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Peasants and Its Various Categories as Reflected in Early Medieval Northern Indian Sources (c. 600AD.-1200AD.)

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Abstract:

The early medieval period of Indian history may be seen as a transitional period wherein changes in almost all institutions and spheres of society viz. political, social, cultural as well as economic took place. The study of peasants and their various categories is essential for understanding the agrarian structure and socio-economic organisation of early medieval Northern India (c. 600–1200 AD). During this period, agriculture remained the principal source of livelihood and the foundation of the economy. The present study examines the position, status, and classification of peasants as reflected in contemporary literary, epigraphic, and legal sources. These sources provide valuable information about different categories of cultivators, including landowners, tenants, sharecroppers, agricultural labourers, and dependent peasants. The study also explores the relationship between peasants, landholders, state authorities, and religious institutions, particularly in the context of land grants and the expansion of agrarian settlements. It analyses the impact of land revenue, taxation, forced labour (vishti), and changing land relations on the economic and social conditions of the peasantry. Furthermore, it seeks to understand the variations in peasant status based on landholding rights, occupational responsibilities, and social hierarchy. By examining these different categories, the study highlights the complexity of rural society during early medieval Northern India. Its ultimately aims to understand the diversification in peasants and peasantry during this period.

Keywords: *krsijivi, svayam krtayakrya, asvayamkrtaya, Kutumbi, ardhsiri, sirvahaka, Kinasa, Gartadhanyadhanah, hastas, Kusula-dhaninah, Ghataksiptadhanah.*

Introduction:

The early medieval period of Indian history may be seen as a transitional period wherein changes in almost all institutions and spheres of society viz. political, social, cultural as well as economic took place. The major developments such as decline of trade and commerce, scarcity of

coins, consequently decay of urbanization and growth of village culture, absence of paramountcy and emergence of petty landed aristocracy, etc. played decisive role in bringing about changes during this period. Further land grants of both nature viz. secular as well as religious not only strengthened feudal economy but also led to the subjection of peasantry in this period. But some historians came out with the findings of continuation of surpluses that was produce by the peasantry, trade and trading centers, towns, coins, etc.

From the above views, it can be concluded that the agrarian character of society had been increasing during this period which led to the complexity of agriculture and the variety of peasants. So, their division and classification is inevitable in order to understand their position and prospect in actual life.

During this period a considerable degree of categorization existed among peasants. We find evidence of more than one criterion of such differentiation. The mention of two methods of organizing productive activity in agriculture in the commentary of *Medhatithi on the Manusmrti*[1] (9th. cent. AD) reflects the stratification of peasantry into two broad segments. The term *krsijivi* has been defined by *Medhatithi* as one who obtains his livelihood from agriculture through self-employment (*svayam krtayakrya*) and also one who obtains his livelihood from agriculture without getting engaged in actual agricultural work (*asvayamkrtaya*).[2] It is clear that the farmer was small holding peasant who cultivated his fields through self-employment or family labour and the later was a big landholder who engaged labourers for agricultural work on his fields and or leased his unfarmed fields to sharecroppers. However, these two methods of organizing productive activity-suggesting two broad categories of peasants cannot be said to have been mutually exclusive. Many peasants belonging to the middle level of peasantry might have resorted, in different degrees, to both these methods. Then again, many Brahmana and Ksatriya peasants of even the lower level, for whom agriculture as a regular occupation was interdicted by the earlier Dharmasastra tradition[3], may have desisted from actual agricultural work.

The sources of early medieval period refer to two main types of the peasantry such as (i) free peasants and (ii) dependent peasants.

Free Peasants means that the peasants who owned their fields. The terms such as *Kutumba Ksetras* family fields of householder and *Kutumbi* i.e. Dipa and householder (*Kutumbi*) Revalla mentioned in the Anjaneri plates of Jayabhata III of Kalacuri[4] years 460 A.D. testify the similar notion. These two types of family fields have been separated clearly from the denoted piece of land. Evidently, such fields continued to be held by the particular families from generation to generation. The above references are also found in some Maitraka inscriptions[5] of the seventh century A.D. wherein the fields owned by cultivators have been described as *Kutumbins*. And such fields have been separated from the donated piece of land. The free peasants were considered to be independent with regard to their property. But the verse of *Narda* quoted in *Vyavaharakanda*[6] *of Laksmidhara* (12th. cent. AD) points

to the rights of the king to deprive a peasant of his field and house enjoyed even for three generations. Though in another verse, he has been given the moral advise that he should not take such a drastic step for the fields and the houses constitute the householders means of subsistence and basis of residence there.

Dependent Peasants means that peasants who did not have not their own fields. Such peasants, infect, worked on the other's fields as sharecroppers. It seems that the prosperous and free peasants would have been scanty and among the dependent peasants seemed to number have far exceeded that of the free peasants, the most common appears to have been share-croppers.[7] One may site *Medhatithi on Manu* (IV. 253, 9th. cent. AD) who clearly uses the words *ardasiri, ardhika, kutumbi, bhumikarsaka* for share croppers in the similar context. The word *ardhsiri* has also been explained by *Vijnanesvara* as a share cropper.[8] In a verse of *Brhaspati* cited in the *Vyavaharakanda of Laksmidhara*[9] (12th. cent. AD) the word *sirvahaka* used for the produce sharing peasants also indicates the similar viewpoint. It may be noted here that the word '*kutumbi*' used in some inscriptions to means generally the class of free peasants has been taken to mean a share cropper in the Dharmasastra works.[10] It has been revealed by the law books that land was rented out to the sudras for half the crops.[11] *The Mahapurana of Jinasena* (10th cent. A.D.) suggests that a village was largely inhabited by sudra peasants.[12] *Nitivakyamrta* of Somadeva Suri also mentions *sudra-karsakas*.[13] It seems that sudras constituted the majority of the class of dependent peasants in the capacity of temporary peasants and share croppers. What is thus significant to be noted is that both the owner of the land termed as *ksetrasvami* as well as the cultivator's *karsaka* who were either temporary tenants or share croppers contributed in field produce side by side. *Vyasa*[14] cited in *Vyavaharakanda* reveals that some temporary peasants rented fields from the landholders and got them tilled by the poorer peasants who were either share croppers or hired labourers. In Itsing's (7th. cent. AD) statement[15] it is testified that the Buddhist monasteries got their land cultivated by them at the charge of one sixth of the produce and provided fields and bulls to such peasants. Such peasants as being called temporary tenants or share croppers had to pay one sixth of the produce to the land owners.

Besides the temporary tenants, there were some other classes of produce sharing peasants who were engaged in agricultural activities on bond and contract basis. The eminent commentator *Medhatithi*,[16] (9th. cent. AD) states that the sudra share croppers were entitled to half the crop whereas *Brahaspati* quoted in the *Vyavasakanda of Laksmidhara*[17] (12th cent. AD) has classified share-croppers into two categories. One, if the share cropper was provided the food and clothing (by his master) he was entitled to one-fifth of the produce, if he was not given food and clothing would get one third of the produce. An account of the *Lekhapaddhati*[18] reveals that *Kutumbikas* were allowed to take one-third of the grain. The word *Kutumbika* appears to mean share-croppers hare which has been used by Medhatithi also for share-croppers.

The dependent peasantry also included the plough-drivers and other field labourers who rendered his services to landlords for their livelihood. The term *halika*[19] and *Halavahaka*[20] has been used for the ploughmen. The term *Kinasa* was used in the earlier period for a free Vaisya peasant[21] but in this period the term has been used for the plough-driver (*Kinasakasya halavahakasya*).[22] Similarly the term *Krsivala* generally used for the well-to-do peasants[23] has also been used for agricultural labourers. In the seventh century, Hiuen Tsang found the Sudras as the class of agriculturists who labored in ploughing and tillage[24] which reveals that the plough drivers were obliged to work in the fields of their masters. The dictum of Apastamba quoted in the *Vyavaharakanda*[25] suggests that if the plough drivers or the petty peasants tried to run away leaving the agricultural work on the land of their master they were to be beaten with a stick. This shows their miserable condition and the state of dependence.

Besides these two types of broad categorization, various other types of categories in peasantry are also found in the contemporary sources:

Peasants: On the basis of number of ploughs:

The number of ploughs owned by peasant was a rank symbol mainly evidencing his economic status based on the area of land under his cultivation. According to the *krsi-parsara*,[26] (probably between 6th -11th cent. AD) there is *Laksmi* (goddess of wealth) in ten ploughs, wealth (*dhana*) in five, and food (*bhaktam*) in three. It is further stated that with two ploughs there is mearly the maintenance (*posana*) of one's self and that a peasant possessing only one plough remains so poor as to get into debt (*rnam*).

Some other sources indicate that big landlords resorting to direct cultivation, on a large scale, possessed a large number of ploughs. In a story of the *Dasakumaracarita*[27] *of Dandin* (probably 6th cent. AD), we come across references to a *grahapati Janapada-mahtltara* in the region of Mithila and Pundra-desa who has been called as "*satahali*"[28] (one possessing 100 ploughs). At another place, in the same text, a *gramani* (gramapati-village headmen/lord) has been called *anantasira* (one possessing innumerable plougs).[29] These *gramanis* may be compared with the village headmen or *pancas* of the Mughal period who were called *muquddam*.[30] They wielded considerable power over their villages and being big landholders engaged laborers for their agricultural work.

The poor peasants of the lowest level who had no ploughs borrowed plough from others for the accomplishment of their work. The verse of the *kavamimansa of Rajsekhara's*[31] (9th cent. AD) describes such poor peasant's condition. It also refers that Balram had a plough, Siva had a couple of bulls and Visnu had a limitation of land. In the same a poor peasant who had no bull, could not depend on agriculture. This point shows that all the components of agriculture such as plough, bulls and land were not available to all the peasants. Such peasants fulfill their requirements with the borrowed components or things from the other rich peasants.

Peasants: On the basis of land right and land tenure:

There is noticeable evidence of two broad divisions of peasants on the basis of land rights and land tenure. *The commentary of Haradatta* (12th Cent. AD) on the *Apastamba Dharmasutra*[32] (2.11.2) refers to the *svatantraksetravan,* who was regarded as free peasant by virtue of his land rights and could punish his ploughmen if they left the agricultural work. The existence of *asvatantra-ksetravan* is also implied here, who had no rights to punish his ploughmen for such a default; only the ruler could punish them. Obviously the *svatantra ksetravan* were *ksetra svamins* (owners of plots) and the *asvatantra* (unfree) ones were dependent peasants (tenant peasants, share croppers etc.).

Peasants: On the basis of Manual labour:

The reference of *Kathakosa prakarana*[33] *of Jinesvara Suri* (11th Cent.AD.) indicates that the status of peasant who worked as manual labour in agriculture was viewed as lower in status than that of the peasants who were big landholders and employed laborers for their agricultural fields. But generally, only the village headmen, lords and a few men who were members of village council may have been big or rich landholders in villages.[34] In an *ekabhoga grama* (village enjoyed by an individual), only the village lord who may have carried on direct cultivation by engaging workman and also a big landholder, the other residents of the village were dependent peasants, agricultural laborers and servants.

The commentary of *Medhatithi on Manu*[35] (9th C. AD.) also indicates the prevalence of the two types of peasants on the basis of labour. One who lived by agriculture through self-employment (*svayam krtaya*) and the second one who maintained his livelihood from agriculture without getting engaged in actual agricultural work (*asvayamkrtaya*).

Peasants: On the basis of grain storage:

During the period under study, the *Brahmapurana*[36] while becoming more specific in regard to the storage of the yield divides the peasants into three categories. Such a division helps to understand that the landholdings were unequally controlled by individuals and consequently the amount of their products varied as testified in following manner:

(i) *Gartadhanyadhanah* (these who stored their grain in large underground chambers)

(ii) *Kusula-dhaninah* (Those who stored their grain in granaries)

(iii) *Ghataksiptadhanah* (the peasants who kept their grain earthen pots)

The peasants belonging to the last category was obviously poor peasants and constituted a noticeable segment of peasantry.

Peasants: On the basis of Varna-Jati:

This criterion also played an important yardstick in the gradation of peasants during the period understudy. According to the classical thinkers of Dharmasastra time, agriculture was as an occupation was assigned only to the vaisyas. However, in case of only *apaddharma* (occupation to be temporarily

resorted to in distress) it could be adopted by the people of the first two varnas also.[37] But the *Parasara smrti*,[38] (7th cent. AD) while providing an alternate view allows agriculture as sanctioned profession for all the varnas.

The literary as well as epigraphic evidences reveal that the Brahmana peasants having the same ritual status, belonged to different socio-economic strata from the material point of view.[39] The same was the case with the peasants of ksatriya[40] and vaisyas varnas. The sudra peasants mostly belonged to the strata of dependent peasantry.[41] A large number of sudras were agricultural workers also. According to R.S. Sharma, to become the sudra as peasants in early medieval period was the important nature of social development.[42]

In viewed above, peasantry differentiated internally in terms of certain significant variables. Therefore, all peasants cannot be aggregated together under a homogenous monolithic category. However, in some contexts, the commonalty of peasants-mostly including those of lower strata, who lived under similar agrarian economic condition of existence, was seen as being a category within the wider hierarchical social system.

In his *Brhatsamhita*[43], Varahamihira has mentioned the following *varnas*, occupational classes and social groups in course of associating different constellations (*naksatras*) with each of them: Brahmanas, Ksatriyas, *krsivalas* (peasants), *vaniks* (merchants), people belonging to Ugra *jati*, *sevajana* (menials), and Candalas. The trend of the toiling peasantry emerging as a socio-economic category cutting across the *varna* structure is, to some extent, reflected in the muddled accounts of the distinctive sections of society in the *Nitivakyamrta*[44] of somadeva (10th. cent. AD). We find here the separate mention of *krsivalas* along with Brahmanas, Ksatriyas, Kiratas, *vaniks* and Vaisyas.

Aparajita-prccha[45] also highlights the *vedis*[46] of different lengths (in hastas-cubits) for the main sections of the hierarchical society as follows:

(1) Brahmanas (7 *hastas*) (2) Ksatriyas (6 *hastas*) (3) Vaisyas (5 *hastas*) (4) Sudras (4 *hastas*) (5) *Karsakas* (3 *hastas*) (6) *Prakrits* (artisans and craftsmen) (2 *hastas* or 1 *hasta*)

In this hierarchy, the *karsakas* (lower peasantry including the ploughmen) have been assigned the fifth place in descending order. Here we find clearer evidence of the emergence of lower peasantry as a socio-economic class cutting across the *varna* structure of the society.

But the existing state of peasant differentiation, as noticed above, tended to preclude the emergence of a high degree of class consciousness. As such the peasantry cannot be said to have been a class for itself. Nevertheless, some piece of evidence[47] clearly reveal that, especially during the later phase of the early medieval period, the exaction of exorbitant taxes and forced labour, and other kinds of oppression at times led peasants to unite locally for protesting against oppressive measures of offering resistance to their oppressors.

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