

# EARLY MEDIEVAL AGRARIAN FORMATION OF MITHILA

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In early medieval period, the agrarian society of Mithila underwent a radical change. In Post-Gupta period Mithila became an essay shelter of numerous rajputa clans and militant tribes from various parts of Indian subcontinent, causing the formation of countless small principalities and feudatories. The early medieval Mithila folk sagas, Lorikain, Raiya Ranpal and Raja Salhesh refer to a sizeable number of principalities held by the chieftains of different high and low castes of sudra varna. The process of proliferation and fragmentation further accelerated when the Pala and Karnata rulers granted lands to the temples, brahmanas and their ministers on large scale. This further localized the political authority based on land. Early medieval Mithila also witnessed a sharp decline in trade and commerce and a distinct upsurge of sudras. The society of Mithila basically became agriculturist and pastoral, dominated by the sudras. However, the brahmanas succeeded in extending the process of Brahmanization of the new settlers of Mithila and extended their hold over the society. The state accepted and sanctioned the local authority of the chieftains of different communities and granted lands to brahmanas and royal high officials to balance the agrarian society for effective state control. And thus, the ancient varna based agrarian society transformed into a feudal agrarian society based on land and local political authority. The present paper is an attempt to analyse the agrarian structure of early medieval Mithila, which facilitated the growth of composite Mithila culture.

After the death of Harsha, there prevailed political confusion, chaos and anarchy for pretty long period. Arjuna or Arunashva was the ruler of Mithila at the time of Harsha's death.<sup>1</sup> He attacked a Chinese mission, which was visiting India under the leadership of Wang-Hiuen-tse. Wang some how fled to Tibet via Nepal, secured some soldiers from there and also succeeded in getting help from Nepal and Assam. he disastrously defeated Arjuna and took him captive to China.<sup>2</sup> According to Levi, with this event, began a new phase in the history of Mithila<sup>3</sup>, which was followed by a series of invasions and intrusions. The resurgent Later Guptas of Magadh expelled Tibetans and Mithila became a prominent Vishaya of Magadh.<sup>4</sup> But the Magadhan suzerainty didn't last long. Between 725 and 733, the whole of Magadha and Gauda fell into the hands of yasovarman of Kannauj. Obviously Mithila came under the control of Yasovarman. Nalanda Stone Inscription attest the victorious campaign of Yasovarman<sup>5</sup>. But he was followed by Muktapida, who extended his power upto Purnea, the eastern part of Mithila region.<sup>6</sup> Though due to conflicting sources, it is difficult to explain the nature of these expeditions and their impact on Mithila, the absence of any local political power and the insecurity of Mithila was evident. time again time Mithila was victimised by various war campaigning dynasties of north India. Before the rise of the Palas, Bengal and Mithila were ruled by the Chandra dynasty<sup>7</sup>, Khalimpur copper plate of Dharmapala refers to the anarchical condition of north-eastern India.<sup>8</sup> Dharmapala acquired supremacy not only in Bengal, but also conquered Mithila and extended his influence upto Nepal Tarai in later half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Dharmapala is credited for the establishment of an effective administrative system and curbing anarchy in Mithila region. He established his capital at Monghyr, situated on the bank of river Ganga, just opposite to eastern part of Mithila, which facilitated him to control Mithila effectively. But the rising power of Dharmapala and his keen interest in the politics of Kannauj attracted the rivalrous dynasties of northern India and Mithila converted into the battle ground for nearly two centuries to come. During the period, various dynasties and rajput clans like Chandellas, Gaharwalas, Kalchuris, Parmaras, Chalukyas and others settled down in different parts of Mithila region and formed their principalities. Though, the Pala rule continued some how with changing localities in the region upto 1097, when finally Karnatas succeeded in establishing a consolidated full-fledged independent state in Mithila, Mithila remained intact and witnessed an all

round development including agrarian as well as cultural renaissance under the Karnatas, Karnata rule lasted upto 1324, when it was finally annexed by Giyasuddin Tughlaq.

There were two major consequences of the sustained political upheavals and ceaseless war campaigns in the land of Mithila. The worse victim of the relentless invasions was trade and commerce of the region, which miserably declined<sup>9</sup>. Another aftermath had virtually transformed the whole socio-economic formation of Mithila. Certain bands of soldiers or Kinsmen of the invading rajput kings often opted to settle down in different parts of Mithila, rather reverting back with their ruler chiefs. Chieftains of such rajput clans carved principalities and usurped political authority in their settlement areas, with the help of their kinsmen<sup>10</sup>. In absence of effective central authority and political stability the chieftains of rajput clans acquired not only the vast tracts of land but also power to rule over the people of their locality. Thus, there emerged numerous big and small principalities comprising one or two villages to ten-fifteen villages according to the capacity and militancy of the chieftains and their kinsmen. While enjoying full control over their principalities these local rajput chieftains became intermediaries between the inhabitants of their principalities and the ruling dynasty. The Pala and thereafter Karnata rulers recognised the authority of these chieftains, obtained tributes and entrusted the responsibility of revenue collection. The ruling dynasties established Skandhavaras and sub-capitals in different ancient bhuktis or vishayas to control over the local chieftains. Among so many fragments of rajput clans, Parmaras, Chandellas, Gandhavaras, Chedis, Karnatas, Chauhanas, Galhautas and Gangas were worthwhile to mention. The chieftains of different militant castes of the sudras also followed the footsteps of rajput fragments and they acquired principalities on the line of rajput clans. The folk literature of Mithila contains the names and deeds of several high and low caste sudra rajas of early medieval Mithila, Who acquired principalities by their adventurous and chivalrous expeditions. Lorik, Raiya Rampal, Raja Salhesh and Haraba were the famous chieftains of early medieval mithila.<sup>11</sup>

Fragmentation and proliferation of principalities continued through out the period.<sup>12</sup> Jyotirishwara enumerates the names of the kula of these landed aristocracy in a long list, entitled, rajputa kul varnana, e.g. *Somavamsa, Suryavamsa, Rora, Chola, Sena, Pala, Yadava, Pamara, Nanda, Nikumbha, Pushpabhuti, Shringara, Ahrana, Gupajjhajhara, Suruki, Sisara, Vaikvaka, Ganahavara, Suvara, Heyana, Chhevaraka, Survara, Meda, Mahara, Vata, kachhavaha, Vayasa, Karamba, Chhuriyoja, Bhonda, Bhima, Vinha, Pundriyana, Chauhana, Chhikora, Chandella, Chanuki, Kunchivara, Ranjakuta, Mundauta, Vikauta, Galhauta, Chhangala, Chhabela, Bhati, Khati, Raghuvamshi, Panihara, Murabhanja, Gomata, Gandhara, Vardhana, Visista, Gutiya, Bhadra, Khurasana etc.*<sup>13</sup> The list shows that apart from rajput bands or groups from different parts of Indian subcontinent, a considerable number of sudra caste groups also acquired land and principalities in Mithila, which were recognized as samanta or rajputra by the Karnata rulers. A 7<sup>th</sup> century Mithila lokgatha Lorkain describes several principalities of yadavas and dusadhas respectively high and low caste sudras.<sup>14</sup>

The process of proliferation and fragmentation of principalities hastened under Pala and Karnata rulers, when they granted land not only to brahmanas and temples but also to their own ministers and commanders. Monghyr copper plate inscription of Devapala, Bhagalpur copper plate inscription of Narayanpal and Bangaon copper plate inscription of Vighrahapala III<sup>15</sup> attest the prevalence of the system of land grants. The ministers of Karnata rulers like Shridhardas, Karmaditya, Devaditya, Vireshwara, Ganeshwar and Chandeshwar were samantas and possessed villages by virtue of royal grants.<sup>16</sup> They were powerful feudal lords and in that capacity they made princely gifts and constructed huge religious structures.<sup>17</sup> Thus, besides the brahmanas and the temples, land were granted to the ministers and commanders on large scale causing the proliferation of principalities.

The chiefs of the principalities were popularly called raja, but literary evidence suggest various nomenclature for the chiefs of the principalities as samanta, mahasamanta, mandaleswar, mahamandaleswar and likewise.<sup>18</sup> Though, Maithili folk sagas of early medieval period frequently call the chiefs of the localities or principalities, raja, both textual and folk evidence attest different

ranks in feudal hierarchy. But the functioning and inter-relation of the different orders of the local chiefs or feudal lords are not clear.

Thus, the early medieval Mithila fragmented into principalities of both local chiefs and grantees of royal charters, enjoying vast land rights. The king himself was the overlord of the local lords and at the same time he was also a lord possessing big land holdings in different localities of the state.

Village was formidable and basic unit of the agrarian formation. One of the major changes in village communities was that a number of sudra castes, old and new, settled in the villages. The initiation of several clans and tribes to the brahmanical fold took on a large scale, which not only proliferated the sudra castes but also facilitated to divide the sudra varna into two distinct order-the high and low castes. The Puranas declared them *sat* and *a sat sudras*.<sup>20</sup> The high caste sudras were agriculturists, whereas the low caste sudras were artisans, Puranas depict a third category of low caste sudras and call them *antyaja* category. In practice the *antyajas* were on the outside of the Varna System. Jyotirishwar refers to them as *nirvasita* (excluded) and provides a long list of *antyaja* or *nirvasita* castes,<sup>21</sup> comprising labourers and low professionals. It will be worthwhile to mention here that the sudras outnumbered the brahmanas and other two higher varnas in early medieval Mithila and formed the major social basis of the agrarian formation. Several sudra castes acquired land under the leadership of their chiefs and became agriculturists. Dharmashastras sanctioned their right to land. The sudra chiefs also granted land to the brahmanas and this was legalised too. Infact, the early medieval period witnessed phenomenal growth of the sudra caste and so the expansion of agriculture. Maithili lokgatha, *Lorkain* is a ballad of agriculturist and pastoral society, in which different sudra castes have their *raja* and they have vast tracts of land for both agricultural and pastoral purposes.<sup>22</sup> But majority of the sudra peasants possessed small land holdings.

Infact, there emerged a powerful landed aristocracy in the villages consisting the rajputa chieftains and brahmana, kayastha and other beneficiaries of royal grants. The sudra chieftains were also in sizeable number. Apart from their own large and medium estates they enjoyed fiscal and administrative rights on village communities. Virtually they monopolised the land of the villages and peasants were forced to serfdom.<sup>23</sup>

The landed aristocracy of the early medieval Mithila transformed the ancient stratification of the society. Localism prevailed all over Mithila region and the peasants, artisans, labourers and even the merchants were strictly attached to their habitation. Peasants, artisans and merchants found it very difficult to move from one place to another. Thus, the agrarian economy was closed one and localised. Land and land-rights based social stratification replaced the varna based social structure. Though, varna and caste was still prominent and prevalence, but land ownership with fiscal and administrative rights became the main determinant of the stratification of agrarian society. The Bhakti movement harmonized this changed stratification and the nibandhkaras of early medieval Mithila like Chandeshwar, Shridutta Upadhyaya, Harinath Upadhyaya, Indrapati, Bhavasharmana and others tried their best to accommodate the changes in the framework of varna system.

The worst victim of the closed economy were the peasants, merchants, artisans, labourers and low professionals. They had to perform *begdar* (free service) and had to pay tributes, gifts, offerings and presents to the landed aristocracy, to whom they attached with. The big and middle land holders possessed slaves, which were called *bahiya* (male slave) and *bahikirani* (female slave)<sup>24</sup>. Slavery was wide spread and slaves could be sold, purchased, gifted and transferred. Same was the fate of the labourers also, which were bonded to land holders. The local chiefs, big land holders and the beneficiaries of the royal grant were all oppressive and often acted as the sovereign king of their respective estates or principalities. Naturally peasants and artisans were condemned to lead a life of poverty.<sup>25</sup> Shridhardas, a minister of Karnata king, depicted the pitiable condition of a poor house holder.

To sum up, the early medieval agrarian society was stratified. The landed aristocracy, comprising the rajputa and sudra chieftains, their kinsmen, grant holder brahmanas, kayasthas and other royal ministers were at the top of the agrarian society and apart from their own big land

holdings they enjoyed fiscal and administrative authority. The condition of the middle strata of the society was not satisfactory and they were sudra and vaishya pleantry as well as artisans and merchants, whereas on the bottom of the agrarian structure there remained labourers, low professionals and slaves, which were the most sufferers.

In the age of confusion and chaos, it is very difficult to trace the ownership of land. The new settler clans and tribes as well as several militant sudra castes either reclaimed the virgin land and established new settlement areas or extended their authority over the old village settlements and carved principalities. Their chieftains assumed the fiscal and administrative authority and proprietary rights on the land. These chieftains along with the Kings frequently granted lands to brahmanas and others, which attest their propriety rights on the land simultaneously. But how it was executed is not known.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps the tillers had no propriety rights and the nature of the lands of royal grants were either posture or virgin and the beneficiaries had only administrative rights to extract revenue from the peasants.<sup>27</sup>

Land was the mainstay of early medieval economy and agriculture was the chief source of livelihood. With the growth of the population and sharp decline in trade and commerce, pressure on land increased.<sup>28</sup> Peasants were regarded the backbone of the society. The rajputa, brahmana, kayastha as well as sudra big land holders persued agriculture with the help of bonded and hired labourers and beggar (forced labour) by the small land holder peasantry, most of which were by caste sudras, whereas the sudra peasantry themselves worked on their plots with the help of family members. According to Varnaratnakar, plough was the chief agricultural implement.<sup>30</sup>

Apart from agriculture, cattle rearing was the secondary source of livelihood. In agriculturist society cattle played an important role and were important means of production. Maithili lokgathas depict Mithila society mainly as postortal and several chieftains of Lorkain possessed cows upto one lakh.<sup>31</sup> It seems that the king also possessed substantial animal wealth in form of cows, buffaloes, goats, sheep etc., which were look after by an officer.<sup>32</sup>

As agriculture was the chief occupation of the majority of society, due attention were paid to irrigation. Jyotirishwar refers to the various means of irrigations such as saraovara, kupa, jalashaya etc.<sup>33</sup> But general peasants were depended on rains and there was not much of irrigated land.<sup>34</sup>

Maithili sources inform the name of a variety of cereals, fruits and vegetables, which were produced in early medieval Mithila. In Kirtyaratnakara, there is a reference to the production of wheat and barely.<sup>35</sup> Varnaratnakar refers to rice, pulse, barely, millets, peas, oil seeds, sugarcane, onion, garlic, poppy, spices, fruits and vegetables with their varities.<sup>36</sup> Chandeshwara refers to the navanna festival first day of the harvest of paddy.<sup>37</sup>

Though, Chandeshwara has described land revenue elaborately, it is very difficult to know the actual amount of the burden imposed on the peasantry by way of bhag, bhog, kara or hiranya in paucity of the other sources. It seems that peasants were subjected to forced labour of various kinds, which practically reduced them to the position of semi-serfs. The Chieftains and the beneficiaries enjoyed rights of ownership over the villages and their peasants. In early medieval period, the state gave up its claims to several taxes and the local chiefs and grantees, the man on spot came down heavily upon the peasants. Heavy realisations and extraction by the local authority caused depression and misery of the peasants of Mithila and that is why they do not seem to have been very adventous and enterprising.

To conclude, the agrarian formation of early medieval Mithila was entirely based on feudal pattern. The most of the landowners were militarily an extremely powerful class and were the chieftains of rajputa clans and sudra castes. Shridhardas in his anthology, Saduktikarnamrita,<sup>40</sup> has collected some poems, which reflect that ordinary folks were condemned to lead a life of acute poverty and distress. According to Shridharadas wealth (land) was monopolised by landed aristocracy and condition of the poor small land holders was pitable. but it was a systematized agrarian structure which Mithila witnessed after a long upheavals and it formed economic based of the cultural renaissance under the Karnatas.

**References :**

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