

# Land Grants and Agrarian Change



**Subject: History**

**Unit: Towards Early Medieval India**

**Lesson: 8.2: Land Grants and Agrarian Change**

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# Land Grants and Agrarian Change

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# Land Grants and Agrarian Change

## 8.2: Land grants and agrarian change

In the contested spaces of Indian history, the debates on early medieval India are among the most difficult to negotiate. For decades, historians have worked towards characterizing this period, and have often done so in markedly different ways. Is this a period marked by the decline of state power or the expansion of state society? By the collapse into a rural economy or the expansion of agriculture? By urban decay or by a 'third urbanization'? By 'feudalism' or 'integration'? In many ways, the debates still remain unresolved.

Central to these debates is the issue of land grant **charters** which began to be issued on a wide scale in this period. This lesson is concerned with only the beginnings of this system, its origins and very first outlines. Much more can be written about how it developed over time.

### Land grants and land tenure

In early India, land possessed great value and the gift of an estate was a marker of status. The earliest inscriptions recording royal land grants were issued during Satavahana rule. But the practice truly grew in scope from the fourth century CE. By the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries, ruling dynasties across the subcontinent, as well as their subordinates and feudatories were all engaged in making such grants. This phenomenon cut across dynastic boundaries, reflecting new modes of expression and a whole new political economy.

Land grant charters were usually engraved on sheets of hammered copper. They are described as *tamrapatta*, a 'plate of copper' or *tamrashasana*, 'an order in copper'. If the text of the grant was long, then several copper sheets were used (often resembling leaves in a manuscript) and were bound together with a royal seal and ring.

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Figure 8.2.1: The Tiruvalangadu plates of Rajendra Chola: These plates record the gift of the Palaiyanur village to the Tiruvalangadu temple by Rajendra Chola (1012-1044 CE). Tiruvalangadu was a site associated with Shiva and is also commemorated in the hymns of the Bhakti saints.

The grant consists of 31 copper plates, the ends of which are secured by a large circular copper seal marked by the royal emblem of the Chola dynasty.

Source: <http://beta.thehindu.com/arts/history-and-culture/article70517.ece>

In the period between the fourth and seventh centuries, grants of land were being made to brahmanas and temples. Villages granted to brahmanas were known as *agraharas*, *brahmadeyas* or *shasanas*. Some grants were also made to Buddhist and Jaina monasteries, Vaishnava and Shaiva shrines, and there was also a smaller number of 'secular' grants to officials.

Inscriptions record in considerable detail the name of the donor, as well as the recipients, terminologies and circumstances of giving and receiving. These statements were formulaic but variable, and were usually recorded in Sanskrit. When we compare the inscriptions of this transitional period (4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries) with those of later periods, it is evident that many formal elements and themes were still developing. These inscriptions constitute a tradition that would evolve in complexity over time.

While administrative arrangements varied from grant to grant, elaborate protocols were involved not just in making the gift, but also in framing these records. Only when the transaction had been sanctioned and recorded by the royal bureaucracy could such a grant be issued.

### Value addition: what the sources say

#### Rules laid down by the *Vishnu Smriti* for the grant of land

"Let him (the king) bestow landed property upon brahmanas.  
To those upon whom he has bestowed (land), he must give a document, destined for

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the information of a future ruler, which must be written upon a piece of cloth, or a copper plate, or must contain the names of (three) immediate ancestors, a declaration of the extent of the land, and a description (of what results) from disrupting the donation and should be signed with his own seal. Let him not appropriate to himself landed property bestowed (upon brahmanas) by other rulers.”

**Source: Vishnu Smriti 3.81-83, cited in Willis, Michael. 2009. *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual: Temples and the Establishment of the Gods*. Cambridge: University Press, 153.**

The ruler’s decision to grant land was reinforced not only by administrative force on the ground, but also by appeals to scriptural authorities. The inscriptions often invoke norms laid out by *shruti, smriti and itihasa*; they also refer to specific texts such as the *Mahabharata* of Vyasa. They indicate how brahmanical ideology was being worked out in the fields of practice. They also tell us how the countryside was being shaped at this time.

Yet the prevalence of common terms, protocols and procedures across a wide area indicates that the scriptural injunctions were not hollow claims. Instead, they provided a set of ideas and practices that informed laws on property on a wide scale. The existence of such ideas is particularly evident in the **imprecatory** verses often found at the end of land grant inscriptions. Invoking the words of Vyasa, these detail the merit attained from granting land and the evil resulting from violating such a grant. Remarkably, these verses occur across an extensive area -- from north Bengal to Tamil Nadu -- far exceeding the territory controlled by any king. Despite their formulaic nature, they indicate the very real concerns about the validity and viability of such grants (Willis 2009, 152-153).

### Value addition: what the sources say

#### Imprecatory verses from the Gunaighar Plates of Vainyagupta

“Regarding the (future) protection (of the grant) these are verses sung by the reverend Vyasa, the compiler of the Vedas and the son of Parashara:

The giver of land rejoices in heaven for sixty thousand years (but) he who confiscates (granted land) and he who assents (to such actions) lives in hell for that period!

He who takes away land given by himself or by others rots along with his forefathers becoming a worm in ordure!

O Yudhishtira, best of kings, carefully protect the land granted to brahmanas by former (kings) for protection is better than the gift itself!”

**Source: Willis, Michael. 2009. *The Archaeology of Hindu Ritual: Temples and the Establishment of the Gods*. Cambridge: University Press, 153.**

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The logic of such a system was an expansionary one. If confiscation of estates was excluded, then the only possibility of acquiring or donating more land was to push into the interior regions which were still uncontrolled.

### Land grants and local states

Land grant charters often contain provisions indicating their recipients were to enjoy the land and its privileges undisturbed. This is evident both in the warnings given in imprecatory statements as well as in declarations stating that the benefit of the grant was to be enjoyed not just by the recipient but his son, grandson, great-grandson and beyond.

The repeated mention of land grants being accompanied by privileges and exemptions is regarded by historians of the 'feudalism school' as evidence of the weakening of royal authority and fragmentation of power. R. S. Sharma and other scholars have argued that such grants ate into and destroyed the rights of local communities (Sharma 1980, 4-6). Resources that had earlier been communal property belonging to village communities -- such as grasslands, pasture and water bodies -- were given over to the new landlords for use. Further, the king's orders stated not only that these areas were beyond the reach of his officials (who could enter only if they were chasing after a criminal), but also that the villagers had to obey the donees and pay taxes to them. All this led to the increased subjection of the peasantry, leaving them at the mercy of their new landlords.

### Different ways of defining the early medieval transition

At the heart of these arguments is the debate over defining the transition to early medieval India. Thus, the feudalism hypothesis began with the assumption that early historic India was marked by centralized states. The paradigm of such a state was the Mauryan empire -- marked by its vast territory and diverse peoples. The early historic period witnessed the expansion of urbanism, with cities based on trade and commercial enterprise. The decline of trade, among other factors, is said to have precipitated a socio-economic crisis as well as political fragmentation. This led urban civilization to relapse into a subsistence economy based on agriculture in the post-Gupta period.

Against this hypothesis of decline and fragmentation, another set of historians, among them B. D. Chattopadhyaya and Hermann Kulke, argue that the early medieval period can best be viewed in terms of an 'integrationist' framework. According to Chattopadhyaya, this period can be characterized by the expansion of certain processes including: (a) agrarian expansion across various regions of the subcontinent, (b) the spread of state societies through local state formation, (c) peasantization of tribes and their incorporation within the *varna-jati* framework (Chattopadhyaya 1994, 16). Compared to the catastrophic break envisioned by the historians of the feudalism school, the integrationist paradigm sees the early medieval period as marked by the acceleration of processes of change.

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These different ways of viewing the transition necessarily entail different ways of viewing the phenomenon of land grants. These discussions have also led the feudalism hypothesis to be questioned on several counts.

To begin with, it is argued that land grant charters were legal documents concerned with transactions and technicalities, rather than overarching political statements about the power of the king. To argue that they represent an erosion of the king's power and privileges would amount to reading too much into them.

Further, not all land grants summarily gave away all the rights of the crown. Also, although estates were being set up in certain areas, large tracts remained in the hands of the crown. Still other areas continued to be managed in accordance with systems that had been in place for centuries. These are distinctions that must be recognized and specified.

Through land grants, the state sought to expand its reach, and the economic and political framework put in place by these grants eventually led to economic expansion and extension of the state's control.

### Value addition: interesting details

#### Different units of measuring land

Various land measure terms find mention in texts and inscriptions alike. Of these:

The *angula* was the smallest unit, measuring  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch.

The *hasta* was the standardized distance between elbow tip and middle finger, about 18 inches.

In eastern India, measures such as the *adhavapa* ( $\frac{3}{8}$  -  $\frac{1}{2}$  acre), *dronavapa* ( $1\frac{1}{2}$  - 2 acres), and *kulyavapa* (12-16 acres) were in use.

The *pataka* was a larger unit of 60-80 acres.

The diversity of terms and units suggests that there was no uniform set of measurements and different regions had diverse ways of measuring land.



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The image shows a land measuring rod from a medieval Tamil temple. The inscriptions mention measuring rods whenever land was granted with privileges and exemptions.

**Source: Singh, Upinder. 2009. *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12<sup>th</sup> Century*. Delhi: Pearson Longman, 493; <http://www.tnarch.gov.in/epi/ins13.htm>**

### Intervening in marginal and outlying lands

Grants of land to brahmanas, temples and officials led to political intervention in regions so far untouched by state society. A direct result of these processes was the evolution of new agrarian regions and settlements.

Often, terms used in the inscriptions indicate that the granted land was away from inhabited zones. The marginal nature of the land is indicated by terms such as *ardhakhila* ('partially productive'), *apratikara* ('producing little revenue'), *aprada* ('not yielding anything') or even *atraranye* ('here in the forest'). The Tipperah Copper Plate Grant of Lokanatha, issued in Bengal in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, refers to the creation of a settlement for brahmanas in forest land (*atavi-bhukhanda*) which had been inhabited by wild animals so far.

In the two centuries of Vakataka rule, central India and the northern Deccan experienced considerable agrarian expansion. K. M. Shrimali's analysis of 131 settlements listed in the inscriptions leads him to suggest that many of these sites emerged in this period. Grants made by the Vakatakas include donations to temples and local cults, but the great majority of gifts were made to brahmanas. Plotting the locations of such grants on a map, Shrimali shows how the majority of these estates were located in outlying regions of the kingdom. Most appear to be located in the foothills of the Satpura and Maikal range, and are absent from regions lying within a 180 km radius from Nagpur (Shrimali 1987, 25-30). Clearly land grants served to 'Sanskritize' outlying regions and involved groups living in the peripheries in networks of the political centre.

As agriculture expanded, there was also the expansion and diversification of agricultural techniques. But as R. N. Nandi argues, to claim virgin land, grassland or forest for agriculture was not always an easy or feasible process. Considerable investment of energy and resources was required and irrigation facilities had to be provided as well. Such resources were usually beyond the reach of ordinary peasants or agriculturalists of a village, however much they might have wished to undertake such expansion. In contrast, precisely these kinds of resources and additional privileges were granted to land grant holders, allowing them to facilitate the process of agrarian expansion (Nandi 2002, 317). Within existing settlements, it made more sense for peasants to develop dryland and waste plots in the village and increase productivity by excavating new sources of irrigation and evolving a diverse complement of crops.



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Figure 8.2.2: Sendan Maran's Irrigation Inscription, written in Vatteluttu script. Dated to the 7th century CE, this inscription was found on the bed of the Vaigai river.

Studies have shown how in the Tamil country, the expansion of agrarian settlements went alongside the patronage given to irrigation works

Source: <http://www.tnarch.gov.in/epi/ins4.htm>

Within the granted estates -- through the development of agriculture and pastoral herds, trade and commercial transactions -- different groups came to develop new forms of wealth. In this complex web of interactions, villagers met and interacted through administrative networks, circuits of pilgrimage or the setting up of local markets.

Alongside the dissemination of agriculture, went the dissemination of brahmanical ideology and Sanskritic culture. Since the king gave land and privileges to brahmanas and temple priests, they supported him and sang his praises.

### The rise of local states

In such a scheme of analysis, land grants become not agents of dismemberment, but instruments of state formation. As states extended their power through the countryside, the integration of rural economy and society led to the creation of an agrarian base upon which new ruling groups could assert themselves. Thus, rather than a period marked by political fragmentation, there was an intensive growth of regional kingdoms. Many of these kingdoms endured for several centuries (Kulke 1982, 245).

Different kinds of political forces rose up in the new regions. Beginning as feudatories or dependent lineages of earlier imperial dynasties, they eventually acquired enough confidence and power to assert their own rule. The Maitraka dynasty, for instance,

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established the first regional state in the Saurashtra region. This area had been witness to the rule of the Mauryas, Indo-Greeks, Kshatrapas and Guptas. But the Maitrakas, who began their political career as *senapatis* (military commanders) of the Guptas, were the first to focus their power in the region (Sinha 2001, 153).

Land grant charters issued by the Maitrakas facilitated territorial and political integration. Grants issued in the first seventy years of their rule were confined to the districts of Bhavnagar, Amreli and Kheda and sought to bring the resources of these areas into the coffers of the kingdom. Aside from the terms of the grant, the charters also contained genealogies, praises and titles of the rulers. When such documents were read out in the countryside, Nandini Sinha argues, they would have impressed upon the people the ruler's authority, thereby facilitating the transition from 'chiefship' to 'kingship' (ibid, 152).

Many new lineages emerged from local bases in the Gupta and post-Gupta periods. Between 400-600 CE, around 50 new kingdoms are said to have emerged in the regions of present-day Maharashtra, eastern Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Bengal (Sahu 1997, 18). These states emerged not from the breakdown of an earlier state but through autonomous developments taking place in new regions, reflecting the important transitions occurring in the agrarian economies and social organization of formerly marginal regions.



Figure 8.2.3: The recent discovery of a copper plate inscription from Shimoga throws light on the Alupas, a lineage which ruled in parts of Malnad and the coastal districts of Karnataka for over a thousand years, beginning in 450 CE. The inscription is engraved on a copper plate measuring 20x20 cm. The emblem of the Alupas, the figure of twin fishes, is

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carved on top. On the basis of its palaeography, the charter is ascribed to the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. It records that Aluvarasa II of the Alupa family made a tax-free grant to the Belmannu Sabha on the day of a solar eclipse.

Source: <http://www.thehindu.com/2009/11/19/stories/2009111951260300.htm>

### Alterations in agrarian space: rural settlements

The extension of agriculture also led to the expansion of rural settlements across the country. For studying rural settlements on the ground, there exists no alternative to archaeology. But early medieval archaeology is an under-developed field. The need for rural settlement studies remains a pressing one.

How do we define a *grama* as an area of settlement? Based on a study of literary texts and inscriptions, Chattopadhyaya argues that three constituent elements of a *grama* can be identified. These are: the *vastu* or habitation area, the *kshetra* or the cultivated tract, and the *gochara* or the area reserved for pasture. Of course, variations in this division of space occurred from region to region and from one village to another (Chattopadhyaya 1990, 6-7).

#### Value addition: interesting details

##### A debate on defining the *grama*

An early medieval text, the *Abhidhanarajendra* of Vijayarajendra Surishvara, has a detailed debate on how to define a *grama*. Various opinions are put forward by various authorities on this issue.

One view held that a *grama* included all the land on which the cows of a village could graze. But then, as someone pointed out, cows could also graze on the land belonging to other villages!

Another argument put forward was that the *grama* was an area that grass-cutters and wood-cutters could cover in a day. Against this also, objections were raised.

Eventually, the text concludes the debate by citing an authority who states that a *grama* is defined by fenced and enclosed space -- a most unsatisfactory resolution!

**Source: Chattopadhyaya, B. D. 1990. *Aspects of Rural Settlements and Rural Society in Early Medieval India*. Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co, 5.**

Studies of settlement patterns can shed important light on the changing nature of settlements, their social composition, as well as the link between habitation areas and other features of the rural landscape.

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In her survey of the Shorapur Doab in the Gulbarga District of Karnataka, Suchi Dayal provides a long-term perspective on agrarian adaptations in a 'famine zone'. Drought is common in this region, for the Bhima and Krishna rivers reduce to a trickle in the dry months. But despite its marginal location, the presence of inscriptions indicates the area was occupied from very early times. These inscriptions increase during the rule of the Rashtrakutas and Chalukyas, with a large concentration of *brahmadeya* settlements being established in the region (Dayal 2005, 83-84). The location of these *brahmadeyas* was marked by arable land and proximity to water sources (whether seep springs, tanks, ponds, rivers or streams). Over time, temples were set up at many of these sites and the proximity of the temple to the water body also increased its importance in this parched region. Dayal argues that the Shorapur Doab was highly forested in its early history. The state's intervention in this region was influenced both by the availability of mineral resources and its advantage for conducting trade in the region. The introduction of brahmana communities served to spearhead cultural colonization, bringing new lands under cultivation and taking forward the acculturation of tribal groups (Ibid, 88).

Land grant charters often specify the boundaries (*maryada* or *sima*) of the granted areas. These boundaries were usually natural landmarks such as streams, cultivated plots belonging to individuals, a monastery compound, or even the boundary where a neighboring village began (Chattopadhyaya 1990, 19). With time, the increasing density of settlements and greater use of agrarian space led to more detailed and complicated delineations of donated land. References to rivers, wells, tanks, orchards, marshland, pasturage, cremation grounds, temples, monasteries etc. give us a picture of a rural landscape rapidly advancing in complexity.



Figure 8.2.4: A memorial for a cock, 6th century CE, Indalur, Vilupuram District of Tamil Nadu

Source: <http://www.tnarch.gov.in/epi/ins11.htm>

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Figure 8.2.5: A memorial for a hero and his dog, 624 CE, Eduttanur, Tiruvannamalai District, Tamil Nadu

Source: <http://www.tnarch.gov.in/epi/ins11.htm>

Over time, an individual *grama* could become the centre of a cluster of settlements, acquiring a nodal position in the settlement hierarchy. Through administrative developments, military movements, or religious or commercial networks, a given village could even become an important urban centre. In such situations, sometimes the name of the *grama* remained unchanged; in other cases, these changes are reflected in the changing suffix of the settlement: from *grama* to '*pura*', '*nagara*' or '*pattana*'.

The theory of the unchanging Indian village has proved to be an enduring Orientalist construct. However, it has very little historical basis. For instance, cremation grounds and temples were not present in all settlements, but were often shared between certain villages. Nor did each village possess the full complement of caste or occupational groups, forcing them to look outside for such services. The setting up of ritual, administrative and commercial networks also meant that villagers came to interact with each other. And above all, the premise of endogamy that determined the caste system meant that women were married into villages other than their own (Sahu 1997, 35-36). Thus, rather than a time of stagnation, the transition to the early medieval period was marked by far-reaching changes in rural society and economy.

### Brahmanas and local societies

Individual villages and the networks that bound them constituted the basic framework of early medieval society. And village communities, like villages, varied according to time and place.

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### Reconstituting rural society

Historians have tended to broadly distinguish between brahmanic and non-brahmanic villages in this period. Within brahmanic villages, a further distinction is made between an *agrahara* (a settlement of brahmanas) and *devadana* (a settlement oriented around a temple). But lately, scholars have argued for the need to closely study the degree of brahmanical intervention in specific villages. For instance, while the setting up of an *agrahara* involved considerable intervention, the gift of a few plots of land to brahmanas in a village would not fundamentally alter the existing social structure (Sahu 1997, 27).



Figure 8.2.6: This set of copper plates was recovered from the Ganjam District of Orissa and is now preserved at the Orissa State Archaeology Museum in Bhubaneswar. Dated to the reign of the Shvetaka king Anantavarma (c.8<sup>th</sup> century CE), it records the gift of four plots of land situated northwest of the village of Bhullavanika in the Hemvakamatamva *vishaya*. The gift was made to four brahmanas -- Vinayakasvami, Narayanasvami, Dugurlasvami and Sarvasvami -- who are said to belong to different *gotras*.

Source: [http://asi.nic.in/pdf\\_data/sanskrit\\_and\\_dravidian.pdf](http://asi.nic.in/pdf_data/sanskrit_and_dravidian.pdf)

But in outlying areas, the intervention of brahmanas in rural society involved the imposition of a bureaucratic and priestly elite. It imposed a level of 'Sanskritization' on local cultures. Nor was this influence limited to the cultural domain alone. For estates to reproduce themselves and acquire the labour needed to work them, it was also necessary to have a well-defined social structure. This was established through the *varna-jati* system with its ideology of difference and well-defined hierarchies. At the ground level, however, it is nearly impossible to order rural society into the idealized categories of the *Dharmashastra* texts. Within villages there existed a range of groups -- from brahmanas to *samantas* (officials), peasant castes and servile groups.

Meanwhile, the transformation of tribes into castes or the 'peasantization of tribes' was gaining rapidity in this period. The medieval period, in particular, was to see the rise of peasant castes like the Jats and ruling lineages like the Rajputs to the centre stage of history. While the *varna* system provided the overall normative model for such 'incorporation', the categorization of *jati* allowed for regional variations in the relative

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positioning of such groups. Such changes cannot be seen as independent of the transformations in agrarian regions and state societies, but were fundamentally linked to them.

### The rise of feudal ties

From the 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the growth of the agrarian economy led to the emergence of regional landed aristocracies. There was the fission of previously undifferentiated village or tribal communities with the rise of new ruling elites. The reconstitution of rural society also meant greater differentiation within its ranks. It meant the emergence of new kinds of servile groups -- the lower peasantry, village servants, tenants and lower artisans -- upon whose labour the entire structure of society rested. The increased subjection of the peasantry is seen as an essential element of the rise of 'feudal ties'.

Central to the feudalism hypothesis is the notion that the phenomenon of land grants led to the rise of a class of landlords at the expense of the peasant possession of land. The subjection of the peasantry increased and their rights were curtailed even in areas where they had possessed greater freedom before (Sharma 1980, 214-217). In the centuries of the transition and beyond, share-croppers and wage-labourers became the basis on which the agrarian order of early medieval India was formed.

Such changes, however, took place over an extended period of time. In his study of Gupta and post-Gupta inscriptions from Bengal, Chattopadhyaya points out that even at the height of its power, the Gupta state tried to accommodate the rural landed interests functioning through supra-village groups. Thus, the Baigram record of 447-448 CE asked those demarcating the plot for sale to ensure that existing areas of cultivation were not disturbed. Further, Chattopadhyaya points out, official orders of this period usually began with the expression *kushalam-anuvarnya bodhayanti* i.e. 'informs after enquiring about their welfare.' As a form of address, this is quite different from the later expressions, '*samadishati*' or '*samajnapayati*', conveying commands or orders that were imposed on the village folk. (Chattopadhyaya 1990, 44)

In a debate that took place between Harbans Mukhia and R. S. Sharma in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Mukhia argued that the peasant in medieval India possessed some measure of 'autonomy' since he possessed complete control over the means of production. Sharma responded with a barrage of questions:

What is the significance of owning the means of production? Is it not meant for using the fruits of production? Do the fruits stay with the peasant or are these substantially appropriated by the landlord? How does this appropriation become possible? What is the mechanism that enables the landlord to appropriate the surplus, a part of that fruit? Is it merely because of his control over the means of production or because of his coercive power? Or is it extracted through the ideological weapon such as the peasant's belief that he is duty-bound to pay? (Sharma 2009, 209)

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These are questions that need to be posed in any study of agrarian relations in early Indian history.

In early medieval India, land was undoubtedly the primary means of production, the basis of economic activity. To work the land, an individual required other means which included labour, implements and animals. But, as Sharma argues, even if a peasant possessed his own field, his own oxen and his own implements, did this translate into actual autonomy and control? Given that there was repeated and regular interference from landlords, who sought to extract taxes, forced labour and other kinds of dues, the peasantry could not possess efficient control over the means of production (Ibid, 209-210).

### Value addition: did you know?

#### Dependent labour in a Buddhist monastery

The Buddhist text, the *Samantapasadika* of Buddhaghosha, provides certain details of interest to the historian regarding the workforce in Buddhist monasteries. It states that these workmen were not slaves, but were obliged to work for the *sangha* according to a stipulated manner. While some worked full time for the monastery, others needed to work for the *sangha* every morning, while yet others had to provide their labour every fifth day or once in a fortnight. When they were not providing labour to the monastery, these individuals could work as hired labour for others. Similar conditions were laid down for dependent weavers and washermen.

**Source:** Yadava, B. N. S. 2002. The Problem of the Emergence of Feudal Relations in Early India, in *The Feudal Order: State, Society and Ideology in Early Medieval India*, ed. D. N. Jha. New Delhi: Manohar, 268.

### Exploitative regimes in agriculture

Varieties of servitude existed in early medieval India. While serfdom of the European type was absent, the exploitation of peasants by landlords was widespread and took ever newer forms. Although slaves did not dominate the workforce, the practice of slavery continued, especially in the wealthier households.

Scholars like Sharma and B. N. S. Yadava have pointed to the fact that inscriptions record the gift of villages as well as villagers, i.e., transfers not only of plots of land but of the people residing on them as well (Yadava 2002, 257). The purpose of such **injunctions** was to ensure that local communities would provide labour, dues and services to the donees and for this reason, they were forced to remain attached to the land.

Sharma argues that while the early grants gave the donee only a few exemptions and property rights, the nature of concessions granted by later inscriptions made the donee the owner of the land and the lord of his estate. For instance, provisions in the grants state that he was allowed to collect all kinds of taxes and all kinds of income, proper and improper,



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fixed and unfixed. Further, at the end of many of these lists, the terms *adi*, *adikam* (etcetera) were appended. Land grant charters from Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Konkan and Gujarat of Gupta and post-Gupta times contain provisions allowing the beneficiary to evict peasants, introduce new peasants, as well as assign land to those he pleased. Such concessions could plunge the cultivators into servitude, also giving the beneficiaries superior rights over the land and its produce (Sharma 2009, 210-211).

After the seventh century, many grants gave away villages along with such resources as fertile lands, water resources, different kinds of trees and pasture grounds. For instance, in eastern India grants record the gift of mango, mahua, and jackfruit along with the gift of land. Such provisions served to alienate the peasantry, not only from the fruits of their labour but also from resources which had hitherto been held in common by village communities (Ibid, 210-211). Such commands reflected an exercise of authority, an indication of power over the people of the village. But merely issuing these commands was never enough. They had to be backed by coercion and force.

Regimes of forced labour (*vishti*) also find mention in inscriptions from western, central and south India. The extraction of forced labour was among the privileges granted to the beneficiaries. To fulfill his desire to increase or augment his resources, the landlord could ask the peasantry to carry out his orders. This authority to extract obedience and control over labour power could then be used in limitless ways -- from the management of the estate to cultivation, from the digging of wells to rendering personal service (Sharma 2009, 211). *Vishti* amounted to a degree of control that extended beyond the payment of taxes and dues: the ruling authority could lay claim to the labour of an individual, to his very self.

What is also interesting is the fact that after 1000 CE, references to *vishti* reduce and disappear. Instead of forced labour, there is growing reference to an increased number of revenue terms. For instance, in south India under the Cholas, references to *vetti* reduce but references to *kodamai* (produce rent) increase in frequency. It follows that a rise in agrarian productivity as well as the evolution of a more stratified society led the burden of exploitation to shift from forced labour to increased taxes and dues.

What we see coming into being in the early medieval period is a social structure based on increasing inequality. The ideology that marked this period was instituted by the brahmanas and upheld by rulers, and it worked to the advantage of both groups. The primary division was between landed intermediaries and the peasantry, although even these groups came to be divided into several categories and sub-categories. Land grants had a central role to play in the growth of such divisions, for they created differential access to power and resources within local communities and these differences only increased with time.

Alongside economic exploitation, both caste and gender discrimination had a central role to play. Central to brahmanical patriarchy was the control of women. The reproductive powers of women had to be harnessed and controlled so as to extend the lineage and maintain the domination of the upper castes. The caste system also worked to control and limit the access of the lower castes to economic resources and social status.

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The growing power of temples and their spread into the countryside is another phenomenon that marked the early medieval centuries. From the 8<sup>th</sup> century onwards, historians have noted the extension of the temple into rural worlds which had so far been marked by local cults and folk deities. Cults of such deities were usually marked by small shrines at road crossings or within villages. But the temple became an indication of political power and structural temples grew into towering edifices. So much so that, by the 10<sup>th</sup> century, they came to dominate the surrounding countryside and also became landed magnates engaging in economic and cultural transactions.

### Value addition: interesting details

#### Setting up Shiva's temple



The Asanapat Nataraja Image Inscription dated to c.550 CE was found at Asanapat in the Keonjhar District of Orissa. The inscription praises Maharaja Shatrubhanja "who won in many battles, who was an overlord of many powerful chiefs, who was the lord of the Vindhyan forests... who gave away lakhs of cows... who granted *agraharas* to brahmanas of different countries..." and so on. It records his patronage and construction of a temple.

The image shows the eight-armed Shiva-Vinadhara dancing the *tandava*, with his attendant Bhairava seated cross-legged on the right and Nandi, the bull, seated on the left.

The inscription shows how in formerly forested regions, under patronage from new

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ruling lineages, brahmanical deities and the structural temple were making their presence felt.

**Source:** Krishnan, K. G. 2002. *Uttankita Sanskrit Vidya Aranya Epigraphs*, Vol.III. Mysore: Uttankita Vidya Aranya Trust, 414-416.

The rise of the temple is but one of the many markers of the progressive feudalization of the Indian countryside. These processes unleashed in the 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries were to grow and expand over the course of several centuries. They set in place an economy based on land and a society marked by hierarchical differences. Inequalities in the distribution of land, unequal access to ritual practices and resources, caste stratification and brahmanical patriarchy: these features defined the world within which many people lived out their lives. These developments were to have a long legacy. Their resonances can be seen in the Indian countryside even today.

### Summary

- Questions relating to the agrarian order are central to the debates on characterizing the transition to early medieval India. Of particular importance is the phenomenon of land grant charters which began to be issued on a large scale by ruling dynasties across the subcontinent in this period.
- Grants of land to brahmanas, temples and officials are regarded by historians of the 'feudalism school' as marking the weakening of royal authority and evidence of fragmentation of power. In contrast, scholars subscribing to the 'integrationist' paradigm see this period as marked by agrarian expansion and the spread of state society.
- The integration of rural economy and society led to the creation of an agrarian base upon which new ruling groups could assert themselves. Between 400-600 CE, around 50 new kingdoms emerged in the regions of modern Maharashtra, eastern Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa and Bengal.
- The extension of agriculture also led to the expansion of rural settlements across the country. In outlying areas, the intervention of brahmanas in rural society involved the imposition of a bureaucratic and priestly elite. It imposed a level of 'Sanskritization' on local cultures.
- Land grants created differential access to power and resources within local communities and these differences only increased with time. From the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the growth of the agrarian economy led to the emergence of regional landed aristocracies. The increased subjection of the peasantry and the extraction of forced labour (*vishti*) are seen as essential elements of the rise of 'feudal ties'.

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- Thus, rather than a time of stagnation, the transition to the early medieval period was marked by far-reaching changes in rural society and economy.

### 8.2: Exercises

#### Essay questions

- 1) What differences exist between the arguments of those historians who advocate the idea of 'Indian feudalism' versus those who suggest an 'integrationist' approach? Do you think the transition to the early medieval period can be characterized as being marked by 'change through continuity'?
- 2) Discuss the importance of land grant charters in the agrarian order in the period between the fourth and seventh centuries CE.

#### Objective questions

Question Number	Type of question	LOD
1	Multiple choice question	1

#### Question

The earliest inscriptions recording royal land grants belong to the rule of which dynasty:

- a) Mauryas
- b) Satavahanas

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c) Shungas

d) Pallavas

**Correct Answer /  
Option(s)**

b)

### ***Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer***

The first examples of royal land grant charters that we have were issued by the Satavahana dynasty.

### ***Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer***

Reviewer's Comment:

Question Number	Type of question	LOD
2	Multiple choice question	1

### **Question**

Which of the following terms refers to a grant made to a temple establishment:

a) *Agrahara*

b) *Devadana*

c) *Brahmadeya*

d) *Shasana*

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Correct Answer / Option(s)	b)
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### *Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer*

*Devadana* refers to a grant made to a temple establishment.

### *Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer*

*Agrahara*, *Brahmadeya* and *Shasana* are all terms referring to grants of land to brahmanas.

Reviewer's Comment:

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## Glossary

**charters:** a written grant usually made by a sovereign political authority which is a record of rights and privileges that have been given to a new institution

**imprecatory:** suggestive of a curse or of instruction prohibiting any kind of interference

**injunctions:** a law or order that compels or restrains a person from undertaking certain acts

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