

# SIGNIFICANCE AND ROLE OF BRĀHMAṆA SETTLEMENTS OF SOUTH WESTERN INDIA IN THE EARLY MEDIEVAL AND MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Nagendra Rao

The entry of the brāhmanas in the history of South India led to far reaching consequences. The brāhmanas played an important role in standardizing the social structure, with the emergence of the *varṇa* order and evolution of *jāti* hierarchy. They also played an equally important role in state formation in the region where there existed pre-state features. The acceptance of *varṇa* system in the social structure meant the transition from tribe to caste on the one hand and transition from pre-state to state situation on the other.<sup>1</sup>

The kings realized the practical value of the brāhmanas particularly during the post-Gupta period and they invited the brāhmanas to come to their territory and settle there. The brāhmanas were expected to legitimize the position of the kṣatriyas by connecting their genealogy with the genealogy of the great kings of North India like e.g. the Ikṣvākus. Vedic rituals were another means of the legitimization of the kṣatriyas. Later the brāhmaṇa authors in the court of the kings wrote the biographical histories of the kings. One of the best biographies or *caritas* was the one written by Bāṇa Bhaṭṭa regarding the life and times of Harṣavardhana of Thaneshwar.<sup>2</sup> Such biographical attempts are made at lesser level when we find the writing of the *vaṃśāvalī* (genealogy) of Mayūravarmā. This obviously pressurized the king to grant lands to the brāhmanas.

The *brahmadeyas* led to two consequences. Firstly, the land grants led to creation of the agency through which the state could express its ideology. Secondly, the state was able to extend the land under cultivation. This led to creation of surplus production on the one hand and creation of resource base for the state on the other. The tax concessions given to the donees helped in attracting the migration of productive and non-productive classes to those regions where there still existed primitive forms of cultivation like slash and burn cultivation. This explains the

reference to both brāhmaṇa and non-brāhmaṇical groups in the brāhmaṇical traditions.

The patronage of the kings was expressed through two means. Firstly, the kings issued inscriptions, where in, they assured the rights of the brāhmaṇas over the villages or plots of land that were given to them as land grant. Secondly, this was expressed through the brāhmaṇical tradition though they had the single purpose of establishing the credentials of the brāhmaṇas over the villages or the land grants that were made to them. On certain occasions, this led to creation of spurious land grants and brāhmaṇical myths.

Thus in a purely agrarian economy the importance of fertile agrarian tracts were noticed by the brāhmaṇas. It was these brāhmaṇas who gave a linkage to the Purāṇic traditions of North India. Thus the caste *Purāṇas* of South India, which claim great antiquity, in reality, may not belong to remote past. By doing this cultural symbols like Vedic rituals remained uniform throughout India. Thus, all over India one can see a uniform pattern of brāhmaṇa settlements. They, in fact, exhibited more or less similar features. Most of brāhmaṇa settlements were found in the form of clusters of villages around important river valleys.<sup>3</sup> They had their assemblies that met in important brāhmaṇa settlements. For instance in the case of South Western India, the brāhmaṇa settlements are found on the river banks like Sita and Netravati.

Most of the times one can notice assimilation of the aboriginal culture. Thus on the one hand there was worship of brāhmaṇical gods, while on the other there existed the small shrines of non-brāhmaṇical *daivas*. The role of the brāhmaṇas in the previously non-brāhmaṇical society was very significant since the brāhmaṇas possessed the knowledge of agrarian seasons and weather through their knowledge of astronomy and astrology. They were able to suggest remedies for the ills of the people. Thus, it was easy for them to impress their ideology on the people. This pattern of creation of brāhmaṇa settlements was a phenomenon one can notice all over South India. South Western India, a coastal region of modern state of Karnataka, was not an exception to this development.

## SIGNIFICANCE AND ROLE OF ... MEDIEVAL PERIOD

R.S. Sharma argued that the land grants that were given to the brāhmaṇas led to the emergence of Indian feudalism since along with the land grants several administrative and judicial rights were delegated by the kings to the landlords. This led to the creation of conflict between two classes, brāhmaṇas and peasants.<sup>4</sup> B.D. Chattopadhyaya argued that the brāhmaṇa settlements led to the expansion of agricultural production.<sup>5</sup> Herman Kulke believed that brāhmaṇa settlements were created due the need for validation and legitimacy of the post-Gupta kingdoms. He says that the brāhmaṇas played an important role in the process of legitimization of the rule of the local kingdoms. The brāhmaṇas also integrated the divergent local cults into the greater Sanskritic culture.<sup>6</sup> Burton Stein stated that the brāhmaṇas were the authoritative interpreters of the ideological framework. They lived with the peasants in the rural settlements.<sup>7</sup> The studies made by these scholars have revealed certain important aspects of the relation of the brāhmaṇas with the society during the different points of time.

Above details exhibit certain general pattern of development related to brāhmaṇa settlements. Some of the above features can be found in South Western India as well. Even though the earliest inscriptions of South Western India mention the brāhmaṇa communities and brāhmaṇa settlements like Shivalli, it is in a caste purāṇa, *Grāmapaddhati*, where we find important details regarding the establishment of brāhmaṇa settlements in South Western India. In the *Grāmapaddhati* there are details about brāhmaṇa families in thirty-two villages. The fact that this was a caste purāṇa enables us to assume that this work was written with a purpose. By preserving the tradition in a written form attempt was made to maintain traditional rights over land and villages.

The brāhmaṇas attempted to claim ownership rights through two ways. Firstly, by composing and preserving the traditions they claimed ownership rights. The tradition regarding creation of Paraśurāma *kṣetra* belongs to this category. Through the myths, which could not be placed in specificity of time and space, it was attempted by brāhmaṇas to dominate fertile agrarian tracts. The second way of claiming ownership right was through

the land grants which were issued in the form of inscriptions by kings, governors, traders, rich members of the society, etc. who needed the support of brāhmaṇas to legitimize their position in society.

Discussing about the first type of brāhmaṇical attempt to claim land ownership rights we may present the data available in the brāhmaṇical traditional chronicle, the *Grāmapaddhati*. Through this brāhmaṇical tradition the brāhmaṇas who were obviously the authors of this work, tried to claim ownership rights over large tracts of land in the western coast. The tradition discusses the creation of land by Paraśurāma out of sea by the use of his arrow and by the use of his axe in two different contexts. Basically this has to be seen as a myth which was purposely created for the preservation of the rights of brāhmaṇas over land. It is said that lord Paraśurāma donated villages to brāhmaṇas. Here Paraśurāma may be considered as a cult figure, a figure that represents the migration of the brāhmaṇas from North India. Paraśurāma is seen in the traditions of North India as found in the *Purānas*. The question as to why Paraśurāma was taken in the case of the brāhmaṇical traditions in South Western India can be answered by arguing that Paraśurāma himself represented the aggressiveness of the brāhmaṇa, who claimed to have defeated the kṣatriyas and extirpated the kṣatriyas from earth, which tradition itself may highlight the ongoing power struggle between the brāhmaṇas and the kṣatriyas. In this power struggle eventually there must have been a compromise between the brāhmaṇas and the kṣatriyas as seen in the acceptance of kṣatriya Viśvamitra by the brāhmaṇa Vasiṣṭha. Thus the motif of Paraśurāma as the divine power is effectively used in this tradition.

Another important incident mentioned in the *Grāmapaddhati* is the representation of the temporal figurehead in the form of emergence of Mayūravarmā. For one thing, Mayūravarmā is taken since he himself was a brāhmaṇa and he had kṣatriyaized himself to become the king, another representation of transformation of brāhmaṇas from being merely a priestly class to a dominant ruling class. On the one hand there was the need for the recording of this transformation so as to legitimize the position of the newly established rule of the brāhmaṇa ruler Mayūravarmā.

## SIGNIFICANCE AND ROLE OF ... MEDIEVAL PERIOD

This is a clear example of social mobility in early India, a process wherein there was not only a change of profession but also a change in the *varṇa* itself, which itself is not a simple development, which must have led to far reaching consequences. On the other hand, there was the need for the brāhmaṇas to claim ownership rights, which was done by claiming land grants by Mayūravarmā. We know that land grants during the early medieval and medieval times throughout India had become common phenomena, a feature of growing feudalisation of the society.<sup>8</sup>

This tradition itself can be considered as the attempt of the brāhmaṇas to establish the *varṇa* order in the society in a social context where there was simple division of social classes on the basis of the professions performed by these classes. In fact, after the establishment of the brāhmaṇa settlement we may safely argue that there was intensification of social stratification in South Western India. The *Grāmapaddhati*, the dating of which is a problematic task, uses the details, which place this work in the early medieval and medieval times. However, the details of settlement of *grāmas*, the appointment of non-brāhmaṇas to look after the agricultural activities, the enslavement of previously dominant communities of the non-brāhmaṇa peasants called *holeyas* and the reference to feudal terms of relationship between the kings and the people, suggests emergence of feudal polity and society. There is reference to the settlement of brāhmaṇas in the thirty-two villages or *agrahāras* of South Western India. Many of these thirty-two villages can be identified even today. The document even gives the names of all the brāhmaṇa families who were made to settle in all these thirty-two villages.

What are the activities of the brāhmaṇas? It is said that they have to perform the *yajña*, *adhyāpana* other priestly occupations. However, among the brāhmaṇas we find the reference to two categories: *trikarmis* and *Śatkarmis*. *Trikarmis* were not supposed to perform *pūjā* and they were managers of land and the temples. This categorization of the brāhmaṇas indicates the emergence of one section of brāhmaṇas who were more interested in agricultural activities. Although *sāstra* literature condemned agricultural pursuits to the brāhmaṇas, we find certain brāhmanical

communities like the Matti brāhmaṇas, etc., indulged in agricultural activities. The authors of the *Grāmapaddhati* clarify that this is allowed because they were fallen brāhmaṇas cursed to perform agriculture and horticulture.

The *Grāmapaddhati* indicates the migration of the brāhmaṇas from outside regions even though it is contentious issue as to exactly from where these people migrated, historians arguing migration from a place called Ahicchatra which has been identified with various places like one in U.P. and other in Andhra Pradesh, eastern coast of South India. However, recent reference that another name of Badami was Ahicchatra as found in the work of R. Champakalakshmi seems to be more acceptable since it is possible and plausible that there was the migration of the brāhmaṇas from Ahicchatra or Aihole.<sup>9</sup> And we are informed that it was the brāhmaṇas who started the agricultural guild of south India which was known as *mahānāḍu* and which emerged as the Ayyavole Five Hundred.<sup>10</sup>

There are several references to brāhmaṇas as the owners of the land as we find in the inscriptions of South Western India.<sup>11</sup> An analysis of the inscriptions shows that land grants were given to the temples and the brāhmaṇas for the alleged purpose of gaining religious merit from these pious activities. However, more important reason for the creation *brahmadeyas* and *devadānas* seem to legitimize the position of the traders, trader guilds which originated from an outside region and they had come to stay in the locality. As far as the kings are concerned, they tried to use the temples as the objects of dissemination of their ideology to indoctrinate the subject population of the local zones or peripheries.

Starting from 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. the inscriptions of South Western India refer to the activities of brāhmaṇas and mention the importance of Shivalli which is often compared to Kāśī itself, which is most sacred domain of the brāhmaṇas and a pilgrimage center.<sup>12</sup> The inscriptions realize the importance of the brāhmaṇas. Their defiance by other *varṇas* in the society is compared with the murder of several cows of Shivalli, which is the ultimate crime of the populace in the society which would have fetched the

## SIGNIFICANCE AND ROLE OF ... MEDIEVAL PERIOD

maximum religious demerit for the offender. It is said that those who harm brāhmaṇas would commit the sin equal to killing of one thousand cows, indication of how both brāhmaṇas and cows were important for the agrarian economy of the times.

There are several inscriptions which indicate the patronage given to the brāhmaṇas by not only the kings but also by other communities like traders, bangle sellers, agriculturists, even Jains and others. This meant that even in the absence of emporiums the brāhmaṇas continued to receive patronage. Later petty chieftains replaced the king. For instance we find reference to a brāhmaṇa who was the advisor of a sūdra peasant who stayed in his residence called *bidu*. One way of improving the economic position of the brāhmaṇas was by giving monetary aid and land grants to temples, which were managed by the brāhmaṇas.

Folklore represents the expression of feelings of the common people regarding various sections of society. In South Western India there are folk literature like *paddanas*, *kabitas*, proverbs, etc. Among these *paddanas* form the most important source of information. In the folklore of South Western India, the brāhmaṇas are represented as dominant section and some times there is an expression of feeling of contempt among the people regarding this community. But they are considered as a kind of necessary evil in the society, since they are knowledgeable in astrology, seasons and contact with divine forms.<sup>13</sup> The brāhmaṇas had become successful in influencing the non-brāhmaṇa sections and their customs and practices. This is proved by the fact that it was the brāhmaṇa priest who initiates the *bhutada kola*, a ritual of non-brāhmaṇas. During the earlier times there existed *bidus* or settlement of bunts, the local feudal lords. Usually these lords were advised by a brāhmaṇa. Thus traditions, inscriptions and folklore tell us how significant brāhmaṇa settlements were in the early medieval and medieval society of South India.

### References:

1. B.D. Chattopadhyaya, 'Political Processes and Structure of Polity in Early Medieval India', Presidential Address,

## Nagendra Rao

Ancient India Section, *Indian History Congress*, 44<sup>th</sup> session, 1983. (henceforth 'Political Processes and Structure of Polity').

2. A.B. Keith, *A History of Sanskrit Literature*, Delhi, 1993, p.316.
3. Nagendra Rao, "The Historical Tradition of South Kanara and the Brahmanical Groups : *A Study of Gramapaddhati and Sahyadri Khanda*" Unpublished M.Phil. dissertation, Mangalore University, 1995.
4. R.S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, Calcutta, 1965.
5. B.D. Chattopadhyaya, 'Political Processes and Structure of Polity'.
6. Hermann Kulke, *The State in India 1000-1700*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997.
7. Burton Stein, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 6-9.
8. M.G.S. Narayanan, *Foundations of South Indian Society and Culture*, Delhi, 1994.
9. R. Champakalakshmi, *Trade, Ideology and Urbanization South India 300 B.C. to A.D. 1300*, Delhi, 1996, p.50.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *SII*, VII and IX Part II.
12. Nagendra Rao, 'Shivalli: A Brahman Settlement of Dakshina Kannada', *Quarterly Journal of Mythic Society*, Volume XCI, Issue No. 3, 2000, pp. 72-81.
13. B.A. Vivek Rai, *Tulunadina Janapada Sahitya*, (in Kannada) Bangalore, 1985.