



Feudalism in Ancient India: Comprehensive analysis

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ABSTRACT

Not all nations saw the emergence of the feudal system at the same period. Its origins can be found in a variety of historical eras and geographical locations. Since feudal practices varied not just from country to country but also from king to king and from period to time, it is practically impossible to describe feudalism precisely. Academics of Indian history and culture are in agreement about the origins of feudalism in ancient India, but there is considerable disagreement about the chronology. The system, according to Kosambi, had the seeds of feudalism in the early period but did not become feudal until the end of the sixth century A.D. The system gained popularity between 600 and 900 A.D., and it reached its pinnacle between 900 and 1200 A.D. Sharma (1958) divided Indian feudalism into three phases: the beginnings and first phase (350-750 A.D.), the second phase (750-1000 A.D.), and the peak of Indian feudalism (1000-1200 A.D.), which marked the beginning of its decline toward the end. Ancient feudalism was the development of a new political and economic system that ruled the northern and later southern portions of the peninsula. The term has been debated, nevertheless, because the type of feudalism practised in Ancient India throughout these ages was distinct from that found in other parts of the world.

Keyword: Feudalism, Ancient India, Gupta Dynasty, Land Grants, Agrarian Economy

Introduction

Every country in the globe has gone through a process of socioeconomic and political evolution, and as a result, has lived in a feudal society. The feudal system, on the other hand, did not emerge in all countries at the same time. It may be traced back to many historical periods in different regions of the world. It is nearly hard to define feudalism accurately since feudal usages differed not only from nation to nation but also from king to king and time to time. The term 'Feudal' derives from the Latin word 'Feodalis' (Oxford Dictionary) which means feud on fief indicating fees. The term 'feudalism' originates from the French word Feodal (Girart, 1964) which means fiefs or fee and relates to the military organisation. As a result, the term feudalism has evolved to refer to a type of social organisation that can take many forms in different periods and settings.

Feudalism is a term used to describe the sort of civilization that existed in Europe from the fifth to the fifteenth centuries A.D. It was built on the concept of self-sufficiency. It had a powerful class of landlords who used extra-economic means to take excess product and labour services from peasants. Peasants continued to work in the fields and were also subjected to 'forced labour.' They were attached to the soil that these landed intermediaries controlled. However, in a larger sense, European feudalism is defined by a weak king, powerful aristocracy, serfdom, manor, chivalry, land, and peasants. The peasants, widespread employment of the service tenement, the supremacy of a class of specialised warriors, and bonds of obedience and protection that connect man to man within the warrior class all take on a different form known as vassalage and fragmentation of power (Marc Bloc & Manyon, 1961). European feudalism, however, remains the model for all feudal systems as well as the most well-known.

In general, feudalism referred to a system in which labourers (serfs) were forced to work for the lords. It had a hierarchical social structure, with rulers, soldiers, priests, and literates at the top and merchants, craftsmen, town-people, and peasants at the bottom. To pay their feudal and other duties, the serfs relied heavily on household labour. As a result, there was a clear link between agricultural productivity and biological reproduction. It was considered favourable to both the serf and the master if a peasant family grew in size. Feudalism, according to Nural Hasan, was largely a "agrarian economy in which the surplus is expropriated by a "pretty closed ruling elite through both non-economic coercion and the role played by it in agriculture as well as ancillary handicrafts production." In ancient India, feudalism existed. The nature of Feudalism is reflected in the events of Ancient India. Ancient India had all of the elements of a feudal society in place. The money from various fractions of land was distributed to the king's officials or designated holders, who were the equivalent of vassals in other countries. The practice of providing land in place of financial wages, which began in the seventh century, accelerated the feudal process.

Feudalism in Ancient India

The term feudalism has evolved to refer to a type of social organisation that can take many forms in different ages and places. When it comes to the origins of feudalism in ancient India, academics of Indian history and culture are unified, but when it comes to determining the chronology, there is a lot of disagreement. Some researchers are looking for signs of feudal structure throughout the Buddhist and pre-Mauryan eras. Another set of researchers,

on the other hand, rejects such studies and works hard to establish the origins of feudalism in Satavahana and Gupta India. The origins of feudalism are thus dated to the 6th century B.C. until the 4th century A.D.

According to Haran Chander Neogi, feudalism in India originated during the Buddhist era. Feudalism arose when the slave economy's foundations were damaged, and the expansion of the feudalistic economy was determined by the rate at which slavery decayed. According to Neogi, Buddhism provided the ideology in India that diminished slavery while strengthening feudalistic characteristics. Following Bimbisara's accession to the Magadhan throne in the 6th century B.C., India witnessed the first territorial kingdom shaped by centralised administration, and this centralised efficient administration may have effectively checked the expansion of incipient feudal tendencies. Another well-known researcher, H. Chatterjee, believes that feudalism may have begun in India during the Manu Samhita period (200 B.C. to 200 A.D.). In support of his claim, he cites the Manu Samhita, which mentions *Isa* and *Adhipati*. These phrases, he claims, are tied to feudalism (*Sirchur*). Unfortunately, the time of Manu is a subject of controversy, while it is generally agreed to be between the 2nd century B.C. and the 2nd century A.D. This leaves around a 400-year window. This time contrast is sufficient to disprove Chatterjee's point of view. According to G.M. Bongard Levin, feudalism began in India in the first century A.D. He based his theory on epigraphic records from the Satavahana period, when he discovered that the king could grant small landholdings from his own estates to Brahmanas and adherents of other religions. If there was no available property, he had to purchase land from a private owner and then dispose of it at his leisure (Bongard Levin, 1985). However, he agrees that ancient sources (such as those from the Mauryan era, Buddhist writings, the Dharmasutra, and so on) include numerous allusions to private land ownership and private estates. However, most historians believe that the modest origins of feudalism may be traced back to the Gupta dynasty.

According to R.S. Sharma, feudalism in India originated with land donations to Brahmanas, temples, and monasteries, for which inscription evidence dates back to the Satavahana period and is multiplied by the Gupta period. According to ancient epigraphic documentation, the Satavahana dynasty granted land grants to the elite classes in rituals, and thus the genesis of Indian feudalism began here. However, such land grant records lacked specific evidence of revenue or administrative power transfer as well. The existing land revenue and agricultural system was significantly complicated by ancient Indian feudalism. According to Kosambi, the system had the seeds of feudalism in the early period but did not become feudal until the end of the sixth century A.D. Between 600 and 900 A.D., the system grew in popularity, and between 900 and 1200 A.D., it reached its pinnacle. Sharma (1958) categorised Indian feudalism into three phases: beginnings and the first phase (350-750 A.D.), phase two (750-1000 A.D.), and the peak of Indian feudalism (1000-1200 A.D.), which marked the start of its fall toward the end. Sharma (1958) roots feudalism's origins in the early Christian era, when the practise of granting land concessions became more widespread. This practice began in remote, backward, and tribal areas and progressively spread to the rest of India. The first epigraphic evidence of land gifts is from the 1st century B.C., although they did not provide the beneficiary administrative power. Administration rights may have been given up for the first time in the gifts made to Buddhist monks by the Satavahana emperor Gautamiputra Satakarni in the 2nd century A.D. According to Buddhaghosa (5th century A.D.), the *brahmadeya* award includes judicial administrative functions. Such gifts were more common from the fifth century, and they took on specific characteristics that contributed to political decentralisation. These included: the right to collect taxes from peasants and enjoy the land's revenue (fiscal power), as well as immunity from paying taxes to the king (*akaradyi*); the right of land not to be preyed upon by royal officials or the army (*apravesya*), which gave them a great deal of autonomy; the right to use the court system to punish thieves and other offences against family, property, person, and other things (*sacauradanda*); and the authority to rule the village's residents was occasionally given, e.g. Samudragupta's Nalanda land gift expressly ties tax-paying artisans and peasants residing in the donated village to the benefactors. Thus, in the Gupta period, the widespread practice of giving land grants prepared the stage for the creation of *brahmana* feudatories, which constituted a new source of authority or state power. The responsibilities that had previously been undertaken by state officials were gradually delegated to the priestly and military classes.

Grants were also awarded to merchant guilds (*renis*), who had their own regulations and handled their own affairs independently of the state. By the late Gupta dynasty, their independence was solidified. A collection of charters from western India, dating from the late sixth century, addressed a group of traders and gave them numerous immunities such as exemption from different dues; freedom to deal with their labourers; and the right to inflict forced labour on particular artisans. They were also granted immunity from royal authorities entering their territory. Later, grants were created to pay military generals and officers in place of their wages. This is supported by the army's division into tiny garrisons and the rise of essentially independent military authorities.

Since land transfers are related to the development of feudalism, the question of why such donations were made, which effectively surrendered the state's authority, has arisen. The givers, mostly monarchs, aspired to gain religious honour, while the receivers, mostly priests and monks, required the resources to execute holy ceremonies, according to the charters. R.S. Sharma uses a Theory of Causation to explain them, suggesting two crises as reasons for the frequency of land gifts. The collapse in India's long-distance trade kicked off the Economic Crisis. Due to the collapse of the Roman Empire, trade with it ceased in the third century A.D., while silk trade with Iran and Byzantium ceased in the middle of the sixth century. India's coastal districts continued to trade with China and Southeast Asia, although this had little influence on the country's internal economy. The scarcity of coinage from the Gupta period onwards, both in North and South India, demonstrates a decline in trade and commerce. Cowries, according to Fa-Xian, were the common means of exchange. This aspect can also be linked to the central government's declining power, which increasingly embraced the approach of compensating officials through income handouts or in kind. The scarcity of coinage indicates that urban life has begun to fade. After the 6th century A.D., many historic commercial towns fell into disrepair, and occupancy vanished in numerous urban areas, such as Mathura, Vail, and Champa. Xuan Tsang expresses his dissatisfaction with the decline of current state of affairs of Buddhist towns.

The transition to feudalism in India was marked by a number of variations, the most significant of which were the four-dimensional zones of feudal differentiation. These four-dimensional zones of feudal distinction included the feudal zones of North-West India, particularly the Gurjara-Pratihara feudal distinctions, the feudal zones of Bengal and Bihar, particularly the Pala feudal rise, the feudal distinctions of Deccan, particularly the Rashtrakutas, and the feudal distinctions of the Southern states of the subcontinent. These causes paved the way for the methodical construction of feudalism in India

over a lengthy period of time. In the Pre-Mauryan period, early Pali literature reveals feudal practises such as the "Brahmadeya." Ancient Indian feudalism included land gifts, taxation authority transfers, coercive rights, and the ability to employ force.

Ancient feudalism was the creation of a new political and economic framework that dominated the peninsula's northern and subsequently southern regions. However, the word has been disputed because the form of feudalism used in Ancient India throughout these ages was not the same as that practised in other areas of the world. For example, ancient Indian feudalism did not place the same emphasis on the economic contract as certain types of European feudalism.

Conclusion

The civilisation that flourished in India until the Mughal Dynasty in the 1500s is referred to as Indian feudalism. The Guptas and the Kushans were important participants in the formation and practise of feudalism in India, and they are also examples of feudalism's demise of an empire. Religious and secular donations were granted to the people in ancient India. The latter concessions were largely enjoyed by state officials, but the former were awarded to religious establishment families to be enjoyed by Brahmanas. However, the procedure of land grants did not only make the Brahmanas strong and affluent; it also made the state officials important and powerful.

All religious, military, political, and administrative services, among others, are compensated by land grants. Lower officers and higher functionaries were given revenue from the village. The entry of foreign invaders, such as 'Saka' Kusana, Parthians, Huna, and others, deepened the polarisation of an already fractured society by their constant payments to vassals and priests, who in turn awarded the Ksatuiya status and integrated them into the Hindu system. There are several references spread throughout the literature and inscriptions. Feudalism arose throughout the medieval and late periods of ancient India to alter the terrain of administrative transition, paving the way for the acceptance of a feudal policy throughout the subcontinent. Indian Feudalism thrived when land grants replaced currency at the beginning of the seventh century. The increase of land grants, and hence feudal regimes, reached its peak between the 9th and 12th centuries AD.

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