritual benefit by the king and his ancestors. By the time research work, expanded and some hidden facts came through historical research. However, the question of the donation of land in Indian historical order is the matter of debatable issue. There are many questions arises to ask why these grants were donated in ancient India? Moreover, why the ruling authority carried this system? Even though this terminology state drop their economic rights, and loss the central monopoly over that land. In addition, that G.C.Chauhan s the opinion these land grants are the legal document of their time. Within their scope, they are supposed to provide us firsthand information of the historical order¹⁷. In the form of the salary, state donated mainly pasture or barren land or boundary touching land for the purpose to extend their empire or to control over the land. There are two different views G.C.Chauhan states that the ruling king had the desire o bring more and more land covered under cultivation through grants and king also issued or donating the land in far-flung regions to setup the central power over there. The other hand R.S.Sharma holds that land grants are usually noticed in those areas where the circulation of coins were minimal or absent. Nevertheless, we have not clear idea about the land donation that more and more barren land was bringing under cultivation or not and after post Mauryan times we are not any particular absence of coins even the post Mauryan to early medieval times, Indian history are noticed from the coins. Therefore, we cannot say that absences of coins are more responsible for issuing land grants.

Impact of Land Grants

There are numerous merits and demerits of issuing land grants on the nature of the state. Through issuing land grants, state reached border areas where state had no much control before and state set-up a new type of landed aristocracy for back-up to the state. On the other hand state mainly got loss in three fields, the one is economic, second social and third political loss. When state issued grants to particular person then state started to face revenue loss after that administrative rights also handover to the new donee. In the end, many charter also clearly informed that many villages were donated with *sarvajanasamet* due to this process people could not migrate to other places without the permission of the new donee. These people were made for an instrument for the donee and people were bound to work into a particular area. Their status started decreasing and ultimately social crises erupted into that area.

There is a general conception among historians that a large number of land was granted in early india as well as early medieval india in this result land hold was occupied by receivers and then those got these land mostly they also got the authoritative rights on the control on the local population. After this process land grants spoliates the life of the people of the donated land G.C. Chauhan, B.N.S. Yadav, Om Parkash rightly state that, “the state controlled economy got transformed into a feudal economy through the issuance of lands grants which ultimately generated a landed aristocracy as an intermediary enjoying the revenues of one or more villages. It was the result of political decline into fragmentation from central to local chiefs or lords and local peasantry to bondage and subjection, sullied the working life of artisans and finally macadamized into the mode for new obligations on the transfer of peasants

ultimately they were subjected to work under that donee for free or normal wage¹⁸.

Conclusion

Conclusively, it is inferred that in the early medieval northern Indian phase of land grants is very critical phase for socio-economic as well as political historical writings. This era is witnessed to expend agrarian settlements but loss of revenue of the state and surplus production were limited then trading activities starting decrease. In the end peasantry had to accept their destiny without any objection. Then conflicts started between the new donee and peasants. The fashion of land grants is responsible for demolition of the socio-economic life of the early medieval times. It is further submitted that a statistical analytical may weight variant aspects of varied dynastical exponents of economic, political and sociological.

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