INDIAN FEUDAL TRADE CHARTERS

BY

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This note comments upon two copper-plate grants of which the older is dated about A.D. 592 and the later approximately A.D. 710. Had they not been sadly mangled in translation, they might have cast considerable light upon the role of the trader in the development of feudal society. Hitherto, it has been customary to merge two millennia of Indian history together as “ancient India”, which amounts to denial of any basic development.

1. An inscription at Kārle shows that traders’ unions of some sort existed even before the Christian era under the title vāniya-gāma, quite apart from the rich Greek and Indian traders who made individual contributions to the magnificent Caitya cave. The ancient meaning of grāma as a united mobile kinship (sajāta) group rather than “village” was carried over in this usage. The collective wealth and power of the merchants’ grāma does not seem to have been dominant at this stage. Princes of that period such as Usavadāra made donations in perpetuity to the monastic Order at Nasik, in the form of interest upon capital deposited with various producers’ guilds (oilmen, weavers, &c.)

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1) EI = Epigraphia Indica; JBBRAS = Journal of the (former Bombay Branch of the Royal) Asiatic Society of Bombay; F = J. F. Fleet: Inscriptions of the earl Gupta Kings (Calcutta 1888, Cor. Ins. Ind. III), cited by number of the inscription; S as in note 2) below and M as in 3), both cited by page.
2) D. C. Sirca in EI 50, 1957, 163-181; earlier, in the proceedings of the Bombay session (1949) of the All-India Oriental Congress (translation).
3) V. V. Mirashi’s edition of the Inscriptions of the Kalachuri-Chedi Era (New Delhi 1955, Cor. Ins. Ind. IV), particularly p. 150 ff.
4) On the right 13th pillar; cf. JBBRAS 30, 1956.66 (Dhenukākata).
6) EI 8.82-4 &c.
The word for guild is śrenī or its Prakrit equivalent. This term is common in the *Arthasastra* of Kautalya for associations of people who had just left the tribal stage but carried their unity — presumably originating in blood relationship — into more than one productive activity. The members of the older śrenī would cultivate grain, herd cattle and colonize waste land. At the same time, they might engage collectively in other production such as that of cloth, or indulge in trade, and take to arms at need. That this flexibility survived to the Gupta period is proved by the famous Mandasor inscription (F 18) composed by Vatsabhaṭṭi in A.D. 473.

The *Arthasastra* state was itself the major producer of its day, virtually a monopolist. Merchants were encouraged only to carry on import and export trade between janapada territories separated by waste land and forest, but had virtually no control over local production and trade, dominated entirely by salaried royal officials. This system changed during the reign of Asoka, with the vast new country opened up for the merchants and for village settlement. The older state management could no longer function efficiently enough to collect and to distribute the village surplus, let alone to supply the villages over long distances through difficult terrain with such necessities as salt and metals. The traders took over the two latter functions; corresponding to them there had to be a class of surplus gatherers, the barons, who could collect the surplus as taxes, dues and rent from the villagers.

The essential difference, which developed gradually, was the predominance of merchant guilds controlled by rich families over the older type of workers’ śrenī. This implies not only progressive deterioration of producer’s guilds due to greater internal disparities in wealth, but also denser settlement in villages. Thus, the vanī-grāma, which spread into the south as mani-grāmam, was an association of traders related by common interest in trade that had to pass through a particular centre, but not necessarily related by kinship nor themselves producers. These traders were given royal charters of the type which form the main basis of this note. They enjoyed special immunities, but were restrained from excesses against their hired workers.

The change could not have been sudden, nor simultaneous over the whole country. The main contention of this paper is that there was a major change in the second half of the 6th century. Āmrakāṭṭdava,