

Agrarian Growth Under the Western Gangas of Karnataka

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Abstract: The present paper is an attempt to underline the agrarian growth in the early medieval Karnataka under the Western Gangas on the basis of the inscriptions issued by them and their feudatories. The territories under discussion suggests that the agrarian economy was based mainly on the cultivation of cereal crops like paddy, millets, corn in addition to the crops like black gram, mustard and sugarcane. Besides that, cultivation of plantation crops like plantain, beetle nut, coconut and sandal is also attested. A study of these inscriptions suggests that one strategy to facilitate agrarian expansion was to promote creation of irrigation facilities, mainly through promoting construction and maintenance of tanks. Besides that, pieces of land and villages were also donated to the brahmanas, various religious institutions, the warriors and the dependents of deceased warriors. For this purpose, brahmanas were invited not only from the close vicinities but also from the places as far as Ahichchhatra. These grants were in a number of cases declared 'free of all hindrances'. But a critical study of the inscriptions suggests that such grants also did carry some financial commitments to the state. This undermines an important argument of the 'Indian Feudalism' model that such grants liquidated the revenue basis of the early medieval states. The study also shows that with the evolution of the state, the nature of land grants also changed. A critical study of these inscriptions also suggests that when the state was directly and indirectly encouraging agrarian expansion, it was motivated by the need to expand its revenue basis, and was not forced by any crisis, social or financial, as argued by the proponents of 'Indian Feudalism' model.

Key words: Agrarian growth, Western Gangas, bittuvaṭṭa, kuṛimbadeṛe, khaṇḍikāvāpa/ khaṇḍukāvāpa, gāvunḍas, brahmadēya, bālgaḷcu/vālgaḷcu, sarva-bādhā-parihāra, aṭṭadeṛe, kuṛudeṛe

The early medieval period of Indian history was characterized by an unprecedented pace of agrarian growth in different regions of the subcontinent. The growth was facilitated by the land grants made to the religious and secular donees by the states and its agents, which in a number of instances, penetrated the regions and localities which had not witnessed the spread of state society even during the period of empires. But the factors responsible for the widespread practice of landgrants have been

a debated issue among the scholars. Equally debated is the issue of the effects of these landgrants on the state exchequer. The present article attempts to study various aspects of the agrarian growth under the Western Gangas (c. fourth century to tenth century CE) who established the first indigenous state in southern Karnataka. The study is based on the Western Ganga inscriptions, published in various epigraphical volumes particularly Annual Reports of Mysore Archaeological Department and Epigraphia Carnatica.

The agrarian economy under the Western Gangas was based on the cultivation of cereal crops including paddy, millets, corn and possibly, black gram in addition to commercial crops like mustard and sugarcane. The inscriptions also record the donations of gardens which were in all probability used for the cultivation of plantation crops like plantain, beetle nut, cocoanut etc. Reference to sandal paste may be taken as an evidence of sandal-tree plantation. But going by the number of inscriptional references, one may conclude that paddy was the most widely grown crop followed by millets. That may at least mean that the state was giving top priority to the cultivation of paddy as it could be the staple crop of the region. That may be due the fact that the climatic conditions of the region were not suited for the cultivation of other cereals such as wheat and barley.

One of the measures adopted by the Gangas to promote agrarian expansion was to encourage creation and protection of irrigation facilities. Due to the seasonal nature of the flow of the rivers of the region, with the exception of Cauvery, the steady supply of water could be ensured only through man-made sources. During the period of our study, such sources were created mainly in the form of tanks followed by canals and rivulets. The importance of tanks in the rural landscape is attested by frequent references to tanks while demarcating the donated lands. The construction, repair and maintenance of tanks were actively encouraged by the state and the local ruling elites and corporate bodies. It was done by assigning land grants (called *bittuvaṭṭa*) to the individuals or corporate bodies. The involvement of the local elites and corporate bodies in the donation of such grants, either as the donor or the donee, suggests that such initiatives were mainly the responsibilities of these individuals and bodies. The destruction of tank was seen as a great sin.

Another important aspect of rural economy was cattle-rearing. The cattle-raids, and the donations made for the valor displayed during these raids indicate the importance of cattle in the contemporary society. The cattle were reared both for their importance as a draught animal and for the dairy products. The Agara inscription of Shripurusha records that the 'Twenty' were exempted from impressment of bullocks. The inscriptional references suggesting ghee as a taxable item attest that the

dairy products had commercial value also. In addition to these, sheep were also reared. The lone inscriptional reference to it suggests that there existed a distinct class of shepherds also who were subjected to the tax called kuṛimbadeṛe.

In addition to patronizing irrigation facilities, the state facilitated agrarian expansion through landgrants. It is interesting to note that the various aspects of these landgrants had close connection with the evolutionary stages of the Western Ganga state. During the first phase of its evolution i.e. from about fourth century CE to seventh century CE, the donations were generally made by the king. The major beneficiaries were brahmanas, both as individuals and in group, followed by religious institutions. A group of brahmana donees could be as large as consisting of seventy-four brahmanas. These brahmanas were often invited from the neighboring villages and, in some cases, from north India. For example, Gattavadi plates of Nititmarga-Ereganga, recounts that the ancestors of the brahmana donee Shivaryya were invited from Ahichchhatra and were settled in the great village of Tanagunduru in the Vanavasa-ṛiṣaya. This practice of inviting and settling down the brahmanas was very well in fashion in the contemporary Karnataka. It is accepted that these brahmanas brought a better knowledge of agriculture with them and helped in agrarian expansion of the donated lands.

During this phase, of the religious institutions, the temples of Arhat received maximum number of donations. The temples of Arhat, belonging to different sects like mula-samgha and Yapaniya-samgha, received donations from the rulers and, in one case, from the favorite courtesan of Simhavarman, called Nandayya. As far as land grants to Buddhist institutions are concerned, there is only one recorded instance of donation to a Buddhist vihara. Though there is no record of donation to any brahmanical temple in this phase, it does not mean lack of state patronage to puranic Brahmanism. It may be noticed in the remains of the contemporary temple, which are found overlaid by the structures of later temples.

Similarly, the phase also does not provide any instance of secular land donation except the occasional donations made to the writers of the charters, who could be a non-brahmana also. The land thus donated generally measured one khaṇḍikāvāpa/ khaṇḍukāvāpa. These donations were often labelled as a brahmadēya. That may mean that the grant would be governed by the rules applicable to the brahmadēya grants.

During the second phase, i.e. from about mid-seventh century to about 1000 CE, the political and social base of both the donors and the donees got broadened. Though the list of donors continued to

be dominated by the rulers, the members of royal family, subordinate rulers, royal officials, corporate bodies, gāvūṇḍas etc. also made land donations. Now the religious institutions outnumbered the brahmanas as the main beneficiaries of the religious grants. The brahmanas, individuals as well as groups, continued to receive land grants. The grants were also made to their corporate bodies.

This phase also witnessed the beginning of secular land grants on a comparable scale. Most of such grants were made to the dependents of the deceased warriors. In addition to them, the warriors themselves, subordinate rulers, royal officials, caretakers of tanks, local elites like gāvūṇḍas, corporate bodies were also the beneficiaries. During this phase also, we get some instances of the writers being paid in terms of land grants enjoying brahmadēya status. But now the lands donated to a 'writer' could even comprise of one village, along with a hamlet (palli), in addition to twenty-four nivarttanās of land in some other village.

The land thus granted, in both the phases, included a variety of land. In many of the instances, the object of grant was a village. In some instances, the village was donated along with a hamlet (palli). But in many of the instances, the granted land was referred to as fertile one, generally measured in its sowing capacity i.e. kaṇḍuga, khaṇḍuga, khaṇḍika, khaṇḍuka, koḷas, kuḍabas or in terms of nivarttana. It could also be a waste land, garden land, pasture land or forest land. The donation actually consisted of either one or more of the above-mentioned variety of land. These objects of donation could spread over more than one administrative unit. For example, the brahmana Madhavasharma received the following as hindrance-free grant during the reign of Shripurusha- from each of the four villages of Eḷangudalur, Mariyachi-gudalur, Paruvi and Shripuram, land to the extent of being sown with twelve khaṇḍikas of corn; house site of the extent of being sown with three kuḍabas; village waste land of the extent of being sown with thirty kuḍabas; garden land of the extent of being sown with two khaṇḍikas; and forest land of the extent of being sown with thirty khaṇḍikas of millet etc.

Types of tenure:

Now the question arise- under what terms and conditions were these donations made? The question assumes significance in the light of the dominant view that, with a number of revenue and administrative exemptions, such grants created a dent in the state exchequer. A number of inscriptions do not mention the privileges granted with the donated land. But a good number of inscriptions actually do. As a result, we get a variety of land tenures prevalent in the Western Ganga state like

brahmadēya, agrahāra, dēvabhōga and dēvasva, namasya, neṛe-śāsana (sarva-mānya and sarva-namasya), nettar-paṭṭi or nettar-paḍi (Sanskrit equivalents of rakta-mānya or rudhir-mānya), vālgaḷcu or bālgaḷcu, kalnāḍu, bittuvāṭa or bittuvaṭṭa, abhyantara-siddhi, sarva parihāra and sarva bādhā parihāra. Due to their nature, the inscriptions do not throw much light on the terms and conditions attached with each type of land tenure. But one may get a broad idea of the same with the help of the references to these terms found in the inscriptions of the contemporary and the later inscriptions, a task that has been made a bit easy by D.C. Sircar through his Indian Epigraphical Glossary. But such an effort is full of the risk of robbing these tenures of their evolutionary nature and the Western Ganga and the subsequent states of innovations in administration in general and revenue administration in particular. Therefore such an exercise should be undertaken with due care and be subjected to the critical study of the available sources.

Some of these land tenures may be discussed in detail. The most common of land tenures was the brahmadēya. According to D.C. Sircar, it refers to the land or village gifted to brahmanas which is generally tax-free. Under the Western Gangas, such grants were made to the brahmanas, and as stated above, the non-brahmana writers of the charters. But in only few cases it was clearly mentioned that the grants were free of all encumbrances. Rather in one instance, we get an indication that such grants could also carry some financial liabilities. The Saraguru copper-plates of Shripurusha stipulate that twelve brahmanas should be fed once a day for one month from the tax of ten gadyāṇa collected annually from the donated brahmadēya.

The agrahāras were rent-free villages or pieces of land granted to the brahmanas for supporting their educational and religious activities. The Western Ganga inscriptions recording agrahāra donations are silent on the revenue demand. Rather the Kuknur plates of Marasimha-II (c. 968-69 CE) clearly mention that the Kukkanura-agrahāra used to remit a fixed permanent toll of ninety-nine dināras every year. It suggests that the agrahāra lands were not free of all tax liabilities under the Western Gangas.

Another important type of land tenure was known as the bālgaḷcu or vālgaḷcu grants. These terms literally mean ‘washing the stains of sword’. It was a compensatory land grant given in appreciation of the valor shown by a hero on the battle-field irrespective of whether the hero gets killed in the battle or survives the same. The grants were generally mentioned as inviolable but none of the grants speak of any tax-exemption for the donees, though according to B. Sheik Ali, ‘in this tenure the entire tax was not remitted but only a part of it’.

Another type of land tenure recorded in the inscriptions of the Western Gangas is kalnāḍu. In the context of land tenure, the term stood for ‘a grant made for the valour and for the maintenance of the dependents of a deceased hero’. Of the Western Ganga inscriptions registering grant of pieces of land and villages tagged as the kalnāḍu grant, only one grant was declared as ‘free of all hindrances’. The rest are silent on the issue. That may mean that the kalnāḍu grants also did not necessarily carry tax exemption.

From the tenth-eleventh century onwards we come across land grants labelled as bittuvāṭa or bittuvaṭṭa. When used in the context of land tenure, it refers to ‘a portion of the produce derived from the lands irrigated by tanks, or wet land irrigated by a tank, granted to the person who built the tank or repaired it’. Wherever details are clear, the donated object is either a piece of land or a village. In addition to that, in all the instances, some royal official, local administrator or corporate body is also involved. For example, the administrator of the sub-division Kareya, the prachaṇḍa-daṇḍanāyaka and the body of ‘Twelve’ jointly granted four khaṇḍugas of land as bittuvaṭṭa to the two tanks Devi-gere and Piriya-gere. But all these inscriptions belong to the period from tenth-eleventh century only.

In addition to the above, there are a number of records mentioning donated land as free of all hindrances (sarva-parihāra or sarva-bādhā-parihāra). In both the phases, such grants were mainly religious in nature. These grants were made by all categories of donors like the rulers, members of the royal family, subordinate rulers, the local community etc. But it should not lead to the conclusion that such grants were free of all liabilities. In some instances, the liabilities of the donee were mentioned in no ambiguous terms. For example, the Kuknur plates of Marasimha II, 968-69 CE declare the donation of village Addavurage as free of all encumbrances after remitting a fixed permanent toll of ninety nine dināras every year. These instances testify that the donated lands declared hindrance free should not be taken as free of all liabilities in all cases.

It is interesting to note that these donations were always declared as inviolable and to be protected by the future generations also. But that was not the case when it came to the practice. For example, the village Kodunjeruvu was donated as hindrance-free grant by Avinita to seventy-four brahmanas who were residents of Suguttur. The charter recorded that ‘whoever takes away this gift will be guilty of the five great sins’. But the same village was donated again by his immediate successor, Durvinita to five brahmanas.

Thus we may infer that the donated lands were not always free of taxes or financial liabilities and were always at the mercy of the ruler. Not only that, as stated above, in some of the instances the donated lands were forest areas or the newly settled villages, the areas which were not generating any revenue for the state. By bringing unclaimed land under cultivation, such grants actually ensured agrarian expansion and ultimately contributed to the state exchequer. For example, the above-mentioned Gattavadi plates of Nītimārga-Eṛegaṅga, Shaka 826, records that the grandfather of the brahmana Shivaarayya were among the community of brahmanas which was invited from Ahichchhatra. They were invited to settle down in the village Tanagunduru in the Vanavasa-*viṣaya*. It is claimed that they were invited ‘to make the place pure and free of sin’. That may mean that the village was a settlement of some tribal people or the people who were not obedient to the state. The inscription also records that their settlement in the village ‘shamed and slain’ the Kali. The inscription also records that Shivaaryya got an enormous tank excavated which was fed by the waters from the three rivulets called Bidirina, Pulivalla and Mavamamma flowing from the great Managali forest. The tract around the great tank acquired the name of Shivaayyamangala. The inscription further records that King Nitimarga Ereganga donated this village Shivaayyamangala to Shivaaryya. Shivaaryya, in turn, divided the village into one hundred and twenty shares, gave away sixty shares to mostly brahmanas and retained the remainder for the enjoyment of his sons and grandsons. Together they point to agrarian expansion. It is worth mentioning that neither of these donations was exempted from taxes. It shows the state as well as individual enterprise in agrarian expansion. As a result, these grants cannot be termed as eroding the revenue of the state entirely.

In this endeavor, the state seems to have promoted the use of local population as labour. The available inscriptions do not mention migration of labour from other localities as was the case with regard to many brahmana donees. For example, the above mentioned Gattavadi plates do not mention migration of labor to the village Tanagunuru from outside along with the brahmana community from Ahichchhatra. At least in some cases, it was hunter-gatherer population who was converted to the agrarian labor. The peasantization of local indigenous population may be illustrated by the Yammaduru inscription of Nitimarga-Permanadi. It records the grant of the village Emmaldikke by Billavas of 96,000 to convert the lands in the village as wet lands to grow paddy. B.R. Gopal on the basis of the meaning of the term billava as an archer, expresses possibility of the body called Billavas of the 96,000 as the body of hunters (a tribe?). On this basis, he expresses possibility that this body made the gift for the hunters to clear the lands of its forests and settle down there.

It is interesting to note that our records do not refer to many taxes. In this regard we come across very few revenue terms and that too in a few inscriptions. For example, the Basavatti inscription of Shripurusha, Shaka 722 records the grant of income from the tax called kuṛimbadeṛe i.e. tax on shepherds. The Krishnapura inscription of Satyavākya-[Permmānaḍi] records the revenue terms like komara-gadyāṇa, māsavuṭṭige, perggade-kāṇike and matadeṛe. Though the exact meanings of these terms are not known, they do indicate the prevalence of some taxes in the territories under discussion. In addition to these, there are references to pattonḍi (one-tenth share of income). We also come across tax on ghee which suggests that even the essential commodities could be taxed. We come to know taxes on land as well. It seems that it was not applied at a uniform rate. For example, the Nandi plates of Madhava I record that the tax payable on a donated piece of land was one-sixth (aṛuṭtonḍi) of the produce. But the Ramapura inscription of Satyavakya-Permanadi records that, as a reward for constructing a dam at Talenere, the donee Kesiga was granted concession in the land tax for the first three years and was to pay it at the rate of one-fifth (aydaḷavis) of the produce thereafter. It suggests that the land-tax could vary from region to region and the state could either exempt or give concession on it.

We also come across epigraphical references to aṭṭadeṛe and kuṛudeṛe. These terms respectively stood for the major taxes and minor taxes. The Kuligere inscription of Nitimarga-Permmānaḍi suggests that aṭṭadeṛe and kuṛudeṛe could be imposed by a sāmanta also, and it was called sāmantadeṛe. The terms are referred to in the Belaguli inscription of Satyavākya-Permanadi also but not as components of sāmantadeṛe. That suggests that the collection of aṭṭadeṛe and kuṛudeṛe was not an exclusive right of the sāmantas. Besides that, tax was also imposed on fairs. The above-mentioned Kuligere inscription of Nitimarga-Permmānaḍi records that the donee Kanakasena-bhaṭāra was granted the income from tax on fairs of Tippeyur. The Nonamangala plates of Kongaṇivarman show that custom was also collected on the goods brought from outside, and in the case of the village Chennelkarani, it was imposed at the rate of one-fourth of the kārṣāpaṇa. Taken together, the last two references suggest that the rural economy can in no way be characterized as ‘closed estate economy’. In addition to these, the exactions were also done in form of some free services. For instance, the Agara inscription of Shripurusha suggests that the villagers were expected to provide forced labour and impressment of bullocks on some occasions. As recorded by the inscription, one such occasion could be a festival. The same inscription also records that tolls were imposed on head loads also.

But inspite of a number of references to taxes and other forms of exactions, one must admit that tax terms under the Western Gangas are not found in plenty. That may be an indicator of the early nature of the state under them which was still in the process of creating an organized revenue system and for that also trying to negotiate with the customary exactions. It is also interesting to note that except the land tax, no other revenue-term or exaction is mentioned in the inscriptions of the early phase. What we actually come across are generalized phrases like ‘free of all hindrances’, ‘free of thirty-two types of imposts’.

The above study suggests that the phenomenon of agrarian expansion under the Western Gangas may better be explained as the endeavor of a state to expand its revenue basis by converting the already existing elites or by installing brahmanas and religious institutions as their agents. These endeavours led to both horizontal and vertical expansion of agrarian economy, a phenomenon also noticed in other regions during the early medieval period.

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