
Interpreting Peasantry of Early Medieval Northern India

Manjeet Singh

Department of History
Panjab University, Chandigarh

When it comes to the writing of economic history of early medieval northern India, it is inevitable to come across word 'peasant', a thousand times, if not more, to do justice with the attributes, constituting a firm foundation upon which rests the massive structure of acquainted past, that we more precisely identify with history. History in itself is a drab discipline, which otherwise, appealing to not more a dozen of scholars, draws the attention of million when served in a savoury platter. Early medieval Indian economy was necessarily agrarian in nature, therefore making the role of peasantry fundamental to the theme of our research. The article would discuss at length the other aspects of peasantry, but what concerns us the most is the study of impact that early medieval trends of donating lands to the different kind of donees had on the peasantry. Attempts shall be made to discover the all aspects of peasantry reflected in the land grants. Defining

Peasantry, peasant in particular as the pivotal role player in peasantry, is more than challenging a risky affair which involves the sentiments of millions even today.

This article on peasantry has precisely been directed at the empirical study of early medieval northern Indian peasantry where goal is to explore new theoretical explanations, alternative approaches, and perceptions of reality founded on fresh insight. The article will cross examine the various socio-economic events that led to the emergence of early medieval peasantry in its distinct form, as differentiated from the traditional peasantry. This transformation is best manifested in the numerous land-grant charters forming the subject matter of our study. The study, despite being focused at the formulation of valid hypotheses from scrutinising the available research work has been supplemented by the survey of literary

traditions shedding light on the social and economic development of early medieval northern India.

Early medieval Indian literary and epigraphic traditions comprise the most important phenomenon responsible for the socio-economic formation of early India. This tradition of land grant, though not new to the given time was inherently effecting the change in the ways of land administration. This change was not limited to the ways on how land and its rights could be managed but went to the extent of changing the socio-political model representing the new age of feudal subjugation. Feudalism once again might be an age old phenomenon, but the quantum of exploitation this effected in early medieval period is one of the points that we consider to ponder upon. Exploitation can be associated with peasantry as is the privilege with the landlordism. For centuries together, peasants have suffered at the cost of their overlords, taking into account the financial or other aspects. Their hardship has been a continuous phenomenon and it has gone unbridled for a considerable period. In this chapter it will be clear how the level of

exploitation becomes the basis of differentiation of the peasantry.

The precise definition of peasantry is practically not feasible as the terminology varies in its essence with the variation in geographical boundaries. But most of the scholars and reference books around the world would primarily relate it with the land in one way or the other.

Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary¹ defines peasant as a countryman: a rustic; one whose occupation is rural labour; and peasantry as a body of peasants or tillers of soil, rustic and labourer. On the other hand Webster International Dictionary recognises peasant as a class that tills the soil as free landowners or hired labourers. Surely, these reference books have not recognised the worth of words they used to define the peasantry. Their purview, especially in defining the peasantry has been quiet modern if not certainly inclined towards the western approach; precisely aimed at expressing the common meaning to a next man. Certainly, such references are meant for a general outlook and not for formulating scholarly debates and discussions.

This is quite clear when the dictionary freely uses the two apparent contrasts in its

description; one a class of free landowner and the others, hired labourers. This difference in this context for a historian is a major change that could effect a social or economic change which if neglected could convince us in believing that there stands no parity between the landowner and landless peasants. Citing the definition of peasant from any dictionary would not be a rational practice given the theme of our chapter in particular. But comparative analysis of the definition from some of the reputed dictionaries and the reference sources would provide us with a comprehensive element to which our topic could relate.

While attempting to define the peasants or peasantry, most of the scholars or the reference sources have strayed away from the central idea of the peasantry. Many of them just considering their attachment to land, an important aspect and ignoring the way of attachment. International Encyclopaedia of Social Science's² interpretation is not so exception. It designates the peasant to be an agriculturist, who lives in a village or small town in rural area and the term peasantry, to the people and communities who are peasants. It would be unjust if we would treat peasantry in such a simple manner, by not giving its due, or

simply overlooking its economic contribution of carrying the burden of sustenance of societies for generations together. Instruments of our theoretical judgement of peasantry still fall short of the impeccable mechanism that we could rely upon to help us in reaching somewhere near to the conceptual meaning of peasant. That could be just because we have not supplemented it with the pragmatic analysis and considerations.

Thus it becomes clear that the definitions of dictionaries or the reference books cannot be taken for granted if we want to reach somewhere concluding the subject matter of peasantry discussions. Any limitation could not save us from the responsibility of finding out a rational way out. While considering the interpretations and ideas of some reputed authors in peasantry and economic histories as regards peasantry might well be in aide, at such point of discussion. There are innumerable scholars and historians who have attempted their hands at working on the peasantry. This has resulted in making the peasantry a multifaceted discipline. While some people have blatantly applied the term peasant to

characterize entire societies, the others just consider it to be the part of any society.

Though the question of defining the peasant and peasantry has for long been the bone of contention between historians, sociologists, anthropologists and thinkers still the need for such definition arise or is created for better social control, colloquial descriptions and collective control by some human agencies. It facilitates to identify a group or community of people with some common traits or practices. But it is for us to decide whether peasants in particular do exist in groups or communities or even caste as some of the scholars are led to conclude.

Historically, the roots of word peasant can be traced back to medieval Europe, where it was used to refer to rural poor, rural residents, serfs, agricultural labourers and the common people as a whole which at times involved the rural inhabitants whether or not involved in agriculture and the literal meaning of 'peasant' in the form of a verb was to subjugate some common man.³ Edelman Marc draws a parallel between term 'peasant' and French word 'paysan' implying connotations such as rustic, crass or rude. Similar trend followed in thirteenth century Germany where again the 'peasant' did not mean anything more than the

connotations mentioned before; it could at times refer to the words manifesting criminality such as villain , rustic, devil or robber.⁴

Following the western trends barring some exceptions has long been tradition in Indian scholar. This has in fact done us more harm than any good. Applying the prefixed moulds to Indian countryman would have been more than a natural selection an ease, or rather a reluctance to look for some suitable words which could better describe the Indian agriculturists or labourers associated with it. The biggest challenge is thus not even the definition but the question to decide as to who should be included in the peasantry, which has invited a lot of debate and criticism. Where on the one hand, the derogatory terms like rustic, rude, robber, crass, used as the synonyms of peasant in west could reflect badly on the condition of peasants prevailed in those times, leading us to believe in the extreme subordination and subjugation of peasants, the theory could not apply uniformly to all social and physical and social boundaries. Even if the exploitation or subordination are to be taken as the variable of feudalism which was hence to be blamed for pre-discussed conditions, the kind of feudalism

that existed in India could in no way be compared to Western feudalism.

In general peasants are the people who depend on agriculture for subsistence directly or indirectly. Teodor Shanin necessitates the presence of four elements to be the indispensable peasantry; family farm as the basic multifunctional unit of social organization, land husbandry and usually animal rearing as the main means of livelihood, a specific traditional culture closely linked with the way of life of small rural communities and multi directional subjection by powerful outsiders.⁵ Shanin further acknowledges the presence of other marginal groups which do not much resemble in the characteristics the peasantry; landless labourers, rural craftsmen, pastoralists and tribal like people sustaining on frontier zones, who have for long kept them free from any political submission that comprise such groups.

Thus it becomes clear that peasantries in no way form the homogenous mass but are marked by internal differentiations along many lines. Shanin attempts to trace the roots of term peasant and finds a concrete resolution by postulating certain traits as to

which the peasantry could relate. Many would agree with Shanin idea as he to some extent succeeds in identifying closely the characteristics peculiar to the kind of peasantry that might have existed in Europe in particular and the whole world in general. The subject matter of defining the peasantry has been complicated even more given the multifarious suggestions being made by the historians World around. Where some scholars like Eric Wolf would even identify the peasant with an active economic agent, who shoulders the responsibility of his home and consumer who directly or indirectly depend upon the surplus produced by him, willingly or unwillingly⁶, the others like Daniel Thorner are of the view that in any peasant economy, more than half of the working population must compulsorily be engaged in agriculture, so as to fit in the fundamental of it being the carrier of production, the basis of material sustenance of society.⁷ Wolf specifically enumerates the peasant to be an agricultural producer but distinctively makes exclusion to craftsmen and fishermen. As for wolf, the peasant of the day differs from the traditional primitive man who farmed to satisfy his hunger, in the matter that the lives of peasants now is characterised by the powers dictating terms

in lieu of so called protection provided by them against the any external intruder agencies. The peasant has since been subjected to the illegitimate demands and sanctions of such power-holders belonging to altogether a different stratus of the society, indicating the idea of rise of State, making the societal relationship even more complex.⁸ Evidently, such an interdependence has though turned out to be depressing for peasant societies but always a blessing in disguise for those, the privileged ones for such exploitations usually catalysed the process of agrarian expansion; though at what cost, this will be taken up later.

The question of identification of peasants is the most striking and crucial in the study of peasantry. It is important to know as to what the word, 'peasant' implies. The question has repeatedly been taken up in recent past many historians by raising yet another query into the question; does it imply the tenants, petty commodity producers, part time farmers or the big estate holders?⁹ Indispensable howsoever it might for the studies in peasantries; surely this question is misleading as to clearly demarcate the frontiers of toiling of the peasants is next to impossible.

It is evident that social and economic anthropologists agree upon the peasants being primarily self-sufficient agriculturalists and further, the scopes of the definition are extended to the miners, loggers, artisans and other wagers in the peasantry as long as they are part of the same social group as agriculturalists, which they usually are because they are members of the same family or because agriculturalists often engage in these activities for additional seasonal employment. All these activities have certain common characteristics; be it the standard of living, labour demand which is not capital based but primarily on the natural resources. They view the peasantry as a marginal, deprived and subjugated section of the society which to a great extent is the truth.¹⁰ The problem with the sociologists and the anthropologists is the tools formulated basically in the training of lone sociological perspective. Some very significant aspects associated with peasantry such as economic and politico-economic can holus bolus be ignored by the sociologists and the anthropologists, which in no way means any offence as the scope of sociological studies might be limited given the historic perspective.

The historical dimension ignored by other social scientists has been included in the Marxist definition but with some limitations. The Marxist definition of peasants as semi-feudal or feudal tenant removes this category altogether from areas in the twentieth century.¹¹ The Marxist definition does not include within itself, for example, landless agricultural labourers whose presence in the countryside; they prefer to treat as a product of capitalist penetration rather than an inherent feature of peasantry itself.¹² But the landless wage labourers have been an integral part of Indian village for a long historical period. One of the Marxist scholars, Irfan Habib defines a peasant as a person who undertakes agriculture on his own, working with his own implements and using the labour of the family.¹³ Irfan's definition of the peasantry is acceptable to Marxist scholars in India. He classifies the peasants such as, the rich peasant (with extensive use of hired labour), the middle peasant (mainly using family labour) and the poor peasant (with land insufficient to absorb the whole of the family of the labourer).¹⁴ He identifies another type of peasant, based on property relations, and recognizes the peasant proprietor, the peasant with some claim to

permanent or long-term occupancy, and the seasonal share-cropper, as separate categories. But in his views the landless labourers are not peasants they form with peasants the working agricultural population, and their history too remains for him a part of peasant history.¹⁵ He ignores the factor of land control and thus implies that a peasant may be an owner, a tenant or in a broader sense, even a labourer without any right of ownership, or occupancy. Such a definition makes the peasant a vague category limiting him by some only to the owner-cultivator and stretching him by other to include even the landless labourers.

Whether peasantries arise from tribal societies, or from the less privileged section of the society or from the specialised group of agriculturists being assigned the task of a universal producer for generations together, the one feature of the nature of their work makes them identical to one another. Such workers, unstill not ascribed any position in the social or economic hierarchy, might form analytically marginal section that share with the hardcore of peasants most of their characteristics. Hetukar Jha argues that the peasant has to maintain his household along with the various social, cultural and political



obligations and therefore the rationale of production that he adopts is entirely different from that of the capitalist mode of production. Jha further acknowledges the peasant household as a representative unit of production in any peasant economy; the peasant family household being a socioeconomic unit which grows crops primarily by the physical efforts of the members of the family.¹⁶ Thorner in this regard hurried in claiming India still to be a peasant economy. Shedding further light on the statement made by him, he categorised the peasants in three principal groups composing the Indian agrarian structure namely: *mālik* the proprietor, *kisān*, the working peasant and *mazdur*, the labourer which also includes the share croppers or the tenants-at-will.¹⁷ Thorner seems familiar with the problem of identification of the peasants in India as is B.N. Ganguly. Where Thorner questions the inadequacy of the terms like landlords, tenants and labourers to canvas a clear picture of the peasantry, Ganguly observes that the mixed status of Indian peasants worsens the problem of identification and makes it even more complicated to find out whether he is a cultivating owner or a not cultivating owner. Thorner by ascribing the Indian terminology

as *mālik*, *kisān*, *mazdur* to the identification of peasants though facilitated to identify the hierarchical division at local level but this in no way made the task of identification any easier as his theory failed to make it clear if the all three were the parts of peasantry, or the *kisān* alone formed peasantry, or could *mazdur* (labourers) be included in the peasantry; because technically the *mālik* can not be identified with peasantry if they do not serve actively in production and so cannot be *mazdur* absorbed into the peasantry if the direct association with land is taken to be the sole criterion of qualification. V.K. Srivastava makes it clear that absentee landlords cannot be designated as peasants for the peasants effectively controlled the lands on which he worked and his production is mainly aimed at subsistence targeting mainly the household consumption, but he produces surplus to get his other needs.¹⁸ This analogue if applied to early medieval Indian context, it could create a chaotic situation as the clause of land control would ruin the very base of definition of the peasants let alone strive for other means of luxury than getting food to the fill. The land control, the central tool of defining peasantry by Srivastava in early medieval period slipped even from the most

privileged hands to the class of newly created landed aristocracy by virtue of a phenomenon peculiar to early medieval context, known as feudalism. Our period of study, the element of land control was lost to the mists of perplexity effected by this phenomenon which now became a frequent fashion until its saturation.

A stark distinction is visible in all three groups but their association with land in different ways for unilateral aimed function justifies their relation with the identical division that is peasantry hence professed by Thakur that the element of land control which remains a key hierarchy determinant requires a qualified inclusion of landless groups into the peasant category.¹⁹

Nonetheless, Srivastava raised a very relevant question regarding peasantry that if one could equate rural or village with peasantry; could all the village dwellers be peasants or is it that this place is legitimately reserved for the agricultural producers of the village; if all villagers are not actively engaged in agriculture, what term could be used to describe them.²⁰ Subhadra Channa counter the application of European concept of peasantry to India, especially early medieval period for peasantry in India is not

undifferentiated and peasants do not belong to particular caste rather come from different strata of the society.²¹ It is but obvious that if any definition of peasant is derived primarily on European manner, this would only reflect the European reality and applying such definitions to Indian history undoubtedly a biggest folly.

What is more relevant in this scenario is the broader understanding of the term peasant. The limitation of man-land relationship and that of agricultural domain pose a biggest hurdle in understanding of peasantry. And in this direction, the approach of R. Firth²² seems to be little relevant who broadly view the peasants as small scale producers. Evidently, the broader analysis of Indian peasant would depend upon the inclusion of rural masses irrespective of their particular occupation and without taking into account cultural or economic homogeneity. Going by this approach, rural inhabitants, then be it rich land-owners, landless labourers, artisans or craftsmen, all may be classified as peasants. It implies that term peasant is not reserved for distinct class of people in a village or society as a whole. Peasantry might be an economic in its function but agricultural alone should not be mandated for it.

One thing is quite noticeable that the identification of peasants particularly in early medieval period in India is the most vulnerable and sensitive issue, much for its exposure to the new social formation occurring as a result of frequented tradition of land grants resulting in even bigger bang when such a trend is at its high. It really makes us think if any such definition formulated by any criteria of social or economic sort would uniformly apply to early medieval Indian peasantry. The alienation of land control either from the superior hands of elites or from the petty farmer who until now had at least virtual rights over land with the compulsory obligation of rent to overlord, is conspicuous by its absence in early medieval north India. R.S. Sharma in his lucid style puts forth that the kind of social structure that existed in early medieval India with a class of landlords claiming the rights to collect the rent on the ground of their self proclaimed ownership or sanctioned by the even bigger sovereign, with a class of peasantry working as producers and paying the fair share of their production as rent third and the vicious object of the promoting production or economic growth not for the welfare of

society as a whole but to quench their obsession for profit.

Two most important determinants of the identification of the peasantry according to V.K. Thakur²³ are: the element of land control and the pattern of exploitative relationship shaped by the nature of structured peasant formation. The element of land control is the most crucial in the context of agricultural operations. Thakur suggest that peasant is the one who owns land and engages himself in agriculture either in the capacity of direct supervisors or cultivators. References has been put forth by Thakur as testimonial to his perception from ancient Indian literature where terms such a *gahapati*, *kuṭumbin/ kuṭumbika* occur in contrast of *kinaṣa*, *kriṣivala*, *kriṣika*, *karṣaka* and the like having the hierarchical as well as functional separations. The yet another problem is added by words such as *pamara*, *holauahakā*, *dāsakammakāra* in the context of land control as these were landless groups whose labour was indispensable for agrarian economic production. Yajanvalkya throws some light upon the terms *karṣaka* and *kṣetravāmi*; citing a reference from his works it becomes clear that land was to be assigned to the cultivator, *karṣaka* directly by the landowner, the *kṣetravāmi*. Here two

thing worth noticing; one that the term *karṣaka* is associated with the cultivator and other that the ownership of land in some manner was the feature of agrarian economy in fourth century C.E.²⁴ Yajanvalkya further distinguishes the landlord or *kṣetravāmi* from the king whom he identifies with term *māhipati*. Conclusively, he identifies three stages in such economic order which were later corroborated by Brhaspati in sixth and seventh centuries. Here again *karṣaka* occurs as a peasant who has certain obligation to his overlord but the utter exploitation and subjection is not testified by Yajanvalkya. Considering the terminological operations in the light of references from early India, the relation of peasant to the land can safely be presumed. English term peasant, meaning countrymen be literally translated into which means inhabitant of countryside.²⁵ Transformation the regular feature of history was quite frequent in early India when term *jana* came to mean a dependent, a servile peasant who was valued and acquired for his labour power. Testimonial to such a change of peasant's relation to land is borne by the medieval texts and Inscriptions. In the literary sources, *gahapati* is referred to the head of the household and implied the

landowning peasant in early Pāli texts having substantial autonomy in his unit of production. The term has been omitted in land grant inscriptions and appears only in later texts in the sense village headman.²⁶ Clear demarcation between the landless and landowning farmer is not drawn early India for until then control of land by the cultivator would have been an obvious phenomenon so as to produce the best therefore helping the state in enhanced revenue. The trend of the dramatic shift in their role might have been the later stage development. We are assured of such assessments because clear term for peasant *kṣetrika* or *kṣetrin*, occurs repeatedly in the texts which derive various meaning as controller of land, agriculturist or the cultivator. It might sometime hint even to a cultivator who necessarily is not the owner of the land; *kṣetrika* as mere cultivator or husbandman seen as the derivation from the Assamese word *khetiyaka* and the word *kṣetrakāra* again implying a peasant used in many land grants especially of eastern India is a case in point.²⁷ So is the term *shetkāri* in Marathi derived from *kṣetreakara* which does not unquestionably imply the owner of land, rather simple cultivator of soil.

In Amarkosa , a sixth century literary work, we find mention of five term for peasants and agriculture workers- *kṣetrajiva*, *karṣaka*, *krṣika*, *krṣivala* and *kinaṣa*; *kuṭumbi* was later added to it by Halayudha.²⁸ Some other related terms too occur in some other Sanskrit works as Abhidhanaratnamāla of Halayudha like *halika*, *krṣikara*, *krṣaka* *krṣajivi* etc. Quite interestingly, in *Aṣṭadhyayi* of Panini the term *halika* appears to have connoted an ox utilized for ploughing.²⁹ The ancient Indian literary sources do not present king and peasant in a bilateral relation, which is defined more precisely as, firstly, to raise produce, and secondly, to pay a share of his produce to the king. By performing these obligations or duties, he can expect the king's protection, and he can enjoy the balance of his produce.³⁰ *Kṣetrapati*, *kṣetraswāmi*, occur in ancient Indian literary tradition as well as epigraphical sources time and again which would either interpret as the cultivator of the soil or the agricultural labourer.³¹

Kuṭumba-kṣetra refers to the field in the land-grants which cultivator owned absolutely.³² But the evidence of Medhātithi suggests that *kuṭumba* was a share-cropper as well. However, we observe that there were a large number of peasant proprietors

who "tilled their own land and the task of tilling the land was done by almost all segments of Indian society. The Kṣatriyas and Brāhmaṇas along with Vaiśyas and Śūdras are found to be engaged in agricultural activities; the bulk goes to the Śūdras who worked agricultural operations.³³ G.C. Chauhan³⁴ includes the following categories as peasants; rich land-owners, share-croppers, tenants, landless labourers, artisans, craftsmen and other who were engaged in any kind of agricultural activities in ancient India. The broader perspective of the peasantry has been paid heed by Chauhan.

In early medieval India with the significant and noticeable events taking place, coming under the watchful eye of scholars, other seemingly not so important were in the offing. These were the social and cultural transformations within the framework of predominant four Varṇa, giving rise to a series of events altogether different to projected trends had such changes not effected ever in the history. The literary sources like *Dharmaśāstras* and others like Inscription bear testimony to these. In traditional Varṇa set up, the Śūdra were flung to the lowest rung of society

preceded by vaisya, ksatriya and brāhmaṇa consecutively. But quite apparently, in the middle of first millennium, the period coinciding with the maximum frequency in land grants, a considerable section of Śūdras were rising in social and economic status after being associated with the agriculture and a section of vaisyas, particularly the ones economically less sound, were descending to the level of Śūdras. From the age Buddha to the advent of Gupta period, the taxpaying vaisyas mostly comprised peasants but by the early medieval times, they were reduced to the position of Śūdras who, in spite of having acquired peasant hood continued to bear the hallmark of servitude. There was a definite change in the relative position of lower two varṇas. Śūdras were no longer slaves or servants rather emerged as cultivators, more specifically the peasants in new progression era. Even law books of sixth and seventh century ascribe the position of tiller of soil or the agriculturist to Śūdra. This development could not escape the eyes of foreign travellers either who briefly mentioned about the Śūdra as cultivator of land; Chinese traveller Hieun-Tsang is one of those who described agriculture as the duty of Śūdras. Other than this, a sizeable

proportion of tribals were being absorbed into this complex social structure, considering them belonging to Śūdra category, but to the advantage of those yielding considerable power.

It is not that the Śūdra were assigned the vocation of agriculture for the first time, but such direct induction into agriculture had never taken place. R.S. Sharma speak of Śūdra engaging into agriculture, citing reference from the Dharmasūtra rules; those Śūdras who worked as craftsmen and artisans are independent people, for these occupations are prescribed for them in case they fail to maintain themselves by service which would imply domestic or agricultural work.³⁵ Even though in ancient past might not directly be inducted into agriculture, the allied services they provided helped the economy to boost with a surplus production. Artisans for example provided the peasantry with the improved implements of agriculture such as ploughshare, spades and others which had direct bearing upon the production agrarian activities. The agrarian expansion would be a myth without large labour pushing it beyond the limiting boundaries. But the question then is; which class could provide such considerable manpower to mobilize large scale agrarian

production of which the bringing of large barren territories under plough was a prerequisite. Was it brāhmaṇa, ksatriya, or the vaisya or the Śūdra itself.

Pragmatic evaluation would reveal that without the direct involvement of Śūdra such a transformation would never have been a major reckoning of the past. The appraisal of the serving character of the Śūdra during the pre-Mauryan times has hence been notably taken into account. R.S. Sharma quotes Gautama who lays down that vaisya and Śūdra should make their gains by labour, making us believe that Śūdra performed the function of primary producer alongwith vaisya peasants to provide material foundation for the growth of society.³⁶As agricultural labourers, Śūdra helped to open to cultivation the thickly wooded areas of Kosala and Magadha and this is for the reason that Kauṭilya advocates the policy of employing Śūdra labour for breaking the virgin soil of new settlements.

In the context of early medieval India, G.C. Chauhan cites the inevitability of employing Śūdra s as agricultural labourers in a period when the economy is primarily centred around the agriculture and the extraction of surplus is the most vivid obsession of the overlord.³⁷In yet another paper on the

socioeconomic position of artisans, he proposes that the Śūdra s were regarded as the collective property of upper three varṇas and they were at the mercy of their masters for the maximum exploitation of labour was the popular slogan for such overlords.³⁸

That all peasants were not Śūdra but a considerable proportion of Śūdra comprised peasantry becomes quite apparent and an established fact in early medieval Indian context. Efforts were made in *Dharmaśāstras* to contain their discontent by making laying down certain rules to absorb them into social mainstream. If some powerful indigenous tribal families or foreign tribes managed to capture power, they came to be recognised and legitimised as ksatriyas and this theory was put forward by Sabarasvami in fourth century, who wrote commentary on the *Mimamsa Sutra* of Jamini. We come across the *antyaaja* meaning the last born and socially degraded and untouchable in early medieval literature.³⁹There goes a myth that *antyaaja* had its origin from the union of ksatriya father and vaisya mother and he was considered as *sat* Śūdra who could perform certain ceremonies and whose food could be accepted.

With the propagation of the system of land grants, numerous tribals were annexed to the brahmanical system and the new peasants came to be considered as Śūdras. Śūdra s who had long served as slaves and domestic servants, artisans and agricultural labourers and early period came to be recognised as peasants in contemporary texts as well as in the accounts of foreigners. Attempts were even made to give it a religious sanction to give it a permanent shape.

R.S. Sharma states that what distinguished early medieval period was the proliferation of caste system, particularly the Śūdra peasant castes proved to be numerous and based on regions, clans and tribes, they were arranged in ritualistic gradation and this phenomenon gave rise to the theory of mixed castes which attributed the origin of numerous peasant castes to the union of existing castes in the reverse order. This was popularised as *pratilomā* order and it was advocated that each mixed caste was either inferior or superior to the other caste.

Sharma argues that though the peasants were exploited more or less in the same manner, they were the victims of the endless divisions caused by the castes based on ritualistic distinctions.⁴⁰ The solidarity against the dominant class of landlords was

still a far cry for the newly created class of peasants. To clear demarcate boundaries between the Śūdra s and vaisya peasants, the idea of *dvija* was preached. The form of servility of the Śūdra s underwent a considerable change right from third century C.E. on account of social crisis but the elements of servitude continued. The theory of origin of mixed caste, or the *pratilomā* order was clearly used to create a hierarchy of degraded Śūdra castes, separated by idea of purity and pollution from one another resultantly making difficult for them to make it a common cause. Such a distinction was manifested in the two forms of Śūdra coming to fore; *sat and asat* Śūdra, *sat* being the pure and upper hirarchical class and *asat* the downgraded impure class of Śūdra.⁴¹ Thus the sanskritization of the social status of Śūdra was a transitory joy which could not outlive few decades let alone the centuries of rigorous subjection and exploitation.

B.N.S.Yadava⁴² opines that Śūdra s comprised the hardcore of peasantry from 600-1200 C.E. though some of them opted for the allied vocations of artisans and craftsmanship. In the light of advent of feudalism, the transformation of Śūdra into peasant class was a very significant process

which was accompanied by the degradation of the status of vaisyas, who lost an important position in the prevalent social structure.

Medhatithi (9th C.E.) in the context of deriding Śūdra to the inferior position to that of *dvija*, the twice born, commenting on text of Manusmriti dictates the terms for the Śūdra miscasting inferiority upon the status of Śūdra; he goes on that it is the duty of the Śūdra that he should reside in the locality of twice born and continue to obtain his living by serving him on whom he is dependent.⁴³

This suggests the restriction on the migration and movement Śūdra from the area ascribed to him mandated by some law or religious sanction. Such a subjection of peasantry could only strengthen the intermediaries who had every right to exploit their potential to the fullest. Moreover a condition was created where manpower could be at their back and call in the times when labour was an indispensable commodity.

The Skanda Purana, a significant literary work of eighth century C.E., provides interesting sidelights of a legendary grant of a number of villages along with 36000 vaisyas as well as Śūdra s four times that number made in times of yore by king Rama to

18000 brāhmaṇas after the performance of certain religious rites. The vaisyas and Śūdra s were evidently intended to serve the donees, who later divided the villages amongst themselves. The services of peasants hence transferred by Rama had previously been enjoyed by him. Associating the obligation of service to the core character of Śūdra, he further declared that a *Śūdra* serving them with humility would become prosperous and attain heaven and failure in doing his duty would ensure his seat in hell.

What distinguished the early medieval period was the proliferation of the caste system; particularly the Śūdra peasant castes proved to be numerous. Based on regions, clans and tribes, they were arranged in some ritualistic gradation. The theory of the origin of these Śūdra castes was known as the theory of mixed castes, which attributed the origins of numerous peasant castes to the union of the existing castes in the reverse order, i.e. in the *pratilomā* order. This theory was conceived in such a manner that almost every mixed caste was either inferior or superior to the other caste. Thus although the peasants were exploited more or less in the same manner, they were the victims of endless division caused by the castes based

on ritualistic distinctions of inferiority or superiority. The element of ritualism tended to distort the reality of exploitation to which the peasants were subjected. Therefore the solidarity of the peasants against the landlords could not be achieved easily.

Stratification in the peasantry of early medieval India was an inevitable phenomenon aided by the various social and economic changes crafting the permanent passage for it. Once we are done with the issue of identification of peasants, to know as to who we are referring to, we must next move on to clearly identify the divisions further occurring within it. Supposedly, if the peasantry is not considered to be a homogenous complex, it is irrelevant to expect homogeneity in its framework. The economic, social or even political parity was never the principal feature of peasantry right from the beginning, even before Śūdra being initiated into this social order. The margins occurred as a matter of fact resulting from the capability of setting themselves free from the shackles of either ideological or ritualistic dominance. If this inhibition could be overcome, with some monastic discipline being readied for such sanctions, even the most degraded sections of brāhamanical or

non brāhamanical society could be absorbed into predominant social order. Hence making us believe that stratification was more a result of yielding to the ideological or religious dominance than being the subject of exploitation in strict sense of terms; at least in the cases when subjects were aware of their inhibitions and had the courage of conviction to shed it off. The literary and other sources have innumerable stances to suggest that such a process was the deliberate attempt of the power wielding authorities to control both the natural and human resources to satisfy their unending want of surplus which resulted in the absolute subjection and control of the peasantry. Thus it becomes important for us to know as to how such process effected transition into another economic phase characterized by stratification, subjugation and subjection of peasantry.

The basis of classification of peasantry is not singular; there are various perspectives following which the peasants can be recognised as various social groups, though identical in function yet discrete in identification. If economic dependence was to be taken as a tool to differentiate peasantries, we would mainly find two

distinctions; the one which is dependent and the other that is independent variable of agrarian economy. The autonomous or independent peasant would obviously imply to the class of landowning peasants whereas there are multiple dimensions of the dependent peasant; they could be landless labourers, sharecroppers, or partial agriculturists or even the bonded labourers attached to a specific plot of land.

If classical Indian literature is anything to go by, the agriculture in India has been the pivotal vocation ensuring the participation, directly or indirectly of all sections of the society since the very beginning. Buddhist texts refer to brāhmaṇas and ksatriyas taking up cultivation as a means of livelihood or the prime mode of subsistence⁴⁴ and the Ramayana goes to the extent of depicting a king, Janaka ploughing the fields with an ease of accustomed ploughman.⁴⁵

The later texts, like the Vrddhaharita (II, 172), show that agriculture was the common profession of all castes and even the brāhmaṇas could adopt it at their convenience.⁴⁶ We are referring to the time when agriculture was still regarded as a noble profession and agriculturists in no way meant the socially and economically

degraded individual and in such a situation majority of the peasants seemingly belong to vaishya and Śūdra social order; exception being made to brāhmaṇa and ksatriya for their engagement with other vocations associated with their social positions; discretion of taking up agriculture being the matter of will or as a last resort to earn a living; Śūdra of course not being maltreated either as commodity or as something that could be donated by a king.

The peasants who owned their land were free from any kind of subordination and subjection. The terms for such self-reliant peasants occur more frequently in literature and less frequently in the Inscriptions. Their economic self reliance was their warrant against any kind of oppression that otherwise hacked the docile peasantry. The term such as *Kuṭumba ksetra* was associated with such fields which were owned by these autonomous peasants. We have repeated reference to terms which might imply the free peasant of early medieval India as *kuṭumbi*, *gahapati* and *kṣetravāmi*. It has been previously discussed that whether *gahapati*⁴⁷ denoted as head of the household, landowning peasant or as the village headman in later texts, he wielded

some considerable authority as regards the matter of land control. The connotations of village headmen or head of the household though do not directly suggest his relation to the land but it is conspicuous that any authority in early medieval period was primarily based on land control; hence it can be inferred that he was in real sense a landowner peasant who could be endowed upon with other titles. Uma Chakaravarti⁴⁸ has contributed a whole chapter in inquiry whether *gahapati* was a peasant producer. She makes it clear how there has been a shift in the way we look at the literal meaning of term *gahapati* in early medieval India from a simple meaning of householder; *gahapati* is associated by her with the seven treasures of a king as the symbol of sovereignty, hence inherent to kingship. She goes on that the reflections from Pāli texts make it evident that the essential aspect of *gahapati* was the possession of property and fundamental association with land.⁴⁹ *Gahapati* by Uma is seen as the person in control of business and control and the one who pays the taxes to king hence being most crucial to him. Such interpretation could raise questions over the *gahapati* being the hardcore landowning peasant but there should not be any

problems in including him into the absentee landlord in the stance of his not being directly associated with agrarian production.

As a result, from the long survey of literary as well as secondary sources of early medieval northern India we can believe that there was a large number of peasants who owned land and cultivated its work of number of peasants who owned land and cultivated its work of tilling-land was done by almost all sections of the Indian society: the brāhmaṇas, kṣatriyas along with the vaiśyas and Śūdras. Largest segment of Śūdras population was engaged in agrarian operations in early medieval northern India, worked as agricultural labourer paid or otherwise. The large number of peasant worked on the fields of big landlords. These peasants had contributed a lot to the prosperity of the country through the ages. It appears that there were a large number of temporary peasants to whom the land was leased out by the owners. It shows that the landless peasants were assigned a subordinate status and seems to be attached to the soil and required to work as per the wishes of the landlords.

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