

THE PANCHOBH COPPER PLATE INSCRIPTION OF SAMGRAMAGUPTA: A STUDY

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The study of early medieval eastern India hinges round the debate on the concept of Indian feudalism. The entire debate becomes crucial in the sense that most of the informed writings on the area have joined the issue with his concept. The paradigm of Indian feudalism has become so dominant in current Indian historiography that most successive writers seek either to strengthen it or demolish it. But the reality is that the entire eastern India was a cultural region in the making during the early medieval times and this shift in centrality from the core area of middle Ganga valley to the erstwhile peripheries does have a relationship with the structure of feudalism that took shape during this period.

The early medieval social formation was marked by the emergence of regional identities. Right from the time of Guptas, and more so during the post-Gupta times, the process of the origin and evaluation of states, which was till then confined to the upper and middle Ganga valley with some activities on this front also going on in some other parts of the sub-continent, came to acquire a regional dimension. This was preceded by a large scale agrarianisation of the erstwhile peripheral areas and this, in turn, inaugurated the beginning of

different pattern of regional economies during the period. In the case of eastern India, despite sub-regional variations, one encounters the emergence of a cultural idiom that can be said to have assumed an identity of its own.

While talking about eastern India, one needs to take into consideration the differing conjunction of forces that operated in its three sub-regions Bihar, Bengal and Orissa. While a large part of Bihar constituting the mid-Ganga valley had hitherto been the core area of political and economic developments, the area of Bengal and Orissa were yet to undergo that process of the exploitation of natural resources. Despite the Magadhan intrusion into these two zones and the emergence of localized state systems, the developed elements of material culture had, at best, made only a nominal presence with their major segments still remaining in the backwaters of economic and political development.

A survey of Panchobh copperplate in north Bihar is important in this regard. The copperplate was discovered from village Panchobh, situated 8-9 kilometers west of Laheriasarai, Darbhanga district. It was found while the cultivation of field for the purpose of farming. The place where the plate was located and unearthed is surrounded by several mounds with structures of bricks

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exposed. Presently the inscription is placed in Patna museum.

The inscription contains 30 lines of writings, 29 full and line only 4 inches long and 13 inches broad. The language of the record is Sanskrit and excepting line one to thirteen, which constitutes the formal part of the grant, the whole is in verse. The characters belong to the eastern variety of nagari alphabet which Buhler has described as proto Bengali.¹ They are of the same type as those in the Deopara inscription of Vijayasena.

The inscription records the grant of a village named Vanigama situated in the district Jambuvani made by the Parambhattaraka Maharajadhiraja Parmeshvara Mahamandalika Samgramagupta, who is described as the lord of Jayapura and the most devout worshipper of Maheshvara. The donee is Brahman of sandila gotra Kumarasavani by name, learned in *yajurveda* and having the three pravara of sandilya, Asita and Devala, son of Krishnaditya and grandson of Rama, who hailed from Kolancha. No particular occasion is mentioned for making the grant except that it is made on account of great favour shown to the donee.² The greater part of the inscription is taken up by an account of the ancestors of the donor which gives the following genealogical table: (1) Yajneshgupta (2) Damodargupta (3) Devgupta (4) Sangramgupta (5) Krishnagupta and (6) Samgramagupta. It is however, noticeable that while Rajadityagupta is credited with all imperial titles of Samgramagupta, Krishnagupta is dismissed with the only epithet Rajputra which seems to indicate that he met with a premature death during the lifetime of his father. Though one or two verses have been devoted to each royal personage, no historical fact is referred to

in the inscription which may lead to their definite identification.³ The mention of Gupta genealogy as referring to the dynasty to which the king belonged is, however, suggestive of the fact what royal line have been in some way connected with the later Gupta of Magadh.⁴ The charter is issued from the royal victory camp and mentions the designations of some officials, most of which occur in the grant of Palas and Senas of Bengal. It is dated on 9th day of the dark fortnight of the month of Kartika in the 17th year of the reign of the king. No era is mentioned, but on paleographical grounds the inscription may be assigned to a period not later than the twelfth century A.D.⁵ The use of the title Mahamandalika along with the imperial titles, Parambhattaraka-Maharajadhiraja-Parmeshvara in the case of Samgramagupta and his grandfather Rajadityagupta, indicates that the family had been at first feudatories of Palas or Senas and later assumed the titles of independence after the decline in power of their suzerains.⁶

Unlike the Gupta and grants, in this inscription we find mention of only political issues, i.e. land grant of a brahmana. The conventional portion of copperplate refers to high and low grades of government officials and their attendants, showing that there was stable bureaucracy in existence. There are references to numerous officials including the prime minister, minister of peace and war, the chief master of military arrays, the chief superintendents of offices, the keeper of royal seal, the lord chamberlain, the superintendent of military supply, the chief keeper of records, the chief warden, the chief justice, the intelligence officers, the writer of grants etc. On the basis of such a vast bureaucracy, we can

assume that there may have been a well established state system extending its control over the surrounding periphery, though the adjacent place and nature of the state will remain doubtful until through large scale excavation is done.

Though this inscription does not mention the existence of merchants and skilled artisans or their representatives such as Sarthavaha, Nagarsresthi, and Kulika, whom we meet frequently in Gupta land grants, the conventional portion of the copperplate invariably refer to high and low grades of government officials, showing that such a bureaucracy can exist without even any appreciable commercialization of the society. In fact, the extensive land grants made in favour of religious beneficiaries, who were to be served within the donated areas by social groups like Malakaras, Tailakas, Sankhavadakas, vadakas, Karmakaras, Charmakaras, Sutradharas, Sthapita, Napias, Rajakas, Vaidyas and others⁷, the rent free nature of these plots of land, enabling the donee to appropriate a major part of the surplus as well as the persistence in the epigraphs of the term *pidam* or forced labour indicative of a burgeoning feudal economic pattern, not only underline the feudal structure of the society but also hint at the operation of a feudal economy. Recently M. R. Tarafdar, while making a comparative study of the different geographical and cultural regions of early medieval Bengal in terms of their economic

viability, has suggested that, "even if it is presumed that the copper plates have left out several socio-economic groups, it is apparent that society was agriculture based and that a long chain of intermediaries extended between the ruler and the cultivators. The bureaucracy noticed in the epigraphs of the time must have been a significant link in the chain of this feudal relationship.

REFERENCES

- ◆ *JBORS*, Vol. V, 1919, P. 582.
- ◆ *Ibid.*
- ◆ *Ibid.*
- ◆ B. Sahai, *Inscriptions of Bihar*, New Delhi, 1983, pp. 141-142.
- ◆ *JBORS*, *op. cit.*
- ◆ Opinion provided by R. D. Banerjee, Poona.
- ◆ These socio-economic groups, some of whom copper plate grant i.e. Paschimbhaga copperplate plate of Srichandra (A. D. 925-975), N. K. Bhattacharya, *Commemoration Volume (ed.)* A. B. M. Habibullah, Dacca, 1966, pp. 179-80, 186-187, K. K. Gupta, *Copper Plate of Sylhet, Sylhet*, 1967, pp. 92-99, 106-07.
- ◆ 'Trade and Society in Early Medieval Bengal', *The Indian Historical Review*, Vol. IV, No. 2, p. 282.

