
UNIT 12 NATURE OF STRATIFICATION AND REGIONAL PROFILES OF AGRARIAN SOCIETY IN EARLY MEDIEVAL NORTH INDIA, C. AD 550 - C. AD 1300

Structure

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12.1 INTRODUCTION

Early Indian society was anything but homogeneous. There were all kinds of differences among the people, and this differentiation was a matter of stratification as well. Caste is a well-known example: There were a number of castes in any given region, which were hierarchically organised, no two different castes being equal to each other. There was, in other words, caste-based stratification. There were other patterns of stratification also. We shall in this Unit be concerned with stratification based on the livelihood of people in agrarian society.

Land was by far the most important resource in early medieval North India, as indeed in all pre-industrial food-producing societies. The overwhelming majority lived off agriculture; as comparative evidence suggests, up to ninety per cent and more of the total population could have been engaged in agriculture, of which fishing and animal husbandry were important subsidiary parts. Stratification in this agrarian society was based on unequal distribution of land and its products. There were important divisions – based on unequal division of land – among the masses engaged in agrarian production, and there was probably even greater stratification (among a much smaller number) based on unequal distribution of surpluses extracted from the producers. A part of those surpluses was claimed on the basis of landownership by landlords (landowners who did no cultivation themselves) and rich peasants (peasants who owned so much land that they cultivated only a part of it, getting the rest cultivated by others). However, to all appearances the major player was the state with its demands on land, its produce as well as the labour-power of the producers.

As we noted in the previous Unit, these matters of agrarian relations have received a fair amount of attention from scholars. For the agrarian societies of the various regions of North India, sizeable information has been gathered from hundreds of land-grant inscriptions. Not all aspects of agrarian stratification, however, have been

equally illumined. Most of the available information relates to the creation of landlords. Epigraphic data from the *various regions* are analysed to bring out a *common* process of the transformation of agrarian society through the creation of 'landed intermediaries'. But there have also been attempts to underline the presence of some other agrarian groups and some other patterns of stratification than land-grant-induced ones. Region- and locality-specific data for these other groups too come almost entirely from those very land-grant inscriptions that attest to the creation of landed intermediaries. The result has been a richer knowledge of agrarian relations for those areas and periods of early medieval North India for which we have the land-grant inscriptions.

Accordingly, non-availability of these inscriptions has meant gaps in our knowledge of the agrarian structure. Thus, for the entire stretch of early medieval Punjab and for nearly four hundred years of post-Gupta and pre-Paramara Malwa region – agriculturally the most extensively cultivated area of Central India, even more so for the early historical period– we remain more or less in the dark about the agrarian make-up because of the near absence of land-grant inscriptions from these regions. Except for the *Rajatarangini*, literary sources have so far not been tapped for the reconstruction of regional agrarian structures.

There have also been significant differences of opinion regarding the overall character of agrarian stratification in early medieval India; these form the subject-matter of the Feudalism Debate about which you have read in detail separately in Unit 10.

Ironically, an aspect on the importance of which scholars are in perfect agreement and equally emphatic, the least work has been done. Historians of all persuasions have long been persuaded, quite rightly, of the importance of the regional context for a proper understanding of early medieval India. Regional profiles of early medieval North India, however, remain a desideratum even for the themes and periods where the possibility was clearly recognised. Thus, in 1965, R.S. Sharma stated: 'A thorough regional survey of villages granted to priests, temples, vassals and officials in Northern India *can be attempted* on the basis of the available land charters in the two centuries preceding the Turkish conquest...' (Sharma, 1965, p.210, emphasis added). No such attempt has been made till date, as you can see by going through the select readings for this Unit and the references therein.

We are far better informed about the uniformity of agrarian structures across regions than about the differences between the regional agrarian economies. Amidst the wealth of locality-specific details (there is hardly an epigraphic datum without an accurate spatial reference), and despite some regional studies (such as those by B.D. Chattopadhyaya and by Marlene Njammasch), regional specificities of agrarian stratification – based on critical comparisons of features specific to particular regions – do not really inform the sketches of the agrarian landscape of early medieval North India.

Our awareness of the regional variegation of the agrarian picture has thus failed to rise much above the programmatic level. It is not easy to say why. Perhaps there was a certain flagging of interest in the issue of agrarian stratification. It was brought back into sharp focus by the Feudalism Debate, where many a crucial point was underlined and clarified, such as the distinction between forced labour and labour rent. [If peasants worked for certain days in a week or month on the landlord's land in lieu of land given to them, they were paying him rent in labour. 'Forced labour' is unpaid and compulsory labour service by people for their political masters, whether the king or his subordinates.] For some front-ranking and many front-runner historians of early India, however, it produced a kind of deadlock, so much so that Hermann Kulke omitted the theme of

early medieval agrarian history altogether in his general history of India, while dwelling on early medieval political structures. Others plunged enthusiastically into all the controversies – real and putative – of early medieval India (trade, coinage, urbanism, importance of ‘brahmanic settlements’, feudal polity), but simply bypassed the debate in their accounts of agrarian history (B.P. Sahu, 1997; Ranabir Chakravarti, 2000). In retrospect, it seems difficult to escape the conclusion that investigations into early medieval agrarian structure have for some time been less than assiduous.

12.2 LANDOWNERSHIP

The subject of landownership in early India has often been debated, with some historians arguing for royal ownership of land, others for individual or private ownership, and yet others for communal ownership. For each of these positions, it is possible to find clear-cut evidence in the sources. For instance, one may refer to Xuan Zang’s (AD 7th century) testimony for early medieval India to argue that ‘the state in India was held at this time, virtually, if not legally, to be the owner of the soil’ (U.N. Ghoshal, 1929, p. 303). It is equally possible to contest the truth of each such evidence, to assert, for instance, that Xuan Zang did not judge the situation correctly in India, having being misled by his Chinese background (Ghoshal, 1929).

However, this confusion of evidence and thus of interpretation is not insoluble. It is not correct to ask whether the state or the individual/groups owned land, because in fact both ‘owned’ land concurrently, but differently. As explained by P.V. Kane in his monumental work *History of Dharmasastra*, ‘the state was deemed to be the owner of all lands as a general proposition’, but ‘individuals and groups that had cultivated lands in their possession were regarded principally as owners thereof subject to the liability to pay land tax and the right of the state to sell land for non-payment of tax’.

It was thus a case of coextensive rights. In fact, before Kane’s magisterial survey of the question, this had been realised by a long line of distinguished scholars, like Wilks, Dubois, Elphinstone, Patton, Chamier and Wilson. We have put the word ‘owned’ in inverted commas above because of a peculiarity of the concept of property (*svatva*) in early India, whereby all kinds of rights in land could be recognised in different contexts as constituting ‘property’, even the rights of sub-mortgagee. Thus, land could be seen variously as the *svatva* of the king or of the individual or of the latter’s tenant-farmers and so on. Failure to recognise this peculiarity of usage has probably been the other main reason for the above-mentioned debate on ownership, apart from the non-appreciation of concurrence of rights.

Among these multiple ‘owners’, nevertheless, one was clearly understood to be *the owner* with overriding rights. These were, as Kane puts it, the ‘individuals and groups that had cultivated lands in their possession’ – i.e., the peasant masses and landlords – who ‘were regarded *principally* as owners’. They held the title (*agama*, literally ‘lawful acquisition’) to their land, and came to be called *mulasvamins* – as distinct from the other *svamins* – or *bhaumikas*, those to whom the *bhumi* or land belonged. It was these people who were liable to pay revenue on the land, decided on the mode of its cultivation, could gift the whole or a part of it, and whose children would inherit it with all its incidents. (In law ‘incidents’ are privileges, burdens or rights associated with a piece of property.)

This ownership of land by the subjects is not negated by terms like *bhupati*, ‘lord of the earth’; and *bhusvamin*, ‘owner of the land’ for the king. These terms referred to the distinct claims of the state. These claims did not infringe on the rights of the

landowners of the realm, making them tenants at will, just as the other set of terms for the king, such as *narapati*, 'lord of men', did not take away the freedom of the subjects, making them slaves.

12.3 THE STATE'S CLAIMS ON AGRARIAN SOCIETY

To be sure, terms like *bhupati* and *narapati* do imply certain claims of the state on the land and the people. Details of these claims are, in fact, quite well-known in plenty from the legal and epigraphic literature. However, the debate over royal versus individual ownership of land has, especially in the context of the debate over early medieval agrarian structure, tended to obscure the precise nature of these claims. Advocacy of royal ownership has meant a near wholesale denial of peasant rights in land; counterclaims of individual ownership have confined the state's role to mere collection of its share of the produce as taxes.

Far from being a passive recipient of revenues, the state maintained a vigorous presence in agrarian society with a view to exploiting to the full all its claims. It began with the assessment, i.e., valuation of land for the purpose of taxation. Depending on the quality of the arable, the state *expected* a certain yield from every field, and taxed it accordingly. When we see, for instance, that a piece of land being granted in ninth century Assam was stated to be worth 2000 measures of paddy, it is clear that the land had been so assessed by the state. The law books provide for fines for the landowners if they do not properly cultivate the land, producing less than what they were expected to do, and thus causing a loss to the treasury. Neglect of cultivation could in fact lead after a time to the loss of title. In a very real sense the land belonged to the state.

Individuals (and collectivities) thus held land on condition of keeping it productive to a stipulated degree. All other territory was under the direct control of the king, who would of course be interested in making it worth his while in some way or the other. This was done mostly by encouraging people to colonise it under private titles, as we noted in the previous Unit, but the early medieval state did manage a bit of it itself, as we shall see presently.

In virtue of his general lordship of the entire territory, of being a *bhupati*, the king claimed a share of all kinds of produce on his land (including forest wealth), not just of the principal crops. Fruits, roots, fuel, vegetables, oil, ghee, everything that grew on, beneath and above his land: nothing could escape, in principle, state demand.

In virtue of the king also being a *narapati*, the state made two more sets of demands, exercising general lordship over the subjects, all of whom were subject to obedience in defined terms, which were generally incorporated among the legal (*shastric*) norms. One was in the form of fines in default of good conduct. The second set of demands comprised *generalised* labour service, as distinct from the labour tax levied from *specific* segments of population, especially the artisans.

As an adage in an inscription put it, the king was enjoined not to confiscate the land properly maintained (*paripalitam*) by good or honest people (*sadbhih*). You already have an idea of what is meant by 'proper maintenance' of land. But people had also to be 'good'/'honest'. If they were found to be deviating from proper behaviour, the state would not generally take back the land; it would fine them for misconduct. These fines were an important means of income to the state as it went about regulating the social order. In fact, the word *danda* came to mean both fine and punishment in

Sanskrit, as it continues to do in Hindi and other Indic languages. A common phrase in early medieval state records is *danda-dashaparadha*, referring to punishment through fines for ‘ten offences’. These stand not so much for some ten specific crimes, but for ten categories of them as seen in the legal literature, which are nearly all-encompassing in scope; the phrase *danda-dashaparadha* thus seems to stand for judicial fines in general. A small, but telling sample of them may be seen in the following extract from a charter, dated AD 592, of a Maitraka ruler of Gujarat:

For knocking (another person) down and dragging (him or her) along, or for cutting an ear, the fine is Rupaka 27. For verbal injury or injury by violence (beating), Rupaka 6¼ as fine. If (permanent) scars are visible (as a result of the beating), Rupaka 48.

Epigraphia India, Vol. 30, pp. 163-81, D.D. Kosambi’s translation.

[*Rupaka* denoted a type of silver coin]

By virtue of its lordship over the people, the state also arrogated to itself the right to demand service from them in a variety of ways. This forced labour was extracted everywhere, and was commonly known as *vishti* or *pida*. In Kashmir, it was called *bharodhi* (or *rudhabharodhi* in its intensified form); *utkhetana* in Assam had probably the same import. There could be several types of forced labour depending on the nature of the job it was needed for. As the term *bharodhi* suggests, forced labour in Kashmir was in the form of carriage of loads, but even there Kalhana could distinguish thirteen types of it. Inscriptions generally refer to all (*sarva*) kinds of forced labour or forced labour as per the occasion (*utpadyamana*), but those from Nepal specify several types, an interesting (and intelligible) instance being *bhotta-vishti*, i.e., *vishti* involving carrying goods to Tibet. Care was taken about extraction of forced labour from the surplus labour-time of the producing masses so as not to disturb the revenue-yielding production processes, such as sowing the seeds or harvesting the crops.

12.4 THE STATE AND STRATIFICATION – 1

The resources that were drawn off the rural world by the state to non-rural areas made the countryside so much the poorer; in themselves, they would not have affected the nature of stratification in agrarian society. However, if taxation was regressive – as it seems to have been – it could not but have deepened the fissures. Regressive taxation means that the burden of state demands was shared unequally, more by the less privileged majority than by the well-to-do strata. As you shall see in your Unit on early medieval polities, local notables such as *mahattaras* and *pattakilas* were routinely associated with state administration; through this direct involvement and general influence, they would have tried, with success, to manipulate the incidence of taxes in their own favour.

Then there were people and institutions whose land was officially either exempt from taxation or taxed at a concessional rate. Numerous records attest to the land of temples and of brahmanas as exempt from taxation (*deva-brahmana-bhukti-varjjam*). This was a special privilege, which was not available to the general run of temples and brahmanas. In fact, there was a category of land grant called *kara-shasana* where tax obligations continued, if at concessional rates. Elite brahmanas were called *brahmanottara*, and epigraphic evidence suggests that they enjoyed tax exemptions. Two categories of tax-free land called *brahmottara* and *devottara* respectively survived well into modern times, *brahmottara* obviously being a contraction of *brahmanottara* (in the sense of ‘the land of a *brahmanottara*’).

As distinct from the removal of a part of the state shares from the village was the consumption of the remaining parts in the countryside itself. A combination of circumstances favoured it. There was the dispersal of the armed forces and other state personnel over the realm, and it was only logical that they be paid out of the state proceeds of the locality. Then there were a large number of village resources, e.g., vegetables, milk, fish, etc., for each of which the state demanded its pound of flesh, for which there was hardly a market generally to commute them into cash payments, and most of which, being perishable and/or cumbersome, presented almost insurmountable problems of long-term storage and long-distance carriage. Finally, the appurtenances of war and government called for regular mobilisation of human labour for non-productive purposes, for which the people had to find time without leaving their station.

As the omnipresent phrase '*a-chata-bhata-praveshya*' – 'not to be entered by *chatas* and *bhatas*' – in the records of the period, meaning a great privilege, shows, their entry meant a major burden for the villagers. *Chatas* and *bhatas* were two categories of state functionaries, and it is usually supposed that the phrase referred to only these two types. However, as the combined testimony of two copper-plate inscriptions of Somavamshi kings from Sonpur in Orissa makes it clear, the combination *chata-bhata* stood for officialdom in general. These two records have an identical format, in one of which state functionaries are called by the familiar term *raja-pad-opajivins* but in the other 'of *chata-bhata Jati*' (*chata-bhata-jatiyan*, *Epigraphia Indica*, XI, No. 8, A, text lines 7-8; B, text line 9). In the same vein is the reference to the entry of '*chatas et cetera*' being forbidden (*nishiddha-chat-di-pravesha*) in Chandella charters, as a consequence of which the king, *rajapurushas*, *chatas* and others were to forego their perquisites or dues (*abhavya*) from the area in question.

The significant presence of the state personnel in the villages is seen in many other ways. There is that pointed expression in the Maitraka and Rashtrakuta charters – *rajakiyanam ahasta-prakshepaniya* (not a finger [literally "hand"] to be lifted at by the royal officers) – which, in its unambiguity of intent and clarity of direction, is more than matched by the following graphic detail in an Assam inscription:

... the land is not to be entered by a number of 'oppressors', comprising, among others, the queen, the royal princes, the royal favourites, the eunuchs, the persons in charge of corralling of elephants and mooring of boats, the officers tracking thieves as well as those charged with the *uparikara* tax and with the *utkhetana* impost.
(U.N. Ghoshal, 1929, p. 329)

Two points may be noted. The reference is to a plot of land, not a village, which makes it clear that 'entry' does not mean trespass but denotes the obligation to serve the visiting 'oppressor'. Second, these obligations, e.g. the obligation to maintain an elephant or two, implied not only deliveries in kind but also labour service. A late commentary on the *Mahabharata* makes matters explicit by likening the king, who foists his elephants on his subjects, to the cuckoo; significantly, this act is called an instance of *vishti* – the obligation to maintain royal elephants belonged more to the category of labour service than to payments in kind.

A crucial feature of stratification in the agrarian society was thus a cleavage between what may be called the state class and the rural populace. [By 'state class' is meant social groups which made up the state apparatus.] It also seems reasonably clear that the presence of this state class bore heavily but unequally on the agrarian classes. It was the common peasantry that bore the brunt of the demands of the officials in

the neighbourhood. For instance, only those brahmanas who were considered no different from the shudras in status were generally seen fit for doing forced labour. In hilly regions like Kashmir and Nepal, it is true, that in principle no one, not even brahmanas, were exempt from it; it was only in lieu of huge wealth and in face of hunger strike that the Kashmir king could exempt a few priests from it. However, as references to fines for not doing work in both the regions show, the obligation to perform *vishti* or *rudhabharodhi* could always be bought off by those who had the wherewithal. The presence of the state class thus served to accentuate the already existing divisions in the agrarian society.

A very small number of references to royal (*rajakiya*) land in the inscriptions show that the government at times owned land and got it cultivated as private landowners did. This was qualitatively different from extracting revenue from the people. This role of the state is also seen in a ninth-century text from Bengal, the *Devi Purana*, which 'recommends that ... the ruler should resort to direct cultivation in the adjacent lower regions of the fort and, for this purpose, he should make the residents of the neighbouring villages (*khetakas*) render service (*sevane karyah*) to him' (Yadava, 1981, p. 264). In Kashmir where the state is known to have held a monopoly of the high-value crop saffron, such a role of the state would have been conspicuous.

A certain interpretation of a category of land-grant inscriptions, put forward by noted scholars such as V.V. Mirashi and Lallanji Gopal, would paint a far more extensive picture of royal farms in early medieval India. A sizeable number of plots of land *held by individuals* are known to have been *donated by the king*. In the same fashion the king is seen to be giving away irrigation resources in quite a few of other instances. How could the king give away what he did not own and possess? On this reasoning, all this is taken to constitute evidence for state-managed agriculture, with the individuals interpreted as temporary tenants having no rights over the land. This interpretation, however, is based on the assumption of either royal or individual ownership of land in exclusive terms. There are rival interpretations of the same evidence based on the same assumption; D.C. Sircar, for instance, thinks that the king purchased the land from the individual holding it before making a pious gift of it. In fact, there is no internal evidence at all for the act of purchase, nor for the individuals being temporary tenants.

The issue has been clouded by the assumption of either royal or individual ownership of land, which we have already found to be rather unhelpful. Once this assumption is discarded and other relevant pieces of evidence brought in, it becomes clear, that in that these were generally instances of co-extensive rights in land. What the king was giving away as *bhumida* ('the giver of land') was state claims over the land owned by the peasants, except in such cases as the one seen in the Jesar Plate of Maitraka king Shiladitya I, when a piece of land was of a missing (*utsanna*) peasant and so was exclusively state property at the time of the grant.

These alienations of revenue and other rights over the land and person of the agrarian classes were the most important way in which the state altered the character of agrarian society in early medieval India. These are considered in the next Section.

12.5 THE STATE AND STRATIFICATION – 2

The land grant inscriptions from North India that are known to us create an unmistakable impression that the vast majority of them relate to transfer of state claims to religious personnel and institutions. In order to have a precise idea of how

these grants affected the agrarian structure, we have to take into account first the details of the claims being granted and then the terms on which these were transferred. Once the structural significance of these grants is thus clarified, further issues of relevance – including questions of scale – may be discussed.

The details of the transfer in these hundreds of records are of course not recounted in a uniform manner all over throughout. The same kind of obligations could be expressed differently, and not all state claims appear in all the records. For instance, *bhaga* occurs as a fairly common name for the principal land-tax, i.e., one on the major produce, but *dani* and *udranga* (which occurs among other places in the Madhuban inscription of Harshavardhana from Uttar Pradesh) were its important variants. The difference in the format of grants between the charters of different kingdoms could be considerable. One major contrast was noted by R.S. Sharma:

Under the Palas and Pratiharas all agrarian rights such as the use of pasture grounds, fruit trees, reservoirs of water, bushes and thickets, forests, barren land, low land, land under occasional flood, etc. were transferred to the donees.

Under the Rashtrakutas, however, except for the rows of trees ..., which too are mentioned in later grants, no other village resources were specifically transferred to the donees. (Sharma, 1980, p. 94)

Even Sharma, who reads much significance in the enumeration of these resources, finds it difficult to accept that the contrast stands for actual differences in the state of affairs in the respective kingdoms. Variations are seen in fact among the charters of single regions or dynasties as well, not just between them. The details on the ‘oppressors’ of the village in the Assam grant already quoted, for instance, are generally missing from the other grants in the region; surely, however, this does not entitle us to infer the absence of these ‘oppressors’ elsewhere in the realm. A study of the records of the Paramaras of Malwa (AD 9 – 13th centuries) has brought out more than nine ways of enumerating the resources that were granted. Analysis shows that, despite the differences in enumeration, in each case all that the state had been asking for so far was being made over to the donee(s).

This kind of analysis remains to be extended to the records of other kingdoms. Yet there are several indications that what we see in the post-Gupta inscriptions are so many different ways of making a common point, viz., the state was handing over to the donees all the claims in their numerous specific details and caveats that it had exercised so far over the area being granted. This common point does not mean of course unvarying uniformity. The point rather is that both uniformity and variation require to be demonstrated through textual and contextual analyses of the sources rather than by taking them at face value.

Variations in some specific details, both within and across regions, are relatively easier to detect. To take an obvious example, step-wells (*vapis*) and water-wheels (*araghattas*) do not occur among the taxable resources of Eastern India, as is only to be expected. Then there are a number of terms, which are known to have been names of taxes or taxable resources, but their precise import eludes us, so specific they were to their time and place. One such term is *mayuta* that occurs in the tenth century Rajor inscription from Alwar region in Rajasthan. F. Kielhorn, the editor of the record, pointed out, there is no mistaking the term ‘as the inscription is written and engraved very carefully’. However, the term has been wrongly spelt by Ghoshal and, following him, by Sircar, and also wrongly interpreted as equivalent to *bhoga*

(in fact *bhoga* and *mayuta* occur as twin elements of the dual expression *bhoga-mayut-aday-abhyam* in the record).

It is also possible to discern variations over time and space in the mode of making demands, as well as in the overall burden of taxation. In some early records from Orissa and from Western India, the principal taxes were demanded in cash and a certain trend in this direction may also be seen in Bengal in the later centuries of our period. This remained of course a limited phenomenon. There is a certain impression among historians that the number of imposts increased in a marked way through the early medieval centuries, making for heavier taxation. This impression of the increasing number of taxes, however, is based on arbitrary selection of a very small number of records. It needs to be thoroughly verified first and then compared with that formidable benchmark of taxation in the earlier period, i.e., the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, where, to quote Kosambi, 'fines [alone] take up nine full columns of the index to Shamasastri's English translation' (Kosambi, 1975, p. 216). The point, however, is that even establishing an increase in the *number* of imposts may not be decisive on the case for higher taxation. After all, at the end of the day as it were, the Delhi Sultanate, with its much shorter list, was levying no less. It would not do to compare numbers alone *over* different states; within any given kingdom, it would of course do.

We may consider a different set of indicators in the sources, which, taken together, point to the ever-increasing incidence of taxation through our period. The aforementioned Rajor inscription mentions customary (*uchita*) and non-customary (*anuchita*) taxes; the division implies the addition of new taxes to earlier ones. (Sharma takes these to mean 'proper' and 'improper' taxes, but this would suggest that the king was declaring his own taxation to be unjust, at least in part, in the act of making a pious donation – an unlikely scenario). A general tendency for taxes to increase may also be detected in a special praise for the founder king, Mularaja, of the Chaulukyas, who dislodged the Chapas of Gujarat. In a poetic pun on the word *bali*, he was credited with having 'fettered' *bali*, that is taxes, and so was like the god Vishnu who, in his Vamana incarnation, had restrained the demon king Bali. Yet the Chaulukyas themselves carried out later a fresh assessment (*nava-nidhana*), unfettering the *bali*! Finally, we have the testimony of Kalhana, who recounts in detail how king Harsha of Kashmir enhanced taxes to an unspeakably harsh extent.

There are, thus, fair grounds for supposing a tendency to increasing burden of state claims. But it does not seem that this was generally effected via land grants, by authorising the donee through grant of arbitrary powers to fleece the people as he wished. The state made over its own rights to the donees, who were authorised to exercise precisely those – no more, no less. This is *positively* shown (as distinct from being inferred from negative evidence) by phrases such as *yathadiyamana*: people were enjoined to pay as they had been paying so far. The state claims being transferred included of course the possibility of additional income in future, such as by getting fallow land cultivated. To quote the Rajor inscription again, it refers to *nibaddha* income as well as one that was not so (*anibaddha*). *Nibaddha* means 'registered', and so seems to stand for surveyed and assessed sources of income; the remaining ones would be *anibaddha*. Such additions were clearly not the same thing as the donee being empowered to increase the rate of taxation.

In accordance with the above, there is hardly any indication in the charters that the communal agrarian rights of the people were dented *for the first time* by the royal grants. Once it is seen that the people were asked to pay to the donees what they

had so far been paying to the state, and that the taxable resources included pastures, ponds, forests, fisheries and the like, it follows that these resources were already subject to taxation in the particular state. Contrary to what is argued sometimes, they were not the communally controlled resources over which the said state had laid no claims itself but, in the act of transferring them, made them subject in future to levies by the donees.

Two major patterns in the occurrence of certain key terms have been discovered by Sharma, which need to be noted and accounted for. One is that *vishti* or forced labour 'practically disappears in the records of the Paramaras, the Chaulukyas and the Chahamanas. Evidently, the practice had died out in their dominions. Similarly, the Gahadavala and Chandella records do not mention forced labour' (Sharma, 1980, p. 196). Second, in a few early charters residents are also mentioned along with the land or the village being granted. The residents are supposed to have been deprived of their freedom of mobility by such acts of grant which multiply in the later period. Accordingly, the grants which do not refer to the peasants and other residents in this fashion did not tie them to the land. For instance, 'Epigraphic records from Bengal do not refer to the transfer of peasants to the donees down to the end of the twelfth century. But later the practice spread to this part of the country as well'. (Sharma, 1980, p. 188. However, Sharma provides one mid-eleventh century instance of such a transfer from Bengal region in the preceding paragraph).

Some authorities feel uneasy about the first pattern without being able to modify it. The second pattern, i.e., reference to the residents being mentioned in the description of the grant, however, has been seen by the critics as having no special significance at all, being just one more way of making mere revenue grants. The inclusion of the residents among the resources being transferred along with the land, it is argued, placed them under no other obligation or restraint than payment of taxes to the donees. This difference of opinion, you should note, is over the inscriptions where the residents (or their houses) are mentioned *as part of the description* of the land/village being granted. There are a handful of records from Western India, where a few peasants themselves – as a category of their own – figure as items of grant. There is no controversy regarding the dependent status of these peasants, to persons of similar status references being found in the literary sources too.

In our view, these patterns, in order to be properly understood, requires fuller source criticism as well as a wider perspective on state demands (which were hardly, if ever, merely of revenue, bereft of further claims). If we bear in mind the three major components of the demands (taxes, fines, and generalised labour service), and take into account the totality of the evidence – evidence of the entire structure of any given record, not just of some terms in it, and of all the available records, not just of a few, – we shall see a confirmation of the point we made earlier: The same three types of state demands were being transferred everywhere (allowing for variations *within* each type). People were liable to perform labour service and were subject to the commands of the donees, even where the particular terms in question are not found. The same implications were present in different ways when *vishti* does not occur, and similarly, even where the residents were not enumerated among the resources that went with the land, other considerations show that they did not become exempt from the authority of the donees. All this may be seen in the following discussion of *all* the known land-grant inscriptions of the Chandellas as put together in *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol. VII, part 3.

The Chandella charters have been noted, as already seen, for the absence of any reference to *vishti* as well as for the inclusion of the residents – ‘artisans, peasants, merchants’ (*karu-karshaka-vanij*) – among the resources being transferred along with the land. They have also been noted for lengthy lists of resources: ‘The Chandella charters present the most elaborate list of the village and its products made over the donees’ (Sharma, 1980, p. 183). However, we find that although all the land-grant records of the Chandellas have the same format, only two records refer to the transfer of the residents; the rest do not (one of these two has *karukapamkavanij*, which is sometimes interpreted as *karu-kapamka-vanij* or as *karuka-pamkavanij*, but is obviously a mistake, as Sharma pointed out, for *karu-karshaka-vanij*). Further, we see much variation in the elaboration of the details of the grant. In one record, there is only one phrase on the village resources (*simatrna-kashthako-paryanta*). In some, people are asked to pay, very briefly, ‘*bhaga, bhoga, et cetera*’ (*bhaga-bhog-adika*), in others, *pashu-hiranya-kara-shulka* is added before the ‘et cetera’, and so on. We would not have known whether the Chandella kings donated income from fines too, but for two records which have *dandadaya* in the list and, besides, refer to the twofold division of the imposts as customary (*uchita*) and non-customary (*anuchita*).

If we go by the variations alone, we will have to conclude that apart from the two exceptions, the rest of the residents in the donated villages were free to stay or move as they liked, that generally the donees did not have the right to levy fines from the people, including even those in the two villages where they were transferred along with the land, that the imposition of non-customary taxation was an exception rather than the rule, and so on. But if we look at the overall structure of the records and take into account the other terms and phrases, it becomes reasonably clear that we will have to conclude differently. The ‘et cetera’ in ‘*bhaga, bhoga, et cetera*’ of one Chandella record included the imposts specified in the other Chandella records such as fines, *pashu-hiranya-kara-shulka* as well the other taxes *which might have been in force but are not known from the available evidence* which, incidentally, gives us no clue to the nature of division between customary and non-customary taxes. When the sum-total of all state claims (*nihshesh-adaya*) was being gifted it did not matter if the resources were listed in full or part. If people were asked to be attentive to (*shravana*) and comply with (*vidheya*) the command (*ajna*) of the donee things did not change materially due to the non-mention of the residents in the description of the grant. People transferred with the land or placed at the donee’s command could not possibly have refused him service. And if we know of no early Indian state which did not demand generalised labour services from its subjects, we are not entitled to assume the absence of the practice in the Chandella state.

The terms on which the state claims were transferred to the religious personnel and institutions created a form of agrarian property. The grants were made in perpetuity, ‘as long as the moon and the sun endure’ as the phrase went. This was typically done by the ritual of libation of water. The adage that we have already alluded to reads in full as follows:

**adbhir = dattam tribhir = bhuktam sadbhis = ca paripalitam |
etani na nivartante purva-rajakrtani ca ||**

(Translation) ‘(land) granted with libation of water, enjoyed by three (generations), properly maintained by good people, and granted by previous rulers – these are not to be confiscated (by the state)’.

The reference to grants made by previous kings indicates that the first item refers to grants made by the reigning king. The second category may be understood in terms of the distinction between *bhuj* (possession/enjoyment) and *agama* (title); it refers to the early *Smṛiti* view that three generations of enjoyment give the title to the land (the period was to be hugely extended in later legal literature). The third category regarding 'proper maintenance' and 'good people' has already been discussed.

The importance of this adage lies in showing the emergence of religious land grants as a recognised form of agrarian property, on a par with the other, older forms. Grant with 'libation of water' represents this form here, but in the inscriptions it is underlined in more than one way. In the records of the Kalachuris of Tripuri, 'libation of water' is in fact usually *replaced* by *shasanatvena*, 'by *shasanatva*', translated somewhat unsatisfactorily as 'by means of a grant'. More generally, aside from the reference to the libation, the property rights were described in terms of rights to 'enjoy the land, cultivate it, get it cultivated, and assign it': The donee was to exercise these rights in the same ways as the state had done so far, which also entails that the donee was to respect the extant agrarian rights of the people as the state had done so far. The clearest statement on the granted land as property occurs, it may be pointed out, in the Chandella charters, where the donees' rights are stated to be 'gift, mortgage, and sale' (*dan-adhana-vikraya*), apart from those of enjoyment, cultivation and the like.

Through the creation of this distinct form of agrarian property was called into existence a distinct class of landlords in early medieval North India. They claimed a share of all kinds of produce in their area, and enjoying extra-economic authority over the people, became their lords.

Several units of such landlordship are seen. At the lowest a small tract of cultivated land, was assigned to a brahmana. In other cases dozens of them, sometimes more, sometimes less, would be collectively granted a village or villages. The more general practice seems to have been the grant of one village to one person, at least at a time.

But there was also the University of Nalanda in Bihar having two hundred villages and the temple of Somanatha in Gujarat, reportedly the owner of two thousand villages. It is impossible to say with precision at what scale the grants were made during our period. There are several indications, however, that a fairly substantial number of landlords were thus created.

By and large the kings of early medieval North India refrained from making such grants to their officials. The state functionaries were no doubt granted land revenue for their services, but it was highly unusual for them to be granted state claims over land on a hereditary basis; an example of such an unusual instance may be seen in a Chandella inscription, when a person was granted land in this fashion on the death of his father in war. The officials, with their service perks and grants, were of course present as members of the state class in the agrarian society. In times of weakening state control, they usurped power at local levels and became hereditary lords. But, to repeat, it does not seem to have been regular state policy to make hereditary landlords of its officials, in sharp contrast to regular state policy towards religious personnel and institutions.

Yet there seems to have existed, on a fairly widespread scale, secular counterparts of the religious grantee landlords armed with state claims over land and people. They were self-created potentates rather than beneficiaries of state grants. A number

of terms in the inscriptions and literature indicate their presence in a very complex composition, but precise details await clarification through research. B.N.S. Yadava has referred to the general category of *bhogins* in the literary sources, one of which refers to *bhogins* seizing villages, and another likens them to kings (Yadava, 1981, pp. 280-81). One regional example of such *bhogins* would be *damaras* of Kashmir. More than one reference in the *Rajatarangini* suggests that the *damaras* arose out of the ranks of prosperous peasantry to dominate the countryside individually (they could own forts) and pose a threat to royal power collectively. Far from being creations of the state, they struck out on their own and competed for a share in state power with the central power (royalty), which followed a conscious policy of preventing the rise of such groups. Their position as landlords would have been analogous to that of the state-created landlords in that they would have the same kinds of claims on the agrarian classes, but different in that while the *damaras* survived and prospered by their own might, the religious grantees remained dependent on the continuing support of the kings, who are known to have, on occasion, exchanged one benefice for another, or seized a grant for some compensation, or even indulged in outright confiscation; it is also known that royal officials could make life impossible for the grantees.

12.6 PEASANTS, SHARECROPPERS AND LANDLORDS: AGRARIAN SOCIETY FROM BELOW

This Section remains one of the least known areas of historical research, less in terms of material available than in those of interest displayed and methods deployed, though recently there have been some fervent pleas for shifting the focus of research to agrarian groups other than the land-grantees.

Most of the research in the field remains terminological. A number of terms that denote the various agrarian groups have been noted and extensively discussed, more by Yadava (1993) than by others, with his usual breadth of scholarship. In-depth studies of the problem remain on the anvil at best.

Kutumbin/kutumbika is the commonest term for peasantry across our period and area. The Maitraka (AD 5-8 centuries) inscriptions contain an appreciable amount of detail on them: their names and the sizes of their plots in precise spatial, chronological and economic contexts. Systematic, detailed studies of these, however, do not seem to have been made, at least in English. But the impression of significant variations in the amount of land held by individual *kutumbins* suggests that the term included, besides the common mass of peasantry, also the more well-to-do groups, i.e., rich peasantry. The same conclusion is suggested for Eastern India in a general way by the reference to *pradhana* or leading *kutumbins* and those of lower status (*kshudra-prakriti*), and in a particular way by the references to a *kutumbin* making a gift of land, meaning he had more land than needed for bare subsistence.

At the lower end, we find *kutumbikas* in conditions of dependence, as when individual *kutumbikas* themselves occur as items of gift. There are other terms in the sources that bring out the existence of such a stratum of helpless dependent peasants, such as *baddhahatika* (a tied ploughman) or *pratibaddhena yojita* (yoked [as an animal] by force).

A category of landholders above the *kutumbins* was that of *mahattaras*. They are known to have been much fewer in number than the *kutumbins* in the village, inducted at local levels in state administration, recognised as the dominant group in a village and bribed the king in individual capacities in pursuit of more power and resources. Seeing that *kutumbins* could include a stratum of rich peasantry, it is quite likely that *mahattaras* must have counted landlords among them. In Western India, *pattakilas* seem to have been a comparable group.

The significant presence of the rich peasants and landlords who got their land cultivated by other is brought out by the evidence for their labouring counterparts, i.e., sharecroppers or farm tenants. I-tsing (AD 7th century) refers to the Buddhist monastery of Nalanda getting its land cultivated by such sharecroppers, who were important enough to figure as a caste in the legal literature.

Were these sharecroppers landless persons or were they smallholders, i.e., people who owned so small pieces of land that they needed to go in for farm tenancy? That there had been some kind of differentiation among them is suggested by the *Arthashastra*'s reference to more than one kind of sharecropping arrangement. Historians, however, have often assumed that the untouchable castes in India were almost by definition landless. Lack of actual research in this issue was underlined by Harbans Mukhia very sharply in the course of the Feudalism Debate:

... no contemporary evidence has yet been cited [Mukhia writes] to the effect that the caste system (or the state) denied them the right to hold land.

Since my familiarity with ancient Indian history is based on secondary sources, I requested three of my colleagues, B.D. Chattopadhyaya, Suvira Jaiswal and Romila Thapar ... to help me out with primary evidence on this point; each has reported failure. (Mukhia, 1985, pp. 253, 261-62 n15)

It may be reported here that in the *Rajatarangini* the king had to request an untouchable landowner (a shoemaker) to sell his land to the king so that a temple could be constructed on the land!

12.7 SUMMARY

In conclusion, we discuss the conceptual foundations of the foregoing account of agrarian society. The early medieval agrarian structure of North India may be visualised in terms of multi-layered stratification. By multi-layered stratification is meant different groups (each group being a stratum) forming a hierarchical order of several layers.

The strata, however, were not all of the same kind, nor did they form the same type of hierarchy in relation to each other. There were, for instance, farm tenants of different types (several 'strata' of them), whose sharecropping arrangements with their landlords formed one type of 'hierarchy'. Likewise, there were peasants of different categories – rich and medium, as well as smallholders. Equally surely, there must have been significant differences in the quantity of land held by the landlords. Peasants differed among themselves, but they differed in a qualitatively different manner from the landlords. The state and its men entered the picture in yet different ways. The concepts of strata and hierarchy are thus useful, but not adequate, for comprehending the specific character of different agrarian groups, and thus the overall character of the agrarian structure.

It becomes, therefore, necessary to bring in the category of class, which provides a uniform scale for distinguishing the crucial divisions of the agrarian society. Agrarian classes are defined principally in terms of landownership, structure of labour employment and mode of surplus extraction. Sharecroppers, peasants, landlords, and the 'state class' as outlined above are in fact such classes.

The defining feature of our agrarian society was the presence of a distinctive class of landlords. They came into existence – either on their own or through the initiative of the state – by converting the state claims over the land and people of an area into their own private claims, on a lasting basis. A new form of agrarian property arose, where all the pre-existing agrarian classes – from the landless labourer to the biggest landowner – were subjected to the demands and authority of the new landlord. Does he remind you of the feudal landlord of medieval Western Europe?

12.8 EXERCISES

- 1) Critically discuss the regional dimensions of our knowledge of early medieval agrarian structure.
- 2) In which ways did the state own land?
- 3) How did the king, in the process of realising his dues from the people, affect the stratification in rural society?
- 4) Analyse the implications for the rural economy of the various types of land grants.
- 5) Write an essay on the landlords other than those created by royal religious grants.
- 6) Discuss the composition of the masses engaged in agricultural production in post-Gupta North India.

12.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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