



Research Paper

Legality and Hierarchy of Social Structure and Power in 9th and 10th Century India

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Abstract: -

Different means of production and production relations created a new social setup by the turn of 10th century A.D. in India. Declining trend of commercial business and disintegration of trading activities disrupted overall economic growth and progress of country, people and above all changed drastically, existing order of that age, hard hitting straight-jacketed varna system. Consequently, recognition in term of origin, identity and hierarchy in socio-political relations underwent subsequent changes and number of new social class started emerging during this period of review

Received 20 Dec., 2022; Revised 01 Jan., 2023; Accepted 02 Jan., 2023 © The author(s) 2023.

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I. Introduction: -

Productive changes after 9th century onwards transformed the production relation in terms of economy and society of the period. The process of chartered land grants easily transferred the land as means of production in different hands either secular or religious identified persons or institutions. The process is attested by a large number of charters, usually recorded on copper plate with fiscal and administrative immunities to vassal and priests.

Historicity and recognition with identity of beneficiaries was further strengthened in the phase of recession of commercial business and disintegration of trade during this period. Economic disruption is also identified by the paucity of availability of coins in excavation. For more than three centuries, well known *Palas*, *Pratiharas* and *Rashtrakutas* ruled in northern and Deccan areas, except deep south. The absence of gold coins in post Gupta time is noted in contradiction with their abundance in the time of *Kushanas* and *Gupta* rulers P. Richard, famous Economic historian believes that once Byzantines had learnt from China, the technique of silkworm they get detached from India and China and it was no more required in their market.¹ Later on this disruption in trading business shook the very foundation of progressive economic link between coastal town specially eastern and southern coast and other cities and towns located in main land of India.

Whenever a village was granted, the inhabitants of the village were instructed to carry the order of the beneficiaries. This could not be possible unless they stayed in the village. Some *Chandela* grants named the various categories of artisans who were transferred to the beneficiaries along with the village they inhabited.² Similarly, in South Indian and Deccan grant, so many cases are reported, where artisans, being instructed to render their service to the temples and monasteries.³

All cultivators, farmers, and labours were expected to remain in the village is also attested with this fact of our knowledge when we examine the land Charters, especially after 9th century onwards. In northern India many land charters clearly transfer the peasants along with the soil to the beneficiaries and the land used for the purpose "*Dhan Jana Sahita*".⁴ Peasants and artisans found it difficult to go independently from one place to another place. The only mobility worth the name in early medieval period is that of soldiers for fighting and acquiring new land for their masters. Undoubtedly, it was a period of war economy, troops movement did not promote commercial business activities.

Kalivarajya (things prohibited in *kali* age) limit the movement of the *Brahmanas* and what is prescribed and instructed for higher social order must be followed in its strict sense of identity as well. It is stated in *Smiriti* text that "those who take sea voyage are fallen from the caste and not fit to be invited in any

religious ceremonial programme".⁵ The law book of *BirhatParasar* recommends that no man would give his daughter to one who lives at a great distance.⁶

All such reference makes sense in the context of feudal localism only. Land grants issued by the king in its legal sense of the that age and subinfeudation practice led to the emergence of an unequal distribution of power and position that created new group and social hierarchy exclusively different from four-fold old model of society. Alberuni mention that Brahmans and other Hindu of high ranking are not generally permitted to settle in the areas occupied by Turks and Karuntas.⁷ At the same time varying size of houses for different groups of ruling chief are recommended along with the member of four *varna*, indicating ranking and status in that period. Apart from such references some text indirectly set aside the consideration of *varna* and put emphasis on relative status of ruling class and nobles. Eight categories of feudal lords and typical feudal courts are also described along with size of residence such affluent class of people with somewhat distinctive title like; *Maharajadhiraj, Parameshwara, Mahasamratha, Samanta, Mandaleshwara etc.*⁸

Their classification is in descending order and grouping of rank in nine categories, the highest being *Chakarvartinand* lowest being *Praharaka*. Such information along with description of nine kinds of thrones differing according to their status and also possession of elephants, horses and weapons signify the importance of their relative status power and position, once again. The social recognition and political identity of the highest section of landed gentry was also stabilised by means of unique symbols insignia of power along with badges of honour on the forehead. Vassals were generally invested with fly-whisk, umbrella Palanquins, horses, elephants etc.

Merchants and artisans during this early medieval phase were given feudal title, indicating military and administrative ranks. Certain title such as *Thakurs, Nayak, Rauvat, Astragrahinetc* were conferred to *Rajput* and *Kshatriya* and others also. The *Kayastha* community or *Thakur* community from lower *varna* was result of this constant transfer of land, and land revenue with certain obligatory function giving new model of economy at the village level, called sometimes as *Jajmanisystem*. The beginning of fragmentation of land on account of the laws of partition of landed property from post-Gupta period onward forced the authority to maintain the details of plots and such necessity gave rise to new established class *Kayestha* who settled all land disputes very easily with available maintained records.

Any dispute, if brought before the authority it was done by a class of writers known by various names such as, *Kayestha, Adhikrita, Lekhaka, Aksapatalikaetc*. They were ready all time to render their services in early medieval society. The emergence of this group as trained professional class undermined the monopoly of *Brahmana* as scribe and writers *Kayesthaserved the Chandellas, Kalchuris* in different regions part of central north and eastern India. It was sometime objected by the *Brahmanas* who usually occupied such high post earlier. As scribe and record keepers, the *Kayestha* must have caused constant trouble to upper elite class who formed considerable class of assignee before their appearance on socio-political landscape of the country. That is why their condemnation was a favourite theme in later *Smiriti* text and *Rajtarangni* of *Kalhana*.⁹

Another new class in northern India also emerged called as *Mahattra* village headman. They had carried their political influence as well as considerable share in the land of village and were responsible for its administration. *Birhatkuthakosa* of *Harisen* of 10th century records mentioned about village headman *Mahuttar* who occupied pastoral land adjoining the village with some notified condition.¹⁰ This substantial class found in interior of the country cut across *varna* & caste boundaries and proliferated in subsequent age. Their survival of title as *Mahto, Mehta, Mahatha, Mehrotraetc* are found among the higher and lower caste in modern time.

Another Lowered class *Sudrano* longer appear mainly as slave or labourer after *post-Gupta* period. Modified *varna* system gave rise to numerous types of landed gentry well connected with administration and relative changes in their status and position. *Alberuni* noted the absence of any significant difference between the *Vaisya* and *Sudra*, who lived together in the same village and mixed together in the same houses.¹¹ This change is reflected in some medieval texts, which represented the *Sudras* as farmers and agriculturist. The *SkandaPuranad* describe the *Sudra* as givers of grains (*Annada*) and householder *grihastha*.¹² There are also some evidences to show it very clearly that from 9th century A.D. trade and commerce declined and traders lost their importance. In the period of *Sena* dynasty in Bengal, the ceremonial trade opening is found absent and *Vaisyas* were used as plough or animal post. It indicated their condition being deteriorated too much. R. C. Majumdar believed that anthropometric studies clearly suggest that in Bengal the *Sudras* are indigenous inhabitants but *Brahmans* are not. Various *Sudracastes* in Bengal also belong to same stock and resemble their neighbours in Bihar.¹³

Process of Proliferation of Caste: -

Later on, 9th century onward, the existing *varnas*, further subdivided into numerous tribes and castes were subjugated and subordinated within the prevailing pattern of proliferated society. Definitely, it was a period of fragmentation and proliferation augmented and forwarded with new mode of production along with evolving new relation. A village with thirty-six sub-caste is mentioned in 10th century Bengal copper plate and

other similar village in Bihar region seems to have its origin in this period under review to classify the fact of proliferation of caste.

It appears to be more interesting among the Brahmanas. Many Brahmana castes were named after the type of rituals they practised. But the most important factor in the multiplication of their castes was the growth of strong localism in course of time, they were to be recognised only by their Gotra, Kula or territorial affiliation to be certain about the purity and continuity of their Gotra. An unique reference of their attachment to the village is provided by the description of village 'siddhala', which in 11th century inscription is called best of village, the ornaments of *Aryavaratha*.¹⁴ By the turn of 12th century A.D. Brahmanas of Bengal (*Radha*) had come to be divided into fifty-six subcastes based on their territorial affiliation or original villages (*gramins*) several of which are found mentioned in 11th and 12th century inscription in Bengal.¹⁵

Similarly, *Kayasthas* came to be divided into different territorial subcastes, such as *Karna*, *Kayastha*, *Ambastha* etc. and so on. Lower caste like *Kurmi*, *Goala* etc. who are far more numerous in multiple fold are also divided into territorial grouping. The old dictum that difference in the country (*desabhed*) leads to the difference in the caste worked seriously in case of early medieval social order.

The fourth lower *varna* came to have the largest in the series of multiplication of subcastes within their group in early medieval era. The law book of *Manu* treated as 1st legal digest mentioned sixty-one mixed castes. It also proliferated exceeding more than hundred, if added to it the list of additional mini-castes (*Hinjati*) given in *Brahmacaivarata Purana*.¹⁶ An increase in manifold in the number of *Sudra* caste may be inferred from other literary sources of 9th to 12th centuries. The *VisnudharmottarPuranastated* that thousands of mixed castes were produced as a result of *Pratilomam* marriages between *Vaisiyas* woman with men of lower castes. R. S Sharma believes while explaining such proliferation of castes, process of subjugation played vital role in expanding this avenue of social hierarchical division in early medieval society. The subordination and political conquest of backward people, living in the jungles, dense forested belt etc. by *Brahmanised* princes from agriculturally advanced areas enormously added to the number and varied degree of *Sudra Varna*. Subjugation of *Bhilas*, *Pulindas*, *Sabaras* etc. is referred to in epigraphic records from central India. From 9th century onward, nearly for five hundred years, almost all *Daccan* power fought against the *Abhiras*¹⁷ who could not be easily assimilated into the *Brahmanical* order. A *Kalachuri* inscription of 11th century mentions about *Ratanpur* Prince who was saved from clutches of a tribal people called *thirus* or *tharus* which was celebrated by his donation of village to two *Brahmans*.¹⁸ It was also noted that priest who were granted land in many subjugated territories were interested in inducting the indigenous aboriginal tribal people into their cultural fold. This process may have been successful because of superior material culture, new script language and ritual to the preliterate people but also acquainted with new technique of cultivation and preservation of cattle wealth etc.

Again, it is also observed by the historians that early medieval phase confronted with phenomenal growth of impure lower castes, or, untouchables who were clubbed with different names like *Chandal*, *Mahasura*, *dasa* etc. *Alberuni* refers around sixty-four names for these untouchables like *Doma*, *Hadi*, *Badhatu*, *Chandela*, *Bhedas*, etc.¹⁹

It is difficult to explain this multiplication in the number of untouchables. But possibility of Sanskritisation for induction in *Brahmanical* fold cannot be ruled out. Tribal population seems to have adjusted with their parallel counterparts with exception of those people who were forced to live outside of definite settlements, hence compelled to be treated later on as *Asprishya* (untouchable).

Transformation of different crafts into castes proved a very significant process of alteration in their existing position with disintegration of trading business activities after 8th century's craft guilds tended to become stagnant and more localised and hereditary in nature. Consequently, guilds and traders gradually converted themselves into closed groups resembling castes for all practical objective and means of their sustenance. Well known commentators, *Apararka*, mentioned that 'heads of guild' may reprimand and condemn wrong doers may also excommunicate them.²⁰ Obviously these condemned categories like *Tambulika*, *Mallakara*, *Chirtakara* and so on, were dubbed as mixed castes out of various crafts.

Another noted and cited reason for multiplication in number of castes in Indian society, especially *Hindus* and *Buddhist* to some extent was found in terms of religious affiliation. The parallel between the proliferation of sects and that of caste in 11th and 12th century is very close to their religious identity. *Buddhism*, *Jainism*, *Saivism*, *Vaisnuism* each one of these religion proliferated into numerous sects not so much due to basic difference in doctrine, as due to minor difference in their rituals and even in food habit and dress. Jainism came to be divided into seven other sects, whereas Buddhism got further subdivided into eighteen sects in *Daccan* areas of India. Each one of these sects were to be led by a teacher or *Guru* who demanded allegiance from his followers and acted as an intermediary just as a feudal lord acted as an intermediary between cultivators and the king. In course of time these members of sects began to behave as member of specific caste or subcaste. They remained confined to their sect and refused to sit together or intermarriage with members of another sects. The *Lingayat* and *Virsdvite* in Karnataka and *Radhasomi* in northern India formed a separate caste. Similarly, *Jains* in Gujrat and Rajasthan came to constitute a large caste divided into so many subcastes. The

ironical fact to be noted for our knowledge is that of history embedded in early medieval time, where religious proliferation sprang and disparities and privileges based on birth could not remain intact properly.

It means before the *sultanate* period Indian society especially northern India underwent some important changes. Regional disparities, along with unequal distribution of resources and military power created a kind of social and political ranking which cut across *varna* consideration. Legally certified chartered grant of available land and its sub-infeudations from below led to the rise of different new class, specially *Rujput* and *Kayestha* whose place in *varna* system could not be clearly explained. Hence, newly emerged different professional classes and ruling aristocratic class exhibited their power or strength to justify their legal status in new framework of socio-economic hierarchical order.

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