

Patterns of Socio-Economic Transformation in Early Medieval Bengal and Assam: A Historical Perspective

SK Manirul¹ and Dr. Dikshita Ajwani²

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History¹

Assistant Professor, Department of History²

Singhania University, Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan, India

Abstract: *The early medieval period (c. 6th–13th century CE) witnessed significant socio-economic transformations in Bengal and Assam, driven by political realignments, agrarian expansion, trade, and cultural exchanges. This period was marked by the emergence of feudal structures, the proliferation of land grants, and the rise of regional polities that reshaped the economic and social fabric. The introduction of settled agriculture, particularly in Bengal, led to the growth of agrarian economies and the establishment of village communities. In Assam, the rise of the Kamarupa polity and the assimilation of tribal communities into mainstream agrarian society transformed socio-economic relations. This study analyzes epigraphic evidence, literary sources, and archaeological data to explore the evolving patterns of land use, social hierarchy, and economic exchange. The research highlights the role of Brahmanical institutions in facilitating socio-economic change and examines the impact of shifting political configurations on local economies. By comparing Bengal and Assam, the study reveals nuanced patterns of transformation that contributed to the formation of distinct socio-economic identities in the region.*

Keywords: Early Medieval Bengal, Assam, Feudalism, Agrarian Expansion, Land Grants, Socio-Economic Transformation, Political Realignments, Brahmanical Institutions

I. INTRODUCTION

The socio-economic landscape of early medieval India (6th–13th century CE) witnessed profound changes as a result of political realignments, the proliferation of land grants, and the transformation of agrarian and mercantile practices. This period saw the rise of feudal structures, where control over land became the primary determinant of socio-economic power, giving rise to a complex web of relationships between rulers, landlords, and peasants. Bengal and Assam, located in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent, experienced these socio-economic transformations with unique trajectories shaped by their geographic, cultural, and political contexts. While Bengal's fertile alluvial plains facilitated the rapid growth of an agrarian economy, Assam's diverse ecological landscape led to a slower but equally significant integration of tribal communities into an expanding agrarian system.

Bengal witnessed the proliferation of land grants, primarily Brahmadeya (grants to Brahmins) and Agrahara (grants to religious institutions), which resulted in the emergence of powerful landed elites and a hierarchical social structure. These land grants, conferred by rulers to Brahmins and temples, not only consolidated agrarian economies but also facilitated the spread of Brahmanical ideology and social order. The control of land became a symbol of authority and power, leading to the subjugation of peasant communities who were bound to the land and its controllers. This process laid the foundation for a feudal order in Bengal, where the Brahmanical elite, along with local chieftains, exercised considerable influence over the agrarian population. The assimilation of tribal communities into the Brahmanical fold through land grants further reinforced the socio-economic hierarchies of early medieval Bengal.

In Assam, the rise of the Kamarupa kingdom under the Varman, Salasthamba, and Pala dynasties facilitated the spread of agrarian systems through the incorporation of tribal communities. The rulers of Kamarupa strategically used land grants and religious patronage to integrate local tribal elites into the expanding agrarian economy. Land grants, recorded in inscriptions such as the Tezpur and Dubi plates, reveal that Brahmins were settled in tribal-dominated areas,

where they introduced plough-based agriculture and Brahmanical socio-cultural practices. This process led to the gradual incorporation of local tribal communities into the agrarian order, resulting in a transformation of social structures. While the spread of Brahmanical institutions played a pivotal role in reshaping Assam's socio-economic patterns, the persistence of tribal institutions and the coexistence of non-agrarian economies contributed to the region's unique socio-economic trajectory.

The geopolitical significance of Bengal and Assam further accentuated their socio-economic transformations. Bengal's fertile alluvial plains, enriched by the Ganges and its tributaries, facilitated intensive agriculture and surplus production, which in turn fueled the growth of trade and commerce. Port towns such as Tamralipti and Samatata emerged as important nodes of maritime trade, connecting Bengal to Southeast Asia and other regions. This facilitated the circulation of goods, wealth, and ideas, contributing to Bengal's socio-economic dynamism. Assam's diverse ecological zones, ranging from the Brahmaputra Valley to the hills of the northeast, enabled the coexistence of agrarian and non-agrarian economies. The Brahmaputra River served as a vital artery for trade and communication, linking Assam to Bengal and other regions. The integration of Assam into broader trade networks fostered economic growth and laid the foundation for long-term socio-economic change.

The rise of regional polities such as the Pala, Sena, and Kamarupa dynasties further reinforced socio-economic stability, enabling the consolidation of agrarian and commercial economies. The Pala dynasty in Bengal, known for its patronage of Buddhism and trade, established a vast territorial expanse that encouraged the growth of urban centers and trade routes. The Sena dynasty, which succeeded the Palas, continued this pattern of agrarian expansion and commercial integration. Similarly, the Kamarupa kingdom in Assam, through its alliances with local chieftains and Brahmanical institutions, facilitated the gradual assimilation of tribal societies into an agrarian order.

Despite these overarching similarities, the socio-economic transformations in Bengal and Assam followed distinct trajectories due to differences in geographic and cultural contexts. While Bengal experienced a more rapid transition from tribal to agrarian economies due to its fertile landscape and proximity to major trade routes, Assam's transformation was slower, marked by the coexistence of agrarian and tribal economies. The study of these diverse patterns of socio-economic transformation in early medieval Bengal and Assam reveals how political configurations, landholding patterns, and religious institutions reshaped the socio-economic landscape of eastern India. By analyzing the complex interplay of agrarian expansion, social hierarchies, and trade networks, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the processes that shaped the socio-economic history of Bengal and Assam during the early medieval period.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

R.S. Sharma's *Indian Feudalism* (1965) highlighted the emergence of feudal structures during the early medieval period, emphasizing the role of land grants in establishing agrarian hierarchies. D.N. Jha's *Feudal Social Formation in Early India* (1987) further explored the relationship between agrarian expansion and the consolidation of Brahmanical power.

B.D. Chattopadhyaya's *Aspects of Rural Settlements and Rural Society in Early Medieval India* (1990) discussed the role of Brahmanical institutions in integrating tribal societies and expanding agrarian economies. The assimilation of tribal communities in Assam into agrarian societies was analyzed by P.C. Choudhury in *The History of Civilization of the People of Assam* (1959).

Nihar Ranjan Ray's *Bangalir Itihas: Adi Parba* (1980) examined Bengal's political evolution and its impact on economic exchanges. Assam's trade routes and commercial activities were studied by H.K. Barpujari in *The Comprehensive History of Assam* (1990), which highlighted Assam's integration into larger trade networks.

Recent archaeological excavations at Mahasthangarh and Chandraketugarh have provided insights into the urban and mercantile structures of early medieval Bengal. Epigraphic evidence from Kamarupa, such as the Tezpur and Dubi inscriptions, underscores the socio-economic transformations in Assam.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To analyze the patterns of land grants and their impact on agrarian transformation in Bengal and Assam.
- To investigate the role of Brahmanical institutions in reshaping social hierarchies and integrating tribal communities.
- To examine the nature of trade and commerce and its implications on local economies.
- To explore the impact of political realignments on socio-economic structures.
- To compare the socio-economic trajectories of Bengal and Assam during the early medieval period.

IV. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

In Bengal, the proliferation of land grants, primarily Brahmadeya (grants to Brahmins) and Agrahara (grants to religious institutions), played a decisive role in transforming the region's agrarian economy. The system of land grants allowed rulers to expand agrarian frontiers and incorporate virgin lands into the plough-based agricultural economy. These grants led to the establishment of village settlements, where Brahmins and other landed elites took control of agricultural surplus, reinforcing a hierarchical socio-economic order.

Brahmadeya grants, often given to Brahmins for religious and social services, created a class of landed intermediaries who mediated between the state and the peasantry. These grants were accompanied by tax exemptions, judicial rights, and administrative privileges, allowing the Brahmanical elite to consolidate their control over agrarian resources. The Agrahara grants, often linked to religious establishments and temple economies, ensured a steady flow of resources to religious institutions, which further facilitated the spread of Brahmanical influence.

The transition from shifting agriculture to settled plough-based agriculture in Bengal was not merely an economic change but also a socio-cultural transformation. Land grants enabled the assimilation of tribal communities into the agrarian economy, leading to the gradual adoption of Brahmanical socio-religious practices. Epigraphic evidence, such as the copperplate grants from Bengal (e.g., the Paharpur and Amgachhi plates), documents the process of land distribution and the creation of hierarchical agrarian communities. Tribal chiefs, who were granted land and elevated to the status of local chieftains, facilitated the integration of indigenous populations into the agrarian order.

The process of land grant distribution in Assam followed a similar trajectory but unfolded at a slower pace due to the region's ecological diversity and the persistence of tribal institutions. Under the Kamarupa rulers, especially during the Varman and Pala dynasties, land grants were issued to Brahmanical institutions, leading to the gradual spread of settled agriculture and the assimilation of indigenous communities. The Tezpur and Dubi inscriptions record land grants to Brahmins and temples, highlighting the incorporation of tribal lands into the agrarian economy.

Unlike Bengal, where plough-based agriculture spread rapidly due to fertile soil and favorable climatic conditions, Assam's ecological complexity slowed the spread of intensive agriculture. Nevertheless, land grants in Assam laid the groundwork for integrating tribal communities into the agrarian system, fostering the emergence of village settlements and hierarchical socio-economic structures.

Brahmanical institutions played a pivotal role in reconfiguring the socio-political landscape of early medieval Bengal. The introduction of the varna system, facilitated by land grants, led to the stratification of society along caste lines. Brahmins, who controlled vast agrarian resources through Brahmadeya and Agrahara grants, emerged as powerful intermediaries between the ruling elite and the peasantry.

Local chieftains, who previously exercised autonomous control over their territories, were assimilated into the Brahmanical order through the conferment of ritual status and socio-religious legitimacy. This process created a hierarchical structure where the landed elite (Brahmins and local chieftains) dominated the agrarian economy, while the peasantry remained subordinate. The integration of tribal communities into this structure further reinforced social hierarchies, as tribal chiefs adopted Brahmanical practices and aligned themselves with the ruling elite.

A similar transformation unfolded in Assam, albeit at a slower pace and with regional variations. The Kamarupa rulers, through the distribution of land grants and patronage of Brahmanical institutions, facilitated the spread of Brahmanical socio-cultural norms among tribal communities. Epigraphic records, such as the Nidhanpur and Dubi plates, document the conferment of land to Brahmins in tribal-dominated regions, where they introduced Brahmanical practices and established control over agrarian resources.

Tribal chiefs, integrated into the Brahmanical order, adopted new socio-religious identities that aligned with the hierarchical structures promoted by the Brahmanical elite. This led to the gradual transformation of socio-political structures in Assam, where tribal societies were incorporated into a Brahmanical framework, albeit with regional adaptations that preserved certain tribal customs and institutions.

The socio-economic transformation of Bengal was closely linked to the growth of trade and urbanization, facilitated by its strategic location and access to maritime trade routes. Port towns such as Tamralipti, Samatata, and Chandraketurgarh emerged as important hubs of commercial activity, connecting Bengal to Southeast Asia, China, and the Middle East. These trade networks enabled the circulation of goods, wealth, and ideas, fostering economic prosperity and contributing to the growth of urban centers.

Merchants, guilds, and trading communities played a vital role in sustaining these commercial networks, often operating under the patronage of ruling elites who derived revenue from trade. The prosperity of port towns led to the development of urban centers where artisans, traders, and administrators coexisted, creating a vibrant socio-economic environment.

In Assam, trade networks operated along the Brahmaputra River, connecting the region with Bengal and other parts of India. While Assam did not witness the same scale of maritime trade as Bengal, its position along trans-regional trade routes facilitated commercial exchanges that enriched local economies. Trade routes connecting Assam to Bengal enabled the flow of goods such as silk, ivory, and precious metals, contributing to the prosperity of the Kamarupa kingdom.

Urbanization in Assam, though less pronounced than in Bengal, was closely tied to the growth of administrative centers and religious establishments. The patronage of temples and monasteries by the Kamarupa rulers attracted artisans and traders, leading to the gradual emergence of urban settlements.

The rise of the Pala and Sena dynasties in Bengal provided a stable political framework that facilitated agrarian expansion and commercial growth. The Pala rulers, known for their patronage of Buddhism and trade, encouraged the spread of settled agriculture and the establishment of trade routes that linked Bengal to Southeast Asia and beyond. The Sena dynasty, which succeeded the Palas, continued to consolidate agrarian and commercial economies by fostering alliances with local elites and maintaining control over key trade centers.

The political stability provided by the Pala and Sena rulers enabled the growth of agrarian economies, which in turn sustained the commercial networks that connected Bengal to the broader Indian Ocean trade system. This period witnessed the growth of village settlements, the consolidation of social hierarchies, and the expansion of temple-based economies.

In Assam, the Kamarupa polity under the Varman, Salasthamba, and Pala dynasties played a crucial role in integrating tribal and agrarian economies. By forming alliances with local chieftains and granting land to Brahmanical institutions, the Kamarupa rulers facilitated the spread of settled agriculture and the assimilation of tribal communities into the Brahmanical order. The political stability provided by the Kamarupa polity created a conducive environment for socio-economic integration, allowing for the gradual transformation of tribal societies into agrarian communities.

V. CONCLUSION

The socio-economic transformation of early medieval Bengal and Assam was shaped by the confluence of agrarian expansion, political realignments, and the role of Brahmanical institutions. The proliferation of land grants led to the creation of hierarchical agrarian societies, while the assimilation of tribal communities facilitated the spread of settled agriculture. The rise of regional polities provided the necessary stability for commercial growth, establishing Bengal and Assam as important centers of trade and cultural exchange. Although Bengal experienced a more rapid transition due to its fertile geography, Assam's transformation followed a slower yet significant trajectory that reshaped its socio-economic landscape.

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