# UNIT 7: DEBATE ON INDIAN FEUDALISM

## Unit Structure

7.1 Learning Objective

7.2 Introduction

7.3 Indian Feudalism - critique

7.4 Let us sum up

7.5 Further Reading

7.6 Answer to check your progress

7.7 Model Questions

## 7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you will be able to:

- understand the origin and meaning of the concept of feudalism as it developed in European historical writing;
- trace how this concept was borrowed and applied to early medieval Indian history;
- examine the main arguments put forward by scholars who support the idea of "Indian feudalism";
- critically assess the objections raised against this thesis, both on theoretical and empirical grounds;
- appreciate the significance of trade, urbanisation and currency in this debate; and
- form an independent view on whether feudalism is a useful framework for understanding early medieval India.

## 7.2 INTRODUCTION

The word "feudalism" did not originate in India , it is a term borrowed from European historical experience. As European powers expanded their influence across the globe, this term, like several other categories of thought, travelled outward and was applied to societies that had developed along very different lines. In its earliest usage, feudalism was understood mainly as a bond of mutual obligation between a lord and his subordinate, the vassal, governed by custom and law. Over time, the meaning broadened to describe a form of polity in which authority was scattered among numerous local chiefs, while a central ruler held only a symbolic position. Later still, under the influence of Marxist scholarship, the focus moved away from the personal tie between lord and vassal towards the economic relationship between those who owned land and those who worked it. The Annales school of French historians added yet another dimension, bringing into the discussion questions of family structure, mentality, and everyday social life.

When this layered and evolving concept reached India, it carried with it all these different shades of meaning, and Indian historians picked up one or another of these strands depending on their own theoretical orientation. This is why the "Indian feudalism" debate has never been a single, unified argument, but rather a cluster of related controversies about how best to characterise the political and economic order of early medieval India, roughly the period between the decline of the Gupta empire and the establishment of Turkish rule in the subcontinent.

## 7.3 INDIAN FEUDALISM - CRITIQUE

The first systematic use of the feudal framework in Indian historical writing is associated with Colonel James Tod, who compiled a detailed account of the Rajput states of Rajasthan in the early nineteenth century. Working within the dominant European understanding of his time, Tod saw feudalism primarily as a relationship of personal loyalty and military service binding a chief to his overlord, and he believed he had found close parallels to this arrangement among the Rajput clans he studied.

The meaning of feudalism shifted significantly only with the rise of Marxist historiography in India during the 1950s and 1960s. At this stage, the emphasis moved decisively away from the lord-vassal bond and towards questions of land ownership, labour, and class structure.

A major reason for this shift lay in the dissatisfaction many Indian Marxist scholars felt towards an earlier category proposed by Karl Marx himself, the so-called Asiatic Mode of Production. According to this idea, Asian societies, including India, had remained essentially static over long stretches of time because property was vested either in the ruler or in the community as a whole, leaving no scope for the kind of class conflict that, in Marx's broader scheme, drove historical change. This view of Asia as fundamentally "changeless" was not unique to Marx; it echoed assumptions found in the writings of several earlier European thinkers, including Montesquieu, James Mill, and Hegel, all of whom contrasted a dynamic Europe with a stagnant Orient.

Indian Marxist historians of the mid-twentieth century were unwilling to accept that Indian society had simply stood still for centuries before the arrival of colonial rule. Searching for an alternative framework that could accommodate change and transformation, several of them turned to the concept of feudalism, even though leading figures such as Irfan Habib remained sceptical of applying this label to India, despite sharing the broader criticism of the Asiatic Mode of Production.

In *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (1956) by D.D Kosambi, he viewed feudalism as a stage in the historical development of Indian society. He proposed that feudal relations in India developed through two simultaneous processes. On one hand, feudalism emerged "from above", as ruling powers granted land and associated privileges to officials, religious institutions, and Brahmin beneficiaries. On the other hand, it also emerged "from below", as locally powerful individuals and groups gradually consolidated their hold over village resources and rose to positions resembling those of landlords or subordinate chiefs.

It was Professor R.S. Sharma who, in his book 'Indian Feudalism' published in 1965 undertook the detailed empirical elaboration of the Indian feudalism thesis. Unlike Kosambi, Sharma concentrated almost entirely on the "from above" process, treating the granting of land by ruling authorities as the central mechanism through which feudal relations took root in India.

Sharma's framework drew heavily on a model developed for European history by the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne. Pirenne had argued that the disruption of long-distance Mediterranean trade, caused by Arab expansion in the seventh century, forced the European economy to turn inward. Estates became largely self-sufficient, producing almost everything their inhabitants needed, and this "closed estate economy" formed the material basis of European feudalism. According to Pirenne, this situation persisted until the revival of trade and urban life from around the eleventh century onward, a revival linked to the Crusades, which in turn led to the gradual decline of feudal arrangements.

Sharma transplanted this framework onto Indian history with considerable precision. He argued that the decline of the Gupta empire was accompanied by a contraction of India's long-distance trade links, leading to a decline of towns and a corresponding "ruralisation" of the economy. In this situation, although land and produce remained plentiful, metallic currency became scarce. Faced with this shortage, ruling powers increasingly compensated their officials, soldiers, and religious grantees with grants of land and associated rights over the cultivators living on that land, rather than with cash payments.This growing class of grantees, described as "intermediaries", steadily acquired greater control over the peasantry, who, in Sharma's reading, came to occupy a position comparable to that of serfs in medieval Europe. Sharma's thesis, presented in its fully developed form in 1965, exercised considerable influence on subsequent historical writing. Scholars such as B.N.S. Yadava and D.N. Jha extended and supported the argument.

At the same time, the thesis attracted serious criticism, most notably from D.C. Sircar, who represented an alternative position within the broader ideological divide of Indian historiography during the 1960s and 1970s. Despite these disagreements, the basic framework of the Indian feudalism thesis remained largely unchallenged at a foundational level until the close of the 1970s.

The most significant theoretical challenge to the Indian feudalism thesis came in 1979, when Harbans Mukhia delivered a presidential address to the Medieval India section of the Indian History Congress, provocatively titled "Was There Feudalism in Indian History?" Mukhia, himself working within the Marxist tradition, questioned the thesis on two distinct levels.

At the theoretical level, he raised doubts about whether feudalism could meaningfully be treated as a universal category applicable across very different societies. He argued that pre-capitalist economic systems, driven primarily by the requirements of consumption rather than by the relentless drive for profit that characterises capitalism, were inherently limited in their geographical reach. While capitalism had demonstrated the capacity to organise the entire world under a single system of production, no pre-capitalist formation, including feudalism, could plausibly

claim such universal scope. Attempts to rescue the concept by speaking of "variations" of feudalism, European, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and so on, only created a further dilemma: if the definition was loosened enough to cover all these variations, it became indistinguishable from any pre-capitalist system in general; if it remained precise, the variations themselves became too wide to fit comfortably under one heading. Mukhia noted that even within European historiography, prominent medievalists such as Georges Duby and Jacques Le Goff had grown increasingly hesitant to use the term feudalism at all.

At the empirical level, Mukhia compared medieval Western Europe and medieval India along three dimensions: ecological conditions, available agricultural technology, and the social organisation of labour.

He pointed out that Western Europe's short agricultural season, limited to about four months of usable sunshine, combined with highly labour-intensive techniques and low seed-to-yield ratios, created an intense and concentrated demand for labour during specific periods of the year. This pressure encouraged the tying of peasant labour to particular estates, producing the institution of serfdom, and generated ongoing tension between lords seeking to maximise control over labour and peasants seeking to protect time for their own cultivation. This tension, Mukhia argued, eventually contributed to technological improvement and rising productivity, until the demographic catastrophe of the Black Death disrupted this trajectory and provoked widespread peasant rebellions across fourteenth-century Europe.

India, by contrast, enjoyed nearly ten months of usable sunshine, fertile topsoil that did not require deep ploughing, and a breed of cattle whose physical structure allowed for far more efficient use of draught power than was possible in Europe for centuries. Indian agricultural productivity, measured in seed-to-yield ratios, was substantially higher than that of medieval Europe, and double-cropping was common in many regions long before it became feasible in Europe. Under these conditions, forced or unfree labour in agricultural production, comparable to European serfdom, was largely absent in India. Where unpaid labour services did exist, they were generally directed towards non-agricultural tasks performed for landholding intermediaries, rather than forming the basis of the agricultural production process itself. Consequently, the characteristic tension of the Indian agrarian order centred not on control over labour, but on disputes over the share of the produce claimed as revenue, a tension that played out largely outside the production process.

Mukhia concluded that medieval India was best described as a "free peasant economy", in which cultivators retained control over their own labour, while the state and its intermediaries claimed a portion of the produce. This, he argued, marked a fundamental structural difference from the European pattern, in which the resolution of the lord-serf conflict over labour eventually contributed to the transition from feudal to capitalist agriculture from the twelfth century onward. In India, by contrast, conflicts over revenue did not bring about a comparable transformation of the production system until much later, under altogether different historical circumstances.

R.S. Sharma, as the principal target of this critique, did not abandon his position but substantially refined it. In his essay "How Feudal Was Indian Feudalism?", he

moved away from explaining the rise of feudalism purely as a result of deliberate state policy, and instead presented it as an economic formation arising out of broader social and economic crises. He connected this reformulation to contemporary perceptions of decline associated with the idea of the *Kaliyuga*, a theme that B.N.S. Yadava explored in considerable depth through early medieval literary sources, interpreting *Kaliyuga*narratives as reflecting a genuine sense of crisis accompanying social transformation.

Sharma also expanded his evidence base regarding peasant resistance, identifying additional instances beyond the Kaivarta uprising discussed in his original work. In his later writings, particularly his 2001 collection *Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalisation*, he extended the analysis into cultural and ideological territory, examining how feudal hierarchies were reflected in art, architecture, and the values of loyalty and gratitude promoted within feudal society.

Other scholars working within the feudalism framework pursued similar cultural extensions. D.N. Jha, in his edited volume *The Feudal Order: State, Society and Ideology in Early Medieval India*, brought together essays exploring religion, particularly the Bhakti movement, and the growth of regional languages and cultures as part of what he termed the "feudal order". Whereas many historians have interpreted the rise of Bhakti as a popular reaction against Brahmanical orthodoxy, scholars within the feudalism school instead read it as reinforcing Brahmanical dominance, by cultivating attitudes of surrender and devotion that could readily be transferred from a deity to a worldly lord.

Even within this broadly sympathetic camp, disagreements emerged. D.N. Jha noted an apparent mismatch between the regions from which evidence of *Kaliyuga* anxieties was drawn and the regions where the supposed crisis was expected to be most acute. B.P. Sahu went further, suggesting that the *Kaliyuga* material reflected not a crisis but a redefinition and reassertion of Brahmanical ideas of kingship.

The most persistent challenge to the Indian feudalism thesis concerns its core assumption is that the period in question was marked by declining trade, shrinking towns, and a shortage of currency. This assumption has come under sustained pressure from two directions.

First, the European model itself, on which Sharma had relied so heavily, has been substantially revised by later historians. Marc Bloch questioned the very opposition between a "natural" or self-sufficient economy and a money economy, while Guy Bois demonstrated that feudal relationships in parts of Western Europe actually developed alongside, rather than in opposition to, expanding trade networks around the year 1000. The sharp dichotomy Pirenne had drawn between feudalism on one side and trade and urbanisation on the other has thus been largely abandoned even within European historiography.

Second, and more directly, empirical research on early medieval India has increasingly questioned whether trade and urban life actually declined to the extent the feudalism thesis requires. B.D. Chattopadhyaya has shown evidence of urban revival considerably earlier than the date Sharma's framework would predict, while Ranabir

Chakravarti's studies have documented flourishing trade networks during precisely the period supposedly characterised by economic contraction. Similarly, the assumption of a severe shortage of currency, central to Sharma's argument, has been challenged by the work of B.D. Chattopadhyaya, B.N. Mukherjee, and John S. Deyell, the last of whom argued in his 1990 study that the absence of large quantities of precious-metal coinage did not necessarily indicate an absence of functioning monetary exchange. As Marc Bloch had earlier shown for Europe, a wide range of commodities, including, in the Indian case, cowry shells imported from as far away as the Maldives, could and did serve as media of exchange, themselves implying the existence of long-distance trading networks.

Beyond these specific empirical disputes, the Indian feudalism thesis faces additional conceptual difficulties. If the feudal period in India is taken to span roughly from the third to the eleventh century, questions arise about how to characterise the centuries that followed, before the establishment of colonial rule, and about whether such a long span of time can reasonably be treated as a single, undifferentiated phase. European historians, by contrast, have long distinguished between earlier and later phases of feudalism, sometimes described as the "First and Second Feudal Age" or as the "Low and High Middle Ages", recognising that feudal society underwent significant internal transformation over time, and that in Europe feudalism was eventually succeeded by the rise of capitalism. No comparable account of internal change, or of what succeeded feudalism in India after the eleventh century, has been fully worked out within the Indian feudalism framework. Kosambi's suggestion that feudal structures persisted in India until the seventeenth century only widens this difficulty, by treating an even longer span of time as essentially unchanging.

Despite these unresolved tensions, the debate has been notable for the high intellectual standard maintained by its participants, a point remarked upon favourably by the English medievalist Susan Reynolds, who contrasted it with the more personalised disputes she observed in some European academic circles. Whatever its outcome, the debate has compelled historians on all sides to re-examine and refine their positions, which is, after all, the ordinary business of historical scholarship.

## 7.4 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, you have learnt-

- The application of the term "feudalism" to early medieval India has its roots in nineteenth-century European scholarship, beginning with James Tod's identification of lord-vassal relationships in Rajasthan. The concept was substantially reworked by Indian Marxist historians from the 1950s onward, partly as a reaction against Marx's own category of the Asiatic Mode of Production. D.D. Kosambi proposed a two-way process of feudalisation, from above and from below, while R.S. Sharma, drawing on Henri Pirenne's model of European feudalism, developed a detailed thesis centred on state-granted land assignments, declining trade, and the rise of an intermediary class controlling a subjected peasantry.

- The debate gained wide acceptance but was challenged theoretically and empirically by Harbans Mukhia in 1979, who questioned both the universal applicability of the concept of feudalism and the validity of drawing close parallels between Indian and European agrarian conditions. Sharma responded by refining his framework to emphasise broader social crisis rather than state policy alone, while other scholars extended the debate into cultural and religious domains, particularly through the study of Bhakti.
- More recently, research on trade, urbanisation, and currency by scholars such as B.D. Chattopadhyaya, Ranabir Chakravarti, and John S. Deyell has placed considerable strain on the central empirical claims of the Indian feudalism thesis, even as the broader theoretical and methodological questions raised by the debate remain only partially resolved.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

- Who first applied the concept of feudalism to Indian history?
- Which historian wrote *Indian Feudalism*?
- What is meant by "feudalism from above"?
- What is meant by "feudalism from below"?
- Which period is generally associated with Indian feudalism?
- Who was the major critic of the Indian feudalism thesis?

## 7.5 FURTHER READING

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

Deyell, John (1990), *Living Without Silver: The Monetary History of Early Medieval North India*, New Delhi.

Jha, D.N. (ed.) (2000), *The Feudal Order: State, Society and Ideology in Early Medieval India*, New Delhi.

Kosambi, D.D. (1956), *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Bombay.

Kulke, Hermann (ed.) (1994), *The State in India, A.D. 1000-1700*, New Delhi.

Mukhia, Harbans (ed.) (1999), *The Feudalism Debate*, New Delhi.

Sharma, R.S. (1965 and 1980), *Indian Feudalism*, New Delhi.

Sharma, R.S. (2001), *Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalisation*, Orient Longman, Calcutta.

## 7.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Answer to Q1**.Colonel James Tod.

**Answer to Q2**.R. S. Sharma.

**Answer to Q3**.The granting of land and privileges by rulers to Brahmins, officials, and institutions.

**Answer to Q4**.The growth of local chiefs and landlords exercising authority over peasants.

**Answer to Q5**.The period between the sixth and twelfth centuries CE.

**Answer to Q6**.Harbans Mukhia.

## 7.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

**( A) Very Short Questions**

1. What is feudalism ?
2. Where did the concept of feudalism originate?
3. Who first applied the concept of feudalism to Indian history?
4. Who wrote *Indian Feudalism*?
5. In which year was *Indian Feudalism* published?

(B) **Short Questions**

1. Discuss D.D. Kosambi's idea of feudalism "from above" and "from below."
2. Describe the main features of R.S. Sharma's theory of Indian feudalism.
3. How did scholars like B.D. Chattopadhyaya and Ranabir Chakravarti challenge the Indian feudalism thesis?

( C ) **Long Questions**

1. Discuss the origin of the concept of feudalism in European historiography and trace its application to early medieval Indian history.
2. Examine the main features of R.S. Sharma's thesis of Indian feudalism.
3. Critically evaluate Harbans Mukhia's theoretical and empirical objections to the concept of Indian feudalism.
4. The debate on Indian feudalism has enriched our understanding of early medieval Indian society." Discuss.
5. Critically examine the concept of Indian feudalism.