



Measuring units and flora fauna in early medieval Bengal

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Abstract

During the early medieval period different kinds of measurement units were prevalent in Bengal.

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Introduction

The various measuring units used include *kulyavapa* (or *kulya*), *dronavapa* (or, *drona*), *adhavapa*, *pataka*, *pada*, *hala*, *pramana*, *amsa*, *unmanas*, *bhukhadikas*, *khadikas* etc. There are instances, when no land measuring units are given in our sources. Land is also measured in terms of currency units like *panas*, *gandaka*, *kakinis* etc. Sometimes land measuring units appear along with the annual yield of the land, which is given mostly in terms of currency units.

Land grants in Varendra region of Bengal contain land measuring units like *kulyavapa*, *dronavapa*, *adhavapa*, *pramana*, *amsa*, *unmana*, *bhukhadikas*, *khadikas*, etc. Land measurement units are also sometimes accompanied by currency units like *purana*, *pana*, *gandaka*, *kakini*, *kaparddaka*, etc. There are instances, where no units are given, and land grants simply state that so and so village(s) has been donated^[1]. This is more so in the case of the donation of single villages. In one instance (the Belwa plate of Mahipala I), land donated has been represented in terms of 'units', but no name has been given of these units. In Varendra, *kulyavapa* appears by far to have been the most frequent term of reference. Out of 25 inscriptions, as high as 13 plates refer to *kulyavapa*, (or, *kulya*) as a land measuring unit. Another interesting fact in the region is the occasional reference to 8x9 *nala* (or, reed) standard, used for measuring out lands. Lands were measured through *nala* standard in many areas, and various regions like Samatata and Varendri had *nala* of their own. For example, Samatata had the *Samatatiya-nala*.^[2] *Vrshabhsankara*, an epithet of Vijayasena also acted as the name of a *nala* prevalent in places like *Vardhamana Bhukti*, and was probably introduced by him only. There were also the prevalence of some other measures like *halas* and *hastas*, the former being the area cultivated through one plough^[3]. So, the grants mentioning the transfer of certain *halas* of land must have been smaller plots as compared to other units of donation, as happened in the Samatata region.

Images of urban centres in the sources

Most of the land transfers are situated in the rural areas, and include cultivable, untilled, and fallow land. So, the picture that emerges is basically a very rural one. The only reference

to urban areas are constituted by the almost stereotypical pictures of political centres (the *skandhavaras* and *jayaskandhavaras*, meaning camps and military camps, respectively) of power, basing from where the monarchs gave land grants. The text, on the other hand, provides us with some occasional glimpses into various facets associated with urban-ness and urbanity. Information is there on fauna, flora, trees, flowers, fruits, even economy. This section would verily try to bring those occasional 'textual' information, as well as those in the inscriptions, so that a picture is drawn, howsoever vague.

Flora and Fauna

One of the first inscriptions to give a description of a victory camp is the Gunaighar plate of Vainyagupta^[4]. It describes *jayaskandhavara* Kripura as 'packed with great ships, tuskers and horses^[5]'. The description in all the Pala inscriptions is similar and conventionalised. All of them talk thus, wherein the *jayaskandhavaras* were situated in Pataliputra, Mudgagiri, Vilasapura, Haradhama and Bata-Parvvatika:

"From the victory camp, situated in Pataliputra,- Camp, in which misapprehension of series of mountain peaks caused by multitudes of fleet, proceeding in channels of Bhagirathi, doubt as to the constant presence of rainy season as produced by lusture of the day, darkened by extremely dense array of mighty tuskers, spaces of quarters are rendered brown by dusts raised by pointed hoof belonging to immeasurable cavalry, presented by numerous kings of the north and head level is lowered by weight of end-less armies of rulers of Jambu islands, come to wait upon his excellency-"^[6]

No other major dynasty, be it the Candras, or the Senas, describe the *jayaskandhavaras*, in such glowing terms, though mentioning them as the place of issue of the grants. For the Candras the place of issue was Vikramapura. For the Senas they were Vikramapura and Phalgugrama. Other political powers like the Ratas and Devas also give description of the *jayaskandhavaras*. The Kailan plate of Sri Dharana Rata mentions the provincial head-quarter Devaparvata, from where the message of the royal grant emanated to the

visayapatis, as encircled by the river ksiroda as if by a moat^[7]. The river had its two banks “adorned by clusters of boats”^[8] the Devaparvata plate of Bhavadeva also gives its description of the place almost in similar terms^[9].

The text, on its part, describes many facets of urban centres. In the third canto, the author compares Sita, the divine consort of Rama, who is also Varendri (meaning female Varendra, or ‘king among the *Varas*’). The city of Sonitapura, within Varendri had large number of temples, with lotuses of very large sizes^[10]. This perhaps indicates that such temples had large tanks, ponds and lakes, associated with them, because lotus is an aquatic plant. Varendri also possessed an excellent garden^[11], with closely planted edible Kanda roots^[12], and large Lakuca and Sripkala trees. It also contained ‘many a Nagaranga tree’^[13] which excelled ‘even Indra’s garden (Nandana)’^[14]. There were a large number of Amalaki, Karuna and Priyala trees.

References

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