

## **CC-5: HISTORY OF INDIA(CE 750-1206)**

### **III. AGRARIAN STRUCTURE AND SOCIAL CHANGE:**

#### **(A). AGRICULTURAL EXPANSION; CROPS**

The discussion on the nature and tendencies of polity and political processes in early medieval times laid stress on the emergence of the regional powers as the distinctive mark of political development. Similarly, the study of economic situation of the early medieval time focuses considerably on landgrants.

Numerically superior to other types of sources, landgrants itself are indicators to the changing socio-economic and political processes from 600 CE. In the opinion of a large number of Marxist Historians, the rise in the number of landgrants at a brisk pace over disparate area since 600 CE indicates a substantial change in the material milieu from that existing in the pre 600 CE days and according to many of these historians these changes led to the formulation of Indian feudalism. The major significance of this formulation is that it views feudalism not merely as a politico-administrative system, but something that witnessed appreciable changes in socio-economic life.

The widespread practice of issuing landgrants created a distinct class of landholders, who would not normally cultivate the soil themselves but engage labourers to cultivate the lands for them.

The expansion of the agrarian economy was the results of various factors such as the extension of margin of agriculture through land reclamation, the spread of irrigation techniques and an expansion in the range of crops. The increase in the area under cultivation can be inferred from the fact that donees of landgrant were sometimes given rights over forested area, references to forests in the vicinity of the gifted land, and the mention of the transfer of wasteland to the donees. There are some direct evidences as well. A 6<sup>th</sup> century inscription of the Kadambas (who ruled over the Goa area) gave the Brahmana donee the right to engage labourers in order to clear a piece of forested area and bring it under cultivation. It also mentions the reclamation of a tract of coastal land, and its conversion to rice fields by damming up seawater.

The Pallavas in south India are also known to have followed a similar policy of granting land for the expansion of cultivation. The period from AD 600 to AD 1200 is unmistakably marked by cultivation of diverse type of crops. Sanskrit

manuals on agriculture like the *Krishipararasara*, the *Krishisiukti*, etc., indicate a growing agricultural sector. It is not surprising that agriculture is hailed in early medieval texts as the occupation par excellence and harbinger of bliss. The possibilities of agrarian expansion by issuing landgrants seem to have encouraged a highly favourable attitude to agriculture. Rich epigraphic data are available on the expansion of agriculture in the hitherto untilled and fallow areas in early medieval Karnataka.

Another instance of forest clearance by the issuance of copper plate charters is furnished by an inscription of AD 762 from Goribidnur taluk. In AD 904, a Taitirya brahmana, living in a settlement of Ahichchhatra brahmanas in the Nanjangad taluk, caused to construct a huge irrigation tank, which was fed by three streams emerging from a nearby forest. The improved irrigation facilities must have led to agrarian expansion, increased the output of crops and therefore resulted in the growth of population. There are instances of growing preference for canal-feeding of irrigation tanks with the help of nearby streams/ rivulets to the previous dependence on rain-fed irrigation canals. This proved conducive to the conversion of virgin tracts into cultivable and settled areas that supported agricultural population. This reduced the dependence of peasants on annual rainfall for filling the tanks.

Foreign authors, especially the Arab geographers, were much impressed by the flourishing agricultural conditions in early medieval times and the diversity of crops. Paddy was undoubtedly the most important crop. Some villages in south-eastern Bengal with boraka name-endings were probably so called for the cultivation of boro variety of paddy. The *Sunyapurana* enlists 50 types of paddy in early medieval Bengal, which was also particularly famous for sugar-cane plantations. Pundra or north Bengal being well-known for quality sugar-cane, the term paundra (grown in Pundra) became a synonym for sugar-cane. There was expansion of the plantations of coconut, betel and areca nuts, betel leaf and cotton, especially in the littoral tracts and the Deccan. Indigo plantation, closely allied to the textile production, seems to have been well established in Gujarat. The far south figures very prominently in the account of foreigners as an area rich in spices; the most frequently-mentioned spice was the pepper from Malabar. Some improvements in the cultivation of oil seeds may logically be inferred in the light of increased number of references to oil-presses (*ghanaka*) and oilmen (*tailika*). Inscriptions also record availability of green vegetables as exchangeable commodities.

The traditional use of ox-drawn plough continued. The use of the large plough may logically indicate some improvements in the technology and manufacturing of ploughs. The early medieval period had good knowledge about the mechanism of pounding and husking grain with udukhala. The Desinamamala of Hemachandra, significantly enough, enlists several synonyms of Sanskrit udukhala in desi the desi vocabulary was the forerunner of many modern regional vernaculars in India. This once again underlines the spread of agriculture in different regions of the India subcontinent. In some areas, like the Kalachuri realm in Dahala (present-day region around Jabalpur), known for its relative isolation, the regular use of khala or udukhala resulted in the imposition of a new levy (khalabhiksha). This may be an indicator to the generative aspects of some of the new elements in the agrarian life during the early middle ages.

The spread of agrarian settlements would have hardly been possible without adequate irrigation facilities. Existing sources portray the preponderance of small-scale or local-level irrigation projects. Though the sastric norms uphold royal rights over-irrigation works (setu) and hence his prerogative to levy a cess on water, actual evidence to this direction is missing. It is only in the Gāhadhavlā records that the practice of imposing a water cess (jalakara) is clearly mentioned. There are, however, some instances of administrative patronage to launch and maintain large-scale or supra-local irrigation projects. The most outstanding example comes from Kashmir, where Suyya, during the reign of Avantivarman, succeeded in diverting the course of the Vitasta. This resulted not only in the prevention of the annual flooding of the Vitasta, but also caused a much greater agricultural output, leading to an appreciable fall in the price of paddy. Many rulers of early medieval times are credited with the construction of large reservoirs, which could have served the needs of a sizable area. On many occasions, such reservoirs were called sagara, samudra, varidhi, etc., and named after the reigning king or the ruling dynasty. This is a practice particularly noticed in the Deccan and south India. King Ramapala is praised in the Ramacharita for excavating a number of large tanks in Varendri. The text gives an impression that such a step was consciously taken to improve upon the distressed economy of Varendri after he had recovered it from the rebellious Kaivartta chiefs.

In early medieval Bengal, there were plenty of natural resources of water enriched by monsoon rains and riverine sources. Early medieval inscriptions from Rajasthan contain significant information about the use of water wheels or

araghattas, also called ghatyantras as a regular device to procure irrigational water. A tenth century AD sculpture from Rajasthan portrays the vertical rotary motion of the wheel, to which were attached small buckets or pots. These pots would go round with the turning of the wheel and fetch up water from below. The sculpture also depicts the employment of workers (comparable expression araghattiyanara) for turning the wheel and fetching water. In Gujarat too, early medieval inscriptions and textual materials are replete with references to vapi or vavi. While the term v pi has been known for a long time in Sanskrit literature as any reservoir, in the early medieval context they connoted step wells, excavated to a great depth to tap the ground water.

The most graphic account of the management of local hydraulic resources comes from the early medieval Tondaimandalam and CholamaFdalam in the Tamil area. Epigraphic evidence leave little room for doubt about the importance attached to the maintenance of tanks and irrigation channels/canals, their periodic desilting and repair and the allocation of the financial resources for these works with minute details, all looked after by the annually elected representatives of the tank committee under the local self assembly (sabhä) in brahmadeya villages. This system has, however, no parallel in other regions of the subcontinent.

The overall impression amidst regional diversities is one of general improvement in irrigational facilities.

A steady extension of the margin of cultivation, the spread of irrigation work, and changes in the market demand led to changes in pattern of land use. In the Karnataka area apart from rice, there was an increasing emphasis of various types of millets such as priyangu, ragi, jowar and bajra. Also increasingly grown were inferior varieties of rice. There was an increase in the cultivation of cash crops sugarcane, betel leaves and areca nuts, coconuts, oranges, and spieces such as black pepper and ginger.

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## REFERENCE-

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