Early Medieval Period: Historiography and Debates

Introduction

The early medieval period spanning from c.600CE to 1300CE is to be situated between the early historical and medieval. Historians are unanimous on the fact that this phase in Indian history had a distinct identity and as such differed from the preceding early historical and succeeding medieval. This in turn brings home the presence of the elements of change and continuity in Indian history. It is identified as a phase in the transition to the medieval. Perception of a unilinear and
uniform pattern of historical development is challenged. Changes are identified not merely in dynastic upheavals but are also located in socio-economic, political and cultural conditions. One of the richest historical debates i.e. the feudalism debate revolve around this period. It is dubbed by B.D.Chattopadhyaya as a period which long remained a much maligned period of Indian history. This period is seen in Marxist historiography as a breakdown of the civilizational matrix of early historic India. Breakdown is envisaged in terms of social crises. Another issue that saw much disagreement among historians relates to the nature of the polity in the period. Different genres of historians agree that there was a shift in the nature of polity of the post 600CE phase from that of the pre 600CE days but the causative factors responsible for this changing scenario are not unanimously identified.

Marxist scholars like R.S.Sharma, BNS Yadav and the likes view early medieval polity as one of decentralization and disintegration in sharp contrast to early historical polity which encouraged forces of centripetality. According to this historiography decentralization and disintegration is to be posited against the backdrop of the emergence and crystallization of Indian feudalism. B.D.Chattopadhyaya does not however see the making of early medieval India in terms
of the crisis of a pre-existent, pan Indian social order. He is not in favour of perceiving early medieval phase only in terms of feudal formation. On the other hand he identifies three major processes which were operative throughout Indian history viz a) the expansion of state society through the process of local state formation b) peasantization of tribe and caste formation and c) cult appropriation and integration.

**Feudalism Debate:**

It will be in order to briefly discuss the contours of the feudalism debate that has shaped up in Indian history. The concept of feudalism is a borrowing from European historiography. Combined with the notion of social formation it is the seminal empirical writings of Henri Pirenne and Marc Bloch which have perhaps served as models for those who began seriously working out empirical validation of feudalism as a social formation in Indian history.

The first assimilation of ‘feudalism’ in the Indian context occurred at the hands of Col. James Todd, the celebrated compiler of the annals of Rajasthan’s history in the early part of the nineteenth century. For Todd, 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. For him the pattern was replicated in Rajasthan..

D D Kosmabi 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 Brahmins; from below many individuals and small groups rose from the village levels of power to become landlords and vassals of the kings.

The hierarchical structure of society, as opined by R.S. Sharma, was the political fall out of the deep seated social crisis, better known as Kaliyuga crisis in and around 4th century CE. This crisis is reflected in the ability of rulers to exercise their coercive authority (danda) and to collect resources by revenue measures. The political authority therefore took recourse to the issuance of land grants to religious donees—largely brahmanas—who were not only endowed with landed wealth but also with administrative and judicial rights. The donees therefore emerged as landed intermediaries between the ruler and the actual peasantry. The landed intermediaries, thus, grew as local power base.
Subsequent to religious donees, secular donees emerged, as dearth of metallic currency, according to Sharma, forced the ruler to assign lands to state officials in lieu of cash. 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. 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. This process lasted until about the eleventh century when the revival of trade reopened the process of urbanisation. 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 Hun 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 suggested that the Kaivartya rebellion in Bengal was an evidence of peasant protest. B N S Yadava and D N Jha stood firmly by the feudalism thesis.
The feudal formulation was based on the basis of land grants alone and any such formulation is open to question. Thus, it has been effectively questioned whether the transfer of revenue to the donee would at all amount to the corrosion of the rulers’ economic prerogatives. D.C. Sircar criticized the Marxist historians for their inability to distinguish landlordism and tenancy in India from feudalism. Harbans Mukhia, a committed practitioner of Marxist history writing in an address entitled ‘Was There Feudalism in Indian History?’ 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 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 use in agriculture in the two regions. With this intervention, the debate was no longer confined to feudalism/trade dichotomy..

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. This enriched his argument considerably. R S Sharma has lately turned his attention to the ideological and cultural aspects of the feudal society; 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. 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, 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 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 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.

Several historians criticized the notion of the decline of trade and urban centres. D N Jha 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. B D Chattopadhyay has shown that there are enough evidence to show urban development and not decay in early medieval India. to have happened at least a century earlier. Ranabir Chakravarti has brought forward ample evidence of flourishing trade, different categories of merchants and market centres 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 Chattopadhyay and B N Mukherjee. and John S Deyell who seriously undermined the assumption of the scarcity of money.

**Debate on the nature of polity**

With regard to the difference of opinion regarding the nature of polity, the multiplicity of regional powers distinguished the
polity of early medieval India from the situation prevailing in the pre 600 CE days. The causative factors responsible for this changing scenario are not unanimously identified. At present there exist at least three different structural models for the early medieval Indian kingdoms.

i) the conventional model of a rather unitary, centrally organized kingdom with a strong central bureaucracy

ii) the Indian Feudalism model of decentralized feudal states

iii) the model of a segmentary state

These three models depict the early medieval Indian kingdom 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. According to the conception of Indian feudalism, state formation after the Gupta period had a decidedly negative character, since the many local kingdoms and principalities had developed at the cost of the former larger political entities. The processes which worked towards administrative decentralization are essentially seen to have derived from a) the practice of making land grants along with administrative privileges.b) the break down of the state’s monopoly over the army. The understanding of the feudal
political set up is also linked up with the changing socio-economic and cultural situations in the early medieval times. The puranic narration of the weakening of the political authority, non-observation of the varnasrama dharma and other things is taken to have represented a deep-seated social crisis. The political fall out of the crisis is seen in the inability of the rulers to exercise their coercive authority (danda) and to collect resources by revenue measures.

The hallmark of the early medieval polity is placed in the samanta system. The term samanta originally denoted a neighbouring king. But gradually it assumed the sense of a vassal. No less than seven grades of samantas are represented in the Harshacharita. The sharp changes which the term samanta went through over time reflects fundamental changes in Indian polity, reinforcing the image of a hierarchical political structure. The evidence of the growing number and influence of the samantas in early medieval polity is seen as both the cause and effect of the centralized political power. The feudal polity is symptomatic of the absence of a paramount power and synonymous with political fragmentation. The construction of feudal polity would suggest that it is primarily based on data pertaining to north India. The proponents of Indian Feudalism, however, consider this to be an all India phenomenon, with regional variations.
A major disadvantage of the theory of Indian feudalism is the preponderance of its conceptual framework of decentralization and political fragmentation. The period which followed the disappearance of the Gupta empire in the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE can be interpreted as a period of political fragmentation in North India and parts of Central India. But this fragmentation certainly was not caused through land donations either to secular or religious donees. A structural interpretation of the early medieval period reveals that this period of North Indian decentralization coincided with a very intensive process of state formation on the local sub regional and regional level in some part of northern India, many parts of central India and in most parts of southern India. It was during this time that a process of indigenous state formation took place in many parts of India.

A major trait of the individuality of the early medieval south Indian polity can be seen in the vital local self bodies of the Pallava and the Chola regime. The local self bodies made their presence strongly felt in the political life within a monarchical set up. The general tendency in a monarchical set up is to undermine the vitality of local self-bodies and to wipe out their existence. N.K. Sastri opined that the Chola monarchy was an intelligent juxtaposition of an extremely powerful
monarchy at the apex level and the overwhelming presence of local self bodies at the villages.

This proposition has been negated by an alternative explanation of the phenomenal presence of local self bodies in south Indian polity. The theoretical model known as the Segmentary State theory, also questions the inadequacy of the feudal model as a tool to explain the prevailing polity in south India. Inspired by the studies of East Africal Alur society by A. Southhall, Burton Stein located the segmentary polity from Pallava times. The Segmentary theory view the king as having enjoyed only limited territorial sovereignty. The element of centrality existed only in the core area even where the presence of quasi-autonomous foci of administration was tolerated by the Cholas. The real foci of power are suggested to have been the locality level centers or nadus. Stein distinguishes sharply between actual political control on one side and ritual sovereignty on the other. All the centers of the segmentary state do exercise actual political control over their own part or segment, but only one center the primary center of the ruling dynasty has the primacy of extending ritual sovereignty beyond its own borders. The absence of an organized bureaucracy forced the Chola monarch to fall back instead on ritual sovereignty in which the position of the ruler required to be legitimized and validated by the brahmana
priest. Stein confines ritual sovereignty mainly to the state cult exemplified in the royal Siva cult of Rajaraja’s Rajarajesvara temple at Tanjore. The construction of massive temples is interpreted not as a mark of the stupendous power of the Chola rule, but as a symptom of political uncertainties, the king being the principal ritualist. Moreover the inscriptions are also looked at by Stein as a clear evidence of ritual sovereignty. Hermann Kulke has questioned Stein’s concept of ritual sovereignty. According to him in a traditional society, particularly in India, ritual sovereignty seems to be an integral part and sometimes even a pace maker of political power. These inscriptions were documents of a systematic ritual policy which was as much a part of the general ‘power policy’ as, for instance, economic or military policies.

A key element of the segmentary state theory was also the so-called Brahmana-peasant alliance at the nadu. This does not have any parallel in Indian history. On the contrary, the peasant is always known to have been exploited by the Brahmana and Kshatriya combination. The creation of vala nadu-larger than the nadu but smaller than a mandalam, by Rajaraja and Kulottunga I is an indicator of the administrative innovations and hence directs intervention by Chola Central authority.
The feudal polity and the segmentary state theory highlight the traits of disintegration and fragmentation as opposed to a centralized state structure. According to B.D. Chattopadhyaya, the segmentary state model or the concept of ritual sovereignty cannot in fact resolve the problem of the political basis of integration since a rigid use of the segmentary state concept relegates the different foci of power to the periphery and does not really see them as components of state structure. The phenomenon of different foci of power was not peculiarly south Indian but cut across all major political structures of the early medieval period.

These models have been challenged by a group of scholars clubbed together as “non aligned historians” by Hermann Kulke. This non-aligned group is reluctant to accept any models. On the other hand their focus is on structural developments and changes within a given state system. According to them the multiplicity of local and regional power is the result of the extension of monarchical state society into areas and communities tribal, non-monarchical polity. In their opinion early medieval polity is perceived as an ‘integrative polity’. The integration of the tribes in the jati system was further given a momentum by the simultaneous absorption of tribal/folk cults into the sectarian Brahmanical Bhakti cults. Bhakti, from the stand point of the state could be an
instrument of integration, much more effectively than Dharmasastra oriented norms. Thus modes of integration formed an important aspect of state formation in early medieval India.