

Status of Ownership of Agricultural Land in Vedic Period

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Abstract: The origin of the word 'Arya' came from a root which means to cultivate and in Rig-Veda it appears as best or excellent, so we can assume that agriculture and peasants had already got a respectable status at that time. This period was also a best representation of a phase of transition from cattle rearing or nomadic phase to sedentary agriculture ⁽¹⁾.

In the Rigvedic period soil was not in a category of wealth and land settlement existed in its simplest form.

Clearing of dense forest (aranya) required communal efforts and as a result the whole community might equally own the share of land and crop production ⁽²⁾. It reflects a type of communal ownership of land. References of Kshetrapati, urvarasam, urverapati, urverajeet and references of 'khil bhoomi' shows peasants personal ownership ⁽³⁾.

Kings ownership on land was only in the form of tax as Bali on agricultural productions. ⁽⁴⁾

In later vedic period fields were counted in the category of wealth, there were evidences of presence of very large farms and their owners. ⁽⁵⁾

Kings share on land was increased as 'bhag -bhog' also enlisted as tax. King could also donate some land related profits to purohitas and officials as reward.

In Yajurveda we find the word 'kshetranam pataye' which means a peasant could be owner of more than one field.

Atharvaveda, Taittiriya Samhita, Chhandogya Upanishad clearly mentioned disputes about lands boundaries, forceful cultivation on others' soil etc. Rudra was known as lord of these land snatchers.

In this early stage of society formation, a piece of land could be owned as private, public or royal property.

Index Terms: land ownership, agriculture, vedic, kshetra

Agriculture played a pivotal role in the economic life of ancient India. It is extremely difficult to decide when exactly the food gathering stage was replaced by that of food production and when was the land considered as wealth or property to be owned by someone.

In the early period of history, when various institutions of society and economy were taking shape in different manners, the ownership of cultivated land was also gradually developed. Archaeologists discovered rural or agricultural settlements of pre Harappan period. Unquestionably Harappan had flourishing plough-based agriculture, their surplus production capable of sustaining its sizeable non-rural population.

There came a complete change from Harappan period to Rigveda (1500-1000BC). Harappan cities and their economic structure were completely destroyed before the Aryans entered the Sapta Sindhu area.

In vedic period, there was sufficient proof that Rigvedic society was essentially pastoral rather than agricultural. Kieth supports the fact that Rigvedic Aryan was mainly ⁽¹⁾ pastoral. But some scholars ⁽²⁾ support that domestic animals are equally important in an agricultural economy and Rigvedic people were not nomadic. There were lots of references when they were making prayers for fertile land, timely rain etc. Thus, we can call it a mixed economy. This period is a best representation of a phase of transition from cattle rearing or nomadic face to sedentary agriculture ⁽³⁾.

The succeeding later Vedic period (1000-600BC) is known as a firm foundation of agriculture with expansion of Aryan culture in upper gangetic valley, followed by distribution of painted grey ware material in archaeological sites.

The new settlers who called themselves Arya did not forget the original significance of the word 'Arya'. In Rigveda, in a hymn, the poet says "oye two ashwins! you have displayed your glory by teaching the Aryan to cultivate with the plough and to saw corn, by giving him rain for the production of his food, and by destroying the Dasyu by your thunderbolt" ⁽⁴⁾.

The origin of the Arya word came from a root which means to cultivate. Max Muller believes that traces of their roots are to be found in the names of many Aryans countries like Iran and Ireland. This word shows their portability towards agriculture and distinguishes from their nomadic habits of Turanians, whose name supposed to indicate their rapid journey or fleetness of

their horses⁽⁵⁾

Thus, the word Arya distinguishes the conquerors as class from the origins of country or civilised man from barbarian. In Rigveda, the meaning of Arya was established as 'best' or 'excellent', which suggests that in that period, agriculture and peasants got respectable status in the society.

In this early stage of society, the land settlement existed in its simplest form. Soil was not categorised as wealth.

The question of ownership and possession of agricultural land is one of the most complicated issues. The various theories on this topic may be divided into three: -

- 1 - Claim of the community on soil,
- 2- King's sovereignty on land,
- 3- Ownership of agriculturists or peasants.

There were many scholars who supported different views like Maine⁽⁶⁾ supports that agricultural land was owned and cultivated by the village community. V.A. Smith⁽⁷⁾ Shamshastri, Hopkins and Bular expressed their views that land was the property of the king. And the theory of individual ownership has been advocated by Baden Powell, K.P.Jaiswal⁽⁸⁾ etc.

Communal ownership of agricultural land:

When we talk about communal ownership it should be assumed that like pastoral economy, Aryans were practising agriculture too in a collective manner.

At that time maximum land was covered with dense forest called 'Aranya'. Deforestation was necessary for the purpose of habitat and cultivation and it required communal efforts. Their joint efforts for clearing forest and expansion of agriculture was mythologically symbolised in Shatpath Brahmin.⁽⁹⁾ The uncultivated forest and settled villages or *grams* were concentric with each other⁽¹⁰⁾. Conclusively the whole tribal community equally owned the land and crop produced on it.

In Rigveda, land was classified as waste land, forest and cultivated land. The waste land called *Khil* or *Khilya*, was defined as the land laying between cultivated lands and forests and separated the fields.⁽¹¹⁾ Oldenberg thinks that *Khilya* could be broad lands which were used commonly for pasturing of the cattle of the community.⁽¹²⁾

Individual Ownership of Land:

The word '*Khil*' also indicated that in the Rigvedic period the concept of separate fields existed. The word '*Kshetra*' also established the existence of a separate field. We also find some words like *Kshetrapati* (lord of field), *Urvarasam* (lord of fertile land), *Urvarapati* (owner of fertile land), *Urvarajeet* (winner of the fertile land)⁽¹³⁾ etc. proves that there was concept of private ownership on land exists.

The reference of Apala, where she claims her father's field and hair as her personal possession, also represented private ownership.

Apala asked for three boons from Indra, "O Indra! Cause to sprout again at three places...grow crops of cultivated fields of ours, hair on my skin and hair on my father's head"⁽¹⁴⁾.

There were prayers⁽¹⁵⁾ for fertile fields and worthy sons and grandsons which indicated private ownership.

Royal Ownership on Land:

The claim of possession on land by the king was very limited as he was only head of the tribes and thus people offered him some share of agricultural products as 'bali'.

Later Vedic Period:

In the later Vedic period there came immense changes in agricultural setup. The political and economic characters of the state were also changed.

Now agriculture is established properly and expanded widely.⁽¹⁶⁾ Now soil was considered in the category of wealth. We find the references of large farms and big land owners, using heavy plough, operated with the help of two, eight, twelve and sometimes even twenty-four oxen also. The reference of heavy plough indicated that peasants were indulging in surplus agricultural production with the help of numerous land labourers and cattle. It made them capable of control over the agricultural economy⁽¹⁷⁾

Royal Ownership:

In this period states were also concerned with agricultural development. Ploughing fields by king Janak of Mithila is well known.

During this time, the king's shares on land were increasing. Atharveda indicates that villagers had to pay some share to the ruler from their production. In one sense it proves the king's sovereignty as a political power rather than his possession on agricultural land.⁽¹⁸⁾ On the other hand, we find that the king's consent was necessary for one's ownership of land.⁽¹⁹⁾

There were references that if a king wanted to donate some land for their relatives or officials for livelihood, he could transfer only some land related facilities, like some agricultural production in form of taxes etc., but the real ownership could not be transferred from peasants⁽²⁰⁾.

Somehow, there developed a class of land grant owners and we found that proprietorship of taxes on land shifted from king to non-agricultural authority.⁽²¹⁾ In Spite of, lord of land *Bhupati*, it is necessary for the king to take permission from the community before grant of land. When king Vhswakarnan Bhuvan tried to grant land to someone, mother earth itself refused to be transferred.⁽²²⁾ Though this reference shows king ownership on land, it's sure that someone strongly opposed the king's new act.

These land grants were mainly bestowed to Purohits for religious purposes on the occasion of Yajna.

We found that in Sarvamedha Yajna shudra and land were not associated with grants, but in the Ashwamedh and Purushamedha Yajna every type of wealth including land could be donated.⁽²³⁾

In Aitarey Brahmin the king, on the occasion of Yajna, bestowed a 'chatuspad' land to Purohita without the consent of the tribe but this donation was made from his personal Sita land.⁽²⁴⁾ It shows that state also owned agricultural land for its income, surely it would be cultivated by slave labourers.

Private Ownership:

In Yajurveda we find the word 'Kshetranam Pataye' which means that a peasant could be the owner of more than one field.⁽²⁵⁾ In Atharvaveda, Taittiriya Samhita and Chhandogya Upanishad the sense of separate field and individual ownership is clearer.

In Taittiriya Samhita it is stated that if a person is having disputes on land with a neighbour he should write prayer on eleven potsherds and offer to please God Agni and Indra.⁽²⁶⁾

Apart from this, if there were any disputes regarding land marking, some people acted as mediators between the parties. These mediators were also helpful in distribution of family wealth, house and land among the members of the family.⁽²⁷⁾

Some disputes begin with when someone forcefully cultivated another field or destroyed the landmark of another field to merge it in its own field. Rudra was known as the lord of these land snatchers.⁽²⁸⁾ In one reference of land dispute Indra took favour of Puru and Trasadasyu and saved them, it shows that in land dispute king's favour means a lot.⁽²⁹⁾

This period has a special and earliest feature of land stratification. We have evidence of the emergence of land rights of non-peasants. The practice of land grants results a type of stratification within peasantry.⁽³⁰⁾ Those who possess numerous cattle and slave labourers were on the top and landless labourer were the at lowest strata. Generally normal peasants owned its field and cultivated it with the help of their family members.

As a conclusion, we can say that in this early stage of society land ownership could be multidirectional; a piece of land could be owned as private and communal as well as royal.

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