UNIT 10 AGRICULTURE, LANDLORD, PEASANTS AND TRIBALS: THE FEUDALISM DEBATE[1]

Structure

10.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will learn about:

- what is feudalism?
- main features of Indian agrarian economy which came into existence in the early medieval period which form the basis of the Indian feudalism theory;
- trade, commerce and urban decay in early medieval India and how such processes came to be related to feudalism; and
- feudalism debate in India.

[1] This Unit has been taken from EHI 03, Block 1 (Units 1 & 3) and MHI 05, Block 3 (Unit 10).

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10.1 INTRODUCTION

The post Gupta centuries of 7th to the 13th are considered as constituting the early medieval period in Indian history. Fundamental changes occurred in this period in the fields of economy, society and polity. These have led scholars to conceptualise these changes in the form of feudalism theory, Segmentary state formulation and as one of integration and continuity (of processes which were unleashed in the early Historic period). In this unit we will be discussing one of these constructs that has been forwarded and is based on the changes occurring in the society, economy and polity: Feudalism. This has been a subject of a lively debate among scholars of early medieval India and the historiography generated, hence, has been very rich and nuanced.

10.2 WHAT IS FEUDALISM?[2]

Before discussing the main features of the feudalism debate in India, we need to define the term 'Feudalism'. The term Feudalism signified the changes that occurred in Western Europe between the late 8th to the 14th century. Central to these changes was the grant of land called 'fief' (a form of real property right) around which revolved the social and economic relationships of the period under study. The word feudalism is derived from the German word 'feud', which literally meant a piece of land. In pre-modern societies, before the industrial revolution, land was the chief source of wealth. Who owned this land, who worked on it and on what terms, and how much income each derived from it, was not merely an index of the economic condition of society, but also of individual wealth and status. Therefore, the relationships that governed the tilling and income from this land are crucial to understanding feudal societies. The terms on which each section of society utilized this land also governed their relationships to each other. Feudalism in this sense represents the entire complex of social, economic and political system derived from this crucial relationship. Serfdom was the basic institution that determined the mechanics of feudalism: as distinct from slavery, in which the one who worked the land was also owned by a member of the ruling landed aristocracy. The relationship with the lord, although less onerous than under slavery, was nevertheless one in which he was oppressed and his labour exploited to an extent that barely left him enough for survival. Mostly he worked with his own tools, and he had to draw his means of livelihood from the parcel of land he was tied to, not from any remuneration from the work he did on the lord's land. This remuneration was a form of labour rent for the strips of land allotted to him by the lord precisely to ensure labour for himself once slavery no longer remained viable.

Now let us discuss some of the main attributes of economy, trade and commerce that characterised the early medieval period in India. Thereafter we will see how the Indian feudalism theorists have used this evidence to postulate a particular kind of economic and social formulation, Feudalism, that they claim came into existence in this period.

[2] This section is taken from BHIC 104, Theme II, Unit 5.

10.3 AGRARIAN ECONOMY

The early medieval period in Indian history marks the growth of cultivation and organization of land relations through land grants. These grants began around the beginning of Common Era and covered practically the entire sub-continent by the end of the twelfth century. In the early medieval period agricultural expansion meant a greater and more regular use of advanced agricultural techniques, plough cultivation and irrigation technology. Institutional management of agricultural processes, control of means of production and new relations of production also played an important role in this expansion. With this expansion, new type of rural tensions also emerged. Commercial activities in agricultural and non-agricultural commodities increased.

The agrarian expansion, which began with the establishment of *brahmadeya* and *agrahara* settlements through land grants to brahmanas from the fourth century onwards acquired a uniform and universal form in subsequent centuries. The centuries between the eighth and twelfth witnessed the processes of this expansion and the culmination of an agrarian organization based on land grants to religious and secular beneficiaries, i.e. brahmanas, temples and officers of the king's government. However, there are important regional variations in this development, both due to geographical as well as ecological factors.

10.3.1 Agrarian Organization

The agrarian organization and economy were highly complex. This can be understood on the basis of intensive studies of the regional patterns of land grants and the character and role of the *brahmadeya* and non-*brahmadeya* and temple settlements. The growth and nature of land rights, interdependence among the different groups related to land and the production and distribution processes also help in a better understanding of the situation.

A *brahmadeya* represents a grant of land either in individual plots or whole villages given away to brahmanas making them landowners or land controllers. It was meant either to bring virgin land under cultivation or to integrate existing agricultural (or peasant) settlements into the new economic order dominated by a brahmana proprietor. These brahmana donees played a major role in integrating various socio-economic groups into the new order through service tenures and caste groupings under the *varna* system. For example, the growing peasantization of sudras was sought to be rationalized in the existing brahmanical social order.

The practice of land grants as *brahmadeya* was initiated by the ruling dynasties and subsequently followed by chiefs, feudatories, etc. *Brahmadeyas* facilitated agrarian expansion because they were exempted from various taxes or dues either entirely or at least in the initial stages of settlement (e.g. for 12 years). They were also endowed with ever growing privileges (*pratiharas*). The ruling families derived economic advantages in the form of the extension of the resource base, moreover by creating *brahmadeyas* they also gained ideological support for their political power.

The land donations implied more than the transfer of land rights. For example, in many cases, along with the revenues and economic resources of the village, human resources such as peasants (cultivators), artisans and others were also transferred to the donees. There is also growing evidence of the encroachment over the rights of villagers on community lands such as lakes and ponds. Thus, the brahmanas became managers of agricultural and artisanal production in these settlements for which they organized themselves into assemblies.

From the seventh century onwards, officers of the state were also being remunerated through land grants. This is of special significance because it created another class of landlords who were not brahmanas. The gift of land to officials in charge of administrative divisions is mentioned as early as c. CE 200 (the time of Manu) but the practice picked up momentum in the post-Gupta period. Literary works dealing with Central India, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Bihar and Bengal between the tenth and twelfth centuries make frequent references to various kinds of grants to ministers, kinsmen and those who rendered military services. The *rajas*, *rajaputras ranakas, mahasamantas* etc. mentioned in Pala land charters were mostly vassals connected with land. The incidence of grants to state officials varies from one region to another. To illustrate, while we hear of about half a dozen Paramara official ranks, only a few of them are known to have received land grants. But very large territories were granted to vassals and high officers under the Chalukyas of Gujarat. The available evidences suggest that Odisha had more service grants than Assam, Bengal and Bihar taken together. Further, the right of various officials to enjoy specific and exclusive levies — irrespective of the tenure of these levies — was bound to create intermediaries with interests in the lands of the tenants.

Large scale gifts to the religious establishments, both brahmanical and non-brahmanical, find distinctive places in inscriptional evidences. These centres worked as nuclei of agricultural settlements and helped in integrating various peasant and tribal settlements through a process of acculturation. They also integrated various socio-economic groups through service tenures or remuneration through temple lands. Temple lands were leased out to tenants, who paid a higher share of the produce to the temple. Such lands were also managed either by the *sabha* of the *brahmadeya* or *mahajanas* of the *agrahara* settlements. In non-brahmana settlements temples became the central institution. Here temple lands came to be administered by the temple executive committees composed of land owning non-brahmanas, e.g. the Velalas of Tamil Nadu; the Okkalu, Kampulu, etc. of Karnataka and Andhra region. Different groups were assigned a caste and ritual status. It is in this process that people following 'impure" and "low occupations" were assigned the status of untouchables, kept out of the temple and given quarters at the fringes of the settlement. The supervision of temple lands was in the hands of brahmana and non-brahmana landed elite. The control of irrigation sources was also a major function of the local bodies dominated by landed elite groups. Thus the brahmana, the temple and higher strata of non-brahmanas as landlords, employers and holders of superior rights in land became the central feature of early medieval agrarian organization. The new landed elite also consisted of local peasant clan chiefs or heads of kinship groups and heads of families, who had *kani* rights i.e. rights of possession and supervision. In other words, several strata of intermediaries emerged between the king and the actual producer.

An important aspect relating to land grants is the nature of rights granted to the assignees. Rights conferred upon the grantees included fiscal and administrative rights. The taxes, of which land tax was the major source of revenue, theoretically payable to the king or government, came to be assigned to the donees. The reference to *pratiharas* or exemptions in the copper plate and stone inscriptions registering such grants indicate that what was theoretically payable to the king was not being completely exempted from payment but the rights were now transferred to the grantees. This was apparently based on the sanction of the *Dharmashastras* which sought to establish the royal ownership of land and hence justify such grants, creating intermediary rights in land. Although there is some evidence of a communal basis of land rights in early settlements, the development of private ownership of rights is indicated by the fact that the grantees often enjoyed rights of alienation of land. They also enjoyed other hereditary benefits in the settlements. Land gifts were often made after purchase from private individuals. Hereditary ownership seems to have developed out of such grants, both religious and secular.

10.4 RURAL TENSION

Notwithstanding agrarian expansion, the rural landscape was far from being a homogeneous scene. There was, to begin with, heterogeneous and stratified peasantry. Unlike the age old and pre-Gupta *gahapatis* we now have graded personnel associated with land : *kshetrik*, *karshaka*, *halin* and *ardhik*. Regrettably, there is hardly any indication of landownership in these terms, which seem to be referring to various categories of cultivators. The *damara* revolts in Kashmir, rebellion of the *Kaivarthas* during the reign of Ramapal in Bengal, acts of self-immolation in situations of encroachments on land in Tamil Nadu, appropriation of donated land by sudras in the Pandya territory, are indices of distrust against the new landed intermediaries. The fact that donors often looked for land where cultivation was not disputed also shows the seeds of turmoil. The possibility of the hero-stones in and around *agraharas* also has the potential of throwing light on rumblings beneath the surface in agrarian settlements.

10.5 AGRICULTURE AND THE EXCHANGE NETWORK

It is sometimes maintained that in the early medieval economic organization, which was a predominantly agrarian and self-sufficient village economy, production was mainly subsistence oriented and was not in response to the laws of the market. Hence there was little scope for economic growth. Craftsmen and artisans were attached either to villages or estates or religious establishments. Hence there was no significant role for traders and middlemen, who only procured and supplied iron tools, oil, spices, cloth, etc. to the rural folk. In other words the functioning of the market system was extremely limited. The aforesaid picture is certainly true for the period 300-800 CE. However, the subsequent 500 years witnessed a rapid increase in the number of agrarian settlements and the growth of local markets initially for local exchange. Subsequently, the need for regular exchange within a region and with other regions led to organized commerce. This in turn led to the emergence of merchant organizations, itinerant trade and partial monetization from the ninth century. Though the relative importance of these features varied from one region to another, the increasing role of agriculture in this new economy is easily seen. Agricultural products came to be exchanged with items of long distance trade carried on by itinerant traders. This development also led to a change in the pattern of landownership towards the close of the early medieval period. Merchants and economically influential craftsmen, like weavers, invested in land i.e. purchased land or acquired land and made gifts of land. In south Karnaraka, for example, a group called the *Jagati-kottali* (community of weavers) and the community of *Telligas* (oil pressers) were active participants in agriculture.

10.6 THE CHARACTERISATION OF EARLY MEDIEVAL AGRARIAN ECONOMY

Different views have been put forward regarding the nature of the overall set up of early medieval agrarian economy. On the one hand, it is seen as a manifestation of feudal economy, while on the other it is dubbed as a peasant state and society.

The salient features of the early medieval economy which became the basis of the Feudalism theory are as follows:

1) Emergence of hierarchical landed intermediaries. Vassals and officers of state and other secular assignee had military obligations and feudal titles. Sub-infeudation (varying in different regions) by these donees to get their land cultivated led to the growth of different strata of intermediaries. It was a hierarchy of landed aristocrats, tenants, share croppers and cultivators. This hierarchy was also reflected in the power/administrative structure, where a sort of lord-vassal relationship emerged. In other words, Indian feudalism consisted in the gross unequal distribution of land and its produce.

2) Another important feature was the prevalence of forced labour. The right of extracting forced labour (*vishti*) is believed to have been exercised by the brahmana and other grantees of land. Forced labour was originally a prerogative of the king or the state. It was transferred to the grantees, petty officials, village authorities and others. In the Chola inscriptions alone, there are more than one hundred references to forced labour. Even the peasants and artisans come within the jurisdiction of *vishti*. As a result, a kind of serfdom emerged, in which agricultural labourers were reduced to the position of semi-serfs.

3) Due to the growing claims of greater rights over land by rulers and intermediaries, peasants also suffered a curtailment of their land rights. Many were reduced to the position of tenants facing ever growing threat of eviction. A number of peasants were only *ardhikas* (share croppers). The strain on the peasantry was also caused by the burden of taxation, coercion and increase in their indebtedness.

4) Surplus was extracted through various methods. Extra economic coercion was a conspicuous method. With the rise of new property relations, new mechanisms of economic subordination also evolved. The increasing burden is evident in the mentioning of more than fifty levies in the inscription of Rajaraja Chola.

5) It was relatively a closed village economy. The transfer of human resources along with land to the beneficiaries shows that in such villages the peasants, craftsmen and artisans were attached to the villages and hence were mutually dependent. Their attachment to land and to service grants ensured control over them by the beneficiaries.

In brief, a subject and immobile peasantry, functioning in relatively self-sufficient villages buttressed by *varna* restrictions, was the marked feature of the agrarian economy during the five centuries under survey.

10.7 TRADE AND COMMERCE

The nature and extent of the use of money, the functioning of the market, the role of agricultural production, and stages in the conditions of urban settlements are interrelated developments. None of these is unrelated to the system of land grants as an almost all India phenomenon between the eight to the thirteenth centuries. One may even suggest that trade and commerce too were being 'feudalised' during this period.

The collection, distribution and exchange of goods is called trade. It is a process which depends on a number of factors such as the nature and quantity of production, facilities of transport, safety and security of traders, the pattern of exchange, etc. It also involves different sections of society including traders, merchants, peasants and artisans. In a somewhat indirect manner, even political authorities have a stake in it as taxes on the articles of commerce imposed by them constitute an important source of revenue of the state.

The period from 750-1000 CE witnessed wide-spread practice of granting land not only to priests and temples but also to warrior chiefs and state officials. As already seen it led to the emergence of a hierarchy of landlord's even graded state officials such as *maha- mandaleshvara, mandalika, samanta, mahasamanta, thakkura* etc. developed interests in land. However, they were different from the actual tillers of the soil and lived on the surplus extracted from the peasants who were hardly left with anything to trade. It resulted in the growth of rural economy where local needs were being satisfied locally through the imposition of numerous restrictions on the mobility of actual producers. The relative dearth of medium of exchange, viz. metal coins only strengthened this trend.

10.7.1 Media of Exchange

India was ruled by many important dynasties between 750 and 1000 CE. These include the Gujara Pratiharas in western India, the Palas in eastern India and the Rashtrakutas in the Deccan. All had the distinction of having been served by some of the most powerful kings of the day, many of whom had very long lasting reigns. It is astonishing that their available coins are very few and in no way compare either in quantity or quality with the coins of earlier centuries. Since money plays an important role in the sale and purchase of goods, the paucity of actual coins and the absence of coin-moulds in archaeological finds leads us to believe in the shrinkage of trade during the period under survey.

Though first suggested by D.D. Kosambi, it was the publication of Professor R.S. Sharma's *Indian Feudalism* in 1965 that brought to focus the paucity of coinage in the post-Gupta times, its link with trade and commerce and consequent emergence of feudal social formation. The subject has been keenly debated over the years. There have been four major types of responses:

1) Contributions which have fully supported this view.

2) A case study of Odisha substantiates complete absence of coins between c. 600 CE and 1200 CE but argues for trade with Southeast Asia and emphasizes the role of barter in foreign trade.

3) Kashmir, on the other hand, shows emergence of copper coinage from about the eighth century CE. Extremely poor quality of this coinage has been explained in terms of the decline of trade-based economy and rise of agricultural pursuits in the valley.

4) Finally, a point of view questions not only the idea of paucity of coins but also the decline in trade. This is based on the evidence from what is described as the mid-eastern India comprising Bihar, West Bengal and the present Bangladesh during 750-1200 CE. While it is conceded that there was no coined money and that the Palas and Senas themselves did not strike coins, it is also argued that there was no dearth of media of exchange. To illustrate, it is emphasized that there was not only a long series of *Harikela* silver coinage but also cowries and more importantly *churni* (money in the form of gold/silver dust) also functioned as media of exchange.

   Well, there may have been some regional exceptions but the all-India perspective fits in the general hypothesis of Professor Sharma. Even with regard to the regional exceptions, the following questions require some attention:

   a) What was the nature and extent of such commercial activities?

   b) Were such activities capable of giving rise to stable commercialized class?

   c) Who took away the profits of this trade?

   d) Did this so called flourishing trade gave any incentive to the toiling, subject and immobile peasantry?

It is significant to note in this context that:

- The relevant sources cited in the context of the mid-eastern India, are silent about the participation of indigenous people in the maritime trade of the area.
- Even the limited trading activities were confined to the ruling elite.
- The miserable conditions of the common man are reflected in the meaning of the word *vangali* (literally, a resident of Bengal) which denoted somebody "very poor and miserable".

Similarly, those who talk about India's trade with Southeast Asia may also do well to keep in view the position of metal money in that region. Detailed study of

Cambodia, for example, shows that during the two centuries of post-Gupta times (CE 600-800) Southeast Asia failed to evolve any system of coinage and barter (largely based on paddy and only marginally on cloth) provided essentials of the Khmer economy. Even when such early medieval coin types as the Indo-Sassanian. Shri Vigraha, Shri Adivaraha, Bull and Horseman, Gadhaiya, etc. emerged in western and north western India and to some extent in the Ganga valley, they could not make much dent in the overall economy. Apart from the doubts about the period of emergence of these coins, their extremely poor quality and purchasing power also indicate the shrinkage of their actual role. Further, in relation to the rising population and expanding area of settlement, the overall volume of money circulation was negligible. Hence, we can say that the case for the relative decline of metallic money during this period is based on convincing empirical evidence. This was bound to have an impact on India's trading activities.

10.7.2 Relative Decline of Trade

Internally, the fragmentation of political authority and the dispersal of power to local chiefs, religious grantees, etc. seem to have had an adverse effect, at least in the initial centuries of the land grant economy. Many of the intermediary landlords, particularly of less productive areas, resorted to loot and plunder or excessive taxes on goods passing through their territories. This must have dampened the enthusiasm of traders and merchants. No less discouraging were the frequent wars amongst potential ruling chiefs. Though two Jain texts of the eighth century, *Samaraiccakaha* of Haribhadra Suri and the *Kuvalayamala* of Uddyotana Suri, refers to brisk trade and busy towns, it is rightly pointed out that these texts draw their material from the sources of the earlier centuries and, therefore do not reflect the true economic condition of the eighth century. As regards the decline of foreign trade with the West, it is pointed out that it had greatly diminished after the fall of the great Roman Empire in the fourth century. It was also affected adversely in the middle of the sixth century when the people of Byzantine (Eastern Roman Empire) learnt the art of making silk. India thus lost an important market which had fetched her considerable amount of gold in the early centuries of the Common Era.

The decline of foreign trade was also caused by the expansion of Arabs on the north-west frontiers of India in the seventh and eighth centuries. Their presence in the region made overland routes unsafe for Indian merchants. A story in the *Kathasaritsagara* tells us that a group of merchants going from Ujjain to Peshawar were captured by an Arab and sold off. Later, when they somehow got free, they decided to leave the north-western region forever and returned to south for trade. The fights amongst the Tibetans and Chinese during these centuries also affected the flow of goods along the routes in Central Asia. Even the western coast of India suffered dislocation and disruption of sea trade as the Arabs raided Broach and Thana in the seventh century and destroyed Valabhi an important port on the Saurashtra coast, in the eighth century. Though as we have pointed out later, the Arabs played an important part in the growth of Indian maritime trade after the tenth century; initially their sea raids had an adverse effect on the Indian commercial activity. There are some references in the contemporary literature to India's contact with Southeast Asia, but it is doubtful whether it could make up for the loss suffered on account of the decline of trade with the West.

10.7.3 Urban Settlements: Decay

This period saw the decay and desertion of many towns. It is an important symptom of commercial decline because the towns are primarily the settlements of people engaged in crafts and commerce. As trade declined and the demand for craft-goods slumped, the traders and craftsmen living in towns had to disperse to rural areas for alternative means of livelihood. Thus towns decayed and townsfolk became a part of village economy. Besides the accounts of Huien Tsang, the Puranic records too, while referring to Kali age indicate depopulation of important cities. This seems to have been the continuation of the trend already indicated by Varahamihira (5th century). The decay of important towns such as Vaishali, Pataliputra, Varanasi, etc. is evident from the archaeological excavations which reveal poverty of structure and antiquities. The pan-Indian scene is marked by desertion of urban centres or their state of decay in the period between the third and eighth centuries. Even those settlements which continued up to the eighth century, were deserted thereafter. One can mention Ropar (in Punjab), Atranjikhera and Bhita (in Uttar Pradesh), Eran (in Madhya Pradesh), Prabhas Patan (in Gujarat), Maheshwar and Paunar (in Maharashtra), and Kudavelli (in Andhra Pradesh) in this category of urban settlements. Even the medieval greatness of Kannauj (in the Farrukhabad district of Uttar Pradesh) for which several wars were fought amongst the Palas, Pratiharas and the Rashtrakutas, has still to be testified by the excavator's spade.

The commercial activity during this phase of early medieval period had declined but did not disappear completely. In fact, trade in costly and luxury goods meant for the use of kings, feudal chiefs and heads of temples and monasteries continued to exist. The articles such as precious and semi-precious stones. ivory, horses, etc. formed an important part of the long distance trade, but the evidence for transactions in the goods of daily use is quite meagre in the sources belonging to this period. The only important articles mentioned in the inscriptions are salt and oil which could not be produced by every village, and thus had to be brought from outside. If the economy had not been self-sufficient, the references to trade in grains, sugar, textile, handicrafts, etc. would have been more numerous. In short the nature of commercial activity during CE 750-1000 was such which catered more to the landed intermediaries and feudal lords rather than the masses. Though there were some pockets of trade and commerce such as Pehoa (near Karnal in Haryana) and Ahar (near Bulandshahr in Uttar Pradesh) where merchants from far and wide met to transact business, they could not make any significant dent in the closed economy of the country as a whole.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

1) What were the main features of the Indian agrarian economy that emerged in the early medieval period?

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2) Which of the following statements are right or wrong? Mark (✓) or (×).

   i) According to R.S. Sharma there was decline of coinage during the post-Gupta period. ( )

   ii) There was abundance of coins in Odisha between 600-1200 CE. ( )

   iii) The poor quality of copper coins of Kashmir (around 8th century) can be ascribed to the decline in trade. ( )

   iv) Apart from minted money there were no media of exchange during the 8th-12th centuries. ( )

10.8 INDIAN FEUDALISM

The first assimilation of 'feudalism' in the Indian context occurred at the hands of Col. James Tod, the celebrated compiler of the annals of Rajasthan's history in the early part of the nineteenth century. For Tod, as for most European historians of his time in Europe, lord-vassal relationship constituted the core of feudalism. The lord in medieval Europe looked after the security and subsistence of his vassals and they in turn rendered military and other services to the lord. A sense of loyalty also tied the vassal to the lord in perpetuity. Tod found the institution and the pattern replicated in the Rajasthan of his day in good measure.

The term feudalism continued to figure off and on in works of history in India, often with rather vague meanings attached to it. It was with the growing Marxist influence on Indian history writing between the mid-1950s and the mid-60s that the term came to be disassociated from its moorings in lord-vassal relationship and acquired an economic meaning, or rather a meaning in the context of the evolution of Indian class structure.

D. D. Kosambi gave feudalism a significant place in the context of socio-economic history. He conceptualised the growth of feudalism in Indian history as a two-way process: from above and from below in his landmark book, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, first published in 1956. From above the feudal structure was created by the state granting land and rights to officials and brahmanas; from below many individuals and small groups rose from the village levels of power to become landlords and vassals of the kings. Kosambi in his characteristic mode, formulated the notion of feudalism in the shape of a formula rather than in a detailed empirical study. This major task was taken up by Professor R. S. Sharma in his *Indian Feudalism*, 1965. However, R. S. Sharma did not follow the Kosambian formula of feudalism from below and from above; instead, he envisioned the rise of feudalism in Indian history entirely as 'the consequence of state action, i.e. from above. It is only lately that he has turned his attention to the other phenomenon.

R. S. Sharma essentially emulated the model of the rise and decline of feudalism in Europe formulated in great detail by the Belgian historian of the 1920s and 30s, Henri Pirenne. Pirenne had displaced the dominant stereotype of European feudalism as lord-vassal relationship and substituted in its place one that had much wider and deeper range of consequences for society. He postulated that 'grand trade', i.e long distance trade in Europe across the Mediterranean had allowed European economy, society and civilization to flourish in Antiquity until its disruption by the Arab invasions of Europe in the seventh century. Disruption of trade led to the economy's ruralisation, which made it inwards, rather than outward looking. It also resulted in what Pirenne called 'the closed estate economy'. The closed estate signified the unit of land held by the Lord (10,000 acres on an average) and cultivated by the peasant, where trade was minimal and almost everything the inhabitants of the estate required was produced within. These estates, in other words, were economically 'self-sufficient' units. The picture changed again from the eleventh century when the Crusades threw the Arabs back to the Near East; this led to the revival of trade and cities and the decline of feudalism. Pirenne thus posited an irreconcilable opposition between trade and urbanization on the one hand and feudalism on the other.

R.S. Sharma copied this model in almost every detail, often including its terminology on to the Indian historical landscape. He visualized the decline of India's long distance trade made with various parts of the world after the fall of the Guptas; urbanization also suffered in consequence, resulting in the economy's ruralisation. A scenario thus arose in which economic resources were not scarce but currency was. Since coins were not available, the state started handing out land in payment to its employees and grantees like the brahmanas. Along with land the state also gave away more and more rights over the cultivating peasants to this new class of 'intermediaries'. The increasing subjection of the peasants to the intermediaries reduced them to the level of serfs, their counterparts in medieval Europe. The rise of the class of intermediaries through the state action of giving grants to them is the crucial element in Sharma's construction of Indian feudalism. Later on in his writings, he built other edifices too upon this structure, like the growth of the class of scribes, to be consolidated into the caste of *Kayasthas*, because state grants needed to be recorded. The crucial process of land grants to intermediaries lasted until about the eleventh century when the revival of trade reopened the process of urbanization. The decline of feudalism is suggested in this revival, although R. S. Sharma does not go into this aspect in as much detail. The one element that was missing in this picture was the Indian counterpart of the Arab invasion of Europe; however, Professor B. N. S. Yadava, another eminent proponent of the Indian feudalism thesis, drew attention to the Huna invasions of India which almost coincided with the beginning of the rise of feudalism here. The oppressive feudal system in Europe had resulted in massive rebellions of the peasantry in Europe; in India R. S. Sharma looked for evidence of similar uprising but found only one example of *Kaivartas* — who were essentially boatmen in eastern Bengal but also engaged part time in cultivation — having revolted in the eleventh century.

The thesis propounded in its fully-fledged form in 1965 has had a great deal of influence on subsequent history writing on the period in India. Other scholars supported the thesis with some more details on one point or another, although practically no one explored any other aspect of the theme of feudalism, such as social or cultural aspect for long afterwards. B. N. S. Yadava and D. N. Zha stood firmly by the feudalism thesis. The theme found echoes in south Indian historiography too, with highly acclaimed historians like M.G.S. Narayanan and Noburu Karashima abiding by it. There was criticism too in some extremely learned quarters; the most eminent among critics was D. C. Sircar. There was too a fairly clear ideological divide which characterised history writing in India in the 1960s and 70s: D. D.. Kosarnbi, R.S. Sharma, B. N. S. Yadava and D. N. Jha were firmly committed Marxists; D. C. Sircar stood on the other side of the Marxist fence. However, neither support nor opposition to the notion of feudalism opened up the notion's basic structure to further exploration until the end of the 1970s.The opening up came within the Marxist historiographical school. We shall return to it in a little while.

In 1946 one of the most renowned Marxist economists of Cambridge university, UK, Maurice Dobb, published his book, *Studies* in the *Development of Capitalism* in which he first seriously questioned the Pirennean opposition between trade and feudalism and following Engels' insights drew attention to the fact that the revival of trade in Eastern Europe had brought about the 'second serfdom', i.e., feudalism. He thus posited the view that feudalism did not decline even in Western Europe due to the revival of trade but due to the flight of the peasants to cities from excessive and increasing exploitation by the lords in the countryside. This thesis led to an international debate in the early 1950s among Marxist economists and historians. The debate was still chiefly confined to the question whether feudalism and trade were mutually incompatible. Simultaneously, in other regions of the intellectual landscape, especially in France, where an alternative paradigm of history writing, known as the ***Annales*** paradigm, was evolving, newer questions were being asked and newer dimensions of the problem being explored. Some of these questions had travelled to India as well.

10.8.1 Was There Feudalism In India?

It was thus that in 1979 a Presidential Address to the Medieval India Section of the Indian History Congress's fortieth session was entitled 'Was There Feudalism in Indian History?' Harbans Mukhia, its author, a committed practitioner of Marxist history writing, questioned the Indian feudalism thesis at the theoretical plane and then at the empirical level by comparing the medieval Indian scenario with medieval Europe. The theoretical problem was concerned with the issue whether feudalism could at all be conceived of as a universal system. If the driving force of profit maximisation had led capitalism on to ever rising scale of production and ever expanding market until it encompassed the whole world under its dominance, something we are witnessing right before our eyes, and if this was a characteristic of capitalism to thus establish a world system under the hegemony of a single system of production, logically it would be beyond the reach of any pre-capitalist system to expand itself to a world scale, i.e. to turn into a world system. For, the force of consumption rather than profit maximization drove pre-capitalist economic systems, and this limited their capacity for expansion beyond the local or the regional level. Feudalism thus could only be a regional system rather than a world system. The problem is hard to resolve by positing different variations of feudalism: the European, the Chinese, the Japanese and the Indian, etc., although this has often been attempted by historians. For, then either the definition of feudalism turns so loose as to become synonymous with every pre-capitalist system and therefore fails to demarcate feudalism from the others and is thus rendered useless; or, if the definition is precise, as it should be to remain functional, the 'variations' become so wide as to render it useless. Indeed, even within the same region, the variations are so numerous that some of the most respected historians of medieval Europe in recent years, such as Georges Duby and Jacques Le Goff, tend to avoid the use of the term feudalism altogether; so sceptical they have become of almost any definition of feudalism. The empirical basis of the questioning of Indian feudalism in the 1979 Presidential Address lay 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 organization of forms of labour use in agriculture in the two regions. With this intervention, the debate was no longer confined to feudalism/ trade dichotomy which in any case had been demonstrated to be questionable in its own homeland. The empirical argument followed the perspective that the ecology of Western Europe gave it four months of sunshine in a year; all agricultural operations, from tilling the field to sowing, tending the crop, harvesting and storing therefore must be completed within this period. Besides, the technology that was used was extremely labour intensive and productivity of both land and labour was pegged at the dismal seed: yield ratio of 1:2.5 at the most. Consequently the demand for labour during the four months was intense. Even a day's labour lost would cut into production. The solution was found in tying of labour to the land, or serfdom. This generated enormous tension between the lord and the serf in the very process of production; the lord would seek to control the peasant labour more intensively; the peasant would, even while appearing to be very docile, try to steal the lord's time to cultivate his own land. The struggle, which was quiet but intense, led to technological improvement, rise in productivity to 1:4 by the twelfth century, substantial rise in population and therefore untying of labour from land, expansion of agriculture and a spurt to trade and urbanization. The process was, however, upset by the Black Death in 1348-51 which wiped out a quarter of the population leading to labour scarcity again. The lords sought to return to the old structures of tied labour; the peasants, however, who had tasted better days in the 11th and 12th centuries, flew into rebellions all over Europe especially during the 14th century. These rebellions were the work of the prosperous, rather than the poor peasants. By the end of the century, feudalism had been reduced to a debris. Indian ecology, on the other hand, was marked by almost ten months of sunshine where agricultural processes could be spread out. Because of the intense heat, followed by rainfall, the upper crust of the soil was the bed of fertility; it therefore did not require deep, labour intensive digging. The hump on the Indian bull allowed the Indian peasant to use the bull's drought power to the maximum, for it allowed the plough to be placed on the bull's shoulder; the plain back on his European counterpart would let the plough slip as he pulled it. It took centuries of technological improvement to facilitate full use of the bull's drawing power on medieval European fields. The productivity of land was also much higher in medieval India, pegged at 1:16. Besides, most Indian lands yielded two crops a year, something unheard of in Europe until the nineteenth century. The fundamental difference in conditions in India compared to Europe also made it imperative that the forms of labour use in agriculture should follow a different pattern. *Begar*, or tied labour, paid or unpaid, was seldom part of the process of production here; it was more used for non-productive purposes such as carrying the *zamindar*'s loads by the peasants on their heads or supplying milk or oil, etc. to the *zamindars* and *jagirdars* on specified occasions. In other words tension between the peasant and the *zamindar* or the *jagirdar* was played out outside the process of production on the question of the quantum of revenue. We do not therefore witness the same levels of technological breakthroughs and transformation of the production processes in medieval India as we see in medieval Europe, although it must be emphasised that neither technology nor the process of agricultural production was static or unchanging in India.

The 1979 Address had characterised the medieval Indian system as one marked by free peasant economy. Free peasant was understood as distinct from the medieval European serf. Whereas the serf's labour for the purposes of agricultural production was set under the control of the lord, the labour of his Indian counterpart was under his own control; what was subject to the state's control was the amount of produce of the land in the form of revenue. A crucial difference here was that the resolution of tension over the control of labour resulted in transformation of the production system from feudal to capitalist in European agriculture from the twelfth century onwards; in India tension over revenue did not affect the production system as such and its transformation began to seep in only in the twentieth century under a different set of circumstances.

'Was There Feudalism in Indian History?' was reprinted in the pages of a British publication, *The Journal of Peasant Studies* in 1981**.** Within the next few years it had created so much interest in-international circles that in 1985 a special double issue of the journal, centred on this paper, comprising eight articles from around the world and the original author's response to the eight, was published under the title *Feudalism and Non-European Societies*, jointly edited by T. J. Byres of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, editor of the journal, and the article's author. It was also simultaneously published as a book. The title was adopted keeping in view that the debate had spilled over the boundaries of Europe and India and had spread into China, Turkey, Arabia and Persia. The publication of the special issue, however, did not terminate the discussion; three other papers were subsequently published in the journal, the last in 1993.The discussion often came to be referred to as the 'Feudalism Debate'. A collection of concerned essays was published in New Delhi in 1999 under the title *The Feudalism Debate.*

10.9 FEUDALISM RECONSIDERED

While the debate critically examined the theoretical proposition of the universality of the concept of feudalism or otherwise, with each historian taking his own independent position on the question of Indian historical evidence, R.S. Sharma, who was chiefly under attack, reconsidered some of his earlier positions and greatly refined his thesis of Indian feudalism, even as he defended it vigorously and elegantly in a paper, 'How Feudal was Indian Feudalism?' He had been criticised 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. B. N. S. Yadava also joined in with a detailed study of the notion of *Kaliyuga* in early medieval Indian literature and suggested that this notion had the characteristics of a crisis — the context for the transition of a society from one stage to another. All this considerably enriched the argument on behalf of Indian feudalism. R.S. Sharma was also able to trace several other instances of peasant resistance than the one he had unearthed in his 1965 book. This too has lent strength to the thesis. R. S. Sharma has lately turned his attention to the ideological and cultural aspects of the feudal society; in his latest collection of essays, published under the title *Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalisation* in 2001 in New Delhi, he has revised several of his old arguments and included some new themes such as '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. This venture of extension into the cultural sphere has been undertaken by several other historians as well who abide by the notion of feudalism. In a collection of sixteen essays, *The Feudal Order: State, Society and Ideology in Early Medieval India,* 1987and 2000, its editor D.N. Jha has taken care to include papers exploring the cultural and ideological dimensions of what he calls the feudal order, itself a comprehensive term. One of the major dimensions so explored is that of religion, especially popular religion or bhakti, both in north and south 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 virtue of 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.

There have been certain differences of opinion among the historians of the Indian feudalism school too. D. N. Jha for example had found inconsistency between the locale of the evidence of the notion of *Kaliyuga* and site of the 'crisis' which the *kaliyuga* indicated: the evidence came from peninsular India, but the crisis was expected in brahmanical north. B. P. Sahu too had cast doubt on the validity of the evidence of a *kuliyuga* as indicator of a crisis; instead, he had perceived it more as a redefinition of kingship and therefore a reassertion of Brahmanical ideology rather than a crisis within it.

10.10 FEUDALISM, TRADE AND URBANISATION

However, the basic structure of the Indian feudalism thesis, i.e. antagonism between trade and urbanisation on one hand and feudalism on the other remains untouched. And that has not been without problems vis-a-vis recent trends in history writing. In European historiography itself there has been a sea change among historians on this problematic. If Henri Pirenne had posited an irresolvable dichotomy between urban/ rural, trade/feudalism and natural or self-sufficient/money economy dichotomy in the 1930s, later historians tore it to pieces by demonstrating the perfect compatibility between the one and the other. The great French historian, Marc Bloch, even titled one of his papers as 'Natural Economy vs. Money Economy: A Pseudo-Dilemma', and another French historian, Guy Bois has in a recent work traced the development of feudal economic relationships in Western Europe around the year 1000 in those very areas where trade had greatly developed. In other words, he has established a direct causal relationship between trade and feudalism. The trade/feudalism dichotomy has thus been abandoned in the very place of its origin. The very notion of the existence of natural or self-sufficient economy has been fundamentally questioned both at the level of theory as well as empirical data almost everywhere. Clearly, even for one's daily needs at the lowest level of subsistence, some trade must take place whether for buying salt or clothes or utensils; the volume of buying things and the use of money for it rises as we go up the social ladder. Trade in some form or another is also embedded in an agricultural economy, for the nature of the soil in different regions necessitates cultivation of different crops; they must exchange their produce in order to obtain necessities of subsistence.

Empirically, several historians have had problems with the notion of decline of trade and scarcity of currency in the region and the period of Indian feudalism. D. N. Jha had criticised 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. But, more substantively, trade has been demonstrated to have flourished in several regions of India long before the deadline set by feudalists for its revival around the year 1000, parallel to Europe. B. D. Chattopadhyaya has shown that to have happened at least a century earlier. More recently Ranabir Chakravarti in two books, *Trade in Early India*, 2001 and *Trade and Traders in Early Indian Society*, 2002, has brought forward ample evidence of flourishing trade in the concerned period. The monetary anaemia thesis, fundamental to the formulation of Indian feudalism, has also been put under severe strain by recent researches of B. D. Chattopadhyaya and B. N. Mukherjee. John S. Deyell too in his book, *Living without Silver*, 1990, seriously undermined the assumption of the scarcity of money. One must also keep in mind that metals like gold, silver or copper are not the only forms of money in medieval societies. Marc Bloch had shown that in medieval Europe, almost anything could perform the functions of a medium of exchange i.e., money: a certain measure of a certain kind of spice, a piece of cloth of a certain quality, a measure of a particular grain, whatever. In India too, the tradition of cowries as a medium of exchange has recently attracted the attention of historians and the fact that procuring cowries actually involved long distance trade, for the cowry shells were obtained from the far off Maldives, highlights its significance.

10.11 PROBLEMS

There are some other methodological problems too. If the period between c. 300 and c. 1100 is the life span of Indian feudalism, how is one to characterise the succeeding era, 'medieval India' as it is normally called, prior to the establishment of the colonial regime? Besides, can one leave the long stretch of time under one single head with the implicit assumption that the whole stretch was a single unit which did not witness any major mutations? Marc Bloch had, for example, classified the period of feudalism in Europe into the First Feudal Age and the Second Feudal Age, with the dividing roughly drawn across the year 1000. So sharp was the change in his view that a person from one age would have found himself an alien in the other.

The profound mutations within the structure of feudalism are by now conventional wisdom in European historiography, even if the terms used by different historians sometimes differ. Some historians prefer 'Low and High Middle Ages' to the 'First and the Second Feudal Age.' Also, there is consensus that feudalism in Europe was succeeded by the rise and consolidation of capitalism. Colonialism was one facet of the rise of capitalism. What kind of changes can one visualise in Indian feudalism over the eight centuries of its existence? And, what was it that succeeded it after CE 1100 or so? Surely not capitalism. Adherents of feudalism have not seriously encountered these questions. D. D. Kosambi had extended feudalism to the 17th century almost as an intellectual diktat; this would only compound the problem further by extending its life by another six centuries and treating the entire stretch of nearly 1400 years as the same from one end to the other — an impossible plea for historians of today to entertain, for tracing change, over small periods, is their primary preoccupation.

The problems notwithstanding, 'The Feudalism Debate' has nevertheless traversed a long distance. The academic level of the debate has been nothing short of exhilarating; it never descended even one step below to personal animosity, something noted in a review by Susan Reynolds, herself an eminent medievalist of England, particularly lamenting such descent in academic circles in and near her own home. The debate has been most fertile because it led almost everyone to rethink one's own position and to refine it and modify aspects of it, even while defending it. In the end no conclusive answers were found; but that's in the nature of the discipline, for, it constantly seeks to renew itself through self-questioning.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

1) Analyze recent developments in the feudalism debate?

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2) To what extent is European model of Feudalism relevant in the Indian context?

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10.12 SUMMARY

In this Unit we discussed about how to define Feudalsim. The term was coined in Europe and characterized those changes in economy and society that came into focus from the 8th to the 14th century. In the Indian context the period from the post-Gupta period was marked by changes in the economy and society which the Indian Marxist scholars characterised as feudal. The term was borrowed from Europe and applied to India. In the economic sphere agriculture expanded as a results of the practise of land grants on a big scale. The resultant tensions among the cultivators of land marked the mutual relationships among different groups. There was widespread decline of urban centres due to fall in international trade.

Exavations at most urban settlements have provided poor remains and sometimes a sterile layer indicating desertion of settlements around this time. There was paucity of coined currency and cowries became a common medium of exchange. We also discussed the main fetaures of the debate about whether these changes in the economy and society can point to a feudal set up. The thesis came to be questioned by scholars like B.D. Chattopadhyaya, Ranabir Chakrabarti and John S. Deyell. All their opinions have been taken into consideration.

10.13 KEY WORDS

Agrahara : primarily a rent free village in the possession of brahmanas.

Ardhika : a cultivator who tills land of others and gets half the crop as his share.

Devadana : Rent free land gifted to Brahmanical temple deities. In Jain and Buddhist counterpart is *pallichandam*.

Ghanaka : oil mill

Halin : Ploughman

Karshaka : Tiller of soil

Mahajana : a sort of assembly of Brahmanas.

Oarihara : Exemption from taxes and obligations (priviledges granted to the donees of rent-free land).

Ranaka : title of feudatory ruler

Serfs : A class of tenant cultivators in Medieval Europe. They were tied to the land they tilled. In return they rendered labour on the lord's land or paid a share of their produce, besides several other 'obligations' owed to the lord.

Shrotriya : Brahmana, learned in the *Vedas*.

Tellika : oil man.

10.14 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

1) See the following sections: 10.3, 10.3.1, 10.4, 10.5

2) i) ✓ ii) × iii) ✓ iv) ×

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

1) See the Sections 10.8, 10.8.1, 10.9 and 10.10

2) See Sub-section 10.8.1 and Section 10.10.

10.15 SUGGESTED READINGS

Chakrabarti, Ranabir (2002). *Trade and Traders in Early Indian Society*. New Delhi: Manohar.

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