



Role of rulers in the growth of agrarian economy in western India (c.600-1300 C.E.)

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Abstract

This paper looks into the role of ruling class in the growth of rural economy in western India during the early medieval period. Large scale land grants by the rulers with well defined boundaries led to greater utilisation of agrarian space. Moreover, excavation of different sources of irrigation by the royalty and technological advancements played a vital role in the growth of agrarian economy.

Keywords: rulers, land grants, agrarian expansion, *vapis*, *araghatta*

Introduction

Western India during the early medieval centuries, from c. 600 C.E. to 1300 C.E, primarily witnessed burgeoning rural economy and large scale agrarian expansion. Numerous land grants in different parts of Rajasthan and Gujarat to brahmanas, priests and officials with proper delineated boundaries, *catuhsima*, of the donated land suggest greater utilisation of the agrarian space. Frequent references to the term *bhumicchidranayaya* (i.e. the principle of allowing rent-free enjoyment of an area by the person bringing it under cultivation for the first time) in the land grant charters clearly indicates the grant of uncultivated and inhabitable land, a step dictated by the need to bring more land under cultivation leading to greater agricultural production.

The complicated and detailed boundary delineations of donated land suggest greater utilisation of agrarian space. We have ample examples in the form of land grants with well-defined boundaries, and one such example is Navsari plates of Jayabhata III dated 706 C.E. which records a grant of a *brahmadeya* field measuring 64 *nivartanas* of land on the north-east boundary in the settlement *Samipadraka*, situated in the Korilla *pathaka* with its well defined boundaries. On the East is the junction with the boundary of the village Golika; on the South lay the tank Yamalakhallara and the field belonging to *Mahattara* Mahesvara and the cultivated field belonging to barber Devaka; on the West, the road that goes to the village Dhahaddha from the village Samipadraka; on the North is the tank Barutakhallara and the *brahmadeya* field belonging to the brahmana Narma residing at Korilla [1].

Agrarian expansion and management of hydraulic resources are two interrelated process as the success of agriculture depends to a large extent on proficient irrigational facilities. The frequent references to different types of water resources in the context of land donations and burgeoning rural settlements drive home their importance for irrigational purposes and the role they played in transforming the countryside [2]. To cite an example, Dabok record of 644 C.E refers to *karkka-tadaga* in the context of irrigated fields in Bhilwara district [3].

Introduction of *araghatta* and *vapi* in Rajasthan and Gujarat from ninth-tenth century onwards ensured high agricultural yield and led to proliferation and diversification of crops and cereals. Excavation of wells, tanks and step-wells was considered meritorious which helped to ensure easy supply of water for irrigation purposes [4]. For instance, Bhadund inscription in Godwar district belonging to the reign of Paramara Purnapala dated 1045 C.E. records construction of a step-well (*vapi*) by brahmanas residing at Bhundi-*padra* (Jodhpur district) to acquire worldly fame and spiritual advancement [5].

Innumerable inscriptions from Rajasthan and Gujarat, particularly from south Rajasthan, North Gujarat, Kutch and Saurashtra contain ample references to the construction of tanks (*tadaga*), wells (*dhimada* or *dhiku*), lakes, stepwells (*vapis*), and *araghattas*. From the beginning Chaulukyas who had their base at Anahilavada in north Gujarat displayed commendable efforts and tried best possible means to provide irrigation facilities to their subjects and contemporary inscriptions abound with such examples. According to *Prabandhacintamani* of Merutunga (early 14th century) Durlabharaja (1010-24 CE) excavated a tank called Durlabha tank at Anahilavada [6]. Bhimadeva's (1022-64 CE) wife Udayamati built a step-well (*vapi*) at Anahilavada [7]. Karnadeva (1066-94 AD) built two big reservoirs, one at Karnavati, modern Ahmedabad called Karna Sagar and the other at Modhera [8]. In case of Rajasthan too we find examples of construction of tanks and wells, for instance an inscription found at Vasantgarh dated 1042 CE refers to Paramara Purnapala's younger sister Lahini building a *bavadi* known as '*Lahinivapi*' at Vasantgarh [9].

The interest of the Chaulukayas in the promotion of agriculture is borne by reference to a separate department in charge of irrigation called *varigriha-karana*, which exclusively looked after the construction and maintenance of water reservoirs [10].

Artificial irrigation led to increase in crop production and expansion of agriculture, the evidence for which can be culled from the inscriptions. We often get references to double

cropping and production of *kharif* and *rabi* crops in certain areas. Dabok inscription of 644 CE ^[11] refers to *saradyagraismaka* fields (fields that can be tilled in autumn and summer, indicating double-cropping. This record also refers to *graismaksetradi* (fields yielding crops in summer) and *saradyaksetradi* (fields yielding crops in autumn). Similarly a record of 1383 C.E. refers to the cultivation of *kharif* and *rabi* crops from a well at the village Sadod, Navsari taluk ^[12].

There are references to the cultivation of commercial crops and the benefits of artificial irrigation for them. Sevadi (Bali district) inscription of 1119 which mentions *tila* produced in an area seem to have been under irrigation from reservoirs ^[13]. Cultivation of oilseeds is attested to by the Manglana inscription of C.E. 1215 ^[14].

The revenue terms in the inscriptions, also hint at the wide range of crops produced in the region. Arthuna inscription of Paramara Camundaraja (1078 C.E.) records tax of one *haraka* of barley from a water-wheel, and taxes being levied on cartload of grains, betel leaves, on bullock load of barley, candied sugar and jaggery, salt, Bengal madder, thread and cotton, among others ^[15]. However, increase in the number of taxes on agricultural products is another indicator of increase in crop production and an organised agrarian base.

At the same time the contribution of technological advancement needs to be acknowledged. There was introduction of a devise for crushing sugarcane to manufacture sugar and its by-products. Proliferation of oil-millers' craft is also visible from references to *tailikas* in the sources, the pressing of sesame, sugarcane, mustard seed, and castor beans in water machines etc., and the making of oil from their leaves known as pressing by machine is attested to by the sources ^[16]. The term *ghanaka* often figures in records, it meant an oil pressing devise with a circular motion ^[17]. Irfan Habib ^[18] talked about the introduction of draw-bar and circular track in early medieval period along with the use of cattle to rotate drawbar for threshing, pressing oil, and crushing sugar. Introduction of rotary mill and vertical peg-handle in India from 5th century lightened the work of milling grains. Spinning wheel and bowstring improved the quality of clothing between c.1000-1500 C.E. This in turn helped in expansion of cotton cultivation which implies further expansion in area of a market crop or cash crop.

The above analysis also makes it quite evident that it was due to the efforts of rulers which ultimately helped in the expansion and spread of efficient irrigation system. Excavation of different sources of irrigation by royalty ensured higher agricultural yield and proliferation and diversification of the crops which gave a boost to the rural economy, leading to agrarian growth. Spread of agriculture was instrumental in the cultivation of some non-cereal crops which were essential for agro-based crafts and artisanal industries which altogether gave rise to exchange centres, *hattas*, and nodal points to which were brought the marketable surplus produce for commercial exchange.

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