

THE NATURE OF ECONOMY UNDER THE WESTERN GAṄGAS

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The present paper is an attempt to examine the details relating to land type, crop, revenue etc. from the records of under the Western Gaṅgas and try to find out what they have to tell us about the nature of the economy covered by the territory of the documents. We raise the question, "Can we call it a feudal economy? To give our answer in one sentence before presenting the arguments, it can be said that a close examination of the evidence tends to give the answer in the affirmative. However, it is useless to search for all the components and similar pattern of development as in Western European Feudalism. The essentials of a feudal set-up can be traced in this period also. It has been established that even feudalism can exist in different forms varying over time and space as any other mode of production. It may be useful to start the discussion by defining the concept of feudalism.

Prof. R.S. Sharma¹ has tried to define the essence of feudalism. He says "Feudalism has to be seen as a mode of the distribution of the means of production and of the appropriation of the surplus ". Feudalism appears in a predominantly agrarian economy, which is characterized by a class of land-lords and a class of servile peasantry. The lord-peasant relationship is the core of the matter and exploitation of the estate by its owner, controller, enjoyer or beneficiary is its essential ingredient. Here, we would like to clear that, for us, manorial system and serfdom is not the core of the matter. The existence of an intermediary class and its mediating role between the king and peasantry is more

important. If we also follow some broad framework of universals, then certainly the Western Gaṅgas period can be called a feudal period.

We will develop our discussion through taking up some most important reference points like land grants, role and status of feudatories, condition of peasantry, self sufficient local economy and lastly the role power of the king in overall setup.

As we have already seen, granting land to various types of donees was very much prevalent in the Western Gaṅgas period. Brahmanas were the biggest beneficiaries of this system. But temple and monasteries especially Jaina, Caityas and Basadi were also one significant group of recipients of such patronage. The supposed Purpose of these grants Were to attain religious merits and to provide maintenance to learned persons, ascetics and religious institution. The occasion and purpose of land grants does not seem to have made any difference from the economic point of view because they served same economic functions. Here, we find similarity with the contemporary north Indian developments. There also we find that from the Gupta period onwards, religious grants were extended on a large scale.

This system is obviously different from the Western European practice of land grants given to feudal lords all along with administrative and juridical rights motivated by politico-economic compulsions. But there is no difference between land grants to warriors and land grants to priests and religious institutions in so far as fragmentation of royal authority and some other consequences like the development of intermediaries were concerned. Moreover, even brahmanas and other religious institutions must have treated the peasants in the same way as any other land owner would. Brahman beneficiaries over time would have concentrated more on the management of land than their size of old duties. Compared to the situation in other regions in the Western Gaṅgas period, land were

granted usually on small scale i.e., donation of one or some village or part of villages was common. Therefore, manorial system cannot be thought to have existed and the level of peasant servility also must have been lower.

In the Western Gaṅga period, grants were not merely of religious nature. Remarkably in the later half of this period, the number of secular grants increases enormously. Many war heroes and martyrs are awarded land grants perhaps, as prize or compensation. These grants were mostly donated by feudatories and administrators and had tremendous implication for sub-infeudation. It may be mentioned that, many such donees were already well-to-do people.

We do not know exactly if the state officials were also paid through land grants or not, because we have not come across any inscription stating the purpose of grant as remuneration to any officials. There can be two reasons. Either, there was no central administration but only chieftains and feudatories who were not required to pay or they were granted land for their life - time only and grants were engraved on less durable materials.

Mainly these land grants were given in already cultivated areas rather than undeveloped peripheral areas. Therefore, it cannot be said that land grants were aimed at bringing remote areas under cultivation rather it was a mechanism of surplus redistribution.

If land was granted to some temple then a particular person was made in-charge. He used to administer the donated land and could act as feudal lord as well.

Like North India, in the Western Gaṅga territories also, grants were given to the donees forever, till sun and moon last '*yāvatchandradivākaram*'. Some of the inscriptions

request 'all rulers to come' to respect this grant. Granting a piece of land forever meant permanent loss of control over that area within the kingdom.

In the earlier period, North Indian land grant charters donated only tax-free lands i.e. remission of tax only was granted. Gradually administrative and juridical rights were also transferred. Then, right to exploit all natural resources beneath or above the donated land like mines were also transferred. All these meant renouncement of state sovereignty in that area forever. The Western Gaṅga inscriptions do not show this transitional phase clearly. But, this does not change the picture at all, as from the very beginning, grants suggest that land was donated free of all hindrances for all time to come. Therefore, here also we see formation of various small kingdoms within the big kingdom. This is something typical of feudal set up which exists in the Western Gaṅgas period. This fragmentation must have weakened the central authority as land grants were basically weakening factor for royal treasury.

Land grants generated A new social strata of intermediaries. The origin, function, privilege, duties and status of this class is crucial in the whole concept of feudalism. In the Western Gaṅga period, the development and later on dominance of intermediaries and feudal lords cannot be ruled out.

The word *Sāmanta* has been used in 'Koḍuñjeruvu grant of Avinīta'² and Kūḍlūr plates of Mārasimha³. Again the term '*Sāmanta Cūḍāmaṇi*' has been used in 'Maṇṇe plates of Mārasimha'.⁴ This inscription says, 'his (Mārasimha's) feet were worshipped by feudal chiefs with their heads bent low'. Interestingly, this inscription records a land grant by a 'commander of all the feudatories, Śrīvijaya'. Some of the inscriptions like 'Cūkuṭṭūr grant of Simhavarman'⁵ and 'Koḍuñjeruvu grant of Avinīta'⁶ refer the name of Apapa as the lord of Bāṇapura. These few references lead us to a very important conclusion. It is evident that

there existed a class of intermediaries who were also hierarchised into different categories of lord, *Sāmanta*, *Sāmanta Cūḍāmaṇi*, over all commander of *Samanta* and so on. The 'Kuḷagāṇa plates of Śivamāra'⁷, 'Bīḷiyūru inscription of Satyavākya – Permāṇḍi'⁸ and 'Hiranandi inscription of Rācamalla'⁹ also mention the term 'ay-sāmantas' meaning five sāmantas which looks to be a conventional number and they are taken as some sort of feudal administrator. They used to accept the dominance of king but at the same time maintained their relatively independent existence.

An important aspect of feudalisation is the phenomenon of subinfeudation. In the Western Gaṅgas period we find the land grants in numerous inscriptions like, 'Kuḷagāṇa plates of Śivamāra'¹⁰, 'Talakāḍu inscription of Śrīpuruṣa'¹¹, Dēvalāpura inscription of Śrīpuruṣa'¹², Huḷḷēnahalli plates of Śrīpuruṣa'¹³, Narasimharājapura plates of Śrīpuruṣa'¹⁴, 'Gaṇiganūru inscription of Satyavākya-Permmāṇḍi'¹⁵ and Beḷachalavāḍi inscription of Nītimārga-Permāḍi'¹⁶, extended by either feudatories or administrators, with or without the consent of the king. Here, it is remarkable that we get references to land grants by feudal lords and administrators but these were not necessarily given to feudal lords. It can be said that some sort of subinfeudation process was going on which resulted in the fragmentation of state authority. We do not have clear cut reference regarding the hereditary succession of feudal lords over their donated land. But since most of the grants were given forever, the same may be assumed.

These Sāmantas or feudal lords might have been of two categories, one who were feudal lords and administrators or both and others who were just subjugated and paid tribute and helped in war with their supplies to the army. 'Hiranandi inscription of Rācamalla'¹⁷ says that the king defeated his enemies with the help of his Sāmantas. Many Sāmantas changed sides in the periods of crisis and war. The Nolambas¹⁸ were one such

group and they had to be subjugated again and again. Therefore, continuous warfare and subjugation of Samantas must have been one important political characteristic of this period. These feudal lords were able to control their land, as proved by land grants extended by them and resistance offered to king. Therefore, we can conclude that they were powerful and played an important role in the polity and economy of the period.

There is an important question to be asked at this juncture and that is, how tax was collected and what was the role of the feudal lords in this process? It looks that from village to Nāḍu level in both the territories i.e. areas controlled by the king and by the lord, the basic structure was same and tax was collected by *perggaḍes*¹⁹, *nālbōvas*²⁰ etc.

At the *viṣaya* level, (district) officer called *nadagaṇḍas* were incharge to receive and deposit the money. But, higher officials must have only been for those territories where king could have directly controlled the land. We also hear about land grants extended to these petty administrators. Therefore, we can say that they used to get land instead of their salary. So, the picture we get is not of a Centralised, and salaried administrative mechanism but rather decentralized and loosely fitted machinery of surplus appropriation.

This whole discussion clearly shows the important status and role of feudal lords in the time of the Western Gaṅga dynasty. They were functioning as intermediaries and powerful enough to weaken the central authority.

Now we come to the condition of the peasantry. As we have noted earlier, forced labour has occurred just once in the 'Agara inscription of Śrīpuruṣa'²¹. But even then, its very existence is beyond any doubt. In the Western Gaṅga inscriptions no revenue terms, conditions of grant or privileges are listed. However, the expression 'free from all hindrances' is mentioned. Therefore, it looks that the donees could re-frame the tax-

structure and enjoy forced labour also. Nevertheless, it is beyond doubt that most of the peasants must have been paying tax, than engaging in forced labour. But this does not change the scenario significantly. As R.S. Sharma has argued, if peasants could escape forced labour by paying tax, it does not negate the concept of feudalism.

Harbans Mukhia²² has tried to prove the concept of free peasantry in India. As R.S Sharma²³ has replied, since peasants were not the owner of their land, which was the main component of the means of production, how can we call them 'free peasant'? However, unlike in North India, from inscriptional study of the Western Gaṅga period, we cannot say whether terms and condition were dictated about the nature of crops grown. But, even then, they cannot be called free peasant .They were transferred alongwith the village to the donee. Therefore, we can say that they were attached to the land.

Exploitation of peasants by the ruling class could not have been relaxed by the phenomenon of weak king and strong feudatories, rather it could have been more. Uttanur plates of Durvinīta²⁴ refers to a grant, free of thirty two types of hindrances that suggests that common peasants had to suffer from numerous hindrances. Even if there was no centralized uniform revenue collection mechanism at village level, tax collection could have been regular, as suggested by the names of various posts of village revenue officials.

It is evident that peasant paid taxes and cultivated their field for generations. It can not be said that the state or lords were the sole owner of land and each year or only just for a fixed time or period lands were leased to the peasant. We get references of private ownership of land also. Therefore, we get a multi-tier structure of land ownership, where king, feudatories and peasant, all had some type of proprietary right over the same piece of land.

It has been made clear that feudalism can develop only in a pre-dominantly agrarian economy. Therefore, monetization of economy, existence of long and short distance vigorous trade, flourishing towns and industrial production centres pave the way for decline of feudalism. In the Western Gaṅgas period, however, we find some inscriptional references to numismatic terminology, but that does not necessarily suggest that economy was dominated by money. Archaeological sources have not provided any definite coin belonging to the Western Gaṅga period. Some coins of doubtful origin are attributed to the Gaṅgas. Even these doubtful coins are very few in number.

Without efficient currency system, vigorous trade and commercial activity cannot be imagined. We get very few names of cities or towns. Even they are referred in administrative context. We hear about guilds but do not get detailed discussion about their functioning. Foreign trade is not even mentioned. There is no reference to mining. However, gold, iron and copper mining may have been there but they are not mentioned. The overall picture we get about the Western Gaṅgas economy is that it was a predominantly agrarian economy in which the role of trade, money, town and industrial production was just marginal.

The foregoing examination confirms that the economy of the Western Gangas showed many features that qualify it for the description of “feudal”. This does not mean that a one-to-one correspondence can be seen between these features and what obtained in, for example, in Western Europe. But broad indications do help in such a categorization.

References

NOTE :All references to inscription numbers , unless stated otherwise , are from K.V.Ramesh ,ed,Inscriptions of the Western Gaṅgas.

1. R.S. Sharma, 'How feudal was Indian Feudalism', Journal of Peasant Studies, VIII, No. 3, April, 1981.
2. *Inscription of The Western Gaṅgas*, Ed. By K.V Ramesh, Delhi, ICHR , New Delhi, Agam Prakashan , Delhi , 1984. Ins. No. 15, P. 52.
3. Ibid., Ins. No. 138, P. 411.
4. Ibid., Ins. No. 49, P. 190.
5. Ibid., Ins. No. 7, P. 23.
6. Ibid., Ins. No. 15, P. 52.
7. Ibid., Ins. No. 35, P. 135.
8. Ibid., Ins. No. 106, P. 325.
9. Ibid., Ins. No. 127, P. 390.
10. Ibid., Ins. No. 35, P. 135.
11. Ibid., Ins. No. 40, P. 150.
12. Ibid., Ins. No. 56, P. 226.
13. Ibid., Ins. No. 65, P. 240.
14. Ibid., Ins. No. 71, P. 253.
15. Ibid., Ins. No. 129, P. 393.
16. Ibid., Ins. No. 154, P. 475.
17. Ibid., Ins. No. 127, P. 390.
18. Such references of Nolambas we find in many inscriptions of the Western Gaṅga like Ins. No. 101, 117, 138 etc.
19. The Kannada designaton perggāḍe (per = skt. Mahat + kaḍe = skt. Tara), a translation of Sanskrit mahattara occurs in numerous Kannaḍa inscriptions from early times, and connotes, in general, administrative and revenue officers. Appropriate words were prefixed to the term perggāḍe in order to denote the specific nature of duties as, for instance, in the cases of Sunka verggāḍe (skt. Śulka-mahattara), a revenue officer, mane-verggāḍe (skt.griha-mahattara), an officer in charge of the royal household, antaḥpura-verggāḍe, an officer in charge of the royal harem etc. Since the late medieval period, Perggāḍe, in its modernized form of heggāḍe (hegde) has lost its original connotation of an official designation and has come to be used as a nominal suffix hereditarily.
20. In Kannada inscriptions, the term sēna-bōva (= sanskrit °bhōga) occurs frequently as the designation of revenue officials, mostly at the village level, even as the other common designation gāvūṇḍa. And on the analogy of the gāvūṇḍa in charge of an

entire nāḍu being designated as nāl - gāvunḍa, we have in the present case, the revenue official in charge of an entire nāḍu being designated as nāl -bōva.

21. IWG, Ins. No. 52, P. 219.
22. Harbans Mukhia, 'was there feudalism in Indian History? Journal of Peasant Studies, 8(3), April 1981.
23. Op. Cit., Journal of Peasant Studies, VIII, No. 3, April, 1981.
24. IWG, Ins. No. 21, P. 80.