CHAPTER IV
Social Hierarchy based on the Land-system

The social structure in early Bengal appears to have hinged upon the agrarian economy that was based upon the prevalent land-system. A study of the land-charters, which are more abundant in Bengal, may fruitfully be made to trace the class-stratification, rights and obligations of different classes and interrelation between them.

Categories of land-charters

The land-charters inform us that some plots of land or a number of villages were granted by citizens or princes in favour of some members belonging to the priestly class, or some religious establishments like temples or monasteries. These land-charters may be classified into two categories, namely, sale-deeds and land-grants. The Gupta and the Post-Gupta land-charters found in Bengal are mostly sale-deeds registered for the purpose of making donations, while the charters of the later period from the 8th century onward simply record land-donations.

Land-transactions: Procedure

The records of the Gupta and Post-Gupta period show that a person intending to purchase a plot of land was
required to submit a petition to the Adhikarana of a district or the Astakuladhikarana\(^1\) of a village in accordance with the location of the land in question, stating the object of purchase, that is, making donation, for religious purpose, types of land, namely, Kṣetra, Vāpa-kṣetra, Khila, Aprahata, Vāstu etc. to be purchased as per current local prices and principle of Nīvī-dharma-kṣaya, that is destroying the condition of non-transferability.

In the epigraphs of the Gupta period, purchasers or intending donors were house-holders, or members of the Advisory board, attached with the District administration. In the Dhanāidaha C.P.\(^2\) of Kumāragupta, an Āyuktaka (Sub-divisional officer) is found to have donated the kulyavāpa of land to a brahmin named Varāhasvamin. In the Dāmodarpur C.P. (no. 4) of Budhagupta, the donor is Śreṣṭhī Ribhupāla, a member belonging to the Advisory board of the District administration\(^3\). In two Dāmodarpur C.P.s, two brahmins submitted a prayer to the government for purchasing land with religious purpose. The type of the land, specifically

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1. SI. Vol. I, PP. 284, 324.
2. Ibid. P. 281.
3. Ibid. P. 329.
mentioned by the petitioner, was Vāstu or dwelling-site, Kṣetra or cultivated land and Khila - kṣetra or uncultivated land or fallow or waste-land. According to the Nāradasmṛti, the land which lies uncultivated for one year is ardhakhila and that which remains uncultivated for three years (11, 26) is Khila-bhūmi. The term Khila-bhūmi might also stand for uncultivable land. The petitioner seems to have intended to donate such plots of land in order to provide means of livelihood to the donee. As a rule, the land donated for religious purpose was made rentfree. The question of exemption from taxes in case of uncultivable land could not arise.

The petition for purchase of land was sent to the Pustapāla or Record-keeper who was the final arbiter to settle whether the land should be sold or not, as he maintained detailed record of the land concerned. When the Record-keeper signified his consent, the land in question was sold at the prevalent rate and demarcated according to the local measuring unit āśṭaka-navaka-nalābhya-mapaṇḍya in presence of the village-elders.

4. cf. hajjika-khilabhūmi, i.e. water-logged waste-land, Gunaighar C.P. of Vainyagupta, Ibid., P. 335.
5. CBI., P. 51.
As it has been pointed out, the purchaser of the land usually donated it for some religious purposes. In all cases, by the pious act of donation accrued 'Puṇya' or merit in favour of the donor. Again, the income derived from the gifted land enabled the brahmin donee to perform his daily rites and rituals, or to meet the expenditure of daily worship at a temple and that of occasional repairs of the temple concerned, or to feed the monks, as the case may be. By the pious act of land-grant with various immunities the king is also said to have earned one-sixth of the religious merit. Bhaṭṭarākapādānāṁ dharmaphala - Saṭdbhāgavāptiśca, Baigrām C.P. Generally, the king was entitled to the one-sixth share of the produce of the land. When he exempted the donee from the burden of making payment of such revenue, it was quite natural that he would be entitled to one-sixth of the religious merit accruing from the pious act of donations made for religious purposes.

Land was granted according to the rules of Akṣayanīvī (cf. Baigrām C.P.), Nīvidharma (Dāmodarpur C.P. no. 1),

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7. Ibid. P. 50.
Apradākṣayanīvīdharma (Dāmodarpur C.P. no. 2) and Apradā (Dāmodarpur C.P. no. 5). By these rules, the donees were accorded the right to enjoy revenue-free land without having the right to destroy or alienate it. Rarely do we find mention of such rules in the post-Gupta land-charters, except the Vappaghoshavāta C.P., as late as the 7th century A.D.

In the land-charters of the Pāla-Candra-Varman-Sena period, the king is found to have made land-endowment to the brahmin donees or some religious establishments like temples and monasteries. Sometimes, the king was requested by some of his feudatory chiefs or officials to donate to the religious beneficiaries in their own jurisdiction.⁸ The royal officials of all grades as well as the people representing different classes of the society witnessed the land-transactions, presumably at the invitation of State. The benefices in all these records were donated in perpetuity according to the principle of bhūmicchidra \( \text{bhūmicchidra-nyāyena candrārka - } \)\( \underset{\text{kṣitisamakālam tathāiva pratiṣṭhāpitam}}{\text{candrārka - kṣitisamakālam tathāiva pratiṣṭhāpitam}} \) denoting enjoyment of rent-free holding by one who brings it under cultivation for the first time.⁹ According to Kauṭilya (3rd century B.C.) and Vaijayanti (11th century A.D.), bhūmicchidra means uncultivable land which yields no

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9. IEG., P., 393.
produce. Non-alienation according to the rule of \textit{Akaśayanīvi} is not implied by it. The charters record specifically the concessions granted to the donees. The donees were granted the right to the pasture - grounds, orchards, water-tanks abounding in fish, pits of salt etc., judicial power of inflicting punishment for criminal offences and exemption from all sorts of taxes payable to the king. The charters record specifically the concessions granted to the donees. The donees were granted the right to the pasture - grounds, orchards, water-tanks abounding in fish, pits of salt etc., judicial power of inflicting punishment for criminal offences and exemption from all sorts of taxes payable to the king. A charter generally concludes with an exhortation, the names of officials responsible for the preparation of the document and the date and authentication. The notification of a grant is often followed by an exhortation or admonition addressed by the donor to the contemporary rulers and future kings and to the royal officials and subjects. It is requested that the addressees should respect the grant made by the donor, keeping in mind the glory of land-donation and the sins incurred by an encroachment on the gift-land.

\textit{\textit{bhavadbhisarvai}r\textit{eva bhūmerdānapahala - gauravādaphaharne ca mahānarakatādibhayāddānamidamanumodya paripālaneyam}} \textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} cf. Belāva C.P. of Bhojavarmadeva, IB., P. 21.
\textsuperscript{11} cf. Khalimpur C.P. of Dharmapāla, II. 54-55, CBI., P. 101.
The residents of a gift-village were generally advised to make over their dues in cash or in kind to the donee and also to obey him in all respects \[ \text{prativāsibhiḥ kṣetra-rais cājñā śravaṇa-vidheairbhūtvā samucita- kara-}
\text{piṇḍakādi-sarva-pratyāyapanyah kārya iti}, \text{Khalimpūr C.P.}
\] of Dharmapāla, 11.55-56. The appeal for the preservation of the grant is sometimes found to be accompanied by injunctions in prose and verse referring to the merit accruing from the grant of land, to the maintenance of such a grant and to the suffering that would \text{befall} the confiscators or violators of the injunctions.

Finally, the charters are endorsed by royal officers with the royal seal and dates either counted from some era (e.g. La Sam) or by regnal years of the contemporary ruler.

**Legal validity of the land-charters**

It may be reasonably held that the land-charters endorsed by the State-officials and authenticated by the royal seal and date were considered as legal documents. Those might be required by the Court of Law in the judicial procedure related to the dispute over land. The principle of nīvīḍharmā or bhūmīcchidra as well as exhortation in favour of the gift appear to indicate the donee's claim
over the landed property for perpetuity. The boundaries of
the donated land, as enumerated in the charters, seem to
have been considered as valid evidence to settle any boundary
dispute. The validity of the charters ensured for the donees
the unquestionable enjoyment of immunities as laid down in
the records, so that they could not be chastised by the
future rulers for non-payment of taxes. The Smṛtinivandha-
kāras of Bengal have often referred to such land-charters as
recognised legal evidence 12.

The immunities and privileges conferred on the
religious beneficiaries empowered them with the right of
administering criminal justice (sadaśāpacāraḥ) 13 and
collecting revenue from the tenants in their own jurisdiction.
There was no obligation on the part of the donees except
abiding by the rule of non-alienation of the property. On the
other hand, the residents of the gift-land, as it has been
pointed above, were directed to oblige the donees by making
over to them all the dues payable to the king. Thus, being
authorised with fiscal and judicial rights, the beneficiaries
of the land-grants gradually rose to power and virtually
enjoyed an independent status in their own 'feuds'. They
formed, in course of time, an intermediary land-owning class

12. Suresh Chandra Bandyopadhyaya, Smṛtiśāstre Bāṅgālī, Calcutta,
1368 B.S., P. 155.
that snapped the direct relations between the king and the tillers of the soil. Creation of free holding, however, incurred loss of revenue to the royal exchequer. But the brahmin beneficiaries, in return, shouldered, as desired by the king, the responsibility of making the people conversant with the Vedic culture. Bengal, for a long time, was outside the pale of Aryan fold and it was by the zealous endeavour of the ruling authority that the Vedic culture made steady expansion in Bengal with the settlement of brahmins, on a large scale, in the lands gifted to them. The delegation of substantial administrative power to the donees on a hereditary basis, by dint of series of concessions already referred to, paved the way towards the emergence of a new class in the society. From the Mitākṣara, a commentary on the Yājñavalkya Smṛti, it appears that there were four hierarchical stages, viz. Mahipati (King), Kṣetrasvāmin (land-owner), Karśaka (cultivator) and the hired labourer. From the epigraphs we come to know of the first three stages only. That the newly emerging land-owning class had their lands cultivated by the Karśakas is quite apparent. If there were peasants acting as tenants under the Kṣetrasvāmin, they might employ hired labourer for cultivation of land.
Secular assignment:

Another presage of the growth of landed intermediaries was granting of land-assignment in lieu of remuneration to officials, who served as governors of some provincial and local administrative units discharging the functions of executive, judicial and fiscal nature. We have, however, very few land-charters recording land-assignment to the officials. Some information in this regard, however, may be derived from the available land-donation charters. The Damodarpur Copper-plates dated 5th century A.D. suggest that the position of Uparikas (Provincial governors) put in charge of Purandaravardhanabhukti was hereditary, as they belonged to the Dutta family, and mostly Viṣayapatis (District-officer) were held responsible to the Uparikas. Again, the Gunaighar C.P. of Vainyagupta (G.E. 188) informs us that the king was served by Mahārāja Rudradatta and Mahāsāmanta Vijayasena presumably holding the position of feudatories. The latter held the office of Mahāpratīhāra Pañcādhikaraṇoparika. It appears that the feudatories concerned held vast landed property under the suzerainty of Mahārājādhirāja Vainyagupta.

The Post-Gupta land-grants give us to understand that the royal officials belonging to the bureaucracy, or the feudatories owing allegiance to the king, often made donation of lands for religious purposes. It may be reasonably suggested that such donations would have been impossible, had they not been allowed by the sovereign ruler to enjoy vast landed property. Šaśānka's feudatories Šrī - sāmanta - mahārāja Somadatta and Mahāpratīhāra Subhakīrti donated villages to the brahmīns.¹⁵ In the Tipperāḷ C.P. of Lokanātha,¹⁶ Mahāsāmanta Pradoṣāsarman, the brahmin feudatory chief of Lokanātha, is said to have donated forest-land in the eastern-most fringe of Bengal to a large number of Brāhmaṇas for their settlement. Pradoṣāsarman had to seek permission of his overlord Lokanātha through the messenger Lakṣmīnātha, son of Lokanātha, before making the said gift of forest-land in Suvvungaviśaya that lay in the territory ruled over by Lokanātha. From the Kailān C.P.¹⁷ of Śrīdhāraṇarāta, Minister-in-charge of Peace and War (Mahāsāndhīvigrāhā-dhikṛta), first received the grant of twenty-five pāṭakas

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¹⁵. Midnapore Copper-plates of the time of Šaśānka,
JRASL. XI (1945), P. 1ff.

¹⁶. EI. XV, P. 306ff.

¹⁷. IHQ. XXIII, P. 221ff.
of land from king Śrīdhāraṇārāśī, retained 71/2 paṭakas of land for his own enjoyment and donated the rest in favour of a Buddhist monastery and some Vedic brahmins.

In the Pāla-Sena records may be traced references to some secular holdings. The Khalimpur C.P. of Dharmapāla mentions an official designated Dāṣagrāmika (officer-in-charge of ten villages), who according to the Manusāṁhitā, used to have been allotted one 'kula' of land [kula] kulantu bhūnjīta vimśi pañca kulāni ca 7.18 The same record refers to Mahāsāṁanta Nārāyaṇavarman, who seems to have been assigned a piece of land in Puṇḍravardhanabhukti. Indirect evidence of the grant of land to a high official named Gaṇṭiśa is found in the Bangāon C.P.19 of Vigraha-pāla III. This official is said to have donated a plot of land to a brahmin out of his own holding. That some plots of land were allotted to some of the members of the royal family as well as officials is indirectly suggested by the Calcutta Sāhitya Pariṇāt C.P.20 of Viśvarūpasena. The record informs us that a Brāhmaṇa called Halāyūdha purchased land from two princes of the royal family, namely, Sūryasena and

18. MS. VII. 119.
20. CBI, PP. 326 - 27.
Puruṣottama, and received grant from Nānīsīmha, Minister of Peace and War. The Belā C.P.21 of Mahipāla I furnishes the evidence of secular grant of two hundred measure of land, once allotted to the Kaivartas, for the maintenance of certain services, which are not specified and which the king donated to a brahmin as a free-holding by the present land-charter. Rājās, Rājaputras, Rāṇakas, Mahāsāman tas and Māṇadalapati, often mentioned in the Pāla - Candra - Varman - Sena records, seem to have been royal officials or servants in the royal court whose relations with the reigning monarch and gradations in status were determined by the assignment of land. The vassal chiefs, who were independent in their own states but owed allegiance to their overlord, honoured the obligation of making regular payment of tributes, in the form of either military contingent or financial support, whereas the officials directly put in charge of some principalities were charged with the responsibility of collecting revenue and making payment of the king's share. In the present context we are concerned with those officials who directly served the king. If they were, like the brahmins, grantees of territories under their jurisdiction, they were likely to enjoy considerable administrative and judicial rights. More so,
when the position of the officials concerned was hereditary. Another category of official grantees was formed by those who served in the Ministry, Army or any other department of the Government.

The epigraphic records of Bengal may suggest the existence of secular holdings granted by the king. But there is nothing to suggest that in case of such holdings, the grantees enjoyed the immunities and concessions accorded to the brahmins. It would be, therefore, reasonable to doubt whether the officials enjoyed economic privileges, comparable to those of the brahmin donees. However, they were responsible, like the Rājukas of Asokan Edicts, for maintenance of law and order and promotion of agriculture and industries, ensuring return of larger amount of revenue. The secular assignees constituted, no doubt, an intermediary class intervening between Svāmin (lord or king) and Karṣaka (cultivator).

The land-transactions were made in presence of all those classes whose interests were directly or indirectly involved in the land-economy. Both officials and non-officials, the ruler and the ruled, were involved by the State in sale, purchase and donation of land. Therefore, the land-charters reflect not only gradations in the
bureaucratic hierarchy but also different strata of the society excluding the ruling class.

It appears from the Gupta and Post-Gupta records that the Visayapati or the District Administrator, his Advisory Council, Village-officials, members of the Village-Assembly representing the villagers, Record-keepers (Pustapāla) and Karaṇa-Kāyasthas were involved in land transactions. Actual transfer of land was made under the supervision of the Assembly of the Village-Elders *mahattarā-dyadhi - karaṇa - kuṭumbibhiḥ pratyaveksyāstaka - navaka- nalābhyāmapaviṅchya Catusīmollinghya ... Dāmodarpur C.P.* Inscr. of the time of Budhagupta (482 A.D.), I.10. But Pustapāla or Record-keeper had the key role to play, as he was supposed to be the final authority to take decision on the application praying for purchase of land. Because, he was in a position to assess the position of the land in question, whether it had already been sold away, anybody had prior claim to it, the local government had fixed the price for the land to be sold, or the government had any vested interest in it.

Among the non-official elements, we find reference to the representatives of the mercantile and artisan classes

22. CBI., P. 59.
namely, Nāgarāśresthī (President of the merchants' guild) and Prathamakulika (Chief of the artisans), who were the members of the District Advisory Board during the Gupta period. 23 Again, Mahattaras seem to have played an important part in land-transactions. The Viśayamahattara finds mention in the Faridpur Copper-plate Grants of Dharmāditya and Saṃācāradeva. Along with the Viśayamahattaras are mentioned the Chief traders mahaṭṭharaḥ pradhānavyāpārinah, Faridpur C.P. of Gopacandra 7 24 who might have intervened in the matter of land-transaction, as it was sometimes through their honour that the purchaser could buy the land for donation Icchāmyahāṁ bhavatāṁ prasada-ccirāvasanna - khilabhū - khanḍalakam 7. 25 In the Mallasārul C.P. of Vijayasena mention is made of Mahattaras belonging to different agrahāra villages located in a particular vīthī Vakkataka - vīthī - sambadha - karaṇaḥ - agrahāraḥ - mahattarāḥ ... 1.5 7. 26 Mahattaras along with Brahmans and Kuṭumbins were responsible to the Village-administration. They seem to have been attached to the Aṣṭakulādhikaraṇa, that is, the Village-Council consisting of eight (or more)

24. Ibid., P. 358.
25. Ghugrāhāti Grant of Saṃācāradeva, EI. XVIII, P. 74.
members representing various classes or communities of people. The participation of these local non-official or semi-official elements is of much significance. If the king was the owner of the land, the question may be raised, why he could not alienate the land without the consent of the people’s representatives, namely, the Brahmins, Mahattaras and Kuṭumbins. The tradition of Community ownership of land appear to have been still fresh in the memory of the society.

But a Grāmika or village-headman was at the top of administration of each village. According to Manu, the king should appoint village-headman who should be fed with food, drinks and fuels which the villagers were to supply to the king. He was usually remunerated by rent-free land and could also get a number of petty dues in kind which the villagers were to pay to the government.

27. IEG., P. 32.
29. MS. VII. 115, 118.
The Dāmodarpur C.P. (no. 3) of the time of Budhagupta refers to Grāmika, apart from Aṣṭakulādhikaraṇa headed by Mahattaras and Kutiṃbinas etc. Mahattarādyāṣṭakulādhi-karaṇa - grāmika - kutiṃbinaśca ... Even Grāmika was primarily the representative of the Village-community and then a royal servant. He was probably elected by the Village-Assembly consisting of respectable village-householders and was then appointed administrative head of the village. Defence of the village and the collection of revenue were his primary duties. The Jātakas inform us that neither the Village-headman nor the Village-Accountant (Pustapāla) ruled over the Village-community. The village headman was advised by the Village-elders (Mahattaras).

But from the Gupta period onwards, the Village-Council, comprising the Mahattaras, appears to have developed into a regular body like Aṣṭakulādhikaraṇa. The existence of the Village-Council consisting of the Mahattaras is borne out by the expression Mahattarādyadhikaraṇa occurring in the Dāmodarpur C.P. (no. 3) of Budhagupta.

From the records of the Pāla period, it appears that land-transactions were conventionally witnessed by different

classes included in the village-community, from the brahmins down to the outcastes like Medas, Andhras and Candâlas.

As the donated lands were located in villages, the villagers, their representative and officials including Grâmapati were naturally given recognition by the State. Those whose interests were directly involved in land-transactions were Kṣetrakaras or Karṣakas (i.e. cultivator). They seem to have been mostly recruited from among the tribal forest-dwelling people (vanecarâh) like the Medas and the Andras, often referred to in the Pâla land-charters.

The land-economy of ancient Bengal was characterised by social gradation of different strata belonging to the land-owning class. While the king was at the top of this hierarchical structure, at the bottom remained the large population of cultivators (Karṣakas). Feudal chiefs like Râjâ, Râjanaka, Mahâsâmanta, Sâmanta, Mahâmândalika and Mândalika stood immediately below the king in the scale of social hierarchy. Due to lack of adequate evidence at our disposal, it is difficult to suggest any ranking among the feudal chiefs on the basis of quantum of landed property under their possession. However, Mahânahattaras or Mahattamas

who possessed vast tracts of land seem to have been placed between Māndalika and Mahattaras, the leading chiefs in the villages. Literally, Mahattara means elders of a town or village. According to Stein, Mahattara (Rājatarangini, Vii. 659) was a chamberlain, a village-headman or head of a family or community and a member of the Village-Council.

In the Corpus of Bengal inscriptions, Mahattaras figure both as village-elders as well as prominent persons in towns (Viśayamahattara). The appellations, Mahattara and Mahāmahattara, attached with the names of Village-Elders seem to have suggested their economic status based on landed property. Those settled in the towns or cities seem to have taken to trade, industry and banking as their economic pursuits. The Mahattaras in villages realised their share of the produce from the cultivators on contract or had their lands cultivated by daily-wage labourers. Just below the Mahattaras were the Kuṭumbins or householders who were


33. Dāmodarpur C.P. (no. 3), CBI., P. 59.

34. Faridpur C.P. of Dharmāditya, Ibid., P. 75.
probably owners of smaller plots of land. The term Kuṭumbin originally stood for the head of the house-hold (grhapatī or grhin). In the Jātaka literature, both the terms Gahapati and Kuṭumbika occur to indicate the landowning and mercantile class. So far as the epigraphic records are concerned, the currency of these two terms varied from time to time. In the pre-Gupta inscriptions, the term Grhapati was extensively used, while the term Kuṭumbin was rarely used. On the other hand, in the inscriptions, from the Gupta period onward, the latter gets wide circulation with the disappearance of the former. Kuṭumbin may, therefore, be used as a substitute of Grhapati, that is, head of the family and householder thereby. But Kuṭumbin, occurring in the Bengal epigraphs, seems to have formed the rural population and represented only the land-owning class only and not the mercantile class as it is indicated in the Jātaka literature. At best, it may be well assumed that with the decline of trade and commerce and growth of agrarian economy, Kuṭumbins belonging to mercantile class gradually shifted their interest from trade and commerce to agriculture. According to a Japanese scholar, Yamazaki Toshio, Kuṭumbin, occurring in the Bengal epigraphs, should be translated as peasants.35

meaning of the word, Kuṭumbin (Head of the family or Kuṭumba), the term should not be translated as peasant. Moreover, in the Pāla-Sena land-grants, peasantry is specifically represented by the term Karṣaka or Kṣetrakara. As Kuṭumbins were dependent upon agriculture, they were in close contact with land which they got cultivated either by employing hired labourers or employed themselves in cultivation. In view of their landed property, they may be regarded as peasant-proprietors.

A section of the landed gentry was represented by the new land-owning class emerging due to liberal donation of land to the Brāhmaṇas or the guardians of the Buddhist Church.

As already pointed out, the lowest stratum in the land-based hierarchy was formed by the Karṣakas or kṣetrakaras, that is, free peasants, share-croppers and hired labourers. The big land-owners presumably had their lands cultivated by the share-croppers or hired labourers. The lowest stratum accommodated the largest population. Smaller in number were the people belonging to the land-owning class. Smallest in number were the feudal lords directly serving under the king who was at the apex of a pyramidal social structure.
There appears to have been a line of demarcation between the feudal chiefs or feudatories and the landed gentry. Rājā, Rājanaka, Mahāśāmanta, Sāmanta etc. used to render military service and pay customary tributes to the king in lieu of the opportunity granted to them to enjoy territories under their possession, whereas Mahāmahattaras, Mahattaras, Kuṭumbins etc. were under the obligation to make payment of land-revenue to the king annually at a fixed rate. Although they were not royal servants, they sometimes rendered service to the king when called for. The religious donees, however, enjoyed rent-free holdings and were entitled to a number of concession and thus occupied the most privileged position in the society.

Theory of feudalism: Political aspect

It has been suggested by Prof. R. S. Sharma that the growth of powers and privileges belonging to the landed intermediaries from the Gupta period onward, paved the way towards the rise of feudalism in ancient Bengal as in other parts of North India. Feudalism, as it was in medieval Europe, stands for a system based on land-tenure implying a "contractual but indissoluble bond between service and
land-grant, between personal obligation and real right. What is most important is the socio-economic content of the "obligation", which connects the direct producer and his immediate superior or overlord. The political essence of feudalism lies in the organisation of the whole administrative structure on the basis of land and its economic essence is to be traced in the institution of serfdom in which peasants are attached to the soil held by the landed intermediaries placed between the king and the actual tillers, who had to pay rent in kind and labour to them. It is in the light of such broad features of feudalism that some scholars have attempted to trace the origin and development of the system in ancient Bengal. But feudalism has been defined from various points of view by different scholars. As for example Martin Gibbs in his "Feudal Order" has suggested the main characteristics of feudalism thus: (a) A low level of technique in which the instruments of production are simple and generally inexpensive, and an act of production is largely individual in character, the division of labour being of a very primitive level of

development, (b) Production for the immediate use of a household or a village community and not a wider market, (c) "Demsne farming" on the lord's estate often on a considerable scale by compulsory labour service, (d) Political decentralisation, (e) Conditional holding of land by lords on some kind of service tenure. According to Dr. R. S. Sharma, an exponent of the theory of feudalism in India, the political aspect of feudalism is revealed through decentralisation of administration, delegation of power to provincial and local officials including those of districts (Viṣayapati) and villages (Grāmapati). The title of the provincial governors such as Bhogika, Bhogapati, Bhuktipati smack of feudal relations. It is suggested that the territorial unit called bhukti may have been meant for the enjoyment of the governor under whose charge it was placed. The evidence of the Gupta records found in Bengal shows that Uparika in charge of bhukti was higher in status than the district officer (Viṣayapati Kumārāmātya), and the latter seems to have been the subordinate of the former and appointed by him.

(Uparika) over the district (visaya) is indicated by the significant expression anuvahamanaka - Kotivarsavisaye which may be explained as "The district of Kotivarsa bearing the burden of maintenance" of the Government. Further, the expression hastyasvajana - bhogena ⁴⁰ is explained to suggest that the district officer contributed to the enjoyment of the governor either by supplying elephants, cavalry and infantry or by defraying the cost of their maintenance. Thus, it would appear that the visaya of Kotivarsa had to bear the burden of maintaining the governor's forces. It is argued that the Gupta emperor hardly enjoyed direct allegiance of the district-officers who were more attached to their immediate lord rather than to their overlord. Dr. Sharma, however, does not equate the provincial governors and officer-in-charge of districts with feudal barons of medieval Europe. The land-grants refer to the presence of district-officers on the occasion of land-transactions indicating the recognition of the king's authority up to the district level. The growing hereditary character of the provincial governors, from the Gupta period onward, however, undermined the central authority and tended to feudalise the administration. Names of the Uparika ending with 'datta' in the Gupta epigraphs of Bengal reasonably suggest that

⁴⁰. Dāmodarpur C.P. (no. 5), Ibid. P. 338.
they belonged to the same family. Theoretically, the
emperor enjoyed the power of dismissing his officials,
but in practice, they remained in office on hereditary
basis because of their local power. They further gained in
power and influence because of the practice of combining
several offices in the same person. Thus, in the Guṇaighar
C.P. of Vainyagupta, we find Mahāsāmanta Vijayasena serving
in different capacities Mahāpratihāra - mahāpilupati -
paścādhikaranoparika - pāṭayuparika mahārāja - śrīmahā-
sāmanta Vijayasena 41. It indicates that he was the sole
authority in his own jurisdiction.

Another facet of political feudalism is manifest in
delegation of power to the religious beneficiaries in
respect of giving punishment to those committing ten
offences daśāparādhah or daśāpacārah 42. Thus, the
practice of transferring the right of implementing the
criminal law and conducting justice to the donee further
tended to feudalise the state-apparatus. The grant of
villages to the priests is compared to the practice of
giving benefices to the Church in medieval Europe with the
difference that brahmins, temples or monasteries did hardly
form an organised group in India. It appears, however,

41. Ibid. P. 333.
42. CBI. PP. 202, 101.
from the long list of designations of officials in the Pāla records that the greater part of the Pāla kingdom in Bengal and Bihar was administered by the officers directly appointed by the king.

By the 11th - 12th centuries A.D. feudalistic structure of administration was apparent in the rise of a number of semi-independent principalities resulting from the widespread practice of leasing out territories to the vassals and officials who entrenched themselves territorially and ended up as independent potentates. The Kamauli Grant of Vaidyadeva shows that Vaidyadeva, who served under Kumāra-pāla, had become practically independent towards the last days of the Pāla empire and himself granted two villages in Prāgjyotisabhumikti, without the formal endorsement by his overlord. Apparently, the ministerial staff had increased its landed property as a result of successive grants from the Pāla kings and had ultimately shaken off their control. In spite of numerous references to the term Sāmanta and its various synonyms, it is suggested that the earlier texts do not provide any ideological basis for political feudalism, implying that it had not taken any deep root before the 11th century A.D. Moreover, the system did not develop at the same rate in different parts of India.

43. Ibid. P. 377.
Conditions in Eastern India were different from those in Gujarat and Rajasthan. The comparative absence of secular copper-plate charters under the Pālas and Senas suggests that ordinarily royal functionaries or feudal lords were not allowed to become powerful enough to claim an ever-lasting right to the lands granted to them, as was the case under other ruling dynasties of North India in early medieval period.

Criticism:

There is no denying the fact that delegation of power and the practice of leasing out territories to the vassals and local officials might enable them to grow in power in their own jurisdiction. But, except in a few cases, they could hardly achieve such power as to assert independent authority. References to the Gupta kings as immediate overlords of the Uparikas, as found in the Dāmodarpur Copper-plates, suggest the continuity of the royal authority of the Guptas in Bengal in spite of the growing power of the provincial governors (Uparikas). The exhortation that one-sixth of the religious merit accrued from the pious act of land-donation goes to the king also points to the legal right of the king. Moreover, as it has already been noted above, the vassal chiefs had to seek
the king's permission to let out a portion of land out of their own property as religious endowment, an instance which expressly proves the king's supreme authority over his subordinates. It has, however, been admitted by Dr. Sharma that the long list of officials enumerated in the Pāla-Sena records indicates that the greater part of the kingdom was administered by the royal functionaries who made central authority felt in all the administrative units including the village (cf. Grāmapati, Pustapāla, Cāta, Bhāta). Transfer of judicial right to the religious beneficiaries apparently feudalised the state-apparatus. But those beneficiaries were not charged with unlimited power, as they were not entitled to the right to alienate the land donated to them. Moreover, there was no bond of political obligation on the part of the donees to the king. Besides, the proportion of the gifted land in comparison to Crown-land was so meagre that the power of limited landed intermediaries in the donated land did not have much impact upon the body-politic and could hardly feudalise the relations between the king and the newly grown landed aristocracy.

Theory of feudalism: Economic aspect

The economic aspect of feudalism is related to the emergence of privileged landed intermediaries leading to
the subservience of the peasantry. According to Dr. Sharma, the landed intermediaries including the priestly class as well as the royal functionaries, being assigned or remunerated by land, became for all practical purposes, occupiers and enjoyers of the villages. Thus, they formed a class of feudal lords. The growing power of the privileged intermediaries, it is suggested, reduced the position of the peasants to that of serfs, a characteristic feature of the European feudal economy, in which peasants were bonded to the soil but did not own it. The most important factor which tended to depress the position of the tenants was the practice of subinfeudation. The grantees were authorised to cultivate the land themselves or get it cultivated. When they were granted a number of villages or sizeable amount of land, they had to get them cultivated by temporary tenants (Karaśakas) or hired labourers (Karmakara). In this case, the grantees might have assigned a part of their land or revenue to the sub-tenants. The terms of transfer indicate that generally plots of land were not cultivated by the brahmins but by temporary tenants. The rise and growth of land-owning monastic institutions by the grant of agrahāras was liable to subinfeudation. Sometimes, large number of agrahāras were granted as endowment by the king to the Brahmans and Buddhist monks for meeting the expenses
of maintaining the centres of religion and education.

Land might, therefore, have been assigned to temporary tenants for cultivation. As a result of subinfeudation, the number of free peasants were falling off, giving rise to the temporary tenants under the landed intermediaries.

Another factor which reduced the peasants to servile position was, according to Dr. Sharma, the imposition of new taxes. The Pala-grants enumerate a number of taxes to be paid by the villagers to the donee.  

\[ \text{Kṣetракarai-} \]
\[ \text{Ścājñāsravaṇa - vidheyyirbhuya yathākālam samucita - bhāga -} \]
\[ \text{bhoga - kara - hiraṇyādi - sarva - pratyāyopanayāḥ kārya} \]
\[ \text{iti.} \]

Except for certain taxes specified in the list, others have remained as yet unidentified. The expression sarvapratyāya is interpreted to suggest "all sources of revenue." The grantees were within their rights in levying new impositions of taxes which might worsen the economic position of the peasants. Although 'forced labour' (vīṣṭi) is hardly referred to in the land grants of Bengal, it might have been covered by the expression sarvapida to which the villagers were often subjected and which the king relinquished in favour of the donee.  

\[ \text{parihṛtasar-} \]
\[ \text{vapidaḥ.} \]

Again, a number of concessions, extended to

44. Bhāgalpur C.P. of Narāyana pāla, Ibid., P. 168.
the donees by the charters, \(_{\text{svasima}} - \text{tranyakti} - \_\)
gocaraparyantaḥ satalah soddesah sāmramadhukah sajalas-
thalah sagartoṣarah sajhātavitapah ... \(^{46}\) deprived the
village-community of the rights to enjoy the pasture, jungle, trees, water reservoirs etc. On the other hand, the right of the donees to the enjoyment of these further enabled them to levy tax on the peasants for making use of them. In these circumstances, the condition of peasants was reduced to that of serfs of medieval Europe.

Endowments of villages with all its natural resources created, according to Sharma, permanent "feuds" (villages) which served as nerve-centres of economic life. The growth of self-sufficient rural economy was butressed by lesser use of coins and decline of trade. The decline of trade and commerce during the Pāla period is indicated by the paucity of coins. Coin-denominations, like Drammas or Purānas mentioned in the Pāla grants, can hardly suggest the circulation of coins of such denominations. An exchange of commodities being limited to a great extent, the villages inhabited by brāhmins, mixed-castes and low-caste people like Medas, Andhras and Cāṇḍālas developed into self-sufficient economic units. The mixed-castes adopted

\(^{46}\) Manāhali C.P. of Madanapāla, 1.40, Ibid., P. 215.
various arts and crafts, the lower castes were involved in either cultivation or some degraded occupations and the Brahmins only enjoyed the fruits of others’ labour in lieu of religious service. The villages, granted for the maintenance of the temples and monasteries, also helped to sustain the self-sufficient economy. Dr. Sharma distinguishes the period from A.D. 1000 - 1200 as that of climax and decline of feudal economy. The charters of Bengal specify the yield in cash and demarcate the boundaries of the donated land in precise terms. It shows, according to him, that the colonising activities of the beneficiaries were restricted. The gradual increase in the use of coins during this period points to the possibility of peasants purchasing freedom from imposed labour by paying money. The Sena grants often mention the income of the produce out of the donated land in terms of the Puranā coin. Joining of villages to the urban centres seem to have caused dents in the self-sufficient economy of the rural areas. Moreover, the need of surplus produce for the urban people involved a good volume of internal trade between towns and villages which must have shaken the stagnancy of the village-economy.

47. Mādhāinagar C.P. of Lakṣmaṇasena, IB., P. 112.
48. CBI., PP. 274, 281, 291.
Critism of the theory:

A closer study of Bengal epigraphs would show that landed intermediaries did not maintain feudal relations with the king so much as the feudal barons did in Europe. Contract or obligation which characterised European feudalism was hardly present in the case of donees or assignees of land in ancient Bengal. Numerous land-charters of Bengal record land-grants to the religious beneficiaries without stipulating any obligation of the donees to the donors. The motive of the State-patronage towards liberal donation of land to the Brahmins was not only economic but also socio-religious in character. The king aimed at economic development by bringing more and more waste-land under cultivation. Again, he patronised the study of the Vedas and performance of Vedic rites and rituals. The land-donation was such a meritorious act, according to the Dharmaśāstras, that the one-sixth of the religious merit accruing from performance of rites and rituals was deposited to the credit of the donor $\text{dharmāśaṭṭhāgopa-cayo-asmākam}$.\(^\text{49}\)

It was such as a ceremonial function on an auspicious day after taking sacred bath in the river $\text{Viṣuvatsamkṛántau} \text{Gaṅgāyāṁ snātvā śāsanīkṛtya pradattoasmābhiḥ}$.

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49. Mallasārul C.P. of Vijayasena, Ibid., P. 88.
Bāṅgaḍa C.P. of Mahīpāla-I. Again, the European 'manor' comprising a cluster of villages can not be traced in ancient Bengal. The members of the priestly class, except in cases of religious establishments like temples or monasteries, were donated some pieces or plots of land. The view in regard to the emergence of serfdom in Bengal as a result of repression meted out to them by the land-owning class appears to be an exaggeration of the reality. In Bengal epigraphs, we can hardly trace even an indirect hint to suggest that the tillers were ever obliged to be tied down to the soil they cultivated under the intermediaries. The grant of a village did not necessarily reduce the position of its peasants to that of bonded labourers. On the contrary, the donee had no right to eject the peasants from the village at his own will. What did actually happen in case of donation was the transfer of revenue from the State to the new land-owner.

The system of subinfeudation does not seem to have been familiar at least to those who drafted the land-charters on which we are to depend. The Brahmins might have had their lands cultivated by temporary tenants. But nothing is known about terms and conditions of such tenancy. The villages, belonging to the trustees of temples or monasteries, were not small plots of land and were, therefore,
allotted to some of the ministerial staff in lieu of their services rendered to those religious institutions. For instance, the Paschimbhāg C.P. of Śrīcandra records allotment of small plots of land to Brāhmaṇa, Gaṇaka, Kāyaṣṭha, Mālākāra, Tailika, Kumbhākāra, Karmakāra, Sūtradhāra, Kāhalika, Śaṅkhavādaka, Rajaka, Nāpita, Carmakāra etc. who catered to the daily needs of the religious institution.

That imposition of new taxes reduced the peasants to a servile position can hardly be inferred from the list of taxes found in the records, namely, bhāga - bhoga - kara - hiranyādi - sarva - pratyāyopanaya etc. Both the expressions ādi or sarva seem to have been used to indicate conventional taxes including bhāga, bhoga, kara and hiranyā. Those two terms might also be considered to be adjuncts used by the composer of the record for

50. EDEP, P. 67.

51. (a) Bhāga: King's share of the one-sixth of the produce in grains of tenant's field; (b) Bhogā: periodical supplies made by the tenants to the king; (c) Kara: tax in general for enjoying royal land by using it for cultivation or emergency tax levied upon the villagers over and above the normal grain share; (d) Hiranyā: tax in cash. IEG, PP. 47, 48, 145, 129.
maintaining the balance of versification. No doubt, the immunities from such taxes granted to the priestly class exalted them to a privileged position. The most privileged position of the Brahmins, as laid down in the Smṛtis, was customarily upheld by the rulers, as their concept of social order was based upon the legal texts. Whatever that might be, the king did not lose his sovereign authority in his own kingdom by allowing liberal donation of lands to Brahmins. The officials, referred to in the Pāla-Sena records, seem to have discharged their functions for the consolidation of the royal authority in different parts of the kingdom.

The tax known as Viṣṭi (forced labour) can hardly be traced in the expression sarvapiḍā as suggested by Dr. Sharma. Even if it be so explained, it has to be borne in mind that the donated villages were free from sarvapiḍā \[\text{parihṛta - sarvapiḍā}\] as pointed out before. It appears, therefore, that the peasants living under the donees were free from oppressions perpetrated by the policy of squeezing forced labour. The question of forced labour comes in when the land-owner reserves some Khāś lands for himself and leases out other lands to the tenants. Dr. Sharma himself suggests that the Brahmins had always their lands
cultivated by the Karṣakas, and there is nothing to show that they reserved any part of the land owned by them.

There was no transfer of community-rights to the grantee, as suggested by Dr. Sharma. Although the grant was made along with the right to various natural resources, it did not confer the right of appropriating community-properties like irrigation - tank, jungle, pasture - land, temples etc. When the king donated a village, he transferred his right of taxation to the donees, but, the villagers continued to enjoy the community-rights. The king remained the owner of mines, minerals like salt, orchards and also of treasure-troves to which the donees had no right.

The theory of self-sufficient economy buttressed by dearth of coins deserves critical analysis. Firstly, the absence of coin-finds is not a positive evidence of the paucity of the currency. The Pāla records refer to Dramma and Purāṇa. Moreover, reference to tax-payment in cash (hiranya) as mentioned in the Pāla writs presupposes the existence of some form of currency. Besides, there was hardly any real dearth of cowrie-shells which were extensively used as medium of exchange in the Gupta period.

52. Mahābodhi Inscr. of Dharmapāla, CBI., P. 112.
Besides, Dramma stood in relation to cowrie (Barāṭaka) as a higher denomination in Bhāskarācārya's Lilāvati. It is said that twenty Barāṭakas (Kaḍi) were equal to one Kākinī (paisa), four Kākinis to one Paṇa (anna), sixteen paṇas to one Dramma (rupee) and sixteen Drammas to one Niṣka (Varāṭakānām daśakadvayaṃ yat sa kākinī tāśca paṇāścatasrah. Te śoḍasādramma ihāvagamyā drammaīś-tathā śroḍaśabhiśca niṣkah). 53 The Rājatarāṅgini often speaks of payment of salaries by cowrie-shells. 54 Secondly, commercial and cultural contact between Bengal and Southeast Asian countries, that had its beginning in the early centuries of the Christian era, continued in the Pāla period, as it is evident from the Nālandā C.P. of Devapāla. Thirdly, the dearth of coins bearing the names of Pāla rulers would imply that the Pāla kings did not feel the necessity of issuing fresh coins, as there had been in circulation plenty of 'Gupta imitation' coins in the market. The argument regarding abolition of the practice of exchange of commodities on the ground of mere paucity of coins is least convincing.

53. Ibid. P. 114.
To sum up, the theory of feudalism has been subjected to criticism in the light of epigraphic data. Feudal trends may be traced occasionally in the polity and economy of ancient Bengal. The chain of obligations or contracts that determines the feudal social order can hardly be traced between the king and the land-owning class or between the landed gentry and the peasants. It is true that the provincial governors wielded considerable power in their own administrative units. But they rarely achieved an independent status snapping all political ties with the imperial authority. Further, the long list of officials, occurring in the Bengal epigraphs from the 8th century onwards, shows to what extent the king with his Central government maintained successfully his suzerainty over the remotest parts of the kingdom. The decline of the Pāla power was occasionally signalised by the rise of ambitious vassal chiefs to power. In spite of their semi-independent status, the vassal chiefs consistently followed the policy of owing allegiance to their Pāla overlord. The vassals, referred to in Sandhyākaranandin's Rāmacaritam, can hardly be confused with the feudal barons. Depreciation in the status of free peasants may be reasonably explained by the growth of power and privileges of the intermediary land-owning class. But the system of subinfeudation or serfdom cannot be derived from the epigraphic records discovered so far in Bengal.
The waning state of trade and commerce is, no doubt, evident from the conspicuous absence of the merchants and traders representing a social class in the epigraphic records from the 8th century onward. They seem to have suffered significantly the loss of state-recognition that they had been accorded in the epigraphs of the Gupta period found in North Bengal. This might have been the result of an unprecedented emphasis on the agrarian economy which is reflected in the large number of Pāla-Sena land-grants. Significantly enough, the cultivator-class (Karṣaka or Kṣetraśakā) is for the first time mentioned in the Pāla epigraphs. The expansion of agrarian economy did not necessarily develop a self-sufficient economy at the village-level, as the system of exchange of commodities did not cease to exist. The Khalimpur C.P. of Dharmapāla records the grant of four villages with a common marketplace (haṭṭikā), where the products from different villages seem to have been sold and purchased. The socio-economic set-up, deriving its strength or weakness from the land-owning aristocracy, has been labelled by scholars like D.C. Sircar as land-lordism, as the characteristic features of feudalism can hardly be traced in it.

In view of what has already been said regarding immunities and concessions granted to the donees, it
is not unreasonable to hold that the emergence of the land-owning class, with special power and privileges, tended to feudalise the social order to some extent, to decentralise the power of the king and to reduce the position of the peasantry. This feudialistic trend was evidently recognised in the social hierarchy in ancient Bengal. A sense of obligation on the part of the cultivators to the land-owners seems to have been recognised, although the land-owning class was not apparently bound by any obligation to or contract with the king. There was no feudal social order in ancient or early medieval Bengal as it was in medieval Europe. But the social order in Bengal recognised a hierarchy in both political and economic life. The hierarchy had an apparent, but not real, resemblance with the feudal social structure.