

BHOGPATIS AND THE VILLAGES OF NORTH INDIA

(700 - 1200 AD)

What was life like for the common villagers in the age when the new kingdoms were emerging? What did the villages look like? Recall all that you learnt about the villages of those times in the earlier lesson. Read this lesson to find out more about them.

The villages of the time of the *samantas* were quite different from the villages of today. There were no tractors or trucks moving around. No electricity either. Apart from the absence of modern technology in those days, there were other differences. Villages were then under the control of *bhogpatis*. Who were these *bhogpatis*? What did they do? How did they exercise control over the villages? To find out, let us go back into the history of those times.

The King's Officials

In those days, kings usually appointed only their close relatives to positions of power and authority. Eminent officials and military commanders were thus almost always of royal lineage - closely related to the ruling king. In fact, they were often referred to as '*Rajaputra*' - sons of the king or princes. And they were also awarded high sounding titles such as '*Rana*', '*Rawat*' and '*Thakur*'.

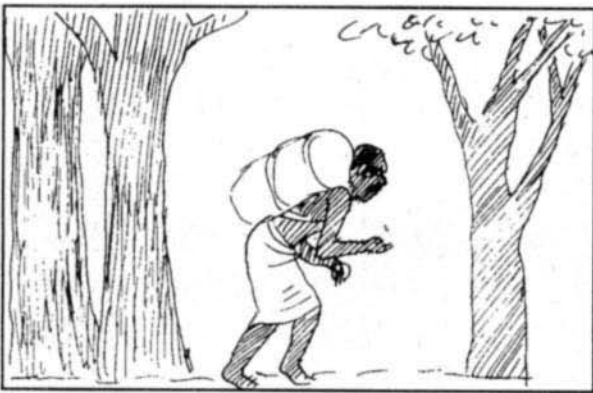
These eminent officials and military commanders were not paid a regular salary. Instead, the king usually granted them some villages, saying, "You are now the *bhogpati* of these 10 villages (or 40, or whatever number of villages he wished to award to them). Enjoy the income you may get from them." In other words, the king permitted them to keep the tax collected from the villages or towns granted to them in lieu of salary.

The Bhogpatis and the Villages

As per the king's orders, these officials would then establish their authority over the villages granted to them. They would begin appropriating a large portion of the harvest of the peasants in the form of tax. However, they usually did not stop there. They would also forcibly collect special additional levies under any pretext whatsoever. Thus they collected taxes on marriages, on felling trees, on fishing, on houses, cattle, travel, wells, waterwheels and so on. They even forced the villagers to work for them without paying them any wages.

- *The king's officials were his*
- *Rana, Rawat and Thakur were*
- *They were granted instead of being given a salary.*





Villagers had to work without wages for the Bhogpatis

Then and Now

Just think if someone came to your village or town, took it over and began doing just as he pleased, what would happen? Wouldn't the people undergo tremendous hardships and suffering?

However, this cannot happen today. The government fixes the various kinds of taxes that can be levied and the amount of money to be collected under each tax. Relevant laws are passed by the Vidhan Sabha and the Lok Sabha for levying such taxes. Government officials cannot do as they please or collect whatever taxes they wish. They must do as the law tells them to. In those days things were different. The *rajās*, *ranas* and *thakurs* collected taxes according to their whims and fancies.

The Village Headman and the Panchakula

Who collected taxes from the villagers on behalf of the *thakur* or *rana*? This was the work of the village headman. He collected taxes and passed them on to the *bhogpati*. In return, he received several benefits. For example, he was exempted from paying taxes on his cultivable land. He was also permitted to collect some taxes from the villagers for himself.

- Who collects taxes from the villagers today? What does he receive for doing this work?
- Why do you think the *bhogpatis* needed the help of the village headman to collect the taxes?

In several areas respected and important people of a village constituted a committee called *Panchakula*. This Committee oversaw matters relating to landownership in the village and settled disputes among villagers. *Panchakula* were of importance in Rajasthan and Gujarat.

Utilising the Rents

What did the *bhogpati* do with the wealth and goods he received by way of taxes? Did he pass this wealth on to the king? No. He had the right to keep the taxes for himself. These taxes were, in a way, his salary, because the king did not pay him a regular wage.

The *rana* or *thakur* used this tax money in whatever manner he wished. He built palaces and forts. He bought weapons and horses. He built imposing temples. He forced the people of his villages to build these edifices without paying them any wages for their labour. The villagers had no choice but to obey his orders.

That was not all. Whenever a *rana* or *thakur* passed through a village, the people had to extend their hospitality to him, look after him and carry his baggage.

Sometimes, the *bhogpati* had wells dug, waterwheels installed and tanks and ponds constructed so that the village fields could be irrigated. In return, he levied further taxes to recover the costs, usually in the form of an additional portion of the peasant's harvest.

The *ranas* and *thakurs* contributed generously to the various temples and *maths* in the region, but these donations and offerings were seldom out of their own pockets. They would, instead, proclaim to the village people, "For every plough or waterwheel in the village, you will have to deposit some coins or grain in the temple on my behalf every year."

Such proclamations are to be found in innumerable stone inscriptions dating to the period between 700 and 1200 A.D.

- How did the *bhogpati* treat the villagers?

Underline four sentences that illustrate his dealings with them.

Difference Between an Official and a Bhogpati

You learned about kings like Ajatashatru and Ashoka last year. During their reign there were no *bhogpatis*. Instead, the king's work was carried out by officials, generals and ministers

appointed by him for the purpose. These officials collected taxes from the people on his behalf. In return, they were paid a regular salary by the king.

• Underline two sentences which highlight the differences between the king's officials of ancient times and the bhogpatis of later times.

EXERCISE

1. Between 700 to 1200 AD, who had the right to collect land revenue from the villages of north India?
2. In those days the village headman did not pay any tax on his lands. Why did he get this benefit?
3. How did the *ranas*, *thakurs* etc. donate to the temples and *maths*?
4. What were the taxes villagers had to pay to the *bhogpatis*? Apart from paying taxes, what else did they do for the *bhogpatis*?
5. Explain whether the king in the time of Ashoka was receiving more revenues from his kingdom than the kings of later dynasties?
6. In which period did the officials receive fixed salaries - in the time of Ashoka or the *samantas*?
7. What did *bhogpatis* do with the money they received from their area?
8. Why did kings give villages to their officials?
9. What were some common practices of the period of the '*ranas*' and '*thakurs*' that have now become illegal?



Bhogpati making villagers build a fort