

Indian Feudalism Debate and Other Models of Polity

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Abstract: *The debates in history always enthused academics and students of history. A large number of such debates created and sustained interest in the historical studies. One of the such debates is on Indian feudalism. Historians considered early medieval as a period of feudalism, described it as an age marked by political fragmentation, the transformation of peasants into serfs and the decline of urban centres and money economy. The feudalism concept has been applied to both north and South India. It is one of the most serious debates in Indian historiography. The impact of several decades of vigorous debate is that it raised important questions about political, social and economic processes. In the present paper an attempt is made to examine various features of this debate and a few other models of polity proposed alternatively by the scholars. In this paper the main arguments on Indian Feudalism and other models of polity are analysed.*

Keywords: *Bhakti*, Early state, Indian feudalism, Kali age, Segmentary state

1. Introduction

The debates in history always enthused academics and students of history. A large number of such debates created and sustained interest in the historical studies. One of the such debates is on Indian feudalism. The historians have been debating the nature of the society, polity and economy of early medieval India. This period was labelled as one of crisis, decline, decay and decadence. Historians considered it as a period of feudalism, described it as an age marked by political fragmentation, the transformation of peasants into serfs and the decline of urban centres and money economy. The feudalism concept has been applied to both north and South India. It is one of the most serious debates in Indian historiography. The impact of several decades of vigorous debate is that it raised important questions about political, social and economic processes. In the present paper an attempt is made to examine various features of this debate and a few other models of polity proposed alternatively by the scholars.

The concept of feudalism was borrowed from European historiography. The multiplicity of regional powers and the absence of a paramount power of pan-Indian structure has been explained by Marxist historians by the concept of Indian feudalism. Let us examine the main arguments on Indian Feudalism.

Feudalism from above and Feudalism from below

D.D. Kosambi viewed the growth of feudalism in Indian history as a two-way process of administrative action and evolution at the local levels. During the early centuries of the Common Era the kings began to grant land rights to officials and Brahmans. It reached an advanced stage of development during the period of the Guptas and Harsha, which is called feudalism from above. The more complex and second stage of feudalism began when a class of landowners developed from the village levels and wielded power between the state and local population and regarded as feudalism from below. This view of a two-stage development of Indian feudalism was criticised by scholars.

Indian Feudalism

R.S. Sharma says that feudalism in India began with the land grants made to Brahmans, temples and monasteries for which we have inscriptional evidence from the Satavahana period, which multiplies by Gupta period. The growth of feudal property in India came to be linked with the undermining of the communal rights in land, as is evident from the later grants which refer to the transfer of communal resources such as pastures, forests, water reservoirs to the beneficiaries. The economic essence of Indian feudalism lay in the rise of landed intermediaries leading to the enserfment of the peasantry through restrictions on peasant mobility and freedom, increasing obligation to perform forced labour or *vishti*, mounting tax burdens and the evils of subinfeudation.

R.S. Sharma says that certain broad features of feudalism are noticeable from the Gupta and post-Gupta period onwards. He put forward the following features as evidence of feudalism in India. The grant of both virgin and cultivated land, the transfer of peasants, the extension of forced labour, the restriction on the movements of the peasants, artisans and merchants, the paucity of coins, the retrogression of trade, the abandonment of fiscal and criminal administration to the religious beneficiaries, the beginnings of remuneration in revenues to officials, and the growth of the obligations of the *samantas*. He visualised the decline of India's long-distance trade with various parts of the world after the fall of the Guptas; urbanisation also suffered in consequence, resulting in the economy's ruralisation. The feudal society was marked by the appearance of a substantial class of landlords and a numerous class of servile peasantry.

R.S. Sharma pointed out the following significances of Indian feudalism.

- 1) Land grants served as an important means of bringing virgin soil under cultivation. Early feudalism was a phase of great agrarian expansion.
- 2) Land grants provided the administrative mechanism for maintaining law and order in the donated areas to the grantees.

- 3) Land grants led to the brahmanisation and acculturation of the tribal peoples. Thus, feudalism worked for the integration of the country.

Kali Age and Social Transition

The concept of Kali Age was linked with the medieval social transition by B.N.S. Yadava. He says that the early sources refer to Kali age as an age of all-round degeneration due to the following events and tendencies.

- 1) Foreign invasions
- 2) The emergence of the ruling aristocracy of foreigners such as Yavanas, Sakas, Hunas, etc.
- 3) Natural calamities like famines and droughts
- 4) Economic decline including the decay of cities, decline of trade, commerce and money economy.
- 5) The disturbances in the system of the four *varnas*.
- 6) The increased social conflict
- 7) The exploitation of peasants by the new ruling class as evidenced by exorbitant taxes and forced labour.
- 8) The impact of the heretical religions and
- 9) The general decline of traditional moral and religious values.

B.N.S. Yadava, an eminent proponent of the Indian feudalism thesis, drew attention to the Huna invasions of India which shattered the Gupta empire and resulted in the rise of feudalism.

Kali Crisis

R.S. Sharma first suggested the Kali crisis in his work *Sudras in Ancient India* in 1958. Then he elaborated it in an article in 1982, which he further refined in 2001. A deep social crisis reflected in the description of the Kali age in various epic and Puranic passages datable to the late third and early fourth centuries was a prelude to the feudalisation of Indian society. Whenever there is a deviation from the norms of the established social order, it is represented as the onset of the Kali age. Kali means the neglect of rituals, and the predominance and influence of heretical sects and also of foreign and non-brahmanical rulers. Kali age is characterised by *varnasamkara* or intermixture of *varnas*. Kali age also implies hostility between Sudras and Brahmans, refusal of Vaisyas to pay taxes and offer sacrifice, oppression of people with taxes, widespread theft and robbery, insecurity of family and property, destruction of livelihood, growing importance of wealth over ritual status, and dominance of *mleccha* princes. Widespread social disorder adversely affected the safety and security of the privileged orders. Thus, the state gave up the earlier practice of collecting taxes directly through its agents and distributing among priests, military and other officials. Instead, it began to assign land revenues directly to priests, military chiefs, officials, etc. The new situation enabled the king to grant land to the leading members of the community who thus became responsible for the appropriation and consumption of the surplus in the form of what may be described as feudal rent.

Landlordism and Tenancy

The feudal formulation was based on land grants alone and any such formulation is open to question. Thus, it has been effectively questioned whether the transfer of revenue to the grantee results in the degeneration of the economic rights of

the ruler. D.C. Sircar has used the concept of landlordism to describe the situation of early medieval India. He has criticized the Marxist historians for their inability to distinguish landlordism and tenancy in India from feudalism.

The Indian Medieval Economy

Irfan Habib has questioned the validity of the concepts of feudalism for Indian history and suggested a neutral term, 'the Indian medieval economy' or the 'medieval Indian system'. Habib's ideas are mainly dealing with medieval society and economy. Irfan Habib suggested the following characteristics of Indian medieval economy.

- 1) The predominance of peasant production in the context of a stratified agrarian economy.
- 2) Since the establishment of Delhi Sultanate, increasing pressure was exerted by the state to collect the bulk of peasants' surplus and revenue was collected in cash.
- 3) The growing impoverishment of the peasantry was owing to the increased demand of the ruling class for revenue. It prevented the technological advancement ensuring an abundance of artisan labour supply at low cost.

Was There Feudalism in Indian History?

Harbans Mukhia, in an article entitled 'Was There Feudalism in Indian History?' questioned the Indian feudalism thesis at the theoretical and the empirical level by comparing the medieval Indian scenario with medieval Europe. Mukhia says that European feudalism developed as a result of changes at the base of society, in India, the establishment of feudalism is attributed to state action. Mukhia questions whether such complex social structures can be established through administrative and legal procedures.

The empirical basis of the questioning of Indian feudalism in a comparison between the histories of medieval Western Europe and medieval India, pursued at three levels: the ecological conditions, the technology available and the social organisation of forms of labour used in agriculture in the two regions. Mukhia suggested that medieval Indian economy was characterised by high fertility of the land, low subsistence needs of the peasants and peasants' freedom of control over their process of production. Mukhia emphasises the free peasant production as the characteristic feature of the medieval Indian economy. He also argues to move away from Euro-centrism in the study of history. With this intervention, the debate was no longer confined to feudalism/trade dichotomy.

How Feudal was Indian Feudalism?

R.S. Sharma, who was criticised by scholars for his concept of India feudalism, reconsidered some of his earlier positions and greatly refined his thesis of Indian feudalism and defended it in a paper, 'How Feudal was Indian Feudalism?'. He suggested that feudalism has to be seen as a mode of the distribution of the means of production and the appropriation of the surplus. He says that feudalism appears in a predominantly agrarian economy which is characterised by a class of landlords and a class of servile peasantry. In this system, the landlords extract surplus through extra-economic methods like social, religious or political methods.

D.N. Jha, although support the Indian feudalism theory, had criticized R.S. Sharma for relying too heavily on the absence of long-distance external trade as the cause of the rise of feudalism in India. D.N. Jha, in an edited volume, *The Feudal Order*, has included papers exploring the cultural and ideological dimensions of what he calls the feudal order. One of the major dimensions so explored is that of religion, especially popular religion or *Bhakti*, both in the north and South India and the growth of India's regional cultures and languages. Even as most scholars have seen the rise of the *Bhakti* cults as a popular protest against the domination of Brahmanical orthodoxy, the proponents of feudalism see these as buttresses of Brahmanical domination by the ideology of total surrender, subjection and loyalty to a deity. This surrender and loyalty could easily be transferred on to the feudal lord and master.

R.S. Sharma was criticised by scholars for looking at the rise of feudalism in India entirely as a consequence of state action in transferring land to the intermediaries. He modified it and expanded its scope to look at feudalism as an economic formation which evolved out of economic and social crises in society, signifying in the minds of the people the beginning of the Kaliyuga, rather than entirely as the consequence of state action. This enriched his argument considerably. R.S. Sharma in a work published in 2001 turned his attention to the ideological and cultural aspects of the feudal society and included some new themes such as 'Tantrism', and 'the Feudal Mind', where he explores such problems as the reflection of feudal hierarchies in art and architecture, the ideas of gratitude and loyalty as ideological props of feudal society, etc.

State in Early Medieval South India

The history of South Indian polity in the early medieval period provide mainly the four models of analysis: Centralised Empire, Segmentary State, Early State and Feudal State. These four models depict the early medieval South Indian kingdoms either as a strong and centralized state or as one of decentralization and disintegration or as a state which has not yet reached the position of a strong and centralized state though it did have some of its characteristics in its core around the capital.

Centralised Empire

K.A. NilakantaSastri presented a picture of a highly centralised empire under the Cholas. He pointed out the structure of the state with an efficient bureaucracy, comprehensive revenue system, and a strong army and navy. Within this polity, NilakantaSastri also identified a large number of autonomous villages. NilakantaSastri's conception of the state in medieval South India remained unquestioned for at least four decades. This historiographical tradition was seriously challenged by Burton Stein. Stein has pointed out the contradiction in the view of K.A. NilakantaSastri with the Chola monarchy as an extremely powerful monarchy at the apex level and the overwhelming presence of local self-bodies at the villages.

Segmentary State

The model of Segmentary state was first constructed by Aidan Southall to explain the Alur society in East Africa. This anthropological model is based on the idea of

pyramidal segmentation. Burton Stein adapted this model to the South Indian states from the Pallava to the Vijayanagara period. The segmentary state was composed of many similar segments surrounding a core and was ruled by the king. He divided sovereignty to political sovereignty and 'ritual hegemony'. Other features are a multiplicity of centres, specialised administrative staff and pyramidal organisation. Hermann Kulke has questioned Stein's concept of ritual sovereignty. According to Kulke in a traditional society, particularly in India, ritual sovereignty seems to be an integral part. A key element of the segmentary state theory was also the so-called Brahman-peasant alliance at the *nadu*. The peasant was always exploited by the Brahman and Kshatriya combination. The model was originally proposed to explain the tribal situation and not suited to a stratified society.

Early State

This model was originally proposed by Henry Claessen and Peter Skalnik. This model is used by Y. Subbarayalu and later James Heitzman to explain the Chola state and KesavanVeluthat to explain the Chera state. The early state is a centralised socio-political organisation for the regulation of social relations in a complex stratified society divided into two basic emergent classes of the rulers and the ruled. The model tries to generalise on a vast variety of systems.

Feudal State

The feudalism model or South Indian feudalism during the early medieval period was suggested by KesavanVeluthat. KesavanVeluthat argues that the basic direct producers in a feudal system own the means of production themselves in a very technical sense. The possession of superior rights by local magnates over land as well as the extra-economic coercion by which those magnates extract surplus from the primary producer are among the foremost characteristics of the feudal mode of production in medieval South India. The political structure of early medieval South India was like the typical feudal pyramid with the king at the top, with the feudatory chieftains immediately below him, with the local groups of *nadus*, *brahmadeyas* and *nagarams* below them, the tenants and cultivators below these groups and finally the landless labourers at the bottom. This pyramidal hierarchy is found in military organisation and judicial administration as well. Comparing with the agricultural production the commodity production was limited. Likewise, the trade was marginal to the economy and society. We have examined the socio-political formation in South India. In the recent historiography, the ideology of the society also gained importance. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the prominent ideology of this period called *Bhakti*. The debate on the nature of polity in pre-modern India contributed significantly to our understanding of the history of political structure in India. Models of state are concepts help us to understand better the functioning and dynamics of power. Regional variations and multiples of patterns make any model proposed to be falling short of explaining any given situation. But we have to admit that in the historiography the utility of these models is beyond such limitations. Thus, further models of theoretical nature should be welcomed in the context of the nature of pre-modern Indian polity.

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