

# The Feudal System in Medieval Assam (6th to 12th Century A.D.)

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## Introduction

A modest attempt is made in the article to throw some light on the prominent features of the feudal system prevailing in Assam during the early medieval period since the 6th to the 12th century A. D. Regional historians while concentrating on the dynastic and political chronology have laid emphasis in their own rights, sometimes on the imperial expanse of the monarchies, sometimes on the glories of the past with a nationalistic nostalgia and could devote least space to the socio-economic formations of the polity. Hence an attempt is made here to draw attention of the scholars to the particular historic stage of evolution of the economy of Assam. The approach to the topic is, however, circumscribed by our limited access to original sources of the ancient period and dependence on translations of the epigraphic documents made available by the assiduous labour of some scholars. Hence the materials presented are telescopic and the views expressed are preliminary and tentative.

Feudalism may be described, from the economic point of view, as an agrarian structure in which a social stratum wielding administrative control over a territory collects the surplus over the bare necessities from the peasantry as intermediaries between the local population and the supreme political authority of a country. The system depicting a particular production relation but differing in details developed in different macro regions of India since the sixth century A. D. Its origin is traced back to the assignment of revenue of some villages to priests and/or local administrators in the Kosala Kingdom in the middle of the first millennium B. C. Since revenue demand was very low and unpaid labour service was at its beginning Kosambi termed the system as 'Proto Feudal' (1956/85 : 155, 255-6).

The Sanskritised equivalent Samantavada or Samantatantra standing for 'Indian Feudalism' (Digby, 1982/24 : 36) is probably derived from the term Samanta implying, during the Maurya period, a neighbouring Ksetraswamin or a King; a reference to it (Sakya Samanto) is also found in Kautilya's Arthashastra (Deva Sarma, 1977 : S. 131 : 6/1/14). During the sixth century A. D. the vanquished Kings and chiefs were also referred to as Samantas or vassals who in person or fealty paid tributes and military service in needs to the conqueror. In south India the local chiefs under

the crown were also called Samantas in the fifth century A. D. In these contexts Prof. R. S. Sharma holds that state power during the post Maurya and Gupta periods moved towards feudalism in the administrations of political, judicial and fiscal affairs (1955/85: 20-25). In Assam the term Samanta Cakravikrama is found in the early seventh century Nidhanpur copper plate land grant document in reference to the prowess of Bhaskaravarma who had surpassed a circle of chiefs (M. M. Sharma, 1978 : 42, lines 37-38).

Feudalism in its global aspects, according to Max Weber is generally based on 'fiefs', i.e. contractual granting of 'rent producing complex of rights' over a territory to individuals in return for fealty, particularly military service in reciprocal though unequal obligations. But it may also be based on 'benefices', i.e. assignment of income of an area to an office holder in return for real or presumed services. While a fief is a vassal's property used for his administrative expenditures including costs of military service, a benefice holder enjoys usufructuary rights as a rentier on official duties during the tenure of his office, though at times it may become hereditary and take the form of a fief in the process of 'gradual imperceptible transitions' (Weber, 1968, III : 1072-74 and 1947 : 351, 378, 380).

As regards Indian feudalism, Kosambi distinguishes two processes in its development, viz. 'from above' and 'from below'. In the former which developed since the second half of the sixth century, the crown levied tributes on his subordinates who, however, wielded full governmental powers in their respective territories. In the other case, a class of land owners wielding armed power over the population, but subject to military service to the state, developed 'within the village', collected taxes as intermediaries and passed over a fraction of it to the feudal hierarchy (1956/85 : 359)

It appears from the occidental (Weberian) and oriental (Kosambian) approaches that feudalism based on 'fief' and 'from above' are almost similar in their main features, viz. royalty and military service of the subordinate to the lord.

But feudalism based on 'benefices' and from below seem apparently to have different characteristics. The benefice holder is 'akin to a bureaucratic official' under decentralised patrimonialism when he appropriates extensive administrative powers as a rentier. This is perhaps why while referring to Iqta holders and Jagirdars Moreland termed the system as 'bureaucracy of the normal Asiatic Type, (1929/90 : 217-18). In cases of feudalism from below Kosambi refers to the regular creation of a new land-owning class, parallel to the Brahmins with whom land has been seeded under royal donations. Examples cited are the Rastrakutas notified in Calukya Land grants who while, having the right to bear arms stood above the cultivators and collected taxes from them. The "feudal agents had powers not only to collect all taxes including those on looms, goldsmiths and horses but to grant them away also". Such grants are dated from about 750 A. D. (1956/85 : 363-64). Elsewhere he also refers to Gupta period officials who themselves acquired

titles like Samanta, Thakkura, Ranaka, Rauta etc., collected revenue, passed over a portion of it to the king and served in the regular army at needs with an armed contingent at his own expenses (1964/81 : 197).

In the above context it may be noted that benefices granted to officials under 'patrimonial feudalism', according to Weber, might take three forms, viz. (1) benefice or allowances in kind, (2) fee benefices or assignment of revenue of an area and (3) Landed benefices, i.e. assignment of office or service land for the incumbent's use. 'This landed benefice approximates the fief' (1968 : 1072-74). Thus it seems, feudalism based on fief and from above on the one side and that based on benefices and from below on the other, converge in the process of metamorphosis.

Needless to emphasise, Prof. R. S. Sharma while elucidating the origin of Indian feudalism has invariably referred to land grants to Buddhist Sramanas, Brahmanas, temples, secular organisations and officials in the form of benefices (1965/85 : Ch. I). Prof. Thapar has also referred to land grants to officials in lieu of cash salaries and Agrahara grants to Brahmanas during the Gupta and post-Gupta periods without however, mentioning if such grant had created feudal production relations (1966/86 : 145-46). But on other occasions the historian states that 'land grants constituted the germ of what was later to develop into a new agrarian structure with its own implications for social and economic formations', i.e. development of feudalism (1979/87: 19, 119). With this background we pass over to elucidate the feudal system prevailing in Assam in the early medieval period.

### **Aryanisation of the Eastern region**

The history of the North-east may be said have unfolded itself with eastward migration of the Aryans as depicted in the Satapatha Brahmana legend of Mathava of Videgha who following Agni, the sacred fire, cleared the forests and had established his people to the east of the river Sadanira, identified with the river Koratoya—the modern Kuratee in Bengal which had 'obviously been displaced eastward' (Kosambi, 1956/85 : 123, also Vasu, 1922/83 : 3-4). The story has been dated by Thapar in the middle of the first millennium B. C. (1971/87 : 161). Reference to principalities or localities of ancient Kamarupa like Suvarnakudya, Antaravartya, Japa, Jongaka, Turupa, Asokagrama, Grameruka, Purnakadvipa and particularly to Paralahitya in Kautilya's Arthashastra (1977 : S. 39, 40) also confirms Aryans settlement in this region since the fourth century B. C. But centuries before the Aryan migration which must have continued like a stream for several centuries the region was populated since the third millenium B. C. by the Mlecchas, the prehistoric people, originating from Mongolia, Yuman and Burma (Nath, 1948/78 : 3).

Genealogies of the non-Aryan chiefs mostly fabricated, linked them with the Aryans with a view of raising their social status as depicted in traditional literary history as well as in some epigraphs.

Naraka described as a descent of the totemic Varaha incarnation of Visnu, his son Bhagadatta participating in the Kuruksetra war and Vana's daughter Usa being married to Aniruddha, grandson of Krishna are pointers to the case. Whatever might be the authenticity of such episodes they also indicate Aryan settlement in the region and what is perhaps more important fusion of Aryan and non-Aryan bloods paving the way to caste formation among the autochthonous groups, the tribes breaking into several Varnas or Jatis through a process of acculturation as it happened in case of the Nisadas whom the Aryans had met first in the Indo-Gangetic region (Jha 1974/84 : 67-84). Aryan culture is said to have spread upto the erstwhile Sibsagar district during the fifth century A. D. as evidenced by an inscription written in chaste Sanskrit on a stone found in the village Khanikargaon in the Sarupathar area of the present Golaghat district (M. M. Sharma, 1978 : 305). Incidentally Prof. R. S. Sharma dates the advent of Brahmanas in the fifth century in North Bengal and Assam, in the 6th century in East Bengal and in the seventh century in Orissa and Gujarat (1974/84 : 177).

### Characteristics of Land grants

Development of feudalism in Assam may be dated back to the mid sixth century A. D. on the basis of epigraphic records of land grants to Brahmanas, temples etc. Bhaskara Varma the twelfth generation king of the Bhauma or Varman dynasty made the first land grants jointly to some sixteen Brahmanas during the first decade of the seventh century through the Dubi copper plate charter (Sasana). It is said in this charter that Bhuti Varma, great-great grandfather of Bhaskara Varma had donated earlier (in the mid sixth century) the tract of land to the Brahmanas ; this Sasana being damaged, the present ruler had renewed the same grant. From Bhuti Varma's land grants it may be presumed that Gupta influences had penetrated the Brahmaputra valley or it was a part of the Gupta empire and it is said that Pusya Varma (mid 4th century A. D.), the first historical king of Pragjyotisa (Pragjyotishendra) was a vassal of the Guptas and Bhaskara Varma himself was an ally of Harsavardhana of Kanauja (Choudhury 1959/66 : 131,174-75). Anyway, since the time of Bhaskara Varma records of land grants to Brahmanas, temples and other institutions like Satras, Asramas and alms houses are found in epigraphs upto the twelfth century. As to the late medieval period, while apportioning of fiefs to the nobility, besides subjugating of local chiefs to vassalage, was a normal feature of the Ahom patrimonial polity, land grants to Brahmanas, temples and other religious institutions like Satras and Mosques became the special privileges of the newly proselitised rulers since the late seventeenth century (particulary since the reign (1681) of Gadadhar Singha (Gait. 1905/84 : 170). This period may be called the climacteric of feudalism in Assam with grouping of the population into occupationally differentiated classes (khels) attached to land and com-

pulsory military service for the adult male population (Baishya, 1989 : 72-73).

Description of the donated land not found in the Dubi plates because of the loss of the last of the six plates is, however, provided in the Nidhanpur copper plates of Bhaskara Varma. It may be recalled that this charter is also a renewal Sasana of an earlier Tamrapatta by Bhuti Varma which was lost and the land became taxable (Karada). The present edict mentions 166 1/16 measures of land demarcated by eight boundaries parcelled out among 205 Brahmanas including seven units for the Balicarusatra. It was an Agrahara (name of the land was Mayurasalmalagrahara) or tax free grant for Brahmanas apportioned according to Bhumicchidranayaya or rules for settlement of waste land. The charter entitled the donees to enjoy the land in perpetuity till the sun, moon and the earth would endure. (Bhattacharyya, 1931 : 33-41). In other charters made by succeeding rulers the unit of land, however, is not mentioned, rather measure of paddy yield of the plot is referred to in expressions like 'dhanya dvisahasra', 'catuhsahasra' etc.

The inscriptions give little clue to the unit of measurement of either land or paddy. Some scholars, however, maintain that land as well as paddy were measured in terms of Drona, more commonly Dona. One Dronavapa of land was an area where on one Drona of seed or its seedlings could be sown or transplanted ; it is equivalent to present day one bigha (0.13 hectares or 0.33 acres) of land measured with the help of a 12 feet long Nala or bamboo pole (Barua, 1951/69 : 93). As for weight, one Drona meant 5 seers (Seer=9331 grams) of any article (Choudhury, 1959/66 : 362).

An important point worth noting in connection with land grants is that while in other parts of India villages were donated, in Assam grant of a definite plot or tract of land was the general norm. On this basis, Prof. R. S. Sharma holds that as most of the micro regions of Assam was covered by forests intercepted by hills and rivers self-sufficient village combining agriculture and industry did not develop till the mid eleventh century. He substantiates his conclusion by citing the charters of Vala Varma, Ratnapala and the Gauhati copper plates of Indrapala wherein references were made to some thousand measure of paddy yield from the donated tract of land (1965/85 : 176). It is true that even in the Khanamukha grant made by Dharmapala during the first half of the twelfth century, not to mention other grants by the preceding rulers, a plot of land rather than a village was donated. But it may also be recollected that two grants by Vanamala, viz. the Tezpur and Parvatiya copper plates of the mid ninth century clearly mention the donation of two villages respectively Abhisuravataka and Haposagrama, besides reference to 'matchless villages' endowing a temple Hetukasulina in the second charter (M. M. Sharma, 1978 : 109, 122, 124). In the context, it is also worth observing that in a sparsely populated region with sedentary agriculture, land was seen by the tribes as a territory of arable fields,

meadows, pastures, woodland as well as water enjoyed by the community. But this feature does not imply that a village economy did not develop earlier, rather the ecological conditions separating one ethnic group from another might have helped formation of isolated and scattered but self-contained villages. Moreover, as experience of every human society 'runs in nearly uniform channels' (Morgan, 1877/1978 : 8-13) the tribes in the Brahmaputra valley as well as of the hilly regions must have the rudiments of manufacturing art in the form of basket making, weaving, pottery etc. (reference to a potter's pit, Kumbhakara Garta, is found in the Nidhanpur grant). Kautilya's reference to forest based products like Chandana, Agarū, Tailaparnika, Bhadrāsriya and textiles like Karpasika, Dukula, Khauma and Patrorna of different localities of ancient Kamarupa is also indicative of the growth and development of self-contained villages as well as commodity production, for the Patrorna (Pat/Patta) of Suvarnakudya was said to be the best in the country (Arthasastra, 1977 : S. 39-41).

### The feudal hierarchy

The other important aspect worth noting is the reference in the inscriptions to a number of feudal titles in Assam common to the all India pattern. Prof. R. S. Sharma has mentioned as many as 25 titles like Samanta, Mahasamanta, Raja, Rajanaka, Rajaputra, Rajna, Rajni, Rajanaka, Raja Vallabha, Bhokta, Bhogika, Mahabhogi, Bhupala, Mandalika etc. (1956/85 : 160, 223, 235). In Assam the following titles are found in the epigraphs: Visayamatya (Varganga rock inscription of Bhuti Varma), Visayapati, Nayaka, Nyayakaranika, Vyavaharika (Nidhanpur C. P. of Bhaskara Varma), Mahasamanta (Tezpur rock inscription of Harjara Varma-mid ninth century), Mahasainyapati, Mahadvaradhipati, Mahapratihara Mahamatya, Brahnadhikara (Hayunthal C. P. of Harjara Varma), Visayakarana, Raja, Rajni, Ranaka, Rajanaka, Rajaputra, Raja Vallabha (Uttara Varvil or Hawra-ghat C. P. of Vala Varma III), Rajanyaka, Rajaputra (Bargaon C. P. of Ratnapala-eleventh century) and Visayillaka (Kamauli C. P. of Vaidyadeva-twelfth century) besides a number of petty officials like Cata, Bhata (Parvatiya C. P. of Vanamala), Mahallakapradhika, Hastivaudhika, Naukavandhika, Chouradharanika, Dandika, Dandapaisika, Auparikarika, Autkhetika, Cattravasa (Nagaon C. P. of Vala Varma-III) etc. The list, however, is not exhaustive; in several copper plates, particularly after those of Vala Varma, the same titles are found; we have mentioned only the titles not found common in the subsequent epigraphs.

It is not easy, from the titles, to ascertain the status of each lord in the feudal hierarchy. We have already referred to the status of Samantas, Ranakas, Rautas, Thakkuras and Rastrakutas in the first section. Some of the titles are also self explanatory and space does not permit us to explain them all; hence a few important are taken up cursorily. Visayamatya, Visayapati, Visayakarana and Visayillaka were the titles of district offi-

cialists like the present day district collectors who were in all probabilities paid by the revenue of a Visaya in the form of fee benefices. It may be recalled that an empire or a kingdom was divided since the Gupta period into Bhuktis or provinces which consisted of some Visayas or districts (Thapar 1966/86:145). While Visaya occupies prominence in all other inscriptions, the Kamauli copper plate grant of Vaidyadeva mentions Vada Visaya in Kamarupa Mandala of Pragjyotisa Bhukti (M. M. Sharma 1978: 280,286). Pragjyotisa Bhukti may indicate that it was a province of the Pala Kingdom of Gauda at the time; for Vaidyadeva's father Bodhideva and the son himself were said to be the ministers (Saciva) enjoying estates or fiefs in this region respectively under Ramapala and Kumarapala of Bengal; later on Vaidyadeva might raise himself either to the position of a king or enjoyed the powers to grant away land - a case of sub-infeudation. Such cases of sub-infeudation combining feudalism from above and below were numerous under Ahom rule since Rudra Singha's time (1696) onwards. Instances are the vassalage of the Rajas of Dimoria and Rane and the Rane of Beltola who had a number of sub-vassals under them (White, 1831/1988: 193-4).

Titles like Ranaka, Rajanyaka, Rajaputra, Raja Vallabha found mostly in grants issued onward since Vala Varma III implying feudalism from below may be compared with those of Orissa where they enjoyed either land or revenue of certain villages, i.e. they were local chiefs (R. S. Sharma, 1965/85:235). Such lords might rise even from servile positions as courts' favourites under patrimonial recruitment of administrative staff or might be vassals who of their own free will entered as royal officials in an extra patrimonial system. The modern bureaucracy is said to have its origin in such patrimonial recruitments (Weber : 1947: 342-3). The edicts commended all these local lords as well as petty police officials like Cata, Bhata, Chauradharika, Dandika, Dandapasika besides controllers of boats and elephants not to enter and harass the inhabitants in the areas granted to Brahmanas. This indicates, on the one side, that all these officials had collected revenue and other taxes from the subjects and on the other, the grantees were accorded administrative, judicial and fiscal powers over the population.

### **Status of the working class**

The inscriptions do not provide information as to the status of the subject people who must have been in the lowest rung of the social hierarchy as slaves, serfs or coloni. It may be recollected that Agrahara endowments granted in accordance with Bhumi-chidra Nyaya were mostly waste or fellow lands intended for bringing them under the plough. The region was also sparsely populated and labour shortage posed probably a great problem at the time. In the situation feudal lords whether a grantee or an assignee might be under constraints to extract maximum revenue from the peasantry, rather might offer favourable terms to attract cultivators.

But at the same time the subjects once so settled might not be allowed to emigrate save by absconding or to change the vocation without the consent of the lord. This condition might have helped institutionalisation of chattel slavery with its full ramification in the late medieval period drawing sanctions, probably, from past practices. Instances of transfer of the resident population along with the grants are provided by the Kamauli grant of Vaidyadeva and the Assam plates of Vallabhadeva (1185 A.D.) by which two villages with four hundred inhabitants and seven villages with residents were donated respectively to a Brahmana and a Bhaktasala an alms house for the Kshudharta or hungry devotees assembling at a nearby temple (M. M. Sharama, 1717: 286, 295). It may be presumed that the residents of the seven villages had to bear the maintenance costs of the alms house and probably the inhabitants of other villages were also bestowed earlier upon the temple for its maintenance.

As regards mode of payments by the peasants and artisans to the grantee or assignee no clue is provided by the epigraphs. It may, however, be noted that in a medieval economy of combined agriculture and manufacturing Ricardian ground rent as a surplus over costs of cultivation was not prevailing; the landlord's share, 'revenue' as it was called, consisted of agricultural as well as industrial products (Marx, 1894/1959: III:767). Prof. Marshall also maintains that "the payments made by the working partner (actual cultivator added) is not a rent at all, but a fixed sum or that part of the gross proceeds" which custom and tradition bind him to pay to the 'sleeping partner' who might be a ruler of a state, an individual collector for the state, a proprietor, landholder, landlord or even a land owner. The 'fixed sum or part of the gross proceeds' implies a metayer or Bhaga of the total produce expropriated from 'men of the working class'. But the landlord had also "the right to claim certain labour services and dues, tolls and presents" and the amounts under these heads varied from time to time, place to place and from one landlord to another. And perhaps more important is the observation of the great economist. He says "when payments of all kinds made by the cultivator left him a margin beyond the necessities of life for him and his family, together with those comforts and luxuries which were established by custom" the sleeping partner "raised the payments in some form or other". If the main payments were a certain share of the produce he might raise the share; in cases of perception of violence by the peasants he would increase the number and burden of his minor imposts. It is also pointed out that in parts of Orissa, the tenants in the early nineteenth century had to pay, besides the customary rent, 33 different cesses (Marshall, 1890/1956:530-33). In Assam the burdens and imposts on the subjects were referred to by terms like Kara, Uparikara, Utkhetana etc. (Barua, 1951/69:89). Thus in spite of Kautilya's recommendations of 1/16th of the produce, the working people were recklessly extorted under systems of metayage, corvee labour, presents, fines and other taxes and Danas and Dakshinas to the Brahmanas and other tribal priests.

## Conclusions

Feudalism created a class of secular and spiritual landlords living on the fruits of labour of the toiling masses by wielding administrative, judicial and fiscal powers over them. While the secular lords as intermediaries between the supreme lord and the local population rendered military service in lieu of landed or revenue benefits, the priest, as the "sole intermediary between gods and men" to quote Gordon Childe (1942/86 176), rendered a spiritual service which was considered very important to the state. In the words of Kosambi "the new Brahmin was an essential adjunct of the state in reducing the mechanism of violence; his preaching of submission reduced the total administrative cost" (1956/85:313). But at the same time he also acted as a pioneer in this backward region. He brought along with him not the spiritual culture alone, he had also helped changing the material milieu by introducing advanced agricultural technology in the form of the wooden plough tipped with an iron share (Langal in Munda and Nangala in Dravidian; Thapar, 1969/87 217, 232) This innovation had helped introducing settled cultivation in place of slash and burn culture in the monsoon-fed alluvial soil of the Brahmaputra valley, mostly probably since the sixth century, if not earlier.

Feudalism had also played another important role; through a process of proselitisation and acculturation of the tribes by assimilating their deities into the Vedic pantheon, it helped integrating a large section of the tribes into the mainstream of Indian culture. But at the same time the system had to grow under its own weight; proselitisation reduced the tribes to the Sudra ritual status of peasants and craftsmen from which they could not move vertically in the caste hierarchy, a factor which probably prevented other tribal groups from coming into the fold even inspite of efforts by later Vaisnava saints like Sankaradeva. This resulted in stratification of an ethnically and linguistically divided pluralistic society manifesting the economic grievances in political struggles even long after Independence.

On the economic front inspite of the introduction of improved agricultural technology, the liturgical system of payments in kind and unpaid labour service accompanied by occupationally differentiated classes tied to the land impeded further technical innovations. While extraction of the surplus over bare necessities of life restricted market development by reducing purchasing power of the people, conspicuous consumption by the nobility and aristocracy hampered capital formation and the traders failed to convert their trade capital into industrial capital for restricted market conditions. Such a feudal mode of production reached the zenith in the late medieval period under Ahom rule of long six hundred years.

## Notes&References

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