

Land Grants in Early Medieval India

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Abstract: *Scholars are of the view that land grants started first in outlying and backward areas and then gradually extended to the Ganga valley the hub of Brahmanical culture. The chronological sequence of land grants obtained from various sources is as follows. In the fourth fifth centuries, Andhra, northern Deccan and a major portion of central India began the practice. In the fifth centuries, Bengal and Orissa as also Gujrat and Rajasthan followed. In the seventh-eight centuries, Karnataka and Tamilnadu began the system; and in the ninth century, Kerala; and by the end of 12th century, the practice had spread to almost the entire country with the possible exception of Punjab¹.*

Keywords: Brahmanical Culture, Grants, Smritis and Puranas.

Introduction: Land grants were given to brahmins as gift or *danas* in the belief that such acts would earn religious merit for the giver and destroy his science. It seems this belief was actively propagated by the brahmins to secure their means of livelihood. All the smritis and Puranas of the Post-Gupta period recommend that land grants characters should be engraved on copper plates, while the *dharmasastra* provided the set legal formula systematized for such purposes. While the earlier land grants were made to the vedic priest (*sto srotriya brahman*), from the fifth to the thirteenth century, such grants were made to the temple (*Devadana*) and other non Brahmanical religious institutions as well (*Buddhist sanghas and jain basadis*). Such institution, some of them possessing vast tracts, came to play a significant role in agriculture as expansion and

organisation from the eight century onwards. Likewise, lands granted to officials for services rendered to the state began to be in evidence in the post-Gupta period. Literary works dealing with central India, Rajasthan, Gujrat, Orissa and Bengal in the period between 10th-12th century make references to various kinds of land grants to officials of all kind.

One of the striking features of the land grants made in settled areas was the transfer by the donors of not only villages with various kinds of dues but also with weavers, brewers, cowherds and other subjects as the *Dhenkanal plates of Tribhuvana mahadevi* indicate². This practice was followed not only by the *Bhuma-Kara* rulers but also by their feudatories, the *Bhajas* and *Tungas* during middle age in Orissa. The assignment of land with weavers, brewers, cowherds etc.; indicates that they were attached to the soil as artisans and husband men and in case of oppression by the donees could not seek shelter in other villages. Such grants must have reduced them to the condition of semi-serfs, producing surplus for the benefit of Brahmana grantees. We find a similar provisions in some 12th century *chandella inscriptions*³: Which make over artisan peasants and traders to the grantee. But in Orissa this system obtained on a far larger scale and for a longer period. Here this practice may have been necessary due to the scarcity of working population for running rural economy.

With the expansion in agrarian economy, there developed self sufficient units of production and consumption under the control of Brahman or religious institution like temples, which had

little to do without side trade. Essentials like salt, iron tools etc., were obtained from merchants, no doubt, but in general there was a decline in trade. This picture certainly true for the period, say 400-800 A. D., underwent a change in the next five centuries. The rapid increase in agrarian settlements and growth in local markets led to the need for regular exchanges, which in turn led to the re-emergence of organized commerce. All this led to a change in the pattern of the land ownership towards the close of the early medieval period. Merchants and economically well off artisans like weavers, etc., started to acquire and made gifts of lands. For instances in south Karnataka a group of weaver known as Jagati kottali and the community of oil-exPELLERS, tell gas were active participants in agriculture the first group was repeatedly referred to as excavators of tanks and promoters of gardens and orchards⁴.

As is to be expected this non-homogeneous rural landscape, where the majority were land less or without any control over land, was not entirely free of tension. The dependent peasants, sharecroppers, labours, etc., the ranks of karshaka, kshetrika, halika, ardhika and so on, without any land holding, occasionally expressed their resentment in protests against the stratified landed intermediaries like Brahmanas, bhogpati and so on. The damara revolts in Kashmir, rebellion of the Kaivartyas in the reign of Rampala in Bengal, acts of self-immolation in situations of encroachment on land in Tamilnadu, appropriations of donated lands by Shudrajs in the Pandya country are instances of the anger against the new landed intermediaries⁵.

Sometimes we come across revenue paying grants called Karasuasana in our records. A copper plate charter⁶ of the Somavamusi king Mahuabhgva Gupta! Janamajaya which records a Kara ½ Sauna (a revenue paying grant and not a revenue free gift) has the following interesting

endorsement. The annual rent of the village granted to some Brahmana by the Somava s II skin was thus fixed at five palata of ruppya. The practice that religion beneficiaries were required to pay some dues to the donors did not prevails in northern India and seems to have been typical of Orissa. Another such example is furnished by the Talchar copper pate inscription of Gayhadatu !Enga which mention the grants of a village in favour of three Brahmanas.

Different views have been put forward on the nature and character of early medieval agrarian economy. One school views it as a manifestation of feudal economy, while the other claims it to be a peasant state and society. The first group says that a subject and immobile peasantry functioning in relatively self sufficient village buttressed by the bonds of the Varna system was the marked feature of the agrarian economy during the period 800-1300A.D. According to first group, the emergence of hierarchical landed intermediaries resulted in gross unequal distribution of wealth, power, land and its produce. Forced labour, originally a prerogative of the state, was now used by land grant beneficiaries, even the artisan were not spared. In the chola inscription there are about one hundred references to such practices. The superior rights of the landed class meant deprivation of the peasants' rights. This, along with increased taxation, coercion and indebtedness reduced the peasants to a pathetic state. The surplus was extracted by various methods. It was a relatively closed village economy. The land grant charters transferred the artisans and peasants of the villages to the done thereby ensuring control over them by beneficiaries.

Some scholars are of the opinion that regionalism, instability and chaos in the political and administrative structure of India in the early medieval period were a direct consequence of the

land prevailing at that time. It was customary in those days to give land to the military and the government officers as a part of their remuneration. Also, there was the practice of granting land to samantas, who, in return provided the king with troops and money. The samantas enjoyed complete autonomy and independence in matters connected with the land given to them. For that tract of land, the administration was with him and him only, even to the extent of dispensing justice. Slaves, serfs forced labour cultivated it and the income there from went to his coffers. All that he was required to do was to provide military service and to pay a fixed amount to the king. Community had a major role to play in land disputes and sales, mediation by jati (Kinsmen) and evidence of cultivators, artisan and even hunter were enjoined in law text. It was for this reason of communal welfare priest were gifted lands so as to enable the temple to function in the interest of the community.

It would appear that the kings were the first to deprive the community of its lands rights; the previously quoted instance from Aitareya Brahmana⁷ points so that. As a representative of the community, he gradually assumed the communal rights on land. Kautilya proposed king's control over agriculture, but no absolute ownership. Manu was the first to refer to the king's supreme power over earth⁸ and Katyayana surpassed them all by declaring the king Bhusavamin (Owner of the earth). That he got his rights over the soil as the first representative of the community, the king forgot conveniently, he started giving land to secure religious merit for himself and his ancestors. He became a private land owner. Manu's provision that the owner loses legal title if someone is in possession of a property for ten years was changed to twenty years by Yajnavalkya, to sixty year by Vishnu, Narad and Brishaspati. The mitaksara provision of hundred

years in the eleventh century made the process of establishing the rights of possessors very difficult indeed, almost impossible for temporary peasants cultivating a piece of land. In this way, the laws helped the landlords to continue their hold over the lands by making the proprietary rights of tenants difficult. The owner had the right to change his tenant and the laws stressed the obligation of the tenant to pay even when they neglected cultivation.

Conclusion: During the eleventh and twelfth century, as also in the two centuries preceding the Turkish conquest a survey has shown, there was an increasing trend throughout the country of granting villages to various people, thereby sapping the country of its inherent vitality. Never before was land donated to secular and religious beneficiaries on such a scale; never before were agrarian and communal rights undermined by lands grants so widely; never before was the peasantry subjected to so many taxes and so much sub in foundation; never before were services, high and low, rewarded by land grants in such numbers as now; and finally never before were revenues from trade and industry converted into so many grants⁹.

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