



# **Early Medieval India**

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## Early Medieval India (c. 750 – 1200 CE)

### Historiography of Indian Feudalism:

D. D. Kausambi was the first Marxist scholar who proposed the concept of feudalism in the Indian context. He coined the terms like, 'feudalism from above' and 'feudalism from below'. According to Kausambi, the feudalism from above or the first stage of feudalism saw the development of a hierarchy between the Kings and his vassals/Samantas. There were no landed intermediaries in this part. The feudalism from below or the second stage of feudalism was the result of land grants which saw the rise of local landed intermediaries between the royal authority and peasantry. However, this two stage evolution of feudalism was rejected by later Marxist historians.

Later, R. S. Sharma undertook a thorough study of the phenomenon of Indian feudalism in his magnum opus, 'Indian Feudalism'. However, he rejected this bifurcation of feudalism from above and below. He studied this phenomenon as a whole. He also linked the Indian feudalism with land grants. He believed that land grants, which were merely religious endowments in the beginning, eventually turned the whole socio-economic structure upside down. Basically, the feudalism paradigm proposed by R. S. Sharma is based on the twin pillars of land grants and decline in trade & money economy.

According to Sharma, land grants were started by Satvahana Kings as a charity to the Brahmana and Buddhist monks. But, the administrative and judicial responsibility rested with the state itself. However from 5<sup>th</sup> century CE onwards, even the administrative rights were transferred to the donees viz. the copper plate land grant inscription of Prabhavati Gupta of Vakataka kingdom. Also, up to the Gupta period, the post of royal officers had become hereditary. And from the period of Harsha, these officials were paid through land grants, which might be due to the paucity of coins on account of a decline in trade and commerce in the post-Gupta period. This was essentially a feudalization of bureaucracy. Additionally, up to the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, most of the grants were individual grants, but, between 5<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century CE, most of the grants were made to the temples and monasteries. From 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards, military grants were more numerous. In this way, land grants led to the feudal formations in India.

But, the views of R. S. Sharma were opposed by two historians, B. C. Sarkar and B. D. Chattopadhyay. B. C. Sarkar, in an article, '**Landlordism confused with Feudalism**', tried to prove that R. S. Sharma had confused the landlords as feudal lords. B. D. Chattopadhyay countered the views of Sharma on the decline of trade & commerce, money economy and urbanisation. He emphasised that there was no such decline in any of the three. If some old currencies disappeared then some new ones emerged e.g. silver coins from Harikela (Bangladesh) and coins from Kashmir valley. He presented a long list of coins viz. masaka, drama, rupaka, dinar etc. mentioned in contemporary texts. He declared that to negate literary evidences and to give primacy to archaeological evidence is an extremist view. Likewise, old towns were replaced by new towns. E.g. if Pataliputra region declined then Kannauj region became prominent.

B. D. Chattopadhyay proposed an alternative paradigm called as '**Integrative State System**'. In this model, he tried to prove that the multiplicity of states is a normal feature of the

post Gupta period. But, it was not due to the political fragmentation but due to the integration of new states in the existing state system. According to him, land grants played an important role in state formation in tribal areas. A simultaneous expansion of agriculture and assimilation of tribals into the Varna divided society was happening on account of the land grant phenomenon. The tribal gods were integrated into the existing Brahmanic-Puranic pantheon. In this entire process, Brahmanas/Priestly class and temple cult played important roles. So, land grants did not fragment existing states but integrated new regions in the form of new states into the existing state system.

Harvansh Mukhia pointed out that the feudalism of Europe had emerged out of its existing socio-economic conditions and not out of an instrument of state policy like land grants, which Sharma was proposing. It was like proposing that Indians were their own grave diggers. More importantly, the manorial system and serfdom, the two key features of the European feudalism, were completely missing from the Indian feudalism paradigm of R. S. Sharma.

R. S. Sharma, in his article, '**How feudal was the Indian feudalism**', which was published in 1989 CE, addressed the concerns of Mukhia. He replied to the first concern by pointing out that Indian Kings did not resort to land grants voluntarily. They started to make these grants to address the socio-political challenges mentioned in Purana in the form of 'Kaliyuga'. The Puranas from the post-Mauryan period were alluding to some sort of social crisis in their idea of 'Kaliyuga'. In his reply to the second concern, Sharma said that the end is more important than the means adopted to achieve that end. The manorial system and serfdom were adopted by the feudal lords of Europe to appropriate the agrarian surplus. In India, feudal lords could do so without adopting these two instrument.

Andre Wing also rejected the feudalism model of R. S. Sharma. He had given an alternative model in the form of 'segmentary state system', which was originally proposed to study the Chola polity. R. S. Sharma had simply ignored this challenge by saying that Andre Wing was himself not sure about this model as he himself had subsequently modified it. Sharma joked that I realised this before him because I am older.

D. N. Jha slightly modified the theory of R. S. Sharma. He argued that if we were to give complete credit to the outside forces for rise and decline of Indian commerce then we are unconsciously accepting the proposition of Karl Marx that Indian society lacked the internal strength to change by itself. So, instead of blaming Byzantine Empire for the decline and crediting Arabs for subsequent rise of external trade, we should focus on the domestic social conflicts that shaped the feudalisation of politico-economic structures in India. The concept of Kaliyuga hints at some sort of social crisis which may have accelerated the feudalisation of India. Similarly, some other kind of domestic social crisis may have weakened the feudal structures. A possible candidate could be the conflict between the interest of feudal lords and peasantry. The Kaivarta revolt in Bengal to end the Matsya Nyaya (justice of fish world) during the period of Rampala reflects one such conflict.

Factors which paved the way for the rise of feudalism in India:

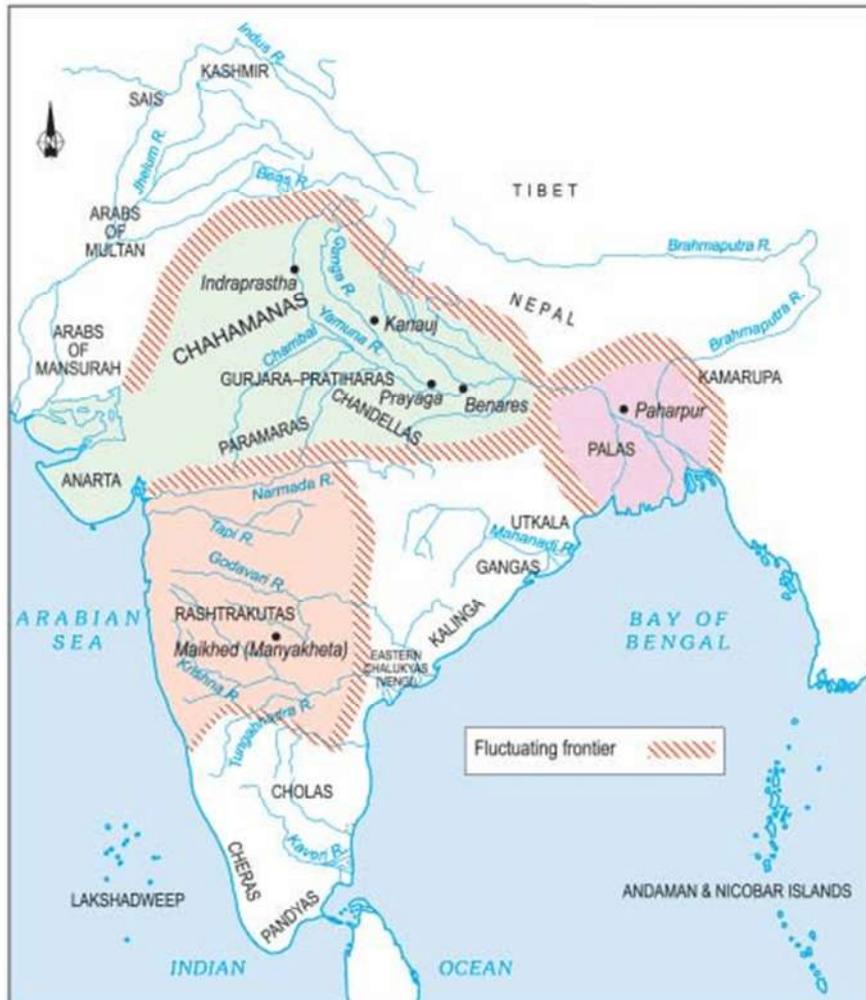
1. The concept of Dharma Vijaya, which was first mentioned in Arthashastra. In other words, Shakas, Kushanas, Guptas avoided complete annexation of defeated Kings, rather, they were allowed to rule as subordinated. This definitely created a hierarchy.
2. External invasions led to political fragmentations, viz. Hun invasions and Turkish invasions.
3. Land grants.
4. Decline in trade & commerce and money economy at least in some parts of the Indian subcontinent.

**Features of Indian feudalism:**

1. Political fragmentation and increased number of subordinate kings.
2. Rise of intermediaries between King and cultivators.
3. Emergence of overlord and subordinate peasantry. Overlords claimed a large part of the agrarian surplus on account of their supposed ownership of land and peasant-cultivator obliged to such exploitation on account of his loyalty to tradition and customs.
4. Landlordism was associated even with temples and monasteries.
5. In at least some of the land grants, peasants and craftsmen were tied with the land. So, they were transferred to the donees along with land. This resulted into feudalisation of agriculture and crafts, also known as Jajmani system.
6. Some of the big feudal lords started to give a part of their grant to subordinate chiefs. Thus, started the subinfeudation (hierarchy of lords).
7. Some of the grantees had military obligation to meet.
8. Feudal consciousness had been expressed in contemporary art and religion also.

**Differences between European and Indian Feudalism:**

1. Serfdom and manorial system were absent in India.
2. In the European context, feudalism was a phase which emerged out of the slave based economic production model i.e. a slave based economy to a serf based economy. In India, slaves existed but they were mainly deployed within household. Slave based production system was absent in India.



- **Major Political Developments in North India:** The political condition of this period was essentially marked by increasing regional consciousness and disappearance of the **Aryavarta** consciousness, internecine struggles and the rise of feudalism- which undermined the institution of kingship and led to political disintegration. After the death of Harshavardhana in c. 642 CE, Indian history is marked by increasing political confusion & disintegration. Several principalities/ kingdoms came into existence which had no concept of unity or cohesion. India became a bundle of states which, for all intentions and purposes, were independent. This feudal system and its hereditary character grew due to several reasons:

  - As the new type of villages arose (due to land grants) a class of intermediaries came into existence.
  - Through the processes of conquests, the smaller and defeated chiefs were reinstated and recognized as vassals of relatively powerful kings, who in turn, were threatened by other powerful kings. This also contributed to the growth of feudalism as some sort of hierarchy of sovereign claims over economic resources emerged out of such conquests.

- The feudal lords had to render military services to their overlords, which also contributed to the growth of the power of such vassals as they had legitimate reasons to stack up strong armies.
- The loss of royal monopoly over supply and procurement of horses and elephants added to the growth of feudal system.
- The process of land grants that were made to the Brahmans (Agraharas grants) and other beneficiaries (temples, royal officers and military service providers etc.), also led to feudal tendencies.
- The management of trade and industries locally to satisfy the local needs of self-sufficient villages accentuated the process of fragmentation. Decline of trade and commerce, both internal and external, also encouraged the process.

### **Tripartite Struggle**

- **Rashtrakutas:** The founder of Rashtrakuta power was Dantidurga. Rashtrakutas were a feudatory of Chalukyas of Badami and assumed independence by overthrowing their master c. 750 CE. Rashtrakutas played a significant role in history. In fact, a conflict between Pratiharas and Palas for the possession of Kannauj regions was going on. Rashtrakutas also participated in it. They made this conflict tripartite. This very like role was played by Marathas later. In fact, this tripartite struggle continued through different stages.

**First Stage:** The first stage of struggle was between Pratihara king Vatsaraja, Pala king Dharmapala and Rashtrakuta king Dhruva I. Initially Dharmapala was defeated by Vatsaraja, but Vatsaraja himself was defeated by Dhruva I.

**Second Stage:** In this stage, the contest was between Dharmapala and Vatsaraja while Rashtrakutas were out of the scene. In this stage, Dharmapala succeeded. After his success, Dharmapala convened a meeting of North Indian rulers and took the title of Uttarapathswami (the ruler of North India).

**Third Stage:** In this stage, the struggle was between the Pratihara king Nagabhata II, Dharmapala and Rashtrakuta king Govinda III. Initially, Pratiharas got success but finally it was Rashtrakutas who turned out to be successful.

**Fourth Stage:** Rashtrakuta king Govinda III continued his presence in North India. He defeated Pratihara king and captured the region of Malwa. Then, he appointed Upendra, his officer as the ruler of Malwa.

**Fifth Stage:** Pala rulers dominated this stage because Palas got the service of two able rulers, Dharmapala and Devpala. On the other hand, Pratiharas were led by a weak king Rambhatta.

**Sixth Stage:** Pratiharas became successful in capturing Kannauj because Pratiharas got the service of two rulers like Mihirabhoja and Mahendrapala. But, Pala rulers like Vigrahapala and Narayan Pala proved to be incompetent rulers.

**Analysis of Tripartite Struggle:** The consequences of tripartite struggle proved detrimental to all the parties. All the three powers were evenly matched. Furthermore, their military strength

lay in the same agrarian-feudal structure. That's why, as the result of this conflict, all the three dynasties met their end. We know that the Pratihara kings were maintaining a large number of feudatories under them. They were supposed to be watchful of their subversive activities. But, due to their involvement into tripartite struggle, they could not pay sufficient attention to these feudatories. As a result of this, the Pratihara Empire declined leading up to the formation of a number of Rajputs states. Likewise, the Pala dynasty declined as well and they were replaced by Senas.

On the other hand, even Rashtrakutas had to face heavy consequences. In fact, Rashtrakutas were established in West and North Deccan. So, it was a bridge state between North and South. They set their one foot in North India while another foot in South India. They had greater ambitions over North India but the geographical barrier didn't permit them long term success. Later, the same role was played by Marathas. But, Marathas had certain advantages. They organized the vast human resources under the Maratha confederacy. So, the Marathas could maintain their presence in North India with the help of satellite powers (Maratha Sardars). But for Rashtrakutas, it was very difficult to maintain their presence in North and South simultaneously under a single command. Furthermore, due to their excessive involvement in North, they couldn't tactfully manage the affairs in South. Otherwise, they might have created a bigger empire. They were eventually replaced by Chalukyas of Kalyani (Basavakalyan) in c. 970 CE.

#### **Cultural Contribution of Rashtrakuta Kingdoms:**

1. Rashtrakuta kings encouraged **religious tolerance**. At that time, there were a number of religious sects prevailing in South India, such as Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism, etc. Rashtrakuta kings gave patronage to Brahmanism and Jainism both. Furthermore, they even permitted Arab people to construct their mosque and profess their religion.
2. Rashtrakuta kings were a great patron to education and learning. In order to encourage education, they made a number of Agrahara donation to Brahmins. These Brahmins were supposed to provide free education to the people. Apart from that, even Brahmin temples as well as Jain and Buddhist monasteries were giving free education to the people.
3. Furthermore, Rashtrakuta court was decorated with a number of scholars. Among Sanskrit scholars, we can mention the name of Rajashekhara who compiled the text like Karpuramanjari (a play) and Kavyamimansa (a guidebook on what constitutes a good poem).
4. Rashtrakuta kings gave patronage to Prakrit and Kannada language scholars also. One scholar Suyambhu composed the first text on Kannada poetics. Even the scholars like Somdeva got the patronage of a feudatory of the Rashtrakuta king Krishna III. Somdeva composed *Yosasthilakachampu*. Likewise, Halayudha was another scholar. Rashtrakuta king Amogvarsha himself was a great scholar. He composed a very important text on Kannada politics, '*Kavirajmarga*' under the pen name of Nirptunga. The great scholars of Kannada language, Pampa and Ponna decorated Rashtrakuta court. Pampa composed the great piece of work like '*Vikramatulvijayam*'. Ponna composed '*Shantipurana*'. There was a scholar Shktayana who composed '*Amoghavriti*'. Another scholar Mahaviracharya composed '*Ganithasarsamgraha*'.

5. Rashtrakuta kings were mainly involved war. So, they were having little time to concentrate over **architecture**. Still, they got some important pieces architecture built in the Vesara style. In fact, Rashtrakuta kings who contributed in the development of Vesara style. We can trace Rashtrakuta architecture at Ellora. These monuments include Dasavathara temple, Ravan ki khai, Rameshwaram temple and Kailashnath temple. Dasavathara temple has been constructed in the Buddhist style. It is double storied and supported by 44 pillars. The main part in this temple was Garbha Griha and a pillared hall. On the walls of the temple, we find the traces of Fresco painting, in which the story of Ramayana and Mahabharata were depicted. But in Kailashnath temple, we find the pinnacle of temple architecture under the Rashtrakuta kings. We can see a phase of transition between rock cut temple and free standing temple style in the Kailashnath temple of Ellora. Although, it is modeled on Virupaksh temple of Pattadakal, the size of Kailashnath was double of the Virupaksha temple.

## **The Rajputs in North India**

In the interregnum between Harsha and Delhi Sultanate, North India was dominated by a few ruling houses viz. the Pratiharas of Kannauj and their successors Gahadavalas, the Kalachuris of Kalanjara, the Chandellas of Jejakabhukti, the Paramaras of Malwa, Chaulukyas (Solankis) of Gujarat and the Chahamanas of Ajmer and Shakambari. These ruling houses were mainly from the Rajput caste, hence, this age is called the Rajput age. **The polity of clan lineage** became the distinctive feature of the Rajputs. In this system, the king reserved the central part of his kingdom and distributed the rest to the clan chiefs. The rulers assumed the imperial titles, to which a number of other titles were added by the Gahadavalas and Kalachuris, such as that of Asvapati, Gajapati, Narapati, Rajotsayadhipati etc. The dominions directly administered by the rulers were split into provinces and so on which were administered by their officers. The village had their traditional headmen. The downfall of the Rajput kingdoms was hastened by the devastating invasions of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni and Muhammad Ghori.

**The Rajputs in Eastern India:** In Eastern India saw the rise and fall of two principal dynasties during this period: the Palas and the Senas. The Palas dynasty had a unique beginning as their founder was chosen by the people for the purpose of ending anarchy in the region. But here also, a permanent and regularly constituted council of ministers was totally absent. Their administration followed the same pattern of a monarchial supported by a bureaucracy. The final downfall of Palas was due to the rise of the Senas who were eventually vanquished by the Bakhtiyar Khalji.

**The Rajputs in Deccan:** Rashtrakutas and Chalukyas of Kalyani were the leading powers of Deccan in this period. Able rulers like Indra II and Vikramaditya VI of the former and the latter respectively took leading parts in the struggle for power in north and south India. But, the feudatories of these powers assumed a semi-independent status even during the heydays of their rule. They had sub-feudatories who held seigniorage under them. Both these categories, the feudal and sub-feudal lords, had sufficient authority to assign land grants freely within their own domains.

**Origin and Rise of Rajputs:** The term "Rajput" originated from the word '*Rajaputra*'. Initially, the term was used to denote a son of the king. So, initially the term 'Rajput' was used as a proper noun

but later it started to denote a caste or a group. We get certain information about Rajputs at the time of conquest of Sindh by Arabs. In fact, 5000 cavalry men appeared to assist Dahir, the king of Sindh. They were referred to as 'Rajaputras' or 'Rajputs'. Slowly, the term which stood for the son of a king came to represent a group of landlords with possibly common origin.

- 1. Indigenous V/s Foreign Origin:** In the analysis of origin of Rajputs, the controversy like indigenous origin versus foreign origin has been given too much weightage. For example Col. Todd declared Rajputs as the descendants of Shakas. Likewise, Cunningham took Rajputs as the successor of Kushanas. On the other hand, the court poets of Chauhanas, Chandbardai, propounded the famous theory of Agnikula (i.e. the origin from the sacrificial fire pit during Agnikula sacrifice of Vashista on Mount Abu). This points toward the indigenous origin of Rajput. But, recently it is being emphasized that, in place of discussing the controversy about the indigenous or foreign origin of Rajputs, we can more easily explain the whole phenomenon as the product of political, economic and social processes. Then, we find that the Rajput class was not a monolithic class and both foreign as well as indigenous elements contributed to it.
- 2. A Political, economic & social Process:** As a political process, we can say that from the Gupta period onwards, a number of local chiefs were given land grants. Some of them were authorised to grant a portion of this land to their subordinate chiefs. So, the big chiefs started to enjoy an autonomous position, so they got their forts constructed and organized their own local army. It was a result of the economic process as well. There was expansion of agriculture in tribal areas through land grants. As a result of this, the tribal economy was gradually transformed into an agrarian economy. So, a number of local tribal chiefs (or landlords) appeared and there were both, indigenous and foreign elements, inside this group. It was a result of the social process as well in the sense that matrimonial relationships played an important role in the upward social mobility of some of the local chiefs. Secondly, even the concept of 'Brahma-Kshatra' might have played some role in upward social mobility. For instance, some of the Rajput clans before getting Kshatriya status adopted the Brahmin status first. As an example we can take the case of Gurjara Pratiharas. In fact, the pater family of Gurjara Pratihara, Harish Chandra, supposedly had two wives – a Brahmin wife and a Kshatriya wife. It was from the Brahmin wife that the succession of Gurjara Pratihara dynasty continued later. These processes contributed to the rise of Rajputs.

## Conquest of Sind

We get the information about the conquest of Sindh from the sources like Chachanama (Story of Chach) and Al Baladhuri's Kitab futuh ul Bauldan (Book of the Conquests of Lands). Chachanama is possibly a 13<sup>th</sup> century Persian translation by Ali Khufi of an original Arab work which is unavailable. It contains a chapter about the history of Sindh just before its conquest by the Arabs. It narrates the Arab incursions into Sindh during the 7<sup>th</sup>- 8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. Thus, it chronicles the Chacha Dynasty's period, following the demise of the Rai Dynasty, down to the Arab conquest by Muhammad bin Qasim in early 8th century CE. And, Al Baladhuri was a 9<sup>th</sup> century