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REVIEW ARTICLE

INDIAN FEUDALISM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO NORTH AND CENTRAL INDIA

Indian Feudalism with Special Reference to North and Central India

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TIME SPAN –A.D 400-A.D 1000

The issue of feudalism in India started as a critique of Marx's concept of Asiatic Mode of Production. Marx rejected the categorization of Indian property relations as feudal. Instead he advised the analysis of pre-colonial India within the framework of Oriental Despotism and Asiatic Mode of production. Both Marx and Engels did not formulate the paradigm of AMP, but we scattered references to these in their writings what runs through the idea of oriental despotism and AMP in the state ownership of land.

Marx and Engels had little insight of Indian situation. Their analysis was based on the reports of colonial rulers who were prejudiced against Indian and sought to justify their rule. It has now been proved by R.S.Sharma and D.N.Jha that private property did exist in ancient India. There were references in Milind Panho and other post mauryan dharma shastras that the king encouraged cultivation in barren areas by ensuring the willing cultivators the right to own that piece of land. It has been stated that in forests or barren area, land belongs to the first cultivator as deer belongs to the one who killed him first. Secondly there are numerous literary and archaeological evidences to prove the emergence of urban centers throughout ancient India. Infact period between 200B.C-A.D. 200. was the peak of ancient Indian urbanization.

In a limited sense feudalism can be defined as a system of landed tenure and personal relationship in which land is held as fief by vassals from lord to whom they are in bond of personal loyalty.

The parcellization of sovereignty and economic issues in his institution of serfdom in which peasants were attached to soil, held by landed intermediaries, placed between the king and the actual tillers who had to make payments in labour and kind to them

The most fundamental feature of feudal mode of production was that the production producers were not separated from means of production but had little control over process of production or fruits of production. Marc Bloc sums it beautifully According to him feudalism is characterized by existence of subject peasantry, widespread use of service tenement i.e.

fiefs instead of salary, supremacy of class of specialized warriors, ties of obedience and protection which binds man to man and fragmentation of authority.

Among the post-independence scholars D. D. Kosambi was the first to formulate the concept of feudalism in India while rejecting list of Asiatic Mode of production. According to him the simple structure of peasant economy was disturbed in the early centuries of Christian era when the king began transfer of land to their subordinate chiefs who thus came into peasantry, a process he term as feudalism from above. The process reached its peak in the post gupta Harsa's period. Much later, around the ninth century A.D, a class of landowner emerged within villages between the state and peasantry, gradually to wild armed power on the local population-a process he calls 'feudalism from below' R. S. Sharma does not join the issue with Kombi but produces evidence which contradicts the two stages of Indian Feudalism. According to him, the origin of feudalism has to be sought in ever increasing number of land grant made to Brahmins and religious institutions since early centuries of Christian era

These grants specified alienation of fiscal, administrative and even judicial rights and exemption from the interference of royal officials the process granted momentum from the last stages of gupta period.

Similarly one of the Pala record specifies a few taxes the done was to collect on behalf of the state but leaves room for the imposition of donees of fresh taxes on the village's. The grants repeatedly refer to the obligation of paying all the dues to the done. Some of the Pratihara land grant charter refer to the transfer of all the resources of revenue often without specifying them. The right to collect taxes was linked to the donees's right to subinfeudation implying the right to eject the cultivator on non-payment of dues. In some charters it was specified that land was transferred with men and material.

What was abandoned step by step to the priestly class was later given to the warrior class also. The grant of administrative, fiscal and judicial rights to the

done led to the creation of a class of landed intermediaries which alienated land and people from central dynasty and deprived the villagers of traditional rights over pastures and water tanks etc. It is essential to reiterate that the grant of land was no unconditional gift to the donee. He was to perform some sort of administrative fiscal and judicial duties for which he would be paid out of revenue collected. The rest of the revenue had to be transferred to the central treasury. In course of time, as central authority in post Gupta period became weak, the donee tended to become more and more powerful within their areas.

Politically, the development was characterized by a continuous process of decentralization or what may be referred as parcellization of sovereignty and economically by the emergence of landed intermediaries leading to enservment of peasantry mortality and freedom increasing obligation to perform forced labour (visti) mounting tax burden and evils of subinfeudation.

A vital issue is why should king make such grants in the first place or in other words what is the prelude to the origin of the feudalism. R. S. Sharma's initial answer to this problem in his monograph Indian Feudalism was that around first millennium A.D. a decline in the Indian commodity production and foreign trade especially with the Roman world led to the decline in urban centers and paucity of coins. The result was the growth of self-sufficient rural economy in which metallic currency became relatively scarce and hence all payments (whether the priest or government officials) had to be made through assignment of land or of revenue therefrom.

Response to the concept of Indian Feudalism in early medieval India came from many historians like D. C. Sircar, B. D. Chattopadhyaya, D. N. Jha and Harbans Mukhia.

D. C. Sircar called Sharma's framework of Indian feudalism landlordism confused with feudalism. His main argument was that there is scarcity of epigraphic evidence of service tenures as compared to land grant to Brahmins and religious institution. He concluded 'obviously the priestly class was most unsuitable for rendering services of feudal type'.

The argument can hold water if one goes strictly by European model of feudalism where the priestly class does not play the role of a Brahmin as in India but Prof. Sharma insists that India experienced its own brand of feudalism where Brahmins played the exploitative role undertaken by the warrior class of Europe, hence he uses the nomenclature Indian Feudalism.

Historians like B. D. Chattopadhyaya has listed some six hundred South India epigraphic evidence of coins of various denominations for post-ninth century A.D. when practice of making land grant became very common and widespread. He is obviously not satisfied with the

correlation between decline in trade. He is not too happy with describing early medieval period as feudal period esp in South and Western India.

D. N. Jha has supported Prof. Sharma's concept of Indian Feudalism but he has pointed out the theoretical weakness explanations of feudal developments only in terms of foreign trade, where decline to a large extent depended on factor external to the Indian situation. To attach greater importance to foreign trade than it deserved would imply that ancient Indian society did not possess any built-in potential for change—a position implicit in the concept of Asiatic Mode of Production.

Prof. Jha seeks an answer to the origin in the description of Kaliyuga. There have been references to Kaliyuga in inscription and Puranas to a period which roughly corresponds to the 3-4th century A.D. and according to Prof. Jha was a prelude to feudalization of Indian society.

Kaliyuga was an age of social conflict in which varnas or social classes discarded functions assigned to them. The lower orders attempted to arrogate to themselves the status and functions of the higher order. In other words they refused to pay taxes and render labour services. The taxes mounted on the elite classes got used to new luxurious life, a result of spurt in foreign trade. The lower classes now began questioning the authority of the elite in a social structure that stood on their production activities but where they were not even granted respectable social position. This also led to varnasamkar or intermixture of social classes especially the last two. The echoes of the protest from lower classes and varnasamkar is evident from both Puranic and epigraphic material.

Several measures were adopted to overcome the crisis. The almost contemporary law book Manusmriti advises that Vaisyas and Shudras should not be allowed to deviate from their duties. This may have led to coercive measures. But a more important step to meet the situation was to grant land to priests and officials in lieu of salaries and remuneration. Such a practice passed the burden of tax collection and law keeping in the donated areas to the beneficiaries. They could deal with recalcitrant peasants on the spot.

This argument of Prof. Jha seems plausible one, though he himself acknowledged that this does not answer the question why more land charters point to donation of land in tribal foothills where class differentiation did not make much head. Prof. R. S. Sharma had gladly accepted the lacunae in his earlier argument and now given due credence to the theory of organic stimulus in form of Kaliyuga problems. Infact he further explains the reason for grants of land in the peripheral areas. He suggests that as the empire was expanding territorially there was the

problem of acculturation of vanquished tribal communities and also of expansion of agriculture. Land grant to brahmins and officials, especially to former provided a solution to the problem. New lands could be brought under cultivation under brahmin supervision. Moreover by implanting brahmins in the conquered tribal areas the tribal people could be tamed and taught to obey the king and pay taxes to him. This way varna system could spread horizontally. B. D. Chattopadhyaya questions if this function of land grant comes within the purview of feudalism or integrative polity.

But before we get down to the alternative paradigm of feudalism it is essential to outline Harbans Mukhia's response to Prof. Sharma's thesis of Indian feudalism.

In his presidential address to Indian History Congress in 1979 Prof. Harbans Mukhia put forward an important question 'was there feudalism in Indian history?'. According to him the hallmark of European feudalism i.e. the manorial system which leads and serfdom did not exist in India. He says that the evidence which Prof. Sharma has marshalled at best establishes the increasing exploitation of peasantry while the need is to show extraneous control over the peasant production which he insists needs to be proved in the Indian context. The critical aspect of such dependence in European context was the diversion of at least a part of peasant labour from his own process of production to that of the lord. This may not be said of India because manorial system did not exist here. He suggests that Indian peasantry was free as it exercised complete control over means and process of production. Evidences of forced labour are also incidental and not widespread. He is not in favour of accepting visti as form of seigniorial control as he insists that it did not contribute to production and was only used for roads or other construction work. India, Mukhia says had higher incidence of fertility of soil compared to Europe till 14th century and that subsistence level was low. There was absence of large land holdings. Consequently, far less agricultural operations. There does not appear to have been a highly concentrated demand for large amounts of labour during short periods. Hence there was no cause for utilization of forced peasant labour or donee's lands.

In a rejoinder to Mukhia's stand Prof. Sharma, in the article 'How feudal was Indian feudalism' states that instances of serfdom in India are far more than incidental. In both cases peasantry in oppressed which is an essential ingredient of feudalism.

Prof. Sharma is also not satisfied with Prof. Mukhia's assertion that Indian peasantry was free and enjoyed complete control over means of production. As mentioned earlier when brahmins or official was granted land, he was authorized to collect specified or unspecified dues –terms used 'uchit' or 'anuuchit' at

times at the end of the list taxes the term used was 'adi-adi' as it means extra.

Which adds enormously to the power of the intermediary. The fact remains that land in early medieval India did not exclusively belong to the peasants. The king being the bhuswami, technically exercised right over his entire territory and by the virtue of that right, he granted land that is bhudan to the donee who also now exercised right on it. Besides this the peasant had the right to till the land but peasant could not pay his mounting dues he could be evicted from the land. Moreover, often the charters spelt out what the villages were granted to donees along with trees, orchids, grasslands, jungles extra. If the peasants do not find free access to various agrarian resources, his autonomy is substantially crippled. The mounting tax burden did not let peasant enjoy fruit of production. How can a peasant under such condition be called free and not servile?

It is important to re-stress that there were not only religious beneficiaries of the grants. There existed many non-religious vassals as well. In Guniagarh grant (A.D.507-08) of Vainyagupta, who was the ruler of a large part of Bengal, his agent Vijayasena, the dutaka or executor of his grant is described as maharaja sri samanta, patuparika, purapalokarika. Evidently executive military and police functions were conferred upon or seized by the feudal vassal. Similar developments seemed to have taken place about same time in northern and western India. The land grants of Harshavardhana associates the titles samantamaharaja and mahasamanta with high ranking officers. All this gives considerable indication of the feudalization of the state apparatus.

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