

III sem core course V  
History of India - III

History Hom 8

(750-1206)

Unit - II - Agrarian structure and social change: - crops -

Introduction -  
one of the major features of Agrarian Economy during early Medieval period is agricultural expansion. In the early Medieval period agricultural expansion meant, greater and more regular use of advanced agricultural techniques, plough cultivation and irrigation technology.

Historical sources - The most important source material for the study of this early Medieval period is the large number of inscriptions. Most of the inscriptions of this period are belonged to the category of copper plates or 'Karnapata'. These inscriptions also inform us about various types of market place from some which were collected tolls and customs (Sulka), thereby indicating the revenue bearing potential of trade.

Information on agricultural and urban centres is available from Dharmasastras and Smriti literature

Agrarian Expansion - The patronage extended by kings, princes and chiefs to agriculture, improvement in irrigation facilities, increasing knowledge of Agricultural Science etc. were some of the major factors which strengthened rural economy. The declines of towns have caused the migration of a number of skilled artisans <sup>into</sup> the country side. They were spread over Maharashtra, Eastern Madhya Pradesh, Andhra, Orissa and Bengal. Each of these states depended on revenue from land and agriculture. In fact post Gupta's time agriculture constituted the basis of the state. Thus the rise of the states leads to the Agrarian Expansion.

Role of land grants - Major reasons for Agricultural Expansion - The Agrarian expansion, which began with the establishment of brahmadeya and agrahara settlements through land grants to Brahmanas in the fourth century on the onwards, acquired a uniform and universal form in subsequent centuries.

Types of land grants: - The system of land grants were related as the gift of Land, which was based on the importance of Dana.

① Brahmadeya - (Gift to Brahmanas)

A brahmadeya is a type of grant of land either in individual plots or village given away to brahmanas making them land owners. The Brahmanas played a major role in integrating various socio-economic groups into the new order through service tenures and the peasantization of shudras in the existing brahmanical social order.



The practice of land grants brahmadeya was initiated by the ruling dynasties and subsequently followed by chiefs, feudatories etc.

Land was given as brahmadeya either as single Brahmanas or to several Brahman families which range from a few to several hundreds or even more than a thousand as seen in the South Indian context.

② Secular grants - These types of land grants were given to the non-Brahmins, officers of the states and others as a gift in remuneration. It created another class of land lords who were not Brahmins. The gift of land on officials in charge of administrative division is mentioned as early as 200 AD but the practice picked up momentum in the post Gupta period. From the literary work dealing with Central India, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Bihar and Bengal between the tenth and twelfth centuries references were found about the various kinds of grants to ministers, kinsmen and those who rendered military service.

③ Deva danas (gift to temples)

Large scale land gifts were given to the religious establishment, both Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical. Temples lands were leased out to tenants, who paid a higher share of the produce to the temples. Such land was also managed either by the sabha of the Brahmadeya Mahajanas or the agrahana settlements.

Crops and plants and cultivated - varieties of cereals including rice, wheat and lentils, legumes, vegetables and fruits are mentioned in the Amarakosha which is dated to the Gupta period. People possessed the knowledge of the ancient grafting as is from the



Brihat Samhita. Hereof many mentioned varieties of rice, mustard, ginger, numerous vegetables and fruits. The Harsha Charita similarly provides a good account of crops and plants. we came across references to different type of rice, sugarcane, Mustard, Sesame, cotton, wheat barley and pulses. Various kinds of spices such as turmeric, clove, black pepper and ginger were also grown. vegetables such as brinjal, pumpkin, cucumber, beans, garlic etc were produced.

There too we came across reference to bamboo, cotton plants, loads of flax and hemp bundles in central India, and cane, bamboo and silk in the context of eastern India.

Advances in Agricultural knowledge and development in irrigation facility:— The evidence and detailed instruction on agriculture are found in the, Brihat Samhita, Agni Purana, Kishi Parasara.

The importance of Manure for crop cultivation is clearly laid down in the Harsha Charita.

The Harsha Charita speaks of some irrigation facilities in the region around western Uttar Pradesh.

During the early Medieval period there was an increase in irrigation sources such as canals, Lake, tanks and wells. The accessibility to water resources was an important consideration in the spread of rural settlement is shown by regional studies.

The increase in the number of irrigation work was due to an advance in irrigation technology.



Land lords and peasants

Land lords - The northern plains areas are highly fertile. Its alluvial deposits were known for high productivity. Intensive cultivation and highly commercialized agriculture. Thus northern plains represented comparatively developed social formations. The region was largely governed by zonal regulations during the Early Medieval period. The prominent social groups are the creamy layer consisted of the Zamindar or the land lords, petty government officials like 'Muzaddam' and 'Chaudhary' rich peasants, local merchants and money lenders.

Peasants - Peasants were not a homogenous group. The rich peasants often formed part of the rural elite. They were commonly termed as Khwad kashita, Kalantaram or Paltis and halomin in Persian documents. They possessed their own granary, well house and ploughs. They used get their land cultivated with the help of hired labour in addition to their family labour.

Next the elite were the ordinary peasants in the rural hierarchy. They bore the brunt of taxation in the village. The burden of taxation was probably highest upon the peasants in medieval period. A late seventeenth century disaster - Udamal of Pongoro Jhak in Eastern Rajasthan clearly illustrates that the raiyats had to pay at the rate of 50 percent of the produce, while, patels, patwaris, Mahajans and pahlis paid 40 percent; The Rajput were paying 25 to 33 percent; while the Chaudhanis and Qanungos were charged even less (25 percent). Khwad & Kasta peasants were also exempted



from paying these cesses like house and marriage taxes. The small peasants were constantly under debt for meeting the expenses for purchasing seed, plough or oxen etc.

The pabis had permission build their own establishments and they possessed their own plough. These pabis were instrumental in the growth and expansion of cultivation.

The muzaniam were the tenants who used to cultivate the land of superior caste / land holders. They also served as state sponsored tenants. In that case they were asked to cultivate surplus lands or abandoned lands, in the village there were also share-croppers.

In western Rajasthan there was another category of peasants called basi. These basi peasants are those peasants who would move wholesale with their master to new "settlements". They were not necessarily cultivating the land of the village where they would reside instead they could cultivate more than one village's lands.

Generally speaking peasants were hand pressed. Even though they were proprietors, their position was almost like serfs. They were not allowed to abandon the land. In case of their flight officials were asked to bring them back by the use of force.

The cultivation of superior land holders largely depended upon agricultural labourers, these landless labourers / menial castes, formed about <sup>one</sup> the sixth to one fifth of the village populations.



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The 'menial castes' were prohibited to take on agriculture thus provided a vast battery of 'reserve' labour force. Tamblers, scavengers, dharmakars etc when not pursuing their profession worked as agricultural labourers. They were compelled to perform began by the superior caste.

The above description clearly points out that the medieval rural society was highly stratified. This stratification was the result of many factors like: (a) availability of seeds, oxen, agricultural implements, Persian wheel, wells for irrigation, etc. as the resource base; (b) the higher castes were assessed at lower rates and lower castes had to pay revenue at much higher rate; (c) nature and pattern of crops produced further intensified the gap, that those who could produce cash crops would be better placed than those cultivating food crops.



## Prohibition of caste

The early Medieval period was a period of prohibition and fragmentation.

Increasing pride of birth characteristic of Feudal society and the accompanying self-sufficient village economy which prevented both social and occupational mobility, gave rise to the thousand of caste in India during the early Medieval period. The change in economy were also result of emergence of certain new castes and decline of certain old ones. For example, the constant transfer of land and land revenues made by princes to priests, temples and officials led to the rise and growth of the scribes or the Kayastha caste which undermined the monopoly Brahmanas as writer and scribes. Similarly the decline of trade and commerce led to the decline in the position of the Vaishyas. The process of prohibition and multiplication of caste was yet another marked feature of the social life of the period.

The process of prohibition appears to be most striking among the Brahmanas. The Brahmanas stood at the top of the social hierarchy during and post Gupta period. However Brahmanas had numerous subsections now divided on the basis of many criteria such as knowledge of Veda etc. Getting birth in Brahmanas family was a privilege. The most severe punishment for a Brahmanas was banishment. When a Brahmanas killed a man, the former had only to fast, pray and give alms. On the other hand if somebody killed a Brahmanas he was ought to greatest sinner and performed the worst



crime. no punishment or remorse could wipe it off -  
Brahman-hatya, the greatest crime of those periods.

in the Kshatriyas community proliferation was caused  
mainly by the emergence of a new people called the Rajputs.  
No other community developed so much of racial and family  
pride as the Rajputs did. Some of them may have descended  
from the original Kshatriya stock. Really the Kshatriya  
caste multiplied from the 5th and 6th century when  
central asian people such as the Huns and Gunganas  
joined their ranks as Rajputs.

Vaishyas in the early Medieval India were almost  
degraded to the Sudra community. In fact, Alberuni  
also did not find any difference between the vaishya and  
Sudra. If you are a vaishya or a Sudra and you dared to  
recite the vedas, your ruler would cut off your tongue.  
One difference was that the Sudra had freedom to sell all  
kind of goods, but the vaishyas were forbidden to carry  
on transaction in some specified articles like  
salt, wine, meat, cards, sword, arrows, water, gold etc.

The Sudras came to have the largest number of  
castes in early Medieval times. The earliest law books  
mentioned 10 to 15 mixed castes, but the law book of Manu  
a work of the 1st century, enumerates 61 mixed castes.  
A huge increase in the number of Sudra castes can  
be inferred from the Vajayanti and also from the  
Abhidharmakosha. Some texts state that thousands  
of vaishya women with men of lower caste. The conquest  
of the backward people living in the jungles and  
hills by Brahmanised princes from agricultural  
advanced area economy added to the number and  
variety of Sudra castes.



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The middle ages saw a phenomenal growth in the number of genuine Sudras or untouchables, who were best noted in the 14th century.

The varna system was also modified by translocation of the Sudras into cultivators and the relegation of the Vaishya to the position of the Sudra with the result that the newly founded Brahmanical order in Bengal and South India provided mainly from Brahmanas and Sudras.

Castes based caste groups - Another significant process that further advanced the process of proliferation of Jatis was the process where the castes were transformed into caste groups.

The Indian society had degenerated in general during this period of contact, it was almost a 'decaying society'. Following were the chief features of the Indian society.

- ① The society became fragmented into innumerable class caste and sub-castes due to the absorption of foreign elements into the Hindu fold.
- ② Members of the original caste discarded their prescribed functions and entered occupation that their skills interest and economic prospects.
- ③ The tribal people were also admitted into Hindu society and thus every tribe was now given the status of a separate caste.
- 4/ The Hindu society lost its liberalism.
- 5/ The Indian lost contact with the outside world.
- 6/ The number of 'Devdasis' and prostitutes increased.
- 7 Education was confined to a few sections of society?



### Peasantization of Tribes -

The tribes were largely semi-nomadic in nature and pastoral variety. This process of sedentarisation of the Pastoralist continued embated throughout the medieval period the commercialization of agriculture and the increase in the extent of cultivation were the two crucial factors behind this transformation. The assimilation of tribes into rural social categories could be discerned by different terminology used of them by modern historians and contemporary scholars. In the case of Jat tribe this process is clearly evident. Alberuni (CA 1030 AD) records them as cattle owner and low caste people. Irfan Habib (1976) argues that their northward migration in southern towards Multan occurred sometime around 11th century.

### Assimilation of Tribal Society in agriculture Society

The tribal societies that got assimilated into agriculture society appear to have subsumed their tribal identity with some sort of 'caste' in the existing rural caste based multi-layered hierarchical society. Agriculturist communities generally speaking, joined the peasant caste of that region. However the hunting gathering tribal group generally formed the lowest ranks outside the labor sold manual. Irfan Habib believe that the tribal formed a substantial part of rural menial proletariat.

Historians have tended to broadly distinguish between Brahmanic and non-Brahmanic village in this period. Within Brahmanic villages, a further distinction is made between 'agnahana' and Devadana. The invention of Brahmanic in rural society involved the imposition of bureaucratic and priestly elite. It imposed a level of Sanskritization on local cultures.

### Socio-Economic aspect of Feudalism -

The socio-economic aspect of Feudalism in India intimately connected with the transformation of Sudra and tribal peasants from Gupta period onwards in the older settled area. Sudra labours seem to have been provided with land in the backward area a large number of tribal peasant was annexed Brahmanical system through land grant - A and they were called Sudra. Therefore, Huein Tsang described the Sudra as agriculture a fact corroborated by Al-Beruni about four



centuries later. The rise of Sudras and Tribal peasants in another important development of early medieval period. There is sufficient reason to believe that Sudras were also becoming peasants in good number. As several law books show that land was rented out to the Sudra and Tribal for half the crop.

Land grants led to peasantization of tribes

The point has been made that the land grants opened virgin land to cultivation in Bengal and elsewhere. This obviously is done on basis of the ~~active~~ use of the term *khila aprahata* which indicate grants of uncultivated land. When cultivated and settled areas were made over many of these terms continued to be used as a matter of convention in Gujarat, Maharashtra which indicate grants in Madhya Pradesh. The forest area containing the land ~~and~~ used to more than one hundred Brahmanas is described as having no district of natural and artificial. A new expertise was brought by their priestly and the other beneficiaries who migrated from the middle Ganga valley plains or similar advanced area in search of better livelihood. For example the knowledge of calendar which could impart a good idea of the rainy and showery seasons.

**Agricultural Expansion:** A major factor for peasantization of tribes.

Agricultural expansion led to the peasantization of tribes. There are indications of agricultural expansion in the middle ages. Several texts deal with founding of villages. This is a text probably during the Chola times. Similar lines in the *Silparatna* deal with the dealing with the training of villages. The explosion in rural settlement in the early medieval period, when the status of king was determined according to the number of villages he possessed. It is easy to estimate the rural population. Huan-Tsang figures for Harsha's army may enable us to size in north-east India. The Chinese pilgrim tells us that Harsha maintained sixty thousand



was elephants and one hundred thousand cavalry

Urban contraction and migration of people to village.

Urban contraction was an important cause of agrarian or peasantisation. Western India provides many examples of migration of town dwelling Brahmins to the countryside where they were donated land by the ruling class. Animal husbandry was improved because of advances made in the treatment of cattle disease. The knowledge of fertilizers improved immensely and the composition was known. Innovation in agriculture techniques may be noted like the big plough and pounder which was used for turning the hard soil. Irrigation facilities were expanded and law books lay down severe punishments for those who cause damage to tank, well and pond embankments. Wells were meant for irrigation of the field but they would be equally useful for drinking water and also for irrigation of garden. There were also machines for lifting water that were operated by men, oxen or elephants. The use of iron implement attained a new peak in this period.

In the first part of medieval period two distinct trends can be discerned. One is the contraction of town and the other is the extension of village. Rural expansion seem to have been facilitated by the other by the migration of artisans to the country where they formed part of the Jajmani system.

It is clear from the above discussion that stratification of caste and peasantization of tribes did exist during medieval time in India. It led to the solidification of castes and intermixing of the tribal ones.

Hence, it is clear to say that these processes did lead to the expansion of agriculture and agrarian base. The expansion of agriculture and agrarian base led to the peasantization of tribes.



## Question —

- 1) What was the main reason for expansion of Agriculture in Early medieval times?
- 2) How many types of Land grants were there in India in early Medieval period?
- 3) Who was the Chinese traveller to visit India during the 1st half of the seventh century?
- 4) Who was the writer of Abhidhama Chintamani?
- 5) Nalanda Monastery enjoyed the gift of how many villages?
- 6) The idea of "dama" or gift was developed by which text?
- 7) Who were magaddams in early medieval times?
- 8) Which foreign traveller has mentioned in his book about the double crop in India?
- 9) In which region of India spices were produced in large quantities?
- 10) The gift of land to Brahmana is called —
- 11) The gift of land to temple is called —