

- The post Gupta centuries of 7th to the 13th are considered as constituting the early medieval period in Indian history.
- Fundamental changes occurred in economy, society and polity of this period — led scholars to conceptualise these changes in the form of feudalism theory, Segmentary state formulation & as one of integration & continuity.
- Feudalism has been a subject of a lively debate among scholars of early medieval India & so the historiography has been very rich & nuanced.

FEUDALISM

- The term Feudalism signified the changes that occurred in Western Europe between the late 8th to the 14th century.
- Central to these changes was the grant of land called 'fief' (a form of real property right) around which revolved the social & economic relationships of the period under study.
- The word feudalism is derived from the German word 'feud', which literally meant a piece of land.
- In pre-modern societies, before the industrial revolution, land was the chief source of wealth.
- Land ownership & income derived from it determined the individual as well as societal wealth & status profile.
- Therefore, the relationships that governed the tilling & income from this land are crucial to understanding feudal societies.
- The terms on which each section of society utilized this land also governed their relationships to each other.
- Feudalism in this sense represents the entire complex of social, economic & political system derived from this crucial relationship.
- Serfdom was the basic institution that determined the mechanics of feudalism: as distinct from slavery, in which the one who worked the land was also owned by a member of the ruling landed aristocracy.
- The relationship with the lord, although less onerous than under slavery, was nevertheless one in which he was oppressed & his labour exploited to an extent that barely left him enough for survival.
- Mostly he worked with his own tools, & he had to draw his means of livelihood from the parcel of land he was tied to, not from any remuneration from the work he did on the lord's land
- This remuneration was a form of labour rent for the strips of land allotted to him by the lord to ensure labour for himself once slavery no longer remained viable.

AGRARIAN ECONOMY

- The early medieval period in Indian history marks the growth of cultivation & organization of land relations through land grants.
- These grants began around the beginning of Common Era & covered practically the entire subcontinent by the end of the twelfth century.
- In the early medieval period agricultural expansion meant a greater & regular use of advanced agricultural techniques, plough cultivation and irrigation technology.
- Institutional management of agricultural processes, control of means of production and new relations of production also played an important role in this expansion.
- With this expansion, new type of rural tensions also emerged.
- Commercial activities in agricultural and non-agricultural commodities increased.
- The agrarian expansion, which began with the establishment of brahmadeya & agrahara settlements through land grants to brahmanas from the fourth century onwards acquired a uniform & universal form in subsequent centuries.
- The centuries between the eighth & twelfth witnessed the processes of this expansion & the culmination of an agrarian organization based on land grants to religious & secular beneficiaries, i.e. brahmanas, temples & officers of the king's government.
- However, there are important regional variations in this development, both due to geographical as well as ecological factors.

AGRARIAN ORGANIZATION

- The agrarian organization & economy were highly complex – understood on the basis of intensive studies of the regional patterns of land grants & the character & role of the brahmadeya & non-brahmadeya and temple settlements.
- The growth & nature of land rights, interdependence among the different groups related to land & the production and distribution processes also help in a better understanding of the situation.
- A brahmadeya represents a grant of land either in individual plots or whole villages given away to brahmanas making them landowners or land controllers.
- The motives behind it was : – to bring virgin land under cultivation or to integrate existing agricultural settlements into the new economic order dominated by a brahmana proprietor.
- These brahmana donees played a major role in integrating various socio-economic groups into the

new order through service tenures & caste groupings under the varna system.

- For example, the growing peasantization of sudras was sought to be rationalized in the existing brahmanical social order.
- The practice of land grants as was initiated by the ruling dynasties & subsequently followed by chiefs, feudatories, etc.
- Brahmadeyas facilitated agrarian expansion because they were exempted from various taxes or dues either entirely or at least in the initial stages of settlement .
- They were also endowed with ever growing privileges (pratiharas).
- The ruling families derived economic advantages in the form of the extension of the resource base, moreover by creating brahmadeyas they also gained ideological support for their political power.
- The land donations implied more than the transfer of land rights. For example, in many cases, along with the revenues and economic resources of the village, human resources such as peasants (cultivators), artisans and others were also transferred to the donees.
- There is also growing evidence of the encroachment over the rights of villagers on community lands such as lakes and ponds.
- Thus, the brahmanas became managers of agricultural & artisanal production in these settlements for which they organized themselves into assemblies.
- From the seventh century onwards, officers of the state were also being remunerated through land grants.
- This is of special significance because it created another class of landlords who were not brahmanas.
- The gift of land to officials in charge of administrative divisions is mentioned as early as c. CE 200 (the time of Manu) but the practice picked up momentum in the post-Gupta period.
- Literary works dealing with Central India, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Bihar & Bengal between the tenth & twelfth centuries make frequent references to various kinds of grants to ministers, kinsmen and soldiers .
- The rajas, rajaputras ranakas, mahasamantas etc. mentioned in Pala land charters were mostly vassals connected with land.
- The incidence of grants to state officials varies from one region to another.
- Very large territories were granted to vassals and high officers under the Chalukyas of Gujarat.
- The available evidences suggest that Odisha had more service grants than Assam, Bengal and Bihar taken together.
- Further, the right of various officials to enjoy specific and exclusive levies — irrespective of the

tenure of these levies — was bound to create intermediaries with interests in the lands of the tenants.

- Large scale gifts to the religious establishments, worked as nuclei of agricultural settlements & helped in integrating various peasant & tribal settlements through a process of acculturation.
- They also integrated various socio-economic groups through service tenures or remuneration through temple lands.
- Temple lands were leased out to tenants, who paid a higher share of the produce to the temple.
- Such lands were also managed either by the sabha of the brahmadeya or mahajanas of the agrahara settlements.
- In non-brahmin settlements temples became the central institution. Here temple lands came to be administered by the temple executive committees composed of land owning non-brahmanas, e.g. the Vellalas of Tamil Nadu; the Okkalu, Kampulu, etc. of Karnataka and Andhra region.
- Different groups were assigned a caste & ritual status.
- It is in this process that people following 'impure' & "low occupations" were assigned the status of untouchables, kept out of the temple & given quarters at the fringes of the settlement.
- The supervision of temple lands was in the hands of brahmana & non-brahmana landed elite.
- The control of irrigation sources was also a major function of the local bodies dominated by landed elite groups.
- Thus the brahmana, the temple & higher strata of non-brahmanas as landlords, employers and holders of superior rights in land became the central feature of early medieval agrarian organization.
- The new landed elite also consisted of local peasant clan chiefs or heads of kinship groups and heads of families, who had kani rights i.e. rights of possession and supervision.
- In other words, several strata of intermediaries emerged between the king and the actual producer.
- An important aspect relating to land grants is the nature of rights granted to the assignees.
- Rights conferred upon the grantees included fiscal & administrative rights.
- The taxes, of which land tax was the major source of revenue, theoretically payable to the king or government, came to be assigned to the donees.
- The reference to pratiharas or exemptions in the copper plate & stone inscriptions registering such grants indicate that what was theoretically payable to the king was not being completely exempted from payment but the rights were now transferred to the grantees.
- This was apparently based on the sanction of the Dharmashastras which sought to establish the royal

ownership of land, creating intermediary rights in land.

- Although there is some evidence of a communal basis of land rights in early settlements, the development of private ownership of rights is indicated by the fact that the grantees often enjoyed rights of alienation of land.
- They also enjoyed other hereditary benefits in the settlements.
- Land gifts were often made after purchase from private individuals.
- Hereditary ownership seems to have developed out of such grants, both religious and secular.

RURAL TENSION

- Notwithstanding agrarian expansion, the rural landscape was far from being a homogeneous scene.
- There was a heterogeneous & stratified peasantry.
- The age old & pre-Gupta gahapatis now replaced by graded personnel associated with land : kshetrik, karshaka, halin & ardhik.
- Regrettably, there is hardly any indication of landownership in these terms, which seem to be referring to various categories of cultivators.
- The damara revolts in Kashmir, rebellion of the Kaivarthas during the reign of Rampala in Bengal, acts of self-immolation in situations of encroachments on land in Tamil Nadu, appropriation of donated land by sudras in the Pandya territory, are indices of distrust against the new landed intermediaries.
- The fact that donors often looked for land where cultivation was not disputed also shows the seeds of turmoil.
- The possibility of the hero-stones in and around agraharas also has the potential of throwing light on rumblings beneath the surface in agrarian settlements.

AGRICULTURE & EXCHANGE NETWORK

- It is agrarian & self-sufficient village economy, production was mainly subsistence oriented & was not in response to the laws of the market.
- Hence there was little scope for economic growth.
- Craftsmen & artisans were attached either to villages or estates or religious establishments.
- Hence there was no significant role for traders and middlemen, who only procured and supplied iron tools, oil, spices, cloth, etc. to the rural folk.
- In other words the functioning of the market system was extremely limited.
- The aforesaid picture is certainly true for the period 300-800 CE.
- However, the subsequent 500 years witnessed a rapid increase in the number of agrarian settlements & the growth of local markets initially for local exchange.

- Subsequently, the need for regular exchange within a region & with other regions led to organized commerce.
- This in turn led to the emergence of merchant organizations, itinerant trade & partial monetization from the ninth century.
- Though the relative importance of these features varied from one region to another, the increasing role of agriculture in this new economy is easily seen.
- Agricultural products came to be exchanged with items of long distance trade carried on by itinerant traders.
- This development also led to a change in the pattern of land ownership towards the close of the early medieval period.
- Merchants & economically influential craftsmen, like weavers, invested in land i.e. purchased land or acquired land & made gifts of land.
- In south Karnataka, for example, a group called the Jagati-kottali (community of weavers) & the community of Telligas (oil pressers) were active participants in agriculture.

CHARACTERISATION OF EARLY MEDIEVAL AGRARIAN ECONOMY

SALIENT FEATURES OF INDIAN FEUDALISM

- Different views have been put forward regarding the nature of the overall set up of early medieval agrarian economy.
- On the one hand, it is seen as a manifestation of feudal economy, while on the other it is dubbed as a peasant state and society.

FEATURES :- HIERARCHICAL INTERMEDIARIES

- Emergence of hierarchical landed intermediaries.
- Vassals & officers of state & other secular assignee had military obligations and feudal titles.
- Sub-infeudation by these donees to get their land cultivated led to the growth of different strata of intermediaries.
- It was a hierarchy of landed aristocrats, tenants, sharecroppers and cultivators.
- This hierarchy was also reflected in the power/administrative structure, where a sort of lord-vassal relationship emerged.
- In other words, Indian feudalism consisted in the gross unequal distribution of land and its produce.

FEATURES :- FORCED LABOUR

- The right of extracting forced labour (vishti) is believed to have been exercised by the brahmana and other grantees of land.
- Forced labour was originally a prerogative of the king or the state.
- It was transferred to the grantees, petty officials, village authorities and others.
- In the Chola inscriptions alone, there are more than one hundred references to forced labour.
- Even the peasants and artisans come within the jurisdiction of vishti.

- As a result, a kind of serfdom emerged, in which agricultural labourers were reduced to the position of semi-serfs.

FEATURES : — CURTAILMENT OF RIGHTS OF PEASANTS

- Due to the growing claims of greater rights over land by rulers and intermediaries, peasants also suffered a curtailment of their land rights.
- Many were reduced to the position of tenants facing ever growing threat of eviction.
- A number of peasants were only ardhikas (sharecroppers).
- The strain on the peasantry was also caused by the burden of taxation, coercion and increase in their indebtedness.

FEATURES : — EXTRA ECONOMIC COERCION

- Surplus was extracted through various methods.
- Extra economic coercion was a conspicuous method.
- With the rise of new property relations, new mechanisms of economic subordination also evolved.
- The increasing burden is evident in the mentioning of more than fifty levies in the inscription of Rajaraja Chola.

FEATURES : - CLOSED VILLAGE ECONOMY

- It was relatively a closed village economy.
- The transfer of human resources along with land to the beneficiaries shows that in such villages the peasants, craftsmen and artisans were attached to the villages and hence were mutually dependent.
- Their attachment to land and to service grants ensured control over them by the beneficiaries.
- In brief, a subject & immobile peasantry, functioning in relatively self-sufficient villages buttressed by varna restrictions

TRADE & COMMERCE

- The interrelated developments are: - nature & extent of the use of money, the functioning of the market, the role of agricultural production, and stages in the conditions of urban settlements
- All of these is related to the system of land grants as an almost all India phenomenon between the eighth to the thirteenth centuries.
- One may even suggest that trade and commerce too were being 'feudalized' during this period.
- Trade depends on a number of factors such as the nature and quantity of production, facilities of transport, safety and security of traders, the pattern of exchange, etc.
- It also involves different sections of society including traders, merchants, peasants & artisans.
- In an indirect manner, political authorities have a stake in it as taxes on the articles of commerce – constitute an important source of revenue of the state.
- The period from 750-1000 CE witnessed widespread practice of granting land not only to

priests and temples but also to warrior chiefs and state officials.

- As already seen it led to the emergence of a hierarchy of landlord's even graded state officials such as mahamandaleswar, mandalika, samanta, mahasamanta, thakkura etc. developed interests in land.
- However, they were different from the actual tillers of the soil and lived on the surplus extracted from the peasants who were hardly left with anything to trade.
- It resulted in the growth of rural economy where local needs were being satisfied locally through the imposition of numerous restrictions on the mobility of actual producers.
- The relative dearth of medium of exchange, viz. metal coins only strengthened this trend.

MEDIA OF EXCHANGE

- India was ruled by many important dynasties between 750 and 1000 CE.
- These include the Gurjara Pratihars in western India, the Palas in eastern India and the Rashtrakutas in the Deccan.
- All had the distinction of having been served by some of the most powerful kings of the day, many of whom had very long lasting reigns.
- Their available coins are very few and in no way compare either in quantity or quality with the coins of earlier centuries.
- The paucity of actual coins and the absence of coin-moulds in archaeological finds leads us to believe in the shrinkage of trade during the period under survey.
- Though first suggested by D.D. Kosambi, it was the publication of Professor R.S. Sharma's Indian Feudalism in 1965 that brought to focus the paucity of coinage in the post-Gupta times, its link with trade and commerce & consequent emergence of feudal social formation.

RESPONSES GENERATED IN THE DEBATES

- A case study of Odisha substantiates complete absence of coins between c. 600 CE and 1200 CE but argues for trade with Southeast Asia & emphasizes the role of barter in foreign trade.
- However, Kashmir shows emergence of copper coinage from the eighth century CE. Extremely poor quality of this coinage has been explained the decline of trade-based economy and rise of agricultural pursuits in the valley.
- Finally, a point of view questions not only the idea of paucity of coins but also the decline in trade. This is based on the evidence from what is described as the mid-eastern India comprising Bihar, West Bengal and the present Bangladesh during 750-1200 CE
- While it is conceded that there was no coined money & that the Palas and Senas themselves did not strike coins.

- It is also argued that there was no dearth of media of exchange.
- To illustrate, it is emphasized that there was not only a long series of Harikela silver coinage but also cowries and more importantly churni (money in the form of gold/silver dust) also functioned as media of exchange.

OTHER DEBATES

- The relevant sources cited in the context of the mid-eastern India, are silent about the participation of indigenous people in the maritime trade of the area.
- Even the limited trading activities were confined to the ruling elite.
- The miserable conditions of the common man are reflected in the meaning of the word vangali (Bengali) which denoted somebody "very poor & miserable"
- Detailed study of Cambodia under Khmer rule, shows that during the two centuries of post-Gupta times (CE 600-800) Southeast Asia failed to evolve any system of coinage & barter.
- Even when such early medieval coin types as the Indo-Sassanian.
- Shri Vighraha, Shri Adivaraha, Bull & Horseman, Gadhaiya, etc. emerged in western & north western India and Ganga valley
- The extremely poor quality & purchasing power of these coins also indicate the shrinkage of their actual role.
- Further, in relation to the rising population & expanding area of settlement, the overall volume of money circulation was negligible.
- The relative decline of metallic money during this period is based on convincing empirical evidence.
- This was bound to have an impact on India's trading activities.

RELATIVE DECLINE IN TRADE

- The fragmentation of political authority & the dispersal of power to local chiefs, religious grantees, etc. seem to have had an adverse effect.
- Many of the intermediary landlords, particularly of less productive areas, resorted to loot & plunder or excessive taxes on goods passing through their territories.
- This must have dampened the enthusiasm of traders & merchants.
- No less discouraging were the frequent wars amongst potential ruling chiefs.
- Though two Jain texts of the eighth century, Samaraicakaha of Haribhadra Suri & the Kuvalayamala of Uddyotana Suri, refers to brisk trade & busy towns, But these texts draw their material from the sources of the earlier centuries.

DECLINE IN THE TRADE

- The decline of foreign trade with the West due to the fall of the great Roman Empire in the fourth century.

- It was also affected adversely in the middle of the sixth century when the people of Byzantine (Eastern Roman Empire) learnt the art of making silk.
- India thus lost an important market
- It was also caused by the expansion of Arabs on the north-west frontiers of India in the seventh and eighth centuries.
- Their presence in the region made overland routes unsafe for Indian merchants.
- A story in the Kathasaritsagara tells us that a group of merchants going from Ujjain to Peshawar were captured by an Arab and sold off.
- Later, when they somehow got free, they decided to leave the north-western region forever and returned to south for trade.
- The fights amongst the Tibetans & Chinese during these centuries affected the flow of goods along the routes in Central Asia.
- The western coast of India suffered dislocation and disruption of sea trade as the Arabs raided Broach & Thana in the seventh century and destroyed Valabhi an important port on the Saurashtra coast, in the eighth century.
- But Arabs played an important part in the growth of Indian maritime trade after the tenth century
- There are some references in the contemporary literature to India's contact with Southeast Asia, but it is doubtful whether it could make up for the loss suffered on account of the decline of trade with the West.

URBAN SETTLEMENT

- This period saw the decay & desertion of many towns— a symptom of commercial decline as the towns are primarily the settlements of people engaged in crafts & commerce.
- As trade declined & the demand for craft-goods slumped, the traders and craftsmen living in towns had to disperse to rural areas for alternative means of livelihood.
- Besides the accounts of Hiuen Tsang, the Puranic records too, while referring to Kali age indicate depopulation of important cities.
- This seems to have been the continuation of the trend already indicated by Varahamihira (5th century).
- The decay of important towns such as Vaishali, Pataliputra, Varanasi, etc. is evident from the archaeological excavations which reveal poverty of structure & antiquities.
- Even those settlements which continued up to the eighth century, were deserted thereafter.
- Ropar (in Punjab), Atranjikhara and Bhita (in Uttar Pradesh), Eran (in Madhya Pradesh), Prabhas Patan (in Gujarat), Maheshwar and Paunar (in Maharashtra), and Kudavelli (in Andhra Pradesh) in this category of urban settlements.
- Even the medieval greatness of Kannauj (Farrukhabad district of Uttar Pradesh) for which

several wars were fought amongst the Palas, Pratiharas and the Rashtrakutas, has still to be testified by the excavator's spade.

- The commercial activity during this phase had declined but did not disappear completely.
- In fact, trade in costly & luxury goods meant for the use of kings, feudal chiefs and heads of temples and monasteries continued to exist.
- The articles such as precious & semi-precious stones, ivory, horses, etc. formed an important part of the long distance trade, but the evidence for transactions in the goods of daily use is quite meagre
- The only important articles mentioned in the inscriptions are salt and oil which could not be produced by every village, and thus had to be brought from outside.
- If the economy had not been self-sufficient, the references to trade in grains, sugar, textile, handicrafts, etc. would have been more numerous.
- In short the nature of commercial activity during CE 750-1000 catered more to the landed intermediaries and feudal lords rather than the masses.
- Though there were some pockets of trade & commerce such as Pehoa (near Karnal in Haryana) and Ahar (near Bulandshahr in Uttar Pradesh) where merchants from far and wide met to transact business, they could not make any significant dent in the closed economy of the country.

INDIAN FEUDALISM

- The first assimilation of 'feudalism' in the Indian context occurred at the hands of Col. James Tod, a celebrated compiler of the annals of Rajasthan's history in the early part of the nineteenth century.
- For Tod, 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 & subsistence of his vassals & they in turn rendered military & other services to the lord.
- A sense of loyalty also tied the vassal to the lord in perpetuity.
- Tod found the institution and the pattern replicated in the Rajasthan
- with the growing Marxist influence on Indian history writing between the mid-1950s & the mid-60s the term feudalism lost its meaning in lord-vassal relationship & acquired a meaning in the context of the evolution of Indian class structure.
- D. D. Kosambi 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 & from below in his landmark book, 'An Introduction to the Study of Indian History', first published in 1956.

- According to Kosambi, the feudal structure was created by the state granting land & rights to officials & brahmanas; from below many individuals & small groups rose from the village levels of power to become landlords & vassals of the kings
- Kosambi formulated the notion of feudalism in the shape of a formula rather than in a detailed empirical study.
- This major task was taken up by Professor R. S. Sharma in his Indian Feudalism, 1965.
- However, R. S. Sharma did not follow the Kosambian formula of feudalism from below and from above; instead, he envisioned the rise of feudalism in Indian history entirely as 'the consequence of state action, i.e. from above.
- It is only lately that he has turned his attention to the other phenomenon.
- R. S. Sharma essentially emulated the model of the rise and decline of feudalism in Europe formulated in great detail by the Belgian historian of the 1920s and 30s, Henri Pirenne.
- Pirenne had replaced the stereotype of European feudalism as lord-vassal relationship
- He postulated that 'grand trade', i.e. long distance trade in Europe across the Mediterranean had allowed European economy, society and civilization to flourish in Antiquity until its disruption by the Arab invasions of Europe in the seventh century.
- Disruption of trade led to the economy's ruralisation, which made it inwards, rather than outward looking. It also resulted in what Pirenne called 'the closed estate economy'
- The closed estate signified the unit of land held by the Lord (10,000 acres on an average) & cultivated by the peasant, where trade was minimal & almost everything the inhabitants of the estate required was produced within.
- These estates, were economically 'self-sufficient' units.
- The picture changed again from the eleventh century when the Crusades threw the Arabs back to the Near East; this led to the revival of trade and cities and the decline of feudalism.
- Pirenne thus posited an irreconcilable opposition between trade and urbanization on the one hand & feudalism on the other.
- R.S. Sharma copied this model in almost every detail
- He visualized the decline of India's long distance trade after the fall of the Guptas; urbanization also suffered in consequence, resulting in the economy's ruralisation.
- A scenario thus arose in which economic resources were not scarce but currency was.
- Since coins were not available, the state started handing out land in payment to its employees and grantees like the brahmanas.

- 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.
- The rise of the class of intermediaries through the state action of giving grants to them is the crucial element in Sharma's construction of Indian feudalism
- Later on in his writings, he built other edifices too, like the growth of the class of scribes, to be consolidated into the caste of Kayasthas, because state grants needed to be recorded.
- It continued till the eleventh century when the revival of trade reopened the process of urbanization.
- Professor B. N. S. Yadava, refers to the Huna invasions of India which almost coincided with the beginning of the rise of feudalism here
- The decline of feudalism is suggested in this revival, although R. S. Sharma does not go into this aspect in as much detail.
- The oppressive feudal system in Europe had resulted in massive rebellions of the peasantry
- In India R. S. Sharma looked for evidence of similar uprising but found only one example of Kaivartas — were boatmen in eastern Bengal but also engaged part time in cultivation — having revolted in the eleventh century.
- Other scholars supported the thesis with some more details, although practically no one explored any other aspects, such as social or cultural aspect for long afterwards. B. N. S. Yadava and D. N. Zha stood firmly by the feudalism thesis.
- The theme found echoes in south Indian historiography too, with highly acclaimed historians like M.G.S. Narayanan & Noboru Karashima abiding by it.
- The most eminent among critics was D. C. Sircar.
- There was too a fairly clear ideological divide which characterised history writing in the 1960s and 70s: D. D. Kosarnbi, R.S. Sharma, B. N. S. Yadava & D. N. Jha were firmly committed Marxists; D. C. Sircar stood on the other side of the Marxist fence.
- However neither support nor opposition to the notion of feudalism opened up until the end of the 1970s.
- In 1946 one of the most renowned Marxist economists of Cambridge university, UK, Maurice Dobb, published his book, Studies in the Development of Capitalism in which he first seriously questioned the Pirennean opposition between trade and feudalism and drew attention to the fact that the revival of trade in Eastern Europe had brought about the 'second serfdom', i.e., feudalism.
- He thus posited the view that feudalism did not decline even in Western Europe due to the revival

of trade but due to the flight of the peasants to cities from excessive & increasing exploitation by the lords in the countryside.

- This thesis led to an international debate in the early 1950s among Marxist economists & historians.
- The debate was still chiefly confined to the question whether feudalism and trade were mutually incompatible.
- In France, where an alternative paradigm of history writing, known as the Annales paradigm, was evolving, newer questions were being asked and newer dimensions of the problem being explored.
- Some of these questions had travelled to India as well.

WAS THERE FEUDALISM IN INDIA ?

- In 1979 a Presidential Address to the Medieval India Section of the Indian History Congress's fortieth session was entitled 'Was There Feudalism in Indian History?' Harbans Mukhia, its author, a committed practitioner of Marxist history writing, questioned the Indian feudalism thesis at the theoretical plane & then at the empirical level by comparing the medieval Indian scenario with medieval Europe.
- The theoretical problem was concerned with the issue whether feudalism could at all be conceived of as a universal system.
- If the driving force of profit maximisation had led capitalism on to ever rising scale of production & ever expanding market until it encompassed the whole world under its dominance, & if this was a characteristic of capitalism to thus establish a world system under the hegemony of a single system of production, logically it would be beyond the reach of any pre-capitalist system to expand itself to a world scale.
- For, the force of consumption rather than profit maximization drove pre-capitalist economic systems, & this limited their capacity for expansion beyond the local or the regional level.
- Feudalism thus could only be a regional system rather than a world system.
- The problem is hard to resolve by positing different variations of feudalism: the European, the Chinese, the Japanese and the Indian, etc., although this has often been attempted by historians.
- For, then either the definition of feudalism turns so loose as to become synonymous with every pre-capitalist system and therefore fails to demarcate feudalism from the others and is thus rendered useless; or, if the definition is precise, as it should be to remain functional, the 'variations' become so wide as to render it useless.
- Indeed, even within the same region, the variations are so numerous that some of the most respected historians of medieval Europe in recent years, such

as Georges Duby and Jacques Le Goff, tend to avoid the use of the term feudalism altogether.

- The empirical basis of the questioning of Indian feudalism in the 1979 Presidential Address lay 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 organization of forms of labour use in agriculture in the two regions.
- With this intervention, the debate was no longer confined to feudalism/ trade dichotomy
- The empirical argument followed the perspective that the ecology of Western Europe gave it four months of sunshine in a year; all agricultural operations, therefore must be completed within this period.
- Besides, the technology that was used was extremely labour intensive and productivity of both land and labour was pegged at the dismal seed: yield ratio of 1:2.5 at the most.
- Consequently the demand for labour during the four months was intense.
- Even a day's labour lost would cut into production.
- The solution was found in tying of labour to the land, or serfdom.
- This generated enormous tension between the lord and the serf in the very process of production; the lord would seek to control the peasant labour more intensively; the peasant would, even while appearing to be very docile, try to steal the lord's time to cultivate his own land.
- The struggle, was intense, led to technological improvement, rise in productivity to 1:4 by the twelfth century, substantial rise in population & therefore untying of labour from land, expansion of agriculture and a spurt to trade and urbanization.
- The process was, however, upset by the Black Death in 1348-51 which wiped out a quarter of the population leading to labour scarcity again.
- These rebellions were the work of the prosperous, rather than the poor peasants.
- By the end of the century, feudalism had been reduced to a debris.
- Indian ecology, was marked by almost ten months of sunshine where agricultural processes could be spread out.
- Because of the intense heat, followed by rainfall, the upper crust of the soil was the bed of fertility; it therefore did not require deep, labour intensive digging.
- The hump on the Indian bull allowed the Indian peasant to use the bull's draught power to the maximum, for it allowed the plough to be placed on the bull's shoulder; the plain back on his European counterpart would let the plough slip as he pulled it.
- It took centuries of technological improvement to facilitate full use of the bull's drawing power on medieval European fields.
- The productivity of land was also much higher in medieval India, pegged at 1:16.
- Besides, most Indian lands yielded two crops a year, something unheard of in Europe until the nineteenth century.
- The forms of labour use in agriculture should follow a different pattern.
- Begar, or tied labour, paid or unpaid, was seldom part of the process of production here; it was more used for non-productive purposes such as carrying the zamindar's loads by the peasants on their heads or supplying milk or oil, etc. to the zamindars.
- In other words tension between the peasant & the zamindar played outside the process of production on the question of the quantum of revenue.
- Therefore the same levels of technological breakthroughs & transformation was not seen in the production processes in medieval India as we see in medieval Europe.
- But technology & production process wasn't completely static in India
- The 1979 Address had characterised the medieval Indian system as one marked by free peasant economy.
- Free peasant was understood as distinct from the medieval European serf.
- Whereas the serf's labour for the purposes of agricultural production was set under the control of the lord, the labour of his Indian counterpart was under his own control; what was subject to the state's control was the amount of produce of the land in the form of revenue.
- The resolution of tension over the control of labour resulted in transformation of the production system from feudal to capitalist in European agriculture from the twelfth century onwards.
- In India tension over revenue did not affect the production system as such and its transformation began to seep in only in the twentieth century under a different set of circumstances.
- Was There Feudalism in Indian History?' was reprinted in the pages of a British publication, The Journal of Peasant Studies in 1981.
- Within the next few years it had created so much interest in international circles that in 1985 a special double issue of the journal, centred on this paper, comprising eight articles from around the world and the original author's response to the eight, was published under the title Feudalism & Non-European Societies, jointly edited by T. J. Byres of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, editor of the journal, and the article's author.

FEUDALISM RECONSIDERED

- While the debate critically examined the theoretical proposition of the universality of the concept of feudalism, 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.
 - B. N. S. Yadava also joined in with a detailed study of the notion of Kaliyuga in early medieval Indian literature and suggested that this notion had the characteristics of a crisis — the context for the transition of a society from one stage to another.
 - All this considerably enriched the argument on behalf of Indian feudalism.
 - R.S. Sharma was also able to trace several other instances of peasant resistance than the one he had unearthed in his 1965 book.
 - R. S. Sharma has lately turned his attention to the ideological & cultural aspects of the feudal society; in his latest collection of essays, published under the title Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalisation in 2001 in New Delhi, he has revised several of his old arguments 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.
 - This venture of extension into the cultural sphere has been undertaken by several other historians
 - In a collection of sixteen essays, The Feudal Order: State, Society and Ideology in Early Medieval India, 1987 and 2000, its editor D.N. Jha has taken care to include 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, 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 & loyalty could easily be transferred on to the feudal lord & master.
 - There have been certain differences of opinion among the historians.
 - D. N. Jha for example had found inconsistency between the locale of the evidence of the notion of Kaliyuga and site of the 'crisis' which the kaliyuga indicated: the evidence came from peninsular India, but the crisis was expected in brahmanical north.
 - B. P. Sahu too had cast doubt on the validity of the evidence of a kaliyuga as indicator of a crisis; instead, he had perceived it more as a redefinition of kingship & therefore a reassertion of Brahmanical ideology rather than a crisis within it.
- FEUDALISM, TRADE & URBANIZATION**
- However, the basic structure of the Indian feudalism thesis, i.e. antagonism between trade & urbanisation on one hand and feudalism on the other remains untouched. And that has not been without problems vis-a-vis recent trends in history writing.
 - In European historiography itself there has been a sea change among historians on this problematic.
 - The great French historian, Marc Bloch, even titled one of his papers as 'Natural Economy vs. Money Economy: A Pseudo-Dilemma', and another French historian, Guy Bois has in a recent work traced the development of feudal economic relationships in Western Europe around the year 1000 in those very areas where trade had greatly developed.
 - In other words, he has established a direct causal relationship between trade & feudalism
 - The very notion of the existence of self-sufficient economy has been fundamentally questioned both at the level of theory as well as empirical data almost everywhere.
 - Clearly, even for one's daily needs at the lowest level of subsistence, some trade must take place whether for buying salt or clothes or utensils; the volume of buying things & the use of money for it rises as we go up the social ladder.
 - Trade in some form or another is also embedded in an agricultural economy, for the nature of the soil in different regions necessitates cultivation of different crops; they must exchange their produce in order to obtain necessities of subsistence.
 - D. N. Jha had criticised 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.
 - But, more substantively, trade has been demonstrated to have flourished in several regions of India long before the deadline set by feudalists for its revival around the year 1000, parallel to Europe.
 - B. D. Chattopadhyaya has shown that to have happened at least a century earlier.
 - More recently Ranabir Chakravarti in two books, Trade in Early India, 2001 and Trade and Traders in

Early Indian Society, 2002, has brought forward ample evidence of flourishing trade in the concerned period.

- The monetary anaemia thesis, has also been put under severe strain by recent researches of B. D. Chattopadhyaya & B. N. Mukherjee
- John S. Deyell too in his book, Living without Silver, 1990, seriously undermined the assumption of the scarcity of money.
- Metals like gold, silver or copper are not the only forms of money in medieval societies.
- Marc Bloch had shown that in medieval Europe, almost anything could perform the functions of a medium of exchange i.e., money: a certain measure of a certain kind of spice, a piece of cloth of a certain quality, a measure of a particular grain, whatever.
- In India too, the tradition of cowries as a medium of exchange has recently attracted the attention of historians and the fact that procuring cowries actually involved long distance trade, for the cowry shells were obtained from the far off Maldives, highlights its significance.

PROBLEMS

- There are some other methodological problems too. If the period between c. 300 and c. 1100 is the life span of Indian feudalism, how is one to characterise the succeeding era, 'medieval India' as it is normally called, prior to the establishment of the colonial regime?
- Besides, can one leave the long stretch of time under one single head with the implicit assumption that the whole stretch was a single unit which did not witness any major mutations?

- Marc Bloch had, for example, classified the period of feudalism in Europe into the First Feudal Age and the Second Feudal Age, with the dividing roughly drawn across the year 1000.
- So sharp was the change in his view that a person from one age would have found himself an alien in the other.
- The profound mutations within the structure of feudalism are by now conventional wisdom in European historiography, even if the terms used by different historians sometimes differ.
- Some historians prefer 'Low and High Middle Ages' to the 'First and the Second Feudal Age.' Also, there is consensus that feudalism in Europe was succeeded by the rise and consolidation of capitalism.
- Colonialism was one facet of the rise of capitalism.
- Adherents of feudalism have not seriously encountered these questions.
- D. D. Kosambi had extended feudalism to the 17th century; this would only compound the problem further by extending its life by another six centuries — an impossible plea for historians of today to entertain
- The problems notwithstanding, 'The Feudalism Debate' has nevertheless traversed a long distance.
- The debate has been most fertile because it led almost everyone to rethink one's own position and to refine it and modify aspects of it, even while defending it.
- In the end no conclusive answers were found; but that's in the nature of the discipline, for, it constantly seeks to renew itself through self-questioning.