

SYSTEM OF LAND GRANTS: THE BRAHMADEYAS AND AGRARIAN EXPANSION OF TAMIL COUNTRY

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Abstract

The early medieval economy was in many major ways different from early historical period. The change led to an agrarian organisation based on a Land Grant system (grants to brahmanas and religious institutions as also secular grants to royal administrative functionaries), which is often believed to have brought into existence a feudal society and polity. In order to understand the nature of the agrarian economy of the early medieval period, one has to study the Land Grant system during the Gupta (4th – 6th centuries AD) and post- Gupta periods (7th-13th centuries AD), when the Land Grant system became a sub-continental phenomenon and when many of the regions, especially the regions peripheral to the Ganges valley began to emerge as distinct political and cultural regions. The Tamil plains are more continuous, with conspicuous agrarian tracts in the major river valleys like the Kaveri (middle and lower reaches), Vaigai and Tamraparni valleys and minor river valleys like the Palar and Pennaiyar, even from the early historical period (3rd century BC-3rd century AD), which later came to be re-structured into the new agrarian order through institutions like the Brahmadeya and the temple.

Key Words

Danam, Agrahara, Chaturvedimangalam, Pariharas and Sastras

Methodology

The methodology adopted in this study is descriptive, analytical and historical. By employing primary sources this paper has been attempted inscriptional evidences of the major and authentic source materials for writing this paper and it is supplemented by contemporary Secondary sources written by various authors.

The early medieval economy was in many major ways different from early historical period. The change is attributed to the decline of trade and commercial economy and absence of monetary transactions in the wake of the decline in trade. The change led to an agrarian organisation based on a Land Grant system (grants to brahmanas and religious institutions as also secular grants to royal administrative functionaries), which is often believed to have brought into existence a feudal society and polity. Although the theory of feudalism itself has been borrowed from the medieval agrarian organisation of Western Europe, important differences from the west European model have been recognised and this has resulted in the characterisation of the Indian agrarian organisation as Indian feudalism. The theory of Indian feudalism has, however, been constantly under debate and such a characterisation of the early medieval economy for the whole of India has also been questioned due to the absence of serfdom and the nature of intermediaries, both religious and secular, as also regional variations in agrarian structures (For feudalism debate see Unit 10 of the present Block). In order to understand the nature of the agrarian economy of the early medieval period, one has to study the Land Grant system during the Gupta (4th – 6th centuries AD) and post- Gupta periods (7th-13th centuries AD), when the Land Grant system became a sub-continental phenomenon and when many of the regions, especially the regions peripheral to the Ganges valley began to emerge as distinct political and cultural regions.¹ While the Land Grant system spread with an amazing uniformity in all the regions, there were significant variations in the ways in which agrarian expansion and integration of the regions were achieved from the 7th to the 13th centuries AD.

The Tamil plains are more continuous, with conspicuous agrarian tracts in the major river valleys like the Kaveri (middle and lower reaches), Vaigai and Tamraparni valleys and minor river valleys like the Palar and Pennaiyar, even from the early historical period (3rd century BC-3rd century AD), which later came to be re-structured into the new agrarian order through institutions like the Brahmadeya and the temple. Tamil Nadu also has a rich corpus of early Tamil literature (the Sangam classics of the early centuries of the Christian era), which provides evidence of the marutam (plains) as distinguished from the mullai (forest) and kurinci (hilly) as eco-zones with different economic activities such as agricultural, 46 pastoral and hunting-gathering respectively.² It is the expansion of agricultural activities within the marutam region and beyond into the other eco-zones that marks the opening up of agrarian tracts and their integration through the Brahmanical institutions from the 6th century AD. It may be assumed that a similar process of the opening up of agrarian tracts occurred also in the Andhra and Karnataka regions, starting from the fertile river valleys and beyond into the forest and hilly areas. Hence the early Brahmadeya and temple settlements emerged in the coastal region of Andhra plains (lower Godavari and Krishna valleys and the deltaic region) from the 4th to the 10th centuries AD and the drier regions of Telengana and Rayalasila came to be integrated into the new agrarian order from the 11th to 14th centuries. In Karnataka the upper and middle reaches of Krishna (Tungabhadra and Malaprabha) and Kaveri with their tributaries with narrower plains were colonised early i.e., from the 4th to 9th centuries and then followed the expansion of the new agrarian order into the frontier zones.³

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The grant of a Brahmadeya (and Agrahara) was considered as the supreme dana and was sought to be protected by specific injunctions and imprecations against those who tampered with it or destroyed it in any way. Following the Dharma Sastra injunctions the ruling families made grants of land to the Brahmanas, on occasions like victory in war or for special astronomic phenomena like eclipses, in areas of agricultural potential with existing settlements or in new areas extending agricultural operations. On such occasions the Brahmanas were given *pariharas* or exemptions from various obligations including revenue payment to the king and given management rights over land and cultivation process.⁴ Exemptions meant generally non-intrusion by royal or government functionaries and troops into such areas, while sometimes a specific amount of revenue was levied annually or for all times. Deforestation and extension of cultivation in hitherto uncultivated land and settling actual tillers/agricultural workers in effect meant that the agrarian base was extended and king's authority established for the first time, where it did not exist earlier. Hence the Brahmadeya's politico-economic role in agrarian expansion was significant.⁵

A Brahmadeya was not exclusively populated by Brahmanas, but was often inhabited by non-Brahmana cultivators or service personnel working for the village as a whole and for the land controlling Brahmanas. Hence a kind of landlord-tenant or service relationship evolved in newly established Brahmadeycis. There are also instances of pre-existing pastoral-cum-agricultural settlements which were clubbed together and granted as Brahmadeycis, wherein the lordship and management rights were given to the grantees. The temple, which either came up along with the Brahmadeyas or independently in such settlements was equally significant in the agrarian integration, yet the temple assumed greater importance as the integrative institution from the 1 C)th century AD in gradual phases in all the south Indian regions. Grants of land and other items to the temple were also administered by locally influential land controlling groups like the Brahmanas and also dominant agricultural groups other than the Brahmanas.⁶

Land grants could be either made to a single brahmana (ekabhoga-Brahmadeya) or to a group of brahmanas (gana-bhoga) or for the maintenance of a brahmanical educational institution (Vidyasthana and Ghatika). With each of the Brahmadeya and temple settlements an irrigation system was invariably established either in the form of tanks (tataka and eri), canals or wells.(e.g. as in the Pallava-Pandya regions). Many of these projects were initiated by the rulers but managed by the local bodies especially the Sabhas or assemblies of the Brahmadeyas or the Mahajanas. Elaborate

arrangements were made by these assemblies for the upkeep of the irrigation works, including maintenance, repair, attention to silting and control of water supply through cesses and specifying committees (variyaams) as in the Brahmadeyas of the Tamil region, for their supervision and administration.⁷ Thus effective management was the key to the difference between the farming societies of the early historical and early medieval periods.

THE TAMIL REGION: THE PALLAVAS (TONDAI NADU - NORTHERN TAMIL NADU): 6th TO 9th CENTURIES AD

In the Tamil region the history of this development extends from the 6th - 13th centuries, which may be further divided into two phases, first from the 6th to 9th centuries AD and the second from the 10th to the 13th centuries AD. Eventually it led to the creation of different levels of complex land rights, superior and subordinate, and to a stratified society based on economic status and more significantly on the vama ideology creating caste distinctions with increasing occupational diversification and the temple becoming the reference point for all such distinctions in status, particularly ritual status.⁸

The early Pallava grants in Prakrit and Sanskrit (4th to 6th centuries AD) refer to villages in the Krishna and Guntur districts, and further south in the Nellore district. Here the Brahmadeya seems to make its first appearance till the establishment of Pallava territorial authority over the northern region of Tamil country, with Kancipuram as their centre of power. Henceforth the bilingual copper plates in Sanskrit and Tamil record grants of Brahmadeya land in new areas as well as pre-existing, cultivated areas in the Palar-Cheyyar valley and further south into the Pennaiyar and Kaveri regions.⁹ These records are remarkable documents for reconstructing the development of agricultural economy and agrarian organisation in different phases. The Brahmadeyas and temples may be seen as harbingers of advanced farming methods such as irrigation technology and seasonal cultivation process. This is clearly established by the Pallava-Pandya records, when they are considered in the context of their geographical and ecological setting. They are also useful as records providing the most detailed references to the nature of the organisation, both agriculture and craft production, which was generally complementary and supplementary to agricultural activities.¹⁰

The Brahmanas were organisers and managers of production in the Brahmadeyas and the Velalas or land owning (controlling) peasants in the non-Brahmadeya (Ur) settlements, where the focus of activities was the brahmanical temple. In the Brahmadeya, the Brahmanas, due to their specialised knowledge of astronomy, would have introduced an element of predictability in yields, on the basis of seasonal sowing, cropping patterns, as well as effective management of water resources. Hence in the records of this period, demarcation of boundaries, establishment of “ownership” or enjoyment rights, nature and category of land and the number of crops to be raised become important details.¹¹

The Brahmadeyas in most cases meant the giving away of rights, economic and administrative, to the donees. Instances are not wanting to show that that they were not completely exempt from revenue payments to the king. The real advantages lay in integrating older subsistence level settlements and non- Brahmadeya villages (Ur) into the new agrarian system, and also bringing virgin land under cultivation, both waste and forest land and making them surplus oriented. There are also examples of several pre- existing settlements being clubbed together into a new Brahmadeya or integrated into it (e.g. Udayendiram Plates and Pattalmangalam Plates of Nandivarman II- 8th century AD). The tax exemptions given to the Brahmadeyas do not obviously apply to such villages thus brought into the system, unless otherwise specified.¹²

The circulation of resources was through the nadu or kurram, which were existing and entrenched peasant regions, duly made into revenue units by the early medieval states - Pallava (6th-9th c. AD), Pandya (7th-10th and 13-16th c. AD) and Chola (9th-13th c. AD).¹³ The circulation of resources was also effected through the temple. The older subsistence level settlements were part of the nadus and quite a few of them were integrated into the new agrarian order through Brahmadeyas. Their extent cannot be precisely determined. Regular revenues reached the royal bhandaras

(treasury) through such circulation. Yet, at the local level, the chief beneficiaries of the redistribution process were the locally powerful elite, temples and brahmanas, apart from temple functionaries and tenants. The co-ordination of the production and distribution processes were in the hands of the sabha (brahmana assembly) and Ur (non- brahmana /Velala assembly), the latter often working in close collaboration or cooperation with the brahmana sabha or under their guidance and often as nattar or as members of the nadu assembly, whose role in the organisation and production of agricultural resources was significant, particularly with regard to the common agrarian problems like irrigation and mobilisation of labour and means of production and redistribution.¹⁴ The Brahmadeya was administered independently of the nadu and hence the Ur is less conspicuous in the epigraphic records while the nadu and Brahmadeya are prominent.

In the Brahmadeyas and temple centres, land relations thus came to be organised around these two institutions, with three categories of landowners- the brahmana, the velala and the temple (administered by the brahmana and Velala)- emerging as the local elite. All the occupational groups were placed in a ritual hierarchy around the temple within the varna framework, depending on the nature of their profession and relationship with the temple as service groups.¹⁵

Cesses appear to have been generally levied in kind and this ties in with the low level of monetisation in this period. There were cesses on the manufacture of salt, on looms, on markets, oil mills, etc. Not only goods but services too seem to have been provided to the donees as indicated by the cesses on potters, weavers, blacksmiths and others. There is some degree of controversy about whether the Brahmadeyas were actually freed from complete taxation. For example the Pullur plates refer to 'ponnirattai-k-karaiyirameyam' which has been translated as 'non-payment of taxes for 12 years'. In other words such grants were meant to develop agriculture and extend cultivation initially and were brought under taxation after some years.¹⁶

The period is marked by the decline in trade and commercial activities resulting in heavy reliance on agrarian sector. In the period from the 9th to 13th centuries agriculture continued to be the mainstay of the economy. This led to the widespread expansion of the land grant economy, particularly the agraahas. Another related feature of the economy of this period, though highly debated, was the emergence of feudal economy. To its positive side Brahmadeyas were instrumental in agricultural expansion to a large extent. However, there also emerged 'superimposition of superior rights in land'. The major beneficiaries were none other than the Brahmanas who emerged as major landowning groups in the region.

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