



Evolving Land Ownership and Economic Paradigms in Ancient India: From Vedic Age to Post-Gupta Period

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Article History	Abstract
<p>Received: 27 July 2022 Revised: 16 Oct 2022 Accepted: 06 Dec 2022</p>	<p><i>Ancient Indian land gifts and the idea of land ownership are the focus of this research article. During this time, there were major shifts and developments in the theoretical understanding of land ownership and the land grant. Private land ownership with alienation rights in Ancient India was primarily possessed by the priestly elite and was gained via land grants. Private land ownership evolved into a critical social institution throughout time. Not all landholding classes, however, were affected by this. Other types of assignees were tightly supervised by the rulers. It was possible to seize and transfer their land. From the latter half of the Gupta era until the rise of the Delhi Sultanate, land and the ownership rights to it were fundamental to all spheres of society, including religion, politics, economics, and culture. A combination of factors, including the period's economic crisis and the fact that land served as a medium of social mobilisation and social position, led to the state granting land to officers, religious groups, and establishments in return for services. Society became more complex and stratified. The amount and variety of primary and secondary sources used for this article are enormous. An essential feature that influenced the country's social, political, religious, and economic history has been illuminated via a monograph that draws on epigraphs, inscriptions, coins, cowries, and manuscripts.</i></p>
<p>CC License CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0</p>	<p>Keywords: Ancient India Land Ownership, Land Grants Dynamics, Religious Land Rights, Gupta Period Property Rights, Social Structure and Landholding</p>

1. Introduction

For as long as anybody can remember, Chronic Land has been seen as a status symbol that is highly valued and held in great esteem in almost every culture on the planet. Additionally, the monarch has always experienced a tremendous amount of pride and dignity whenever he has been presented with the territory as a gift. Depending on whether we are discussing a community, a person, or even a ruler, the concept of who owns what in this region has experienced minor but notable alterations, shifting from communal control to private ownership. These adjustments have occurred in all three of these categories. It was not until the time of the early Vedas that the significance of land as a reservoir of wealth and property was acknowledged.1. The Vedic era was followed by the beginning of a gradual realisation of the significance of land as a form of wealth throughout this time period. However, when agriculture emerged as the preeminent economic activity in the latter part of the eighth century BCE, the value of land saw a significant surge. As a result, the practice of land donations, which did not become widespread until the fifth century, was not only unfamiliar with the early Vedic era but also opposed to it. The Vedic writings also include references to the taboo that prohibits the gifting of land as a present. It is symptomatic of the tribal nature of Vedic society that it places a strong focus on communal land ownership, which is only one of its defining characteristics. In light of this, the Shatpatha Brahmana provides evidence that the Vedic writings condemned the practice of giving land as a gift.2. During the course of the Mahabharata, even the request for land made by the sacrificial priest is not granted. The later practice of selling, purchasing, and gifting property to the Brahmins is a clear example of how this data stands in sharp contrast to the behaviour described above.

Throughout the post-Vedic period, there were modifications in attitude about the ownership of land. In addition, there were sporadic instances in which land deals were mentioned. In addition to this, it has been seen that land is being purchased and sold. It is already the case that a significant change has taken place, despite the fact that several Brahmanical scriptures condemn such practices. In addition, the connection between work and land was seen as an additional remarkable and important shift. A more ancient text known as Manusmirti established a relationship between labour and the land, with the latter being responsible for the cultivation of the former. The concept of property rights underwent a substantial transformation in ancient India, particularly in regard to the position of the monarch in respect to the land. During the Rigvedic era, the chief god Indra was asked to grant the king's lot Bhaga. However, during the later Vedic time, the monarch himself assumed responsibility for the gathering of the sum.³⁾

The Lawgiver, Manu, created private property during the Smirti period by asserting that "the realm is of him who clears it first and a hiran who hunts it first." This was the beginning of the concept of private property. Additionally, the line makes a reference to a dominant economic theory that was prevalent during that era. It seemed natural to connect workers' salaries to their property rights when they had access to such a huge tract of land, so they did so. The proposition that "an occupation with statutory title is the evidence of the proprietorship of the land" is a notion that has been defended by renowned ancient legal academics and philosophers such as Manu, Medhatithi, and Vigneswaran.^{4.} If these assumptions are valid, then it follows that some landed holdings may have been held even before specific evidence of ownership could be established. This is the case with certain landed holdings. With regard to this particular transaction, it was the job of the buyer, and not the seller, to discover the true ownership of the tract. According to the ancient legal and philosophical literature, it is difficult for the king to take or revoke possession of property that has been held by at least three consecutive extended generations. This is because the monarch cannot legally seize or revoke ownership of land. According to Sukra, another major contemporaneous thinker and lawgiver in Ancient India, if a person enjoys this property for more than or at least twenty years and there is no hereditary claimant who claims it, then the land does not belong to the hereditary owner. If, after a hundred years, the original or legal owner comes to claim a piece of land that the person or his kula has been exploiting, the king should punish the original or legal owner as an offender rather than providing him with a reward. That is because the monarch should be considered an offender.^{5.} For the second time, the term makes reference to a changed economic atmosphere, in which the relationship between work and land was the most significant factor that undermined the exclusive ownership over the tract. A shift in understanding about who should own what occurred, and property was also beginning to be given to Brahmanas as a sacrifice. It seems that there was an old agreement that all members of a group or tribe should have equal title to the land. However, this agreement appears to have been made. As stated in the post-Vedic text Aitrya Brahmana, Prithivi raised an objection when Vishwakarma Bhuvan gave land to the Brahmanas who had performed sacrifices after the conclusion of the Yagna.^{6.} These anecdotes demonstrate that throughout the post-Vedic period, individuals were giving large swaths of land without first consulting the community or the grama prior to the donation. The writings provide us with information about the past, and based on that information, we may draw the conclusion that communal governance over the land had not yet been formed. According to the Dharmashastras, which Gautama was the author of, any sort of property, including land, is considered invisible if it contributes to bring about the continuation of human existence. In the Mimasasutra, there are chapters that explain how the society exercised authority over the land. The king is prohibited from giving or gifting the land, as stated in a proclamation that is quite obvious. Beginning in the fourth century and continuing into the fifth century, there was a significant change in the way property was owned and the way land was given away. Not only do the Smritis provide evidence of the changes that took place during that particular time period in history, but a number of inscriptions also provide evidence of these changes. While the distinction between various forms of land was becoming less important, the significance of common land ownership was also diminishing. The categorising of estates was carried out for a number of reasons, one of which was to ensure that the monarch would have control of all types of property. On the other side, the Satvahna period is important because it was at this time that land was transferred to purohitas, shramanas, and Buddhists.⁷ During the fifth and sixth centuries, land was more often given away, which resulted in a shift in the long-held beliefs about who owned what. It was the progressive relinquishment of royal privileges that had a significant impact on the political, cultural, and social milieu of the time period. There was a new period of closed agricultural economy that had started, and along with it came a peasantry

that was both servile and subject to forced work, *visti*. Additionally, there was a rural elite hierarchy that consisted of *mahasamntas*, *samantas*, *rajas*, and *ranauts*.

Significance of land as Module of wealth of in the Vedic Age-

Since the majority of people in the Early Vedic civilization subsisted off the land, cattle were the most important things that individuals could own during that time period. There is evidence that pastoralism played a significant role in the early Vedic economy, as seen by the direct allusions and prayers for *Pashu*, which is a word that is used for all types of cow. During the Vedic time, the wealthy individuals were referred to as *Gomat*, and those who had livestock were given the name *Gomat*. *Gavishti* and *gavesan* are two examples of words that come to mind.⁸ It was known by these names that raids and searches of cattle were conducted. The early Vedic era was distinguished by a concentration on cattle as a sign of affluence rather than land, according to what we have been able to acquire during this time period. There is either very little evidence or none at all to substantiate the significance of land, such as the fact that pasture fields were held by the community. At the beginning of the Vedic era, there are not many allusions to activities related to agriculture. When literary references regarding agricultural activity, agricultural production, and the land started to appear, it was not until the later Vedic and post-Vedic periods that archaeological evidence began to emerge to substantiate these allusions. *Yav* is only found in the *Rigveda*, which is the only location where it is encountered. There is a good chance that it was a word that was often used to denote barley and wheat.⁹ In the years after the year 1000 B.C.E., the value of land increased as a consequence of the increased agricultural activity that was made possible by the invention of iron implements and the use of the fertile soil of the Indo-Gangetic plain. As a result of economic growth in the agricultural industry, land became more valuable. Over the course of this time period, we have not discovered any tangible evidence of land ownership. After then, the authority of the community had been well established.

Land ownership and the practice of land gift in the Post Vedic age and in the age of Buddha-

It was around the sixth century B.C. when a fresh viewpoint on the material world came into being. During this historical period, the Gangetic valley saw the establishment of a great number of *nagara* and monarchical republics. People frequently refer to the period that followed as the "age of second urbanisation," and it was during this time that cities saw a spike in the amount of trade that they conducted. There were several landlords who were referenced in Buddhist texts as living in urban locations, despite the fact that they held property in rural regions.^{ten} Consequently, the existence of these landowners was beneficial to the monarchical states since they contributed to the economic development of the states. The names of *Anathpindika* and *Kosiyagotta*, two prominent merchants and landowners who had a great deal of influence over the kings, are mentioned on many occasions. The term "*khetta*," which refers to farmland, is referenced in Jaina writings such as the *Uttaradhyana sutra*, which is considered to be an important wealth item.¹¹ However, the second source, *Barhatkalpa bhasya*, mentions eleven different types of wealth, and one of those kinds of wealth is agricultural land. Every one of these factors indicates that the property is owned by a private individual. The founding and continued existence of monarchical regimes in the Gangetic basin has resulted in the emergence of a new point of view about the rights to land and property. There was a fast expansion of states that were ruled by kings, such as *Magadha* and *Koshala*. These republics successfully incorporated the tribal oligarchies throughout the course of time. The maintenance of the army and the enormous administrative infrastructure of monarchical countries required revenues in order to function and function well. Because monarchical regimes depended primarily on revenue from agriculture, land was held in very high esteem by those administrations. Consequently, the practice of subletting property rights was uncommon throughout this period of time. During the time of the Mauryans, land was divided up and appropriately marked when it was determined who owned it. The word "*Swayam*" is used by *Kautilya* in *Arthashastra* to refer to the proprietary right that is associated with the sale and purchase of an area."¹² Encroachment was greatly disapproved of and might lead to disciplinary action being taken. It would seem that *Kautilya* is in support of the state owning all of the land that is used for agricultural purposes. On the other hand, it did not agree with the notion that the king should have control over all areas. In the *Arthashastra*, a comprehensive explanation of the many types of land ownership is presented. Within the scope of this discussion, it is essential to differentiate between the *Rashtra* and *Sita* types of landholding relationships.^{a 13} The territories that are classified as *Rashtra* are descendants of republics or tribal groups that were subjugated a significant amount of time prior to the Mauryan dynasty. These territories were not directly under the state's jurisdiction until

much later. It is most probable that the only job was to provide taxes to the Mauryan empire. A unusual kind of land ownership was something that we came upon in the Sita region. However, there was also the possibility of the Sita holdings. Sita land was the name given to the region that had been cleared of its forest cover with the assistance of those who lived in the forest. This is where we have the opportunity to get knowledge about their activities and accomplishments, as well as their involvement in the economy of Maurya. The land that belonged to the Sita people was under the complete and total supervision of the state, and it was not allowed to be sold or transferred. Alternatively, such land may be leased out without the capacity to alienate it. This is a potential disadvantage. In the course of the Mauryan period, there was a wide variety of land in circulation, and land rights were subject to change. In the Kulavagga Jataka, the law giver declared explicitly for the first time that the King had the first right and property rights in land. This was the first time that this was expressed. On the other hand, this viewpoint reiterates the fundamental assumption that the king is not a sovereign ruler who retains control over the whole area. He made a distinction between two jobs when he said that a king owes because he protects his people and the land that they own. In ancient India, this viewpoint was prevalent for a longer period of time, and it continued to be prevalent in later epochs as well.

The Post-Mauryan, Gupta, and Post-Gupta Periods of Land Ownership—

During the Post-Mauryan, Gupta, and Post-Gupta epochs, the concept of land ownership evolved and evolved into a more significant concept. It was not typical for anyone to have absolute property rights to land throughout the period of time immediately following the Mauryan empire. The concept of personal property rights, which was argued for by both Manu and Gautama, suggests that individuals ought to be allowed to assert ownership of land based on their religious position. There are accounts of free-living farmers in the Buddhist canonical Divyavadana. These farmers lived in regions such as Magadha, Sravasti, Kosala, and other locations. They were able to purchase and sell anything they desired.¹⁵ In addition to this, Milinda Panho recounts the tale of an independent farmer from the Gangetic basin who cleared the area of neighbouring dense forests so that it could be used for agricultural purposes. In addition, Milinda Panho confirms that the land that is suitable for agriculture was not given to anybody as a gift or grant. Nevertheless, it does make reference to the Nagara, which were the possession of rulers most likely for strategic reasons. The monarch had total authority over all minerals, with the exception of the Nagara.¹⁶ So, the significance and vitality of these were the primary factors that led to the development of a new style of control. Within the Deccan region, it is quite probable that the Satvahnas had their own unique system of property rights. During the time of the Satvahana kingdom, there is evidence that individuals were entitled to certain lands. During this historical period, land was distributed to Buddhist monks and Brahmins; nevertheless, there is no evidence to suggest that this property was distributed for reasons that were not necessarily religious in nature. During the Ashvamedha sacrifice that took place in Maharashtra in the first century, there is a reference in an epigraphic document that describes the giving of a hamlet to the priests who were performing the sacrifice. Throughout the Shaka and Kushan empires, land ownership remained a prevalent practice. Despite the fact that the Girnar¹⁷ Inscription of Rudraman lends credence to the idea that the state had complete jurisdiction over property, there are instances in which some rights are granted during the process of land transfer.

Occupancy rights or land ownership during the Gupta era

When this period of time was in effect, the state had monopolistic rights over the majority of the land. During this time period, there has been an increase in the number of land grants made to presiding priests. The inscription on the copper plate from Pahrapur, which was written in 478 CE under the Buddhagupta dynasty, states that the King donated the land in order to acquire spiritual virtue.¹⁸ This phrase gives the impression that the state exerted a great deal of control over the area on which it settled. Adding further weight to the conviction was the statement that there were intricate official procedures, which provided more evidence that the land concessions were owned by the relevant individuals. According to inscriptions from the historical period, the king continued to have exclusive rights over the tract even after he had handed it over to the recipient. The implication here is that while the aristocracy may have had a legal claim to the property in rural regions, the state was the one who really held the land in principle for the most part. There were a great number of land tenures that existed throughout the post-Gupta period, and the inscriptions offer proof of this. The following types of land tenures were included in this category: aprada dharma, bhumi-chhidra-naya, nivi dharma akshyana, and nivi dharmas.¹⁹ While the northern and central regions of the nation were home to the most prevalent kinds of

tenure, the other forms were used all across the country. Examples of land tenures that highlight the nature of endowments include eternal endowments, endowments that lack the ability to be transferred, endowments that do not contain administrative rights, and endowments that were gained by converting uncultivated, barren land into cultivable land. Numerous inscriptions on copper plates provide further evidence that a substantial amount of endowments and contributions have been received. In addition, there were prizes that were given to certain communities or groups of persons in order to generate funding for their own causes. Within the context of this environment, it is conceivable to come across examples of secular grants, agrahara awards, and devagrahara grants.²⁰ It is interesting to note that land grants in Bengal and the eastern region did not include the provision of the authority to alienate individuals. On the other hand, the Skandgupta inscription in Central India gives the impression that land grantees were permitted to sub-infeudate in order to cultivate their land.

The rise of an agricultural economy during the Post-Gupta Period is said to have been caused by the growing practice of land grants, which in turn led to an increase in land ownership or occupation rights. Also, sub-infeudation was starting to take off at that time. The practice had become an integral part of Gupta rule by the time it ended. The notion of the king's ownership, however, arose later in the time. Katyana has made it very obvious that the monarch should get bhaga, or a quarter of the land's yield, as he is both the theoretical and practical owner. On the other hand, he does not deny the right of a long-term resident. ²¹ Although it restates the claim stated in the Katyana smriti and Narsingh Purana, Narad Smirti affirms that the monarch is the rightful owner of the land. as well as conveying that the ruler's status gave him the authority to bestow gifts or grants. Donating land was supposedly done for religious and spiritual reasons, but it really points to a major societal problem that existed throughout that time. Land grants were provided to state authorities and clerics during this time as a substitute for pay and other responsibilities. The receivers or beneficiaries of the land grants were fortunate since they were made to shoulder the responsibility of tax collection. Along with these funding came additional responsibilities.²² It was common practice to provide land grants in rural regions with the intention of cultivating more of the previously uncultivated or partly farmed land. The neo-rural elites outsourced this task since they were finding it more and more difficult to cultivate themselves and bring in money. Sharecroppers were now employed to farm the newly acquired fields. Even though they worked the property and felt a connection to it, sharecroppers did not have title to the lands they farmed. The transformation of the once-mobile cultivators into the now-immobile lot was another major change. The movement of rural residents and farmers was limited by new changes in the rural economy. A new power axis, centred on the countryside, is emerging against this background. Particular features of the emerging agrarian economy were the expansion of grant-making beyond previously-adopted agricultural regions into previously-inhabited areas. Land rights are transferred with the tract in certain places. Additionally, they had the power to limit the mobility of the peasants and impose visti on the people. Their authority was augmented by the delegation of powers pertaining to the area's administration, criminal justice, and the judiciary.²³ During this time, the grantees' privileges expanded, while the amount and cost of taxes rose. All of these things add up to a more complicated income structure with uneven distribution across regions. One of the most significant innovations, feudalism, emerged during this time. The canvass where the Brahmins, who had previously been the exclusive recipients, had their benefits spread out continued to grow. A new social stratum known as feudal lords emerged as a result of all these factors. Originally from Maharashtra, this custom eventually expanded throughout India in the fifth and sixth centuries, with slight changes in form from area to region. Poor peasants and sharecroppers are the victims of feudalism and sub-infeudation. There was a catastrophic breakdown among the peasants or rural people as a result of forced labour, various taxes, and excessive tax rates. It has been noted that a closed economy grew dominant, and that peasants or the rural people migrated from various locations.²⁴ Here it is worth noting that there are a number of epigraphic testimony that illustrate the primacy of land occupational rights, in addition to the textual references in the. The giving of the tract was meticulously documented with minute details etched on stone and copper plates. It was common practice to have village authorities present while the records were being created.

Since property became the most important component in Indian culture, economics, and politics beginning in the later Vedic Age, disputes over land ownership and land grants have a special place in Indian history. Throughout history, land ownership and land grants have undeniably evolved and taken on new dynamics, reflecting regional differences and variances. However, the fundamental concept of land ownership as outlined in ancient legal texts remains unchanged.²⁵

Muslims in India didn't really alter the economic and political foundations of rural areas, therefore the core notion persisted even after they took power. For a long time, renowned historians and researchers portrayed and wrote about the past without considering a single issue, but rather the myriad of variables impacting the whole society, government, and economy. The analysis of the rapidly changing circumstances raises the basic issue of whether this time saw the Agri-extension, a strong rural foundation, or the destruction of state authority. The emergence of rural settings, feudalism, and the progress of urbanisation all raise crucial questions. Inscriptions made during the reign of the Satavahanas in the Deccan provide the first evidence of royal land allocations. Land grants, however, were on the rise and almost doubled in volume by century's conclusion. A major player in the events of the late sixth century, feudalism was both a practice and a power to be feared. During that time, there was a lot of feuding.²⁶ This new element signalled a shift and evolution because of its distinctive characteristics. Institutionalised handouts in India's post-Gupta era had far-reaching effects on the country's politics, economy, and society. The rural economy, culture, and politics were hit the worst. Copper plate inscriptions and textual references are among the many pieces of historical evidence that historians use to argue that the era before the later Gupta age—the Mauryan, Post-Mauryan, and early Gupta eras—was characterised by less social fragmentation, long-distance trade, monetary economies, and communal land ownership. But things began to alter in the middle of the Gupta era, and a paradigm shift occurred in the dynamics of society, economics, and politics in the final parts of the era.²⁷ However, throughout the time period under consideration, there were a number of notable economic trends and events, such as agricultural expansion, forced labour, unpaid labour, slavery, the decline of urban centres, private property rights, and so on. The period's other defining feature was the strengthening and modernization of the feudal system, which shaped the nation's politics, economics, and society. According to numerous academics, feudalism first emerged in India. This view is based on the analysis of the massive transfer of land from the secular population to the religious elite, who in turn delegated the exclusive power to govern in the areas of law and order.²⁸ The majority of the land donations had a religious bent, however secular property grants did occur.

4. Conclusion

The land transfers that gave rise to feudalism were of a distinct kind, according to research into literary and epigraphic evidences about them. The texts and epigraphic sources that document grants make reference to a wide variety of land kinds. The practicality of the land or soil was the determining factor in land categorization. A rich riverplain like the Indo-Gangetic plain, the Cauvery, Godavri and Narmada, Sutlej and Beas, or the first was the *urvara* land.²⁹ These areas served many practical purposes, including agriculture and housing. The second category of terrain included remote locations, such as foothills or deserts, where the annual rainfall was moderate to high. Twelve distinct kinds of land are described by Amarsimha in his work *Amarakosa*.³⁰ The several kinds of land described in *Amarakosa* provide light on how the lands were typically distributed at that time. As a result, feudalism had been entrenched in India by the late sixth or early seventh century, and the feudal lords had become prominent members of the new social order. Importantly, the records of the awards included details on the responsibilities, rights, and privileges that could not be infringed upon. *Tmrapatra* also included specific cautions in the event that the responsibilities indicated in the records were not acknowledged.³¹ These inscriptions also declare that the initial beneficiaries will be extended to the children and grandchildren of the first beneficiaries. Although the records indeed indicate some rights, responsibilities, and advantages, historians and researchers belonging to the Feudal School of historiography argue that these things really signalled a progressive division of power and a weakening of the monarchy. The new rural entities are now gradually gaining control of the different common assets, such as grazing land, water supplies, etc. Under the new plan, the peasants would bear the brunt of the changes, which would further entrench the rural elites' exploitation and enslavement of the farmers.³² Additionally, the sub-infeudation has undermined centralised power by creating a hierarchy among the rural elites. During the Harsha and post-Harsha periods, the elites and those who benefited from land grants saw an increase in their privileges. With the exception of the breakup of rural elites, the preceding period's rural setup saw little change with the establishment of the Delhi sultanate. Because they saw the elites as potential sources of discontent and uprising in their newly formed state, the new rulers made great efforts to forge direct relations with the people. Evidence of the ruling class's attitude towards these rural elites may be seen in the works of current authors such as Barni, Amir Khusru, Minhaj us Siraj, and Isami.

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