

Differentiating Gr̥hapati and Gahapati: A Historiographical Survey of the Economic and Socio-Cultural Evolution of Terms in Ancient Times

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Abstract

The following paper attempts to delve into the evolution of the terms Gr̥hapati and Gahapati. Contextualising and historicising the two, the aim is to understand the gradually changing meanings of these over the centuries in Ancient India. Several authors have delved into the socio-cultural and economic significance as well as transformation of the people and social categories pertaining to these titles. However, the paper attempts to bring together the historiography surrounding the theme along with inscriptional evidences. This will help present a succinct picture of the evolutionary nature of epithets in accordance with the evolving times, thus also putting forward a suitable example of how meanings of terms, which have been in use for a long period shouldn't be assumed as static and these needs to be understood in the context of concurrent times as the society transforms over time.

Keywords: Gr̥hapati, Gahapati, Ancient India

Introduction

The terms Gr̥hapati and Gahapati, often used interchangeably, however, have varying meanings and can be better understood according to their varying contextual analysis. While Gr̥hapati (Sanskriticised form) could be found in R̥g veda in its earliest usage, Gahapati (Pali form), on the other hand, occurs in the Vinaya Pitaka for the first time. Initially, both terms were translated to mean the head of the household i.e. Gr̥ha. It was only over the period of time, that the underlying differences and variations were analysed and conclusions were reached to a certain extent, that these two terms cannot be understood as static and one should be cautious against reading later meanings into the earlier forms. In the following paper, the origin and evolution of both terms have been analysed through textual and inscriptional evidences.

Gr̥hapati

'R̥gvedic kinship structure suggests the existence of "elementary" or nuclear family closely embedded in the wider group of clan' which was the basic socio-economic unit and not the extended family.....The Gr̥hapati of R̥gveda was not a householder heading a patriarchal joint family but the head of an extended kin group which had residential unity and formed one unit for social, economic and ritual purpose.' (Jaiswal 1996, 30) A critical study of the required attributes and the analysis of Śrauta rituals by

Heesterman, leads one to conclude that a Gṛhapati was not an old patriarchal head of the family, instead he was the head of the youth of the clan responsible for the protection, well-being and prosperity of his kin-group. This also reflects the continuation of this institution from pastoral society into the transformed settled agricultural society. The head was responsible for organising raids, fighting off other rival groups, protecting the livestock, etc which required a strong and able bodied person. Romila Thappar has argued that as the household became the unit of agricultural production, it eventually gave rise to the gṛhapati as a social category. ‘The transformation of gṛhapati from a leader of the extended kin group taking care of its ritual and material needs to the head of a complex household structured on patrilineal principles is no doubt connected with the shift from nomadic pastoralism to sedentary agriculture.... Agriculture required collective labour of family members or slaves and hired labourers; and as such complex households were more suited to this mode of production. However, the gṛhapati does not seem to have been the head of an ordinary peasant household but a person with a lot of prestige and some authority even in the age of Buddha. Perhaps he was the leader or a leading member of an agricultural community.’ (Jaiswal 1996, 33)

Gṛha is an important component in our attempt to explain the concept of gṛhapati. Early Gṛhyasūtra composed around 800-500 B.C., are one of the most crucial sources to make sense of the ideological, ritual and social understanding of the term. The Gṛha in the context of Gṛhyasūtra is a term that projects sacred area of ritual activities and the intricate ritualistic relationship between Gṛha and gṛhapati; and also between gṛhapati and other members of the household and the activities they conduct within it. ‘The gṛhapati was thus, projected as one who even harnessed the ‘natural elements’... to work for the benefit of the Gṛha. In stark comparison, the references to women in Gṛhyasūtra are almost always in relation to the activities of their husbands...’ (Tyagi 2002, 190) This definition also attracts one’s attention to the gendered aspect of the term and reveals its patriarchal character. Around 1st c. B.C. in later literature, gṛhapati came to assume a more prominent status as a ‘wealthy landowner’ and also as the representative of the household in the public domain denoting both social as well as economic function. ‘Around the first century A.D., as Ranabir Chakravarti shows, a distinction was drawn between the Gṛhastha and the gṛhapati, the former was the head of the household while the latter was a rich landowner who also had interests in trade and moneylending.’ (Tyagi 2002, 191) it is important to make note here that this marks a transition to when gṛhapati’s role was becoming more refined as he began to acquire social and ritual authority. The distinction from Gṛhastha also marks the development of four stage of ashrama system which was absent during the period of early Gṛhyasūtras. Gṛha was derived from the gṛhapati and therefore, it is clear that neither Gṛha (the household), nor the members could exist without the presence of gṛhapati to lead. This was a prototype similar to the kula whose head, the kulapati, was responsible for their ritual and material well-being.

‘The most important was the potentially procreative role of the householder... The entire purpose behind the setting up of Gṛha seems to be to have progeny, hence the acquisition of a virtuous wife was necessary for this purpose.’ (Tyagi 2002, 192) While the underlying qualification to perform ritual was education and erudition, it was only after marriage that a distinction evolved and the person acquired the right for setting up of ritual fire and in process attaining the role of gṛhapati. However, one needs to note here that this whole prerogative was all based on brahmanical male centric ideology. While, the presence of wife was an important condition in performance of certain rituals, the Gṛhapatni was to only assist and not to equally partner the husband in maintaining the household. The pati-patni bond was a ritual bond aimed at progeny and thus the wife was referred to as jaya, one who bears children. However, the

compatibility of the couple, referred to in the Ṛg veda, is missing in these texts. Kumkum Roy refers to the fact that in the Ṛg veda there are prayers to make the dampati of one mind with emphasis on 'equality and consensus rather than dominance and subservience between partners.' (Tyagi 2002, 194) Also, after the death of wife, the husband was freed from all the ritual ties with her and has to establish new household fires if he remarries; while upon the death of husband, wife was still to look after and stay with the husband's household, therefore, maintain her ritual connection. Also, it was the responsibility of Gṛhapatni to visit the kin of his husband and look after their needs; it was only on behalf of him and not as an equal partner. Therefore, it can be observed that while Gṛhapati was the source of existence of Gṛha in the outside world, the Gṛhapatni was always his subordinate and their ritual relation was weaker than others like father-son, teacher-pupil, which lasted even beyond death.

Gahapati

The so-called Pali counterpart Gahapati, also evolved over the period of time. While early Buddhist texts occasionally use the word in the sense of a householder, i.e., as the master of house (like its Sanskrit equivalent gṛhapati), more often this connotation was overshadowed by other implications of the term. (Chkravarti 1996, 65) The first reference to gahapati is found in Vinaya, where it explains the three domains into which society is divided according to text. 'The three categories are khattiya, brahmana and gahapati; this scheme implies them to be the representatives of the following domain categorisation of society: domain of power, domain of religion and domain of economy, respectively. The passage in Anguttara Nikāya, depicts the khattiya as aspiring for power and territory with dominion as his ideal; the brahmana wants mantras and yañña and brahmloka as his ideal; and the gahapati wants kamma (work) and sippa (craft), and has the completion of work (or the fruit of work) as his ideal.' (Chkravarti 1996, 67) Thus, as far as Buddhists are concerned the gahapati represents the economy and this broad classification includes within it all the facets of gahapati.

That Gahapati was an important element of Buddhist society is pertinent from the fact that it is one of the cakkavatti's seven treasures of symbol of sovereignty implying, gahapati as being intrinsic to kingship. Mahasudassana Sutta of Dīgha nikāya reflects on the association of gahapati with the ability to raise wealth and thus being a major asset of king along with his other priceless possessions. Various other references all through the text indicate that gahapati was the most important social group in relation to the king. This further brings us to the possession of property as an essential aspect of the gahapati. There are several references to the management and control of property by gahapati. However, it is important to note here that it was these possessions and assets; like land, orchards, corn cattle, slaves, gold, silver, etc.; that enabled gahapati to become donor of the saṅgha par excellence. Also, Dīgha nikāya describes gahapatis as someone who 'pays taxes and thus increases king's wealth'. (Chkravarti 1996, 70)

Agriculture was an important element in defining the social status of various categories in Ancient India. Thus, making all well-to-do peasants an important component of the agrarian society. In case of Buddhist Gahapati, another term pertaining to social categories is also worth mentioning here, i.e., Kutumbin or Kutumbika. 'The two terms, Gṛha and kutumba, more or less mean the same thing, i.e. a house, the gṛhapati and kutumbika can literally be translated as lord of the household and one having a household (or owing a household) respectively.... The gṛhapati and the kutumbika seem to have been distinguished from a tiller of the soil, variously called kinasa, Kṛṣṭivala and more frequently Karsaka. (Chkravarti 1996, 181) While gṛhapati and kutumbika are almost similar terms, the pali derivative,

namely gahapati, is hardly used in the sense of a mere peasant householder. ‘The significance of gahapati as an exalted epithet, fit to be assumed by a man of vast wealth and social pre-eminence, is amply demonstrated by literary and epigraphic materials.... Though gahapati frequently in use in the early historic period (c. 6th century B.C. to 3rd century A.D.), is rarely found in the documents of the Gupta and the post-Gupta times (c. 4th century A.D. onwards). The term kutumbika in sense of a householder has much longer usage in our sources. All these lead us to consider the kutumbika/kutumbin as the typical example of an early Indian peasant in preference to gr̥hapati/gahapati.’ (Chakravarti 1996, 183) Kutumbika appear in various Jataka stories as well, thus indicative of their significant and visible presence and the process of proliferation of peasants in greater part of the subcontinent from 1st century B.C. to 6th century A.D.

Inscriptional Evidences

There are various inscriptional evidences with reference to terms gahapati and kutumbika. One of the most significant pieces of evidence include an inscription from Nasik which records the excavation of a cave for Buddhist monks by a peasant householder (kutumbika), named Dahanama, in the regnal year of 5 or 6 of the Satavahana ruler, Vasishthiputra Pulumavi (c. A.D. 130-154). Another Kutumbika, Usabhanka, figures in an inscription from Sailarwadi. A resident of Dhenukakata, Usabhanka, is described as ploughman (halakiya) along with his wife and son. The inscription underlies the family unit of the peasant householder and records the donation of a rock cut cave to the Buddhist saṅgha by the wife and the son of the kutumbika. The interesting feature to note here is that the son is referred to as a gahapati, thus, indicating the possibility of social mobility.

The above stated inscription referring to a gahapati son of kutumbin father is a critical evidence to help us understand the changing social realities. While kutumbika and gahapati were initially both peasants, gahapati were the well-to-do land owners who also got involved in trade and commerce, and may or may not work the land with family labour; while, a kutumbika, was a farmer who tilled the land with his family labour and was involved in the minimal required trade activity. Over the period of time, as some gahapatis prospered and moved to urban areas while still retaining their connection with land in their villages, commerce became their main source of wealth. And, as a result, gahapati developed as a distinct prosperous traders’ social category, unlike the kutumbika whose life still revolved around their family labour and agriculture on their own piece of land. These gahapatis became the largest social category of donors to the Buddhist Saṅgha and thus, the large number of followers of Buddhism were traders and merchants.

Inscriptions and land grants also refer to gahapati as witness of the grant along with the other prominent social categories of the area which were worth mentioning as being important social components of the village. The esteem social status of gahapati is also reflected from the fact that various donors made it a point to refer to their gahapati relative; for instance mentioning their grandfather instead of father, or a women mentioning her father instead of husband, etc. Having a gahapati relative was thus a matter of dignity and indicated a prestigious family status in the society. The improved social standing combined with the ever-improving economic role in the society, led to distinct category of gahapati, which later lost their land ties in rural areas and eventually identified themselves as merchants and traders.

Conclusion

Therefore, while initially gr̥hapati and gahapati must have had the same connotation, i.e., being the head

of the household. Over the period of time gr̥hapati intensified along the terms of br̥hamanical patriarchal household head and increased their control over women while regulating production as well as reproduction. Gahapati, on the other hand prospered and developed as traders and merchants, breaking away their ties with peasant landholder kutumbins/kutumbikas. Accordingly, we should be careful to analyse the terms in the right context of time and space and should be critical of understanding the past through the present contextual lenses.

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