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FEUDALISM IN INDIA.

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ABSTRACT:

In this paper, we will first look at the form or facet of feudalism that could be seen in India. Secondly, we would try to differentiate between the feudal system practiced in India and Europe. Thirdly, we would look at the features of feudalism in India, and fourthly we would look at the fall of feudalism in India.

INTRODUCTION:

The word “feudalism”¹ comes from the term “feudal,”² which means a military organization, while the term “feudal”³ refers to a piece of land. The system of feudalism operates on the line of the “lord-vassal”⁴ relationship. The definition of feudalism cannot be precisely defined. But attempts are being made to give a precise definition. Various scholars have given varied purposes considering different facets of the concept of feudalism.

According to Henry Pirenne, feudalism arose because of the “closed estate economy.” While Immanuel Wallerstein believes feudalism is the “form of tribute showing mechanism”⁵ towards their protector. Frank Perlin defines feudalism as a mode of exploitation by a particular class of people who are high in the hierarchy order of society towards the lower marginal sections of society⁶. Some Indian Scholars like Nural Hasan, Harbans Mukhia, etc., have expressed their concurrence with the definition of feudalism propounded by Henry Pirenne⁷. While scholars like D.D. Kosambi has defined feudalism as a “two-way process,”

¹ Nafisa Sarkar, “The feudal society its origin and its crisis: Historiography,” Available at [DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY 2ND SEMESTER CC-4 FEUDALISM.pdf](#) (Last accessed on 09/08/2022)

² Id.,

³ Anonymous, “Feudalism: A Conceptual Analysis,” Available at [09 chapter-2-1.pdf](#) (Last accessed on 09/08/2022)

⁴ D. N. Jha, Early Indian Feudal Formation, Page: 1-21 (1988)

⁵ R. S. Sharma, INDIAN FEUDALISM AD 300-1200, (2ND Edition,1990)

⁶ THE FEUDALISM DEBATE IN INDIAN HISTORY, Available at [Unit-10.pdf](#) (Last visited 09/08/2022)

⁷ Bikramjit Dey, Associate Professor of Legal History, presently Member of the Academic Council (Senate) and formerly Coordinator, School of Social Sciences and Member of the Executive Council, National University of Juridical Sciences, Calcutta, Address at class on the topic “Feudalism” (August 2, 2022)

i.e., “feudalism from above” and “feudalism from below”⁸.” However, R. S Sharma did not express his complete concurrence with the definition of D.D. Kosambi thus pointed out that feudalism rose in India because of “state-action”⁹ in D.D. Kosambi can be referred to as “feudalism from above.”¹⁰ But similarities in the concept of Henry Pirenne and R.S Sharma could be found. At the same time, professor B.N.S Yadava points out the beginning of the rise of feudalism in India from the time of invasion by the Huns.

UNDERSTANDING THE FEUDAL STRUCTURE OF INDIAN FEUDALISM:

Unlike the serfs of Europe, the peasants in India possess land rights in the Early medieval period. They had their land, labor, and various equipment required for agriculture, but even then, they were not accessible as independent laborers. This was because they were constantly checked by the “mechanism of taxes,” which was imposed on the surplus of the goods produced, along with “the claim by the beneficiaries.”¹¹

It is said that all the lands once belonged to the King. The king delegated his lands to the peasants through charters for better administration and reach. Thus, the peasants must pay taxes for those pieces of land. The king claimed the taxes and offered protection and safety to the peasants instead of the tax amount¹².

Moreover, for better management and administration, the king created a new post, i.e., the “beneficiary,” who usually claimed the taxes for other reasons barring protection and safety. Various forms of highly exorbitant taxes were charged by the beneficiaries, resulting in the creation of debts and loans, leading the poor peasants to fall into the money-lenders dungeon hole, thus bringing their status along the line of the serfdoms even after ownership right over the land. If we look at the “control over the means of production” by the peasants, we will find it was very minimal¹³.

⁸ R. S. Sharma, “How Feudal Was Indian Feudalism?”, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 12, (1984), Available at [b55d14d1da54674630978fdaa06ed3dd.pdf](https://doi.org/10.2307/3517092) (Last accessed on 09/08/2022)

⁹ Id.,

¹⁰ KRISHNA KANTI GOPAL, *FEUDALISM IN NORTHERN INDIA* (C. 700 - 1200 A.D.), Page: 37-68 (1962)

¹¹ R. S. Sharma, “How Feudal Was Indian Feudalism?”, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 12, (1984), Available at [b55d14d1da54674630978fdaa06ed3dd.pdf](https://doi.org/10.2307/3517092) (Last accessed on 09/08/2022) (<https://doi.org/10.2307/3517092>, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3517092>)

¹² D. N. Jha, *Early Indian Feudal Formation*, Page: 1-21 (1988)

¹³ R. S. Sharma, “How Feudal Was Indian Feudalism?”, *Social Scientist*, Vol. 12, (1984), Available at [b55d14d1da54674630978fdaa06ed3dd.pdf](https://doi.org/10.2307/3517092) (Last accessed on 09/08/2022) (<https://doi.org/10.2307/3517092>, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3517092>)

Taking it forward from the Early medieval period, we could see that after the 10th Century AD,¹⁴ when cash crops came into being, land rights were taken away from the peasants; instead, land grants were provided. Soon after taking the land rights from the peasants, we find that the king started paying the soldiers and the other officials as “jagirs,” i.e., the right to collect taxes on a particular piece of land¹⁵. This opened the floodgates for more intense exploitation of the farmers now at the hands of these government officials. Thus, we could see that the post of “beneficiary” took a new shape in the form of “government officials”¹⁶ called “vitamin”¹⁷ as per “Yajnavalkya”¹⁸ while bringing down the status of the peasants to that of “rent-paying tenant peasants”¹⁹ named “strike”²⁰ as per “Brhaspati”²¹ and “Vyasa”²² which is equivalent to that of the serfs, i.e., the bonded forced labors²³.

Now the government officials or the same other delegates their power to the hands of sub-feudators leading to the formation of sub-infeudation. These sub-feudatories range from “Brahmanas”²⁴ to that “Agraharas”²⁵. This sub-infeudation resulted in the “reduction of the status of rent-paying permanent peasant tenants to that of the position of tenants-at-will.”²⁶

During the Gupta period this mechanism of extracting the surplus from the peasants in the name of protection and other instruments became widespread. The model of sub-infeudation²⁷ was promoted and promulgated in the name of effective control in the countryside regions.²⁸

¹⁴ THE FEUDALISM DEBATE IN INDIAN HISTORY, Available at [Unit-10.pdf](#) (Last visited 09/08/2022)

¹⁵ D. N. Jha, Early Indian Feudal Formation, Page: 1-21 (1988)

¹⁶ KRISHNA KANTI GOPAL, FEUDALISM IN NORTHERN INDIA (C. 700 - 1200 A.D.), Page: 37-68 (1962)

¹⁷ R. S. Sharma, “How Feudal Was Indian Feudalism?”, Social Scientist, Vol. 12, (1984), Available at [b55d14d1da54674630978fdaa06ed3dd.pdf](#) (Last accessed on 09/08/2022)

¹⁸ Id.,

¹⁹ Id.,

²⁰ Id.,

²¹ Id.,

²² Id.,

²³ Id.,

²⁴ Id.,

²⁵ Id.,

²⁶ D. N. Jha, Early Indian Feudal Formation, Page: 1-21 (1988)

²⁷ KRISHNA KANTI GOPAL, FEUDALISM IN NORTHERN INDIA (C. 700 - 1200 A.D.), Page: 37-68 (1962)

²⁸ THE FEUDALISM DEBATE IN INDIAN HISTORY, Available at [Unit-10.pdf](#) (Last visited 09/08/2022)

Despite all of such subjugation and exploitation, it is said that the peasants in these periods were free and had complete control over their land and their area of control over the mode of production was as well free from any interference from the state, which in turn resulted in building their complete autonomy and freedom.

DIFFERENTIATION BETWEEN THE FEUDAL SYSTEM PRACTISED IN INDIA AND EUROPE:

The following are the differences that could be witnessed between the feudal system practiced in India and Europe:

- In Indian feudal society, we could see that initially, the peasants were not landless, unlike the peasants of Europe, who were nothing more than bonded laborers from the very beginning.²⁹
- In Indian feudal society, we could see that the sub-infeudation takes place based on caste, while in Europe, it is noticed that the sub-infeudation takes place based on class.³⁰
- In the European feudalistic structure, we could find that the serfs were hired to cultivate the landlords' land, while in India, land grants were made to take away the surplus and collect taxes.
- We could find the presence of quasi feudalism and quasi-mannerism in the Indian feudalistic-like structure; in contrast, European feudalism is mostly feudalism, with some facets of manorialism³¹ required for administration.
- Feudalism in Europe protected medieval society after the fall of the empire of Charles³². While feudalism in India helped grow smaller authoritarian states in power dynamics.
- The form of feudalistic practice in Europe helped consideration of the position of women in chivalry. At the same time, in Indian society, we could find women finding

²⁹ Id.,

³⁰ R. S. Sharma, "How Feudal Was Indian Feudalism?", *Social Scientist*, Vol. 12, (1984), Available at [b55d14d1da54674630978fdaa06ed3dd.pdf](https://www.abhidhvajlawjournal.com/b55d14d1da54674630978fdaa06ed3dd.pdf) (Last accessed on 09/08/2022)

³¹ D. N. Jha, *Early Indian Feudal Formation*, Page: 1-21 (1988)

³² KRISHNA KANTI GOPAL, *FEUDALISM IN NORTHERN INDIA (C. 700 - 1200 A.D.)*, Page: 37-68 (1962)

their way to perform yajnas along with men, which they were earlier prohibited from doing so.

FEATURES OF FEUDALISM IN INDIA:

We could find that certain features of Indian feudalism are in congruence with that of European feudalism while some are not. Under this head, we will look at the features of Indian feudalism.

- A. It was said that the king had delegated its power through the means of the charter to the beneficiary by allocating them a particular piece of land, which collected the taxes from that land. Thus, the king is also referred to as the “bhumidata,” i.e., the giver of land³³.
- B. The beneficiaries were entitled to collect all taxes at a specific rate whose records are maintained by them only.
- C. Most of the charters created by the King’s council provided the peasants a mandate, i.e., to follow the order of the beneficiaries.
- D. As the officials’ salaries started being paid in the form of land, i.e., the “jagirs”³⁴ gradation system in the ground was formulated, thereby leading to allocating various stages of land based on the rank of the officials.³⁵
- E. The sub-infeudation was carried out based on the caste system prevailing in India, in the countryside region. The sub-infeudators comprised the “Brahmins,” “Krsivala,” “Karaka,” “Agrahars,” etc.³⁶
- F. Having lost their rights over the lands, the peasants settled in the countryside, which meant “Jana,” and led to the formation of “Janapada.” At the same time, the protests by the peasants were called “Janapada-kopa,” as per Arthashastra³⁷.
- G. The farmers were called “Ksetrika,”³⁸ which meant cultivator of land. At the same time, the village was headed by a headman named “Grahapati.”

³³ R. S. Sharma, “How Feudal Was Indian Feudalism?”, Social Scientist, Vol. 12, (1984), Available at [b55d14d1da54674630978fdaa06ed3dd.pdf](https://www.abhidhvajlawjournal.com/b55d14d1da54674630978fdaa06ed3dd.pdf) (Last accessed on 09/08/2022)

³⁴ D. N. Jha, Early Indian Feudal Formation, Page: 1-21 (1988)

³⁵ R. S. Sharma, “How Feudal Was Indian Feudalism?”, Social Scientist, Vol. 12, (1984), Available at [b55d14d1da54674630978fdaa06ed3dd.pdf](https://www.abhidhvajlawjournal.com/b55d14d1da54674630978fdaa06ed3dd.pdf) (Last accessed on 09/08/2022)

³⁶ Bikramjit Dey, Associate Professor of Legal History, presently Member of the Academic Council (Senate) and formerly Coordinator, School of Social Sciences and Member of the Executive Council, National University of Juridical Sciences, Calcutta, Address at class on the topic “Feudalism” (August 2, 2022)

³⁷ D. N. Jha, Early Indian Feudal Formation, Page: 1-21 (1988)

H. The lands the ruler later granted to the farmers were also referred to as “halika.”

I. It is said that the basis on which the feudalism thesis exists is the oppression between trade and urbanization on one part while dealing with feudalism on the other.

J. Exorbitant tax rates were imposed upon the peasants leading them to fall into the grudges of money-lenders.

FALL OF FEUDALISM IN INDIA:

One of the common reasons for the fall of feudalism in India and Europe is the opening up of trade.³⁹ We could find that as the trade between countries started expanding, the monopoly of the beneficiaries was diminished to a great extent.⁴⁰ Not only this, we could see that with the foreign invasion, the complete administration of the feudal system came to an end. Moreover, it is well known that the increasing internal fights between the beneficiaries and the rulers resulted in easy access by the invaders. We could also see that the growing demand for taxes and exploitation carried out over the farmer increased, leading to revolts and protests.⁴¹ The hostility increased between the ruler and thy ruled. Moreover, at the time of invasions and attacks, we could see that the King was not able to protect his subjects which resulted in the break of trust of the people and the farmers. The officials who were granted the land as a form of salary made it a hierarchical property, causing a heated battle between the ruler and the rule. These reasons marked the end or resulted in the amalgamation of such a mechanism of administration in India, where a blend of quasi feudalism and quasi-manorialism could be seen.

CONCLUSION:

We found various theories regarding the form of feudalism that has existed in India over time. Not only this but the question of whether feudalism in India is feudal.⁴² I have posed several questions which seem to be unanswered. Historians, over time, have expressed their theories regarding feudalism. D.D. Kosambi has defined feudalism as a “two-way process,”

³⁸ KRISHNA KANTI GOPAL, FEUDALISM IN NORTHERN INDIA (C. 700 - 1200 A.D.), Page: 37-68 (1962)

³⁹ D. N. Jha, Early Indian Feudal Formation, Page: 1-21 (1988)

⁴⁰ R. S. Sharma, INDIAN FEUDALISM AD 300-1200, (2ND Edition, 1990)

⁴¹ R. S. Sharma, “How Feudal Was Indian Feudalism?”, Social Scientist, Vol. 12, (1984), Available at [b55d14d1da54674630978fdaa06ed3dd.pdf](https://www.scribd.com/document/546746309/78fdaa06ed3dd) (Last accessed on 09/08/2022)

⁴² THE FEUDALISM DEBATE IN INDIAN HISTORY, Available at [Unit-10.pdf](#) (Last visited 09/08/2022)

i.e., “feudalism from above” and “feudalism from below.”⁴³ At the same time, R.S Sharma pointed out that the cause for the rise of feudalism was the closed market economy which resulted in limited exposure and monopoly by the rulers within.

Although we have some theories regarding the feudal system prevalent then, the question remains whether India was feudal in nature or not.

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⁴³ Bikramjit Dey, Associate Professor of Legal History, presently Member of the Academic Council (Senate) and formerly Coordinator, School of Social Sciences and Member of the Executive Council, National University of Juridical Sciences, Calcutta, Address at class on the topic “Feudalism” (August 2,2022)

LECTURES:

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