

EFFECTS OF SULTAN MAHMUD'S RAIDS ON AGRICULTURE DURING EARLY MEDIEVAL NORTH INDIA

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Introduction

Successive invasion of Sultan Mahmud must have struck a heavy blow on the agriculture of Northern India. The Muslim historians have recorded only the plunder of jewels, gold and silver, but they are almost silent about the forcible seizure of the crops standing in the field or lying in the granary of the peasant. Sultan Mahmud used to undertake his long marches in Northern India in early winter and in the spring season when the autumn and Rabi crops had been harvested. For example, he is known to have crossed Yamuna for proceeding to Mathura on the 2nd December, 1018 A.D. with one lakh of horses and twenty thousand foot soldiers. He did not certainly carry provisions for all these men and animals from Ghazni for the whole of the duration of his stay in India. It was only on the occasion of his march to Somanatha through the desert route that historians speak of soldiers being provided with food, water and forage for many days. But even on this occasion the Sultan collected fresh provisions at Nahrwal, which has been identified with Anahillapataka the capital of Gujarat¹. Famine followed in the wake of the huge army and camp followers, who marched through the country-side under the leadership of Sultan Mahmud.

But the cessation of his invasion did not offer the peasants much opportunity for pursuing their avocations peacefully. War and conquering raids by ambitious monarchs were the normal features of the age. The kings used to start their conquering march on the Vijaya Dasami day or the tenth day of the bright half of the month of Asvina, mainly because the harvesting of the autumn paddy used to take place in the bright half of this month. Lakshmidhara gives a poetic description of the Navanna festival in his Niyatakala Kanda². From his account we learn that eight hundred years ago the harvesting of paddy used to take place at least a month earlier than at

¹ Struggle for Empire, pp. 8-21.

² Natyata, p. 405 ; Kritiyaratnakara, p. 363.

present in Northern India. We get an explanation of the relation between the customary time for the marching of the army and the harvesting of autumn crop in the commentary of Medhatithi who in course of expounding Manu observes “when the expedition is expected to take a short time, and his force is sufficiently strong, then he may start also during the months of Phalguna and Chaitra, specially against a country which is rich in spring harvests. At this time of the year also, he can obtain fodder and at the same time inflict an injury upon the other party, by destroying the crops standing in the fields.” Though the old law-givers set up the ideal of not allowing the soldiers to march through cultivated fields, yet this was seldom observed by the enemy forces. Political stability is a prime requisite for the pursuit of economic activities and especially in the cultivation of land, in which crops stand in the open for three to five months. Apararka in explaining Yaj II. 163 implies that no legal redress is possible for the harm caused to the crops by the horses and elephants belonging to the king and these are simply to be warded off.³ Numerous inscriptions refer to the immunity of the village granted from *chata* and *bhata*, which have been explained as freedom from supplying shelter, provisions and forced labour to the regular and irregular army. This shows that normally the villages consisting mostly of cultivators had to bear these heavy burdens during the movement of soldiers.

Without entering into the old controversy as to whether, the ownership of land belonged to the state or to particular individuals. We may note that land was regarded as a social trust. The state did not allow an owner to waste the valuable gift of nature. Manu⁴ prescribes the imposition of a fine on a cultivator, who does not cultivate his field in proper time, nor guards the crop from being eaten up by animals. Similarly Kautilya⁵ ordains the confiscation of land from those who do not care to cultivate them. We do not know whether this dictum was responsible for the action taken by Govindachandra in 1120 A.D. in bestowing on Thakkura Vasistha the village of Karanda which had been previously given to Rudrasiva by the Kalachuri King Yasah Karna. We find a similar case of confiscation in the action taken by Laksmanasena against the Brahmana Haridasa to whom Valalasena had given a pot of land.⁶ The son of the author of the *Danasagara* was certainly aware of the sin incurred by one who resumed the land which had been gifted away previously. Apararka quotes Brhaspati to say that the result of the resumption of the gift would be hell for sixty thousand years to the resumer.⁷

³ Apararka (Anandasrama), p. 771.

⁴ Manu, VIII. 243.

⁵ Kautilya, II. 1.

⁶ *Epigraphia Indica*, XXI, p. 212.

⁷ Apararka, pp. 579-580.

CONCLUSION:

Several new features are noticeable during the period under survey. It appears that pressure on land increased, possibly due to the adoption of the profession of a farmer by people, who had earned their livelihood previously by trade and industry. The invasion of Sultan Mahmud and the consequent loss of the major portion of the Punjab to the Turks, their subsequent raids and the interminable internecine wars of the eleventh and twelfth centuries could not but affect the trade of the country most adversely. Disturbed political condition always leads to the shrinkage of the volume of trade. If valuable markets were lost, there must have been less production in those industries, which supplied the principal commodities for trade and commerce. A considerable number of persons therefore had to seek their livelihood by falling back on land or agriculture.