Early Indian Feudal Formation

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I am grateful to the organisers of the Japanese Association for South Asian Studies for asking me to deliver a lecture at its inaugural session. The decision to invite an Indian is undoubtedly an indication of a mutually beneficial academic interaction between Japanese and Indian scholars. On my part, however, I look at it as an encouragement to a fellow researcher who has benefited from Japanese historical scholarship in his perception of early Indian feudalism, which forms the subject of my lecture this afternoon.

Although the first Indian Marxist historian to refer clearly to the growth of feudalism in early India was B. N. Datta, it is only in post-Independence period that the discussion of the problem gained momentum as is evident from the writings of D. D. Kosambi and R. S. Sharma, who in spite of their rejection of the idea of self-sufficiency implied in the concept of the Asiatic Mode of Production (hereafter AMP), agree that by the end of the Gupta period the Indian village became nearly self-contained owing mainly to the decline of trade and urban life. The simple structure of the closed peasant economy, Kosambi seems to believe, was disturbed during the early centuries of the Christian era when the kings began to transfer their fiscal and administrative rights over land to their subordinate chiefs who thus came into direct contact with the peasantry, a process he terms "feudalism from above". It reached an advanced stage of development during the period of the Guptas and Harsa. Kosambi holds that at a later stage "a class of landowners developed within the village between the state and the peasantry, gradually to wield armed power on the local population"—a process he calls "feudalism from below". Sharma does not apparently join issue with Kosambi but produces evidence which
contradicts the two-stage theory of Indian feudalism. According to him, feudalism in India, unlike in Europe, began with the land grants made to brahmanas, temples and monasteries for which the epigraphic evidence begins from the first century B.C. and multiplies by Gupta times when village together with their fields and inhabitants, with fiscal, administrative and judicial rights (with the right to enjoy fines received) and with exemption from the interference of royal officials were given to religious beneficiaries. What was abandoned step by step to the priestly class was later given to the warrior class. Religious as well as secular (service) grants became increasingly popular with the emergence of local and self-sufficient economies marked by lack of commercial intercourse, decline of urban life and paucity of coins. The growth of feudal property in India came to be linked with the undermining of the communal rights in land, as is evident from the later grants which refer to the transfer of the communal resources (e.g. pastures, forests, water reservoirs, fisheries, etc.) to the beneficiaries. The economic essence of Indian feudalism, like that of European, it has been argued, lay in the rise of landed intermediaries leading to the enserfment of the peasantry through restrictions on peasant mobility and freedom, increasing obligation to perform forced labour (viṣṭi), mounting tax burdens and the evils of subinfeudation. The crucial element in Sharma’s chain of arguments is the premise that there took place around the middle of the first millennium A.D. a decline in urban commodity production and foreign trade resulting in the growth of a self-sufficient economy in which metallic currency became relatively scarce and hence all payments (whether to priests or to the government officials) had to be made through assignment of land or of revenues therefrom.

Although the relative decline in commodity production and trade, the gradual paucity in metallic currency and the consequent growth of self-sufficient economy are borne out by evidence which has been reinforced over the years, it may not be easy to postulate a causal connection between them and the growth of the practice of making landgrants, the emergence of the class of landed intermediaries and other feudal developments. Attention may, for example, be drawn to the work of B. D. Chattopadhyaya who has listed 600 south Indian epigraphic references to coins of various denominations and whose inventory contains all references, with the exception of six or seven, from the post-ninth century period when the practice
of making donations of land in peninsular India, as indeed in other parts of the country, became very common and certainly more widespread than it may have been in the preceding phase when we have evidence of gradual disappearance of metallic currency and of languishing trade. There has also been in the past few years some realization of the theoretical weakness of the explanation of the feudal developments only in terms of foreign trade whose decline, to a large extent, depended on the factors external to the Indian situation. To attach greater importance to foreign trade than it deserves (as indeed has been done by both Kosambi and Sharma both of whom reject the concept of the AMP) within the Marxist frame of analysis would imply that the ancient Indian society did not possess any built-in potential for change—a position implicit in the concept of the AMP. The rejection of the concept of the AMP on the one hand and the acceptance of the idea of feudal developments on account of factors not directly related to the Indian context on the other, give rise to an anomalous and contradictory theoretical situation. It is this theoretical impasse which has recently led to a rethinking on the part of the exponents of the Indian feudal model from the vantage point of the internal social contradictions with which such surface manifestation as the decline of trade, paucity of coins and the growth of closed economy would have to be largely linked. It has recently been argued that a deep social crisis, reflected in the descriptions of the Kali age in various epic and Puranic passages datable to the late third and early fourth centuries, was a prelude to the feudalization of Indian society. Attention has been drawn to the fact that the Kali age is characterized, among other things, by varṇasankara, i.e., intermixture of varṇas or social orders, which implies that the vaishyas and śūdras (peasants, artisans and labourers) either refused to perform producing functions or else the vaishya peasants declined to pay taxes and refused to supply necessary labour for economic production. A close study of the descriptions of the Kaliyuga indicates that this was a period of sharp social conflict and crisis, largely generated by a two fold social contradiction: the one between the brāhmaṇas and kṣatriyas on the one hand and the vaishyas on the other; the other between the brāhmaṇas and the śūdras. This led to the weakening of the traditional brahmanical social order and, in its wake, of whatever elements of slavery may have remained there. Although there may be many dimensions to the social tension in the early centuries of the Christian era, from the economic point of view, one may
legitimately ascribe it to the earlier method of extracting surplus from the producing classes and distributing it among the various sections of the ruling class. The solution of the sharp class antagonism therefore lay in finding out a new mechanism of surplus extraction. Thus the state gave up the earlier practice of collecting taxes directly through its agents and then distributing them among its priestly, military and other employees. Instead it now began to assign land revenues directly to priests, military chiefs, administrators, etc. for their support. In contrast to Vedic times when no land could be transferred without the consent of the clan and when the practice of land transfer was practically non-existent, the new situation enabled the king to grant land to the leading members of the community who thus became responsible for the appropriation and consumption of the surplus in the form of what may be described as feudal rent.8)

Doubts may, however, be expressed about the validity of the above explanation of the transition to feudal society. The Kali age is described in almost all the early Purāṇas and even if we keep the medieval Purāṇas out of consideration, it is possible to identify at least three sets of Kali descriptions assignable to the third-fourth, eighth and tenth centuries.9) Since most of these descriptions are conventional and repetitive, their chronology becomes uncertain as also their value for historical reconstruction. No less pertinent is the fact that the Kalivarjyas (practices forbidden in the Kaliyuga), which are inextricably linked with the notion of Kali age, do not find place in any of the relevant Puranic and epic passages. They seem to have crystallized around the 11th-12th centuries, nearly half a millennium later than the earliest Kali description in the Purāṇas and the Mahābhārata, and were finally codified in the first half of the 17th century by Dāmodara in his Kalivarjyavinīrṇaya.10) All this indicates the necessity of a critical and rigorous examination of the relevant literary material. But it is not possible to dismiss the Kaliyuga theory out of hand; for there is considerable epigraphic evidence,11) to corroborate the earliest Kali description and to suggest that during the first half of the first millennium Indian society was really caught up in the throes of a crisis that was severe enough to lead to a major social transformation.

The challenge to the premises on which the model of early Indian feudalism is based has often come from the quarters that are reluctant to recog-
nise the elements of change in Indian society. Thus although the practice of land grants and the growth of landed intermediaries around the middle of the first millennium A.D. can also be appreciated against the background of the emergent self-sufficient economy, it has been wrongly contended that trade did not decline and coins did not become scarce in the centuries following the Gupta rule. On the basis of the literary references to the donation of land and villages made by kings as early as Vedic times it has been argued that what has been described as Indian feudality is not different from land-lordism which may have been prevalent throughout Indian history. Similarly, it had been asserted that there was no change in the pattern of land grants throughout ancient India. Evidently such uninformed criticisms seek to project early Indian society as static and immutable and thus to perpetuate, perhaps unconsciously, the imperialist British historiographical cliché of the changeless East.

What has not been but needs to be adequately appreciated is the fact that the Indian Marxist historiography, opposed to the British view of Indian past, has used the west European model of feudalism to explain social change in India from the middle of the first millennium. There has, for instance, persisted in Indian historiography, albeit implicitly, the thinking that the manorial system distinguishes European developments from Indian ones. The land of the seigneurie (manor), though not ubiquitous throughout Europe, was divided into two parts, demesne and manse, each quite distinct but linked to the other by very close ties of interdependence. The demesne, consisting of houses, farm-buildings, gardens, heathland or forest, fields, meadows and vineyards amounted to a large farm, cultivated under the immediate direction of lord and his agents. The manses were small or middle-sized holdings cultivated by the lord’s tenants who owed him various customary dues and, more important still, services, so that they helped in the cultivation of his demesne. Basically a unit of seigneurial taxation and, more often than not occupied by several tenant families the manse was held by occupants (socii) who had to produce for the lord the required sums of money and the bushels of corn, the stipulated number of hens and eggs and days of work on the lords’ demesne. Thus the demesne presupposed the existence of the manse. This linkage of the small and middle-sized holdings with big farms is often believed to be basic to the medieval European agrarian production in the first phase of feudalism and seems to have given rise to serfdom.
which is regarded as the central feature of the mechanism of surplus ex-
traction. Serfdom thus was built into the manorial structure and has
been equated with what has been described as the "structured depend-
ence"\textsuperscript{15} of the peasantry on the lords.

A comparison of the post-Gupta economic scene with the European
picture, though made difficult by the nature of the Indian source material,
shows that a donated village or land cannot be equated with the European
manor.\textsuperscript{16} In India the gifted area does not seem to have been divided
into anything like \textit{mansus indomicatus} and small-sized holdings to which
serfs were attached. The type of relationship and interdependence be-
tween the large-sized farms and small or middle-sized plots of land em-
phasized in the west European context seems to be generally absent in
our country. Here instead of the serf-occupied \textit{manses}, peasant families
themselves became units of production and seigneurial taxation and de-
veloped close economic ties of inter-dependence with the landlord. It may
therefore be argued justifiably that production processes in medieval Eu-
rope were different from those in early medieval India.

While this obvious dissimilarity may be explained, at least partially,
in terms of the contrasting lines of development of agrarian organization
in Europe and India,\textsuperscript{17} the degree of importance attached to the manorial
system itself is often due to the one-sided character of contemporary docu-
ment which deal almost exclusively with it and not because it was a uni-
versal phenomenon throughout the continent. In fact, the manorial
organization flourished only in certain parts of western Europe, especially
in northern France, while in other parts it was partly developed or even
unknown. Allodial estates survived even among some of the strongholds
of the manorial system. And yet historians speak of feudalism in western
Europe. The reason for this is to be found not merely in the existence
of the manor whose structure gave rise to a specific form of production
relation and a surplus exploitation mechanism called serfdom, but also
in a generalised subjection of the peasantry in the regions where the orga-
nization of agrarian production was qualitatively different. It may thus
be suggested that the hallmark of feudalism is not merely the "structured
dependence of the entire peasantry on the lords", as a recent critic of
Indian feudalism would have us believe\textsuperscript{18}, but also, and equally impor-
tantly, the different forms of its exploitation—immobility, forced labour,
ever-increasing burden of dues, etc.—all arising out of the lord’s superior
rights in land, the evils of subinfeudation and the eviction of tenants.

If the similarity in the forms of exploitation of the peasantry in western Europe and India and not the presence or absence of the manorial structure is accepted as a valid basis for comparison between developments in the two regions, it may be posited, on the basis of epigraphic and literary evidence, that peasants and artisans were at times attached to the soil more or less in the same way as serfs were in medieval Europe. There is also evidence to suggest that the inhabitants of the gifted village were often subjected to forced labour in the areas where they were made to stick to the soil—a fact which reminds us of the medieval European practice of making the villeins work for their lord. Inscriptions indicate that viśṭi, levied mainly from the slaves and hired labourers in the Maurya period, brought all classes of subjects in its ambit and by the fifth-sixth centuries it spread from Kathiawar to Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and south India.19) Although north Indian inscriptions belonging to the dynasties of the Paramāras, Cālukyas, Cāhamānas, Gāhaḍavālas and the Candellas do not refer to the practice of forced labour, there are reasons to believe that it did not die altogether after A. D. 1000. In fact, we have epigraphic evidence to show its continuance in Karnataka,20) and its becoming fairly popular in most of the parts of Tamilnadu during the Coḷa period.21) Regional variations apart, viśṭi, like serfdom, seems to have continued throughout the early medieval period and even later in India, though neither was present at all places throughout the country. What, however, seems likely is that here, compared to Europe, forced labour was less common. In other words, the incidence of labour rent, a prominent feature of European feudal economy, was possibly less in India—a fact which can be explained, to a certain extent, by the varying agrarian organizations prevailing in the two regions.22) Nevertheless the Indian peasantry was subjected to an ever increasing burden of rent in kind and to some extent, in cash. This is evident from a large number of land charters which provide often very detailed list of fiscal exemptions (parihāras) granted to the donees in both north and south India.23)

We have no means to ascertain whether or not the rise in feudal rent was owing to the agrarian expansion and the possibly resultant increase in agricultural production.24) But there is little doubt that the collection of rent in India, like in Europe, was often linked with the donees’ right of subinfeudation and eviction. The available epigraphic material reveals
that in several parts of north India (e.g. Malwa, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra) the practice of subinfeudation, implying the right to eject the cultivators, was well established from the fifth to the 12th centuries which may have led not only to an oppressive collection of rent but also to reducing the permanent tenants to the position of tenants-at-will.\textsuperscript{25) The south Indian epigraphs even provide actual examples of eviction of peasants from the land.\textsuperscript{26) Though in the absence of an intensive region-wise analysis of land charters it is difficult to form a clear idea of the precise areas in which eviction was resorted to, it has been rightly argued that it may have been typical of the pockets which were settled and did not face any shortage of agrarian labour and presented a contrast to the thinly populated backward regions marked by the practice of attaching peasants and artisans to the land.

The oppressive rent was often accompanied by the gradual undermining of the communal rights over land in donated areas—a trend which is seen in various parts of the country throughout the second half of the first millennium. Already in the Gupta period, the Vakataka grants begin to refer to the transfer of rights to the enjoyment of mines, hides and pasturage. But in the post-Gupta period the practice spread to eastern India, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat. A recent statistical analysis of personal names in 3543 Tamil Cola inscriptions indicates that the village community in south India also was being gradually deprived of its autonomy by the local chiefs and landed intermediaries.\textsuperscript{27) It is likely that the weakening of the communal control over land in course of time reinforced the economic bondage of the peasantry.

It would then appear that from the Gupta period onwards the Indian peasantry was subjected to a surplus extracting mechanism which, apart from being different from that of the preceding period, manifested itself in various forms in different regions of the country. In backward areas, where there was dearth of labour force, peasants and other producing classes were attached to the soil and were required to perform free labour service for the landlord; and although serfdom may not have struck deep roots, the general restrictions on their mobility reduced them to the position of semi-serfs. In thickly populated areas they suffered the evils of subinfeudation and, living under the constant threat of eviction, were reduced to the position of tenants-at-will. In most parts of the country, however, they were made to pay to the lord an ever-increasing amount
of dues in the form of rent. One can notice a degree of unevenness in the growth of these forms of exploitation in relation to time and space, though one cannot doubt their existence at different points of time at various places during the first millennium and the early centuries of the second. Nor can one miss the clear resemblance between the forms of surplus-extraction prevalent in India and feudal Europe, notwithstanding the importance of production based on peasant household unit in the Indian situation, which apparently has given rise to the belief, even among some Marxists, that the study of Indian society from the vantage point of European feudalism is a case of misguided application.\(^{28}\)

In spite of the unassailable evidence of the subjection of peasantry to the landlords, in a recent attempt to present an alternative to Indian feudal model, it has been postulated that the ancient and medieval agrarian history of India was characterized by predominantly free peasantry which not only had ‘complete’ control over the means of production but also enjoyed autonomy of production because it controlled the process of production.\(^{29}\) However, the available data reveal that in early medieval times the theory of royal ownership of land became sufficiently strong so as to enable the kings or chiefs to make land or village donations on a large scale to priests and officers who, in turn, derived ownership rights from their benefactors. This led to the developments of graded land rights and naturally minimized the possibility of ordinary peasants owning land. Similarly the economic demands made by landed intermediaries, amply borne out by inscriptions, must have conditioned the process of agrarian production and militated against peasant freedom. Ignoring all this, however, it has been contended that the free peasant production together with the high fertility of land\(^{30}\) and low subsistence level engendered ‘relative stability’ of India’s socio-economic system, thus ruling out any change in the “means, methods and relations of production” for two thousand years or so.\(^{31}\) In this unchanging milieu the state is thought of as the chief instrument of exploitation to the total exclusion of landed intermediaries whose emergence as a powerful exploiting class is no longer in doubt. Except for the hydraulic factor which is not (or cannot be) emphasized in view of the high degree of importance attached to soil fertility, the perception of pre-colonial Indian society in terms of the free peasantry construct seems to be taking us remarkably close to the AMP, characterized among other things, by changelessness, expropriation of the
agrarian surplus solely by the state and the absence of intermediate classes, etc. Based on a skimpily familiarity with the primary evidence, the efforts to jettison the feudal model altogether fails to reckon with the logic implicit in the sources, and amounts to bringing in through the backdoor the concept of the AMP and even legitimizing, under a radical camouflage, the imperialist perception of pre-colonial Indian society as stagnant.

Assuming then that the Indian society in later part of the first millennium was developing feudal traits, the basic question that arises is: Did the feudal mode of production in India have any built-in dissolvers or it underwent transformations only through external stimulus? The Indian Marxist exponents of feudalism have tried to show that the classical feudal system in most parts of India, particularly central and western India, tended to decline after A.D. 1000 when the progressive role of land grants in opening up new areas to cultivation was exhausted in Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Malwa and Gujarat. Forced labour, an important feature of feudalism, is not at all mentioned in the records of the north Indian dynasties like those of the Paramāras, Cālukyas and Cāhamānas which ruled after A.D. 1000, though Pāla and Sena inscriptions speak of sarvapidā (which seems to include forced labour) and some Kalacuri records occasionally refer to viṣṭi. On the basis of the Rājatarangini it has been argued that forced labour could be commuted by money-payment. The commutation of labour service into cash payment was possible, we are told, on account of the revival of foreign trade with the Arabs and the Chinese, resulting in the growth of internal trade and towns and the revival of money-economy, thus disturbing the earlier economic self-sufficiency. While the available historical evidence does indicate an increased volume of both foreign and internal trade and the greater use of coins around and after A.D. 1000, it should not be forgotten that trade had not disappeared completely in the centuries following the Gupta rule. The concept of a self-sufficient economy cannot and should not be visualised in absolute terms. It is a relative concept and so is the rise of money economy and trade. It is therefore not possible to explain the growth and decline of a social system on the basis of trade. Moreover, although commercial and urban revival and increased use of money seem to have become an all India phenomenon, viṣṭi does not seem to have fallen into desuetude throughout the country. In Tamilnadu, for example, the Colas, who had flourishing trade contacts with the outside world, issued a large number
of coins and yet in their Tamil inscriptions alone we come across as many as 107 clear references to forced labour (viṭṭi)\(^{33}\). Thus it is difficult to establish a causal relationship between the growth of trade and the decline of forced labour.

It may be further pointed out that the developed phase of India's trade with the outside world in the two centuries preceding the Turkish conquest seems to coincide with the intensification of the practice of making land grants leading to the growth of landed intermediaries, thus severing the direct ties between the state and the peasantry, especially in south India where, in addition to the much larger number of land grants from the Cola period onwards, we have also evidence to prove that village community was fast losing its autonomy—a process which may have facilitated the rise of feudal property\(^{34}\). In Karnataka we have much evidence of trade and merchant guilds after A. D. 1000 side by side with the growth of landed intermediaries\(^{35}\). In the face of the growth of landed intermediaries it is difficult to argue that restrictions on peasant freedom and mobility became less stringent. Moreover, those who maintain that commercial revival in the opening centuries of the second millennium was a major dissolvent of the feudal system ignore the fact that it would have been no more than an external factor which played only a minor role, if at all, in transforming the classical Indian feudal economy and that in spite of growing trade feudal social organization continued to exist in many parts of the country even later, though changes within this system no doubt need to be studied in depth, lest the feudal model in the Indian context should degenerate to the level of a historiographical stereotype.

The commutation of the labour service into money payments and the possible loosening of the restrictions on peasant mobility attributed to the phenomenon of trade, may be treated as symptomatic of a crisis first visible in the earliest descriptions of the Kaliyuga and later in epigraphic records, a crisis which inevitably generated and in course of time sharpened the social cleavage between the landed intermediaries and the peasants. The increase in the volume of rent without necessarily a corresponding rise in the productivity of land and the growing claims of greater rights over land by the rulers and the landed intermediaries not only subjected the peasantry to utmost economic misery but also led to acute tensions between the peasants and their exploiters. Yadava has drawn our attention to the literary evidence which indicates the antithesis between the ruling aristo-
cracy and the peasantry and also to the oppression of the latter by the former, leading to clash and conflict between the two.

We also come across, during the second half of the first millennium and later, considerable testimony of actual historical instances of conflict which strengthens our impression that the feudal formation was marked by its own social contradiction, manifesting itself very clearly in the antagonism between the landed aristocracy and the peasantry. The abortive rebellion of the Kaivarttas, earlier viewed as a popular revolt against the tyrannical ruler, has been interpreted as a formidable peasant uprising directed against the Pālas who subjected them to heavy taxes and deprived them of their plots of land given as service tenures. Some of the Damara revolts in Kashmir referred to in the Rājatarangini have similarly been taken to be in the nature of peasant movements. Similarly a 12th century inscription from Ghazipur district (UP) records an ordinance issued by the landholders of a village in an abnormal situation created by the turbulent people, possibly peasants. Although inscriptions from north India do not provide much direct evidence of social conflict, those from the peninsular region furnish clear examples of peasant unrest and protest. If we leave aside a record of the Vākāṭaka Pravarasena II which has been interpreted as an evidence of conflict between ordinary peasants and other social groups, earliest testimony of tension in agrarian society is available from southern Tamilnadu. Thus the Velvikkuti grant of the early Pāṇḍya Parāntaka Neḍunjadaiyan (c. A. D. 767–811) speaks of the loss of the brahmadeya in the wake of the Kalabhra agression and the Dalavaypuram plates of another early Pāṇḍya ruler, Parāntaka Viranārayana (c. A. D. 862–907) clearly refers to the encroachment upon donated village by the śūdras. In the case of Karnataka, it has been suggested, on the basis of an analysis of inscriptions, that conflict between the brāhmaṇas and feudal lords, between brāhmaṇa freeholders of neighbouring villages and between the peasant villages and the feudal lords of whose domain these villages formed a part, surfaced from the 12th century A. D. onwards. The situation was not much different in Tamilnadu where the Cola epigraphs speak of a dancing girl throwing herself from the temple tower to establish the right of her relations to till the land assigned to her as jīvitam, of a brāhmaṇa who committed self-immolation to establish the rights of the temple servants and of the temple guards who leaped into the flames of a fire to establish their rights over their jīvitam land assign-
Instances of violent protests are also found in south Indian epigraphs of the Cola, and subsequent periods. A record of the time of Rājarāja III states that a riot took place in the fifth year of his reign when original records of land transfer were destroyed as a result of which the rights of individuals had to be decided according to actual possession of land. Another inscription informs us that a riot between Idangai (left hand) and Velangai (right hand) groups took place in the eleventh year of Kulottunga, when the walls of the temple were pulled down, its treasure looted and idol removed. Subbarayalu, on the basis of some Cola epigraphs from the Tiruchirappali district, assignable to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which saw the crystallization of the Idangai and Velangai social divisions, has suggested that the Idangai groups were the newly emerging peasants and their coming together posed a serious threat to the old peasants of the locality. It is significant that in the fifteenth century we get indication of new alignments between the two groups.

Thus according to the copies of an inscription dated 1429 found at Aduthurai (Perambalur taluk) and Kilpaluvur (Ariyalur taluk) the Right Hand and the Left Hand 98 groups decided unanimously not to submit to any outsider even if the pradāni (the local Vijayanagara governor), the vanniya (military peoples) or the jīvitakkārar (9 holders of official tenures) coerced them or even if the brāhmaṇa and vellala kaniyalar tried to oppress them in collusion with government officers. These records have been taken to imply an open revolt by the lower peasantry against the landlords and the government—a revolt which seems to have spread in several parts of the Cola empire.

Although literary texts or inscriptions do not provide many examples of peasant protest either in north or south India, it is striking that instances of both peaceful and violent resistance mentioned in the sources begin to multiply from the 11th century A.D. onwards. One may therefore imagine that in the first half of the second millennium the social contradiction between the landed aristocracy and the ordinary peasants, arising out of the increasing economic oppression of the latter as well as out of the scramble for control over agrarian resources, tended to become sharp. This may also have led to important changes in the socio-economic system and may be viewed as the internal dynamic of feudal society, though in the Indian context the role of such a factor is yet to be adequately appreciated.
There is no doubt that during the last two decades or more the use of the feudal concept has given a definite direction to the early Indian historiography and has generated an impressive amount of literature, a major bulk of which is devoted to the study of specific regions, and, no doubt goes a long way in identifying and explaining the basic processes at work in the social and economic life of the people. While scholars have paid considerable attention to the emergence of feudal economy in specific areas within well-defined chronological segments, its possible linkage with changing social structure and with developments in the fields of literature, art, religion, law, etc. have not been sufficiently researched. The study of these dimensions could greatly improve the efficacy of the feudal model for the study of our early Indian history. Similarly, the study of feudalism in India, which has so far been mainly Eurocentric, could perhaps be more meaningful if adequate attention is paid to the comparable developments in other Asian countries. This would not only enable us to get over the hangover of colonial historiography but also add new dimensions to historical research on early Indian feudalism.

I once again thank you for giving me an opportunity to share some of my ideas with you.

Notes
5) B. D. Chattopadhyaya, Coins and Currency System in South India, Delhi, 1978, Appendix I.
6) The theme of the Kali age was first touched by R. S. Sharma, Śūdras in Ancient India, Delhi, 1958, pp. 176, 213-14. It was further discussed by him in his Ancient India, Delhi, 1978, p. 169. For a fuller discussion of the Kali age as a prelude to feudal social formation in India see R. S. Sharma, “The
Kali Age: A Period of Social Crisis”, in S. N. Mukherjee, ed., India: History and Thought, Calcutta, 1982. Another historian who has shown interest in the transition to feudalism is B.N.S. Yadava. He has provided a detailed analysis of the concept of Kali age to explain the transition from pre-feudal to feudal society in India, “The Accounts of the Kali Age and the Social Transition from the Antiquity to the Middle Ages”, Indian Historical Review (hereafter IHR), v. nos. 1 & 2, July 1978 / January 1979. The idea of Kali age may be equated with that of decadence which seems to have prevailed in late Classical antiquity. For a perceptive historiographical analysis of various aspects of the idea of decadence in Graeco-Roman antiquity see Santo Mazzarino, The End of the Ancient World, New York, 1966.


8) Marx never developed the concept of feudal rent as part of the concept of feudal mode of production which was only his secondary concern, but he did elaborate certain pre-capitalist forms of rent in order to illustrate the distinct nature of capitalist ground rent: see Capital, iii, Moscow, 1974, pp. 614–813. The Marxist position on feudal rent is stated by E. A. Kosminsky according to whom the feudal rent presupposes the existence of a basic class of landlords and of a special type of class of basic producers with a special connection with the land, which remained, however, the property of the ruling class of feudal lords (Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the Thirteenth Century, Oxford, 1956, p. vi). Also see Rodney Hilton, ed. Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism, London, 1976, p. 30.

9) In the opinion of R. C. Hazra, the description of the yuga-dharma in the Vāyu and Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇas is assignable to A. D. 200–275 and in the Viṣṇu Purāṇa to the last quarter of the third or the first quarter of the fourth century A. D. (Studies in the Puranic Records on Hindu Rites and Customs, second ed., Delhi, 1975, pp. 174–75). The Kali passages in the Kūrma Purāṇa are attributed to ‘probably 700–800 A. D.’ (ibid. p. 178) and the yuga dharma section of the Padma Purāṇa may be attributed to the first half of the eighth century (ibid. p. 183). The relevant portion of the Matsya Purāṇa is considered not later than A. D. 950 (ibid. p. 177) and that of the Brahma Purāṇa is assigned to c. A. D. 900–1200 (ibid. p. 187).


11) The first clear inscriptive reference to social crisis as envisaged in the ear-
liest Kali descriptions is found in a second century Satavahana inscription which credits Gautamiputra Satakarni as putting an end to the confusion between the four varnas (Epigraphia Indica (hereafter EI), viii, no. 8, 1, p. 60). In the early Pallava charters Viṣṇugopavarman and Simhavarman are described as “always ready to extricate dharma that had sunk deep owing to the evil effects of the Kali age” (Indian Antiquary, v, pp. 50–51; EI, viii, no. 4, 1, 10). Similarly the Talgunda inscription of the early Kadamba king Kakusthavarman refers to Kaliyuga (EI, viii, no. 5, verse 4, 1.4, p. 34). The tradition of the Kaliyuga continued in later inscriptions as well. In the early Pāṇḍya epigraphs, for example, the evil effects of the Kalabhra phase reminded the brāhmaṇas of the Kaliyuga. The Velvikkuti grant of Parantaka Nedunjetiyan describes the Kalabhra ruler as Kali-araisan (EI, xvii, no. 16, 1.40) and the Madurai Inscription of Centan Arikeśari states that the ruler surmounted the Kali through the mahādānas (EI, xiii, no. 4, 11.5.6). Also see, Rajan Gurukkal, “Non-brahmana Resistance to the Expansion of the Brahmadeyas: The Early Pāṇḍya Experience”, Proceedings of Indian History Congress, Annamalainagar, 1984, pp. 161–63; idem, The Agrarian System and Socio-Political Organisation under the Early Pandyas c. A.D. 600–1000, Ph.D. thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1984.

D. C. Sircar admits that in post-Gupta times there was “scarcity” of money but he exaggerates the role of cowries in trade transactions: Political and Administrative System of Ancient and Medieval India, Delhi, 1974, pp. 18–19; Studies in Indian Coins, Delhi, 1968, pp. 279–88; B. D. Chattopadhyaya, “Currency in Early Bengal”, Journal of Indian History, iv, pt. 3, 1977, pp. 41–60, recognizes the relative absence of coins in Bengal from the middle of the seventh to the thirteenth century, though, like Sircar, he also thinks that cowrie was the basic element in the currency system of the region throughout its history. For a useful survey of cowrie currency, from literary epigraphic texts see D. B. Pandey. “Cowrie as a Monetary Token in Ancient India”, Journal of Numismatic Society of India (hereafter JNSI), xxviii, pp. 25, 27–42.

The hypothesis of paucity of coins has been further strengthened by the writings of L. Gopal (The Economic Life of North India, Delhi, 1965, pp. 101, 125–34 and chapter IX) and B.N.S. Yadava (Society and Culture in Northern India in the Twelfth Century (hereafter SCNI), pp. 270–75, 281–83). Recent studies indicate almost total absence of coin-moulds in post-Gupta period; U. Thakur, Mints and Minting in India, Varanasi, 1972, pp. 161–63; K. K. Thaplyal, Studies in Ancient Indian Seals, Lucknow, 1972, Appendix C. What is true of most parts of northern India also seems to hold good of south India as is evident from B. D. Chattopadhyaya, Coins and Currency System in South India, Delhi 1978. Even so the hypothesis of the relative scarcity of coins...
remains largely impressionistic in the absence of any quantitative study the
importance of which has rightly been underlined by R. S. Sharma, "Coins and
Problems of Early Indian Economic History", JNSI, xxxi (1969), pp. 1–3. For
criticism of D. C. Sircar's view that trade did not decline in the post-Gupta
period see R. S. Sharma, "Indian Feudalism Retouched", IHR, i, no. 2,

In sharp contrast to the general currency situation obtaining in most parts
of the country, the Punjab region has yielded a regular series of coins ranging
in dates from c. A. D. 650 to c. A. D. 1000—a fact which may partly explain the
lack of land grants in the area. But the inverse relationship between the
currency in circulation and the land grants as a mode of remunerating priests
and officers has still to be worked out on the basis of an area-wise quantitative
assessment of coinage during the second half of the first millennium.

13) D. C. Sircar, Landlordism and Tenancy in Ancient and Medieval India as re-

14) D. C. Sircar, Political and Administrative System..., p. 32. For a discussion
of the change in the style and contents of inscriptions from Bengal see Barrie
M. Morrison, Political Centres and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal, Arizona,

15) Harbans Mukhia, "Was there Feudalism in Indian History?", JPS, viii, no. 3,

16) Harbans Mukhia is critical of R. S. Sharma for visualising "the development
in India of almost all components of west European feudalism—serfdom, manor,
self-sufficient economic units, the feudalisation of crafts and commerce, apart,
of course, from declining trade and urbanisation" (see "Was there Feudalism
in Indian History?", op. cit., p. 285). While it is unfair to blame Sharma for
producing empirical evidence indicating similar developments in India and
Europe, Mukhia himself is guilty of reading in Sharma more than his words
about the existence of manor in India would mean. At one place in his Indian
Feudalism (first ed., Calcutta, 1965, p. 74) Sharma says: "the agraharas or
villages granted to brāhmaṇas bear some resemblance to manor, for in some
cases the beneficiaries enjoyed the right of levying forced labour of all varieties
on their tenants" (emphasis added). Obviously what is being implied here
is not the structural identity of the agrahara and the manor but the similarity
of a particular form of exploitation common to both. This is also the un-
derlying assumption of Sharma's another statement: "...only villages do-
ned to the brāhmaṇas could perhaps be regarded as such" (ibid., p. 271,
emphasis added). Mukhia thus misconstrues Sharma's statements to prove
his point.

17) The pre-feudal western Europe provides ample evidence of the existence of
large-sized farms (latifundia, villa) cultivated directly by their owners with the help of gang-slaves, which were the precursors of the medieval manor (Perry Anderson, Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism, second ed., London, 1975, pp. 59ff.; cf. Pierre Dockes, Medieval Slavery and Liberation, London, 1982, pp. 48–114). In contrast to this, Indian references to big farms worked by slaves are few, confined mainly to the Arthashastra and the Jatakas, and probably located in the middle Gangetic basin. This may explain the general absence of the manorial system in India.

18) The perception of feudalism as based on the “structured dependence of the entire peasantry on the lords” (JPS, viii, no. 2, April 1981, p. 276; ibid., xii, nos. 2 & 3, January / April 1985, p. 233) does not carry conviction if we take a comparative view of the typological variations of the feudal formation in different parts of medieval Europe, for it is based on the wrong assumption of the prevalence of the manorial system regardless of its spatial and temporal specificities. Cf. R. S. Sharma “How Feudal was Indian Feudalism”, op. cit. p. 33.

19) Varahamihira (6th century) for the first time refers to a section of workmen known as viṣṭikara or viṣṭikṛ (Brihajjataka, 18.11, 18.18, 21.7 cited in B.N.S. Yadava, “The Accounts of the Kali Age…”, op. cit. p. 56). While Yadava has drawn our attention to the literary evidence of the use of forced labour in agriculture (The Problems of the Emergence of Feudal Relations in Early India, Presidential Address, Section I, Indian History Congress, 41st Session, Bombay, 1980), the very fact is that in a good number of inscriptions the right to viṣṭi is transferred to the inhabitants to work in their fields. Cf. G. K. Rai, “Forced Labour in Ancient and Early Medieval India”, IHR, iii, no. 1, 1976, pp. 16–42; idem, Involuntary labour in Ancient India, Allahabad, 1981, chapters 4 and 5.

20) Epigraphio Carnatica, (revised ed.) i, 87; Y1. 138, 163; vi, Kr. 39.


22) See note 17 above.

23) Oppressive taxation appears to be an important feature of the Kaliyuga; R. S. Sharma, “The Kali Age…” op. cit.

24) It is quite probable that the ever increasing number of land grants led to the extension of agriculture in various parts of the country. Attention has also been drawn to the introduction of several new crops on the basis of some early medieval texts, notably Krisiparasara; IF, pp. 251–53; L. Gopal, “Techniques of Agriculture in Early Medieval India (c. 700–1200 A. D.)”, University of Allahabad Studies (1963–64), pp. 1–37. B. D. Chattopadhyaya has similarly indicated the increasing importance of araghaṭṭa and its possible role

25) *IF*, p. 266.


28) In the writings of Karl Marx, feudalism, unlike capitalism, is not viewed as a world system or a universal phenomenon. But there is little doubt that historical research over the years has shown it to be a widespread social formation, notwithstanding the considerable variation in its precise forms in different countries. Thus although the closest parallel to fully developed European feudalism may be said to have existed in Japan, in other countries the parallelism may be less close; Eric Hobsbawm, “From Feudalism to Capitalism” in Rodney Hilton, ed., *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, London, 1976, pp. 158–59.

29) Harbans Mukhia, “Was there Feudalism in Indian History?”, *JPS*, viii, no. 3, April 1981, pp. 273–310. The idea of free peasantry is not much different from the neo-populist Chayanonian concept of peasant economy which Burton Stein has applied to the study of medieval south India (See *Peasant, State and Society in Medieval South India*, New Delhi, 1980), though Mukhia very recently seems to have lost his original enthusiasm for it.

30) Mukhia’s generalization that soil in ancient and medieval India was very fertile completely ignores the spatial and temporal variation and is buttressed with the help of a few mutually unrelated textual references to the harvesting of two or three crops, spread over two millennia (*JPS*, viii, no. 3, p. 303, fn. nos. 124, 125, 126 and 127). If one were to adopt Mukhia’s method, it would not be difficult to produce far more substantial evidence of recurrent famines and drought to prove just the opposite point of view. Needless to emphasize then that the argument based on the supposed high fertility of land throughout the pre-colonial period of Indian history is misconceived. Cf. Stein, “Politics, Peasants and the Deconstruction of Feudalism in Medieval India”, *JPS*, xii. nos. 2 & 3, January / April 1985, pp. 57–58.


33) Karashima and Sitaraman, “Revenue Terms in Chola Inscriptions”, op. cit., p. 91.
38) EL, xxxii, no. 36.
43) Ibid.
44) Ibid.
47) Ibid.
48) Ibid., p. 128. Also see H. D. Raju Kumar, “Protest Against Heavy Taxation”, The Hindu, 28 February, 1978.
49) In the case of late medieval Europe the role of class conflict in the long-term evolution has been stressed and Robert Brenner, “Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in pre-Industrial Europe”, Past and Present, no. 70, February 1976, pp. 30–76, has argued that the crisis of European feuda-

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