

---

How Feudal Was Indian Feudalism?

Author(s): R. S. Sharma

Source: *Social Scientist*, Feb., 1984, Vol. 12, No. 2, Marx Centenary Number 3 (Feb., 1984), pp. 16-41

Published by: Social Scientist

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/3517092>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Social Scientist*

JSTOR

*R S SHARMA\**

## *How Feudal was Indian Feudalism?*

SEVERAL SCHOLARS have questioned the use of the term feudalism to characterise the early medieval socio-economic formation in India.<sup>1</sup> But the points raised by Harbans Mukhia<sup>2</sup> deserve serious attention. He rightly suggests that, unlike capitalism, feudalism is not a universal phenomenon. But in our view tribalism, stone age, metal age, advent of food producing economy are universal phenomena. They do indicate some laws conditioning the process and pattern of change.

Tribalism may continue or be followed by different forms of state and class society, but it appears universally. Tribal society has many variations. It can be connected with any of the modes of subsistence such as cattle pastoralism, other types of pastoralism, hoe agriculture, plough agriculture, etc. The advent of agriculture requires cooperation and settlement at one place, and creates a lasting base for the tribal set-up. Many tribal societies practise shifting cultivation or swidden cultivation. But an advanced type of agriculture produces substantial surplus and creates dents in tribal homogeneity. Conditions appear for the rise of classes based on status and wealth and above all on the large-scale exploitation of the bulk of the kinsmen by a few people on top. In such a situation the tribal system gets heavily corroded.

Similarly, although the tribal society is organised on the principle of kinship, this organisation could have large variations. Some form of organisation, inherited from the band society, would be developed further in the tribal stage. Cooperation in production efforts would be needed; division of labour would be required. But this could be on the matriarchal basis, patriarchal basis, on the basis of a combination of the two, and in fact could rest on an organisation based on all kinds of kinship combinations and permutations. Marriage practises and laws of 'property' inheritance might differ from one tribal society to the other, and may differ even in the same tribe. But, in spite of these variations, tribal society has been found on a universal scale. Therefore the concept of tribe is useful even for the understanding of social formations known from written texts.

---

\*Professor, Department of History, Delhi University.

It is not necessary to posit diffusion of tribal society although this may have taken place in certain cases. Although feudalism does not seem to be as universal as tribalism, in the Old World it was undoubtedly more widespread than the slave system. The concept of peasant society is still in a nebulous state. But if peasant society means a system in which the orders of priests and warriors live on the surplus produced by peasants and augmented by the activities of the artisans, such a society existed in a good part of the Old World. Tribalism, peasant society or slave system could originate due to internal or external factors or due to both. Similarly it is not necessary to think in terms of the diffusion of the feudal system, although this happened in certain cases. For instance, the Norman feudalism in England was a result of the Norman conquest.

### The Essence of Feudalism

But just as there could be enormous variations in tribal society so also there could be enormous variations in the nature of feudal societies. It is rightly stated by Marx that feudalism “assumes different aspects, and runs through its various phases in different orders of succession”.<sup>3</sup> But certain universals remain the same. This is admitted even by critics of Indian feudalism who think of the variants of feudalism.<sup>4</sup> Feudalism has to be seen as a mode of the distribution of the means of production and of the appropriation of the surplus. It may have certain broad universal features and it may have certain traits typical of a territory. Obviously land and agricultural products play a decisive role in pre-capitalist class societies, but the specific situation about land distribution and the appropriation of agricultural products will differ from region to region. It could be nobody’s argument that what developed in pre-capitalist Western Europe was found in India and elsewhere. Historical laws, as far as they are known, do not work in this manner, nor could one say that feudalism was the monopoly of Western Europe. It is not possible to have any neat, cut and dried formula about feudalism. The most one could say about the universals of feudalism could be largely on the lines of Marc Bloch and E K Kosminsky.<sup>5</sup> Feudalism appears in a predominantly agrarian economy which is characterised by a class of landlords and a class of servile peasantry. In this system the landlords extract surplus through social, religious or political methods, which are called extra-economic. This seems to be more or less the current Marxist view of feudalism, which considers serfdom, ‘scalar property’ and ‘parcellised sovereignty’ as features of the West European version of the feudal system. The lord-peasant relationship is the core of the matter, and the exploitation of the estate by its owner, controller, enjoyer or beneficiary as its essential ingredient. With these minimum universals, feudalism may have several variations. The particularities of the system in some West European countries do not apply to the various types of feudalism

found in other areas. For example, evidence for peasant struggles against landlords in other countries has not been produced in sufficient degree. Similarly, artisan and capitalist growth within the womb of feudalism seems to be typical of the West European situation where agricultural growth and substantial commodity production created major structural contradictions. The nature of religious beneficiaries, who grabbed a major portion of land, also differed from country to country. Thus the Church was a great landlord in Portugal. Buddhist and Confucian establishments controlled land in Korea. Buddhist monasteries were also important in eastern India. Temples emerged as estates in south India, and many Brahmanas enjoyed a similar position in upper and middle Gangetic basins, central India, the Deccan, and Assam. Non-religious landed intermediaries also appear in different forms in different parts of India and outside this country. In certain parts of the country, for example in Orissa, we find tribal chiefs being elevated to the position of landlords. In other parts many administrative officials enjoyed land taxes from the peasants. But in spite of all these variations the basic factor, namely, the presence of a controlling class of landlords and a subject peasantry, remains the same at least in early medieval times.

Again the degree of the servility of the peasants to the landlords might differ from region to region; so also the composition of the cultivating class. The development of agriculture, handicrafts, commodity production, trade and commerce and of urbanisation could create conditions for differentiation in the ranks of the peasantry. Those peasants who produce a little over and above their needs of subsistence might buy their freedom by payment of money in lieu of labour service provided such a practice was favoured by the state and provided a reasonable extent of market economy was available. Several peasants might be reduced to a state of further penury and rich peasants might grow at their cost. But where such developments do not appear, a more or less homogeneous peasantry might continue. However, differences in the techniques of farming and the nature of the soil might affect the agricultural yield and create variations.

Similarly peasants might be compelled to work as serfs on landlords' farms in Western Europe. But serfdom should not be considered to be identical with feudalism.<sup>6</sup> It was after all a form of servility, which kept the peasant tied to the soil and made him work on the farm of his lord. Those peasants who were compelled to pay heavy rents in cash and kind to the landlords or required to provide both rent as well as labour were as servile as those who supplied only labour. It also makes some difference to his servility if a peasant has to bear allegiance only to the landlord. If he has to be loyal to both the state and the landlord then it could be either a case of double servility or divided loyalty. But the fundamental point at issue is the subjection of the peasantry, and that subjection is found in all the possible situations to

which we have referred earlier. There is no doubt that this subjection is a characteristic of early medieval Indian social structure.

It is argued that the peasant in medieval India enjoyed autonomy of production because he had 'complete' control over the means of production.<sup>7</sup> What is the significance of owning the means of production? Is it not meant for using the fruits of production? Do the fruits stay with the peasant or are these substantially appropriated by the landlord? How does this appropriation become possible? What is the mechanism that enables the landlord to appropriate the surplus, a part of that fruit? Is it merely because of his control over the means of production or because of his coercive power? Or is it extracted through the ideological weapon such as the peasant's belief that he is duty bound to pay? The latter ideology that the landlords are the parents of the peasants<sup>8</sup> is reminiscent of the tribal outlook. But this idea may have been further fostered by the priestly landlords in medieval times. At present we will not try to answer all these questions but take up the problem of the distribution of the resources of production in early medieval India.

### The Distribution of Resources in Early Medieval India

Obviously land was the primary means of production. But the real difficulty about the understanding of distribution of land is caused when we think in terms of exclusive control over land by one party or the other. It should be made clear that in early medieval times in the same piece of land the peasant held inferior rights and the landlords held superior rights. One may possess land, labour, oxen, other animals and agricultural implements. But we have to find out how effective is this 'control' over the means of production. Do other conditions such as taxes, forced labour, constant interference by on-the spot beneficiaries, who were ever present, make the peasant's control really operational? Obviously nobody would kill a hen that lays eggs. So peasants would be allowed to stay alive. But that should not be understood as their effective control over the means of production.

In fact land grants leave hardly any doubt that the landlords enjoyed a good measure of general control in the means of production. Why did the landlords claim various types of rents from the peasants and how could they collect their demands? Clearly they did so on the strength of royal charters which conferred on them either the villages or pieces of land or various types of taxes. Why did the king claim taxes? Formerly the king claimed taxes on the ground that he afforded protection to the people. In early medieval law-books he claimed taxes on the ground that he was the owner of the land.<sup>9</sup> Numerous epithets indicate that the king was the owner of the land in early medieval times.<sup>10</sup> Now by the charter he delegated this royal authority to the beneficiary, and on this strength the beneficiary claimed taxes. The king was called *bhumidata*, giver of land. It was repeatedly said that

the merit of giving land accrues to him who possesses it.<sup>11</sup>

Generally the early charters give the beneficiary usufructuary rights. But the later charters grant such concessions as render the beneficiary the de facto owner of the village land. The donated village/villages constitute his estate. For example, the beneficiary is entitled to collect taxes, all kinds of income, all kinds of occasional taxes, and this 'all' (*sarva*)<sup>12</sup> is never specified. Similarly he is entitled to collect proper and improper taxes,<sup>13</sup> fixed and not fixed taxes,<sup>14</sup> and at the end of the list of the taxes the term *et cetra* (*adi, adikam*)<sup>15</sup> is used. All this adds enormously to the power of the beneficiary. These extraordinary provisions could serve as a self-regulating mechanism as and when production increased,<sup>16</sup> but they could also interfere with the expansion of production. Some provisions clearly created the superior rights of the beneficiary in the land of the peasants. For example, the land charters of Madhya Pradesh, northern Maharashtra, Konkan and Gujarat in Gupta and post-Gupta times empower the beneficiary to evict the old peasants and introduce new ones; he could assign lands to others. Now such concessions leave no doubt that the beneficiary was armed with superior rights in land, which of course was in actual occupation of the cultivator. Most grants after the 7th century A D give away the village along with low land, fertile land, water reservoirs, all kinds of trees and bushes, pathways and pasture grounds. In eastern India grants the village was granted along with mango trees, *mahua* (*Bassia datifolia*) trees and jack-fruit trees and various other agrarian resources. Cotton, hemp, coconut and arecanut trees are also given away in grants, but this happens mostly after the 10th century when cash crops assume importance. Such provisions connect the agrarian production directly with the beneficiary and, more importantly, transfer almost all communal agrarian resources to him. If a peasant does not have free access to various agrarian resources his autonomy in production is substantially crippled. Only a free exercise of the agrarian rights mentioned above can make his unit effective in production. Till recent times the powerful landlords barred and blocked the access of the weak and helpless peasants to such rights and could make their life impossible. Of course the caste system helped this process. The untouchables had no access to public tanks, wells, etc. Even if they possessed their bits of land, how could they function independently in production?

Most charters ask the peasants to carry out the orders of the beneficiaries.<sup>17</sup> These orders may relate not only to the payment of taxes which will be concerned with the fruits of production but they may also relate to the means and processes of production. In a way the blanket authority to extract obedience places the peasant at the back and call of the beneficiary. It implies general control over the labour power of the peasants, and undoubtedly labour is an assential ingredient of the means of production. This labour may be used either

in the fields cultivated by the peasant or in those directly managed by the beneficiary. The beneficiaries may insist on having certain types of produce for their ostentatious and unproductive consumption, and with all the seigniorial rights that they possess they can compel the peasants to produce those cereals or cash crops which they need.

We may also note that the law-books of Yajnavalkya, Brhaspati and Vyasa specify four graded stages of land rights in the same piece of land. Thus we hear of *mahipati*, *ksetrasvamin*, *karsaka* and the subtenant or leaseholder.<sup>18</sup> It is important that the medieval jurists understood *svamitva* in the sense of ownership and *svatva* in the sense of property, and this was considered to be a significant distinction in Hindu law.<sup>19</sup> The *svamin* therefore could be equated with the landed beneficiary and the *karsaka* or the *ksetrika* with the rent-paying tenant peasant. Multiple, hierarchical rights and interests in land, which was the chief means of production, can be inferred even from Gupta land sale transactions. These transactions mention the interest of not only the king but also that of the local administrative body (*adhikarana*) dominated by big men; we also hear of the beneficiaries and of the rights of the occupant of the plot.<sup>20</sup> Of course in several Gupta transactions no occupant is mentioned, and it further appears that money for the purchase of the land is paid not only to the *adhikarana* but also probably to the occupant. These typical land transactions are found in Bangladesh. But in the grant system which became widespread in post-Gupta times the local *adhikarana* disappeared, and was generally not consulted in matters of land grants.

Hierarchical control over land was created by large-scale subinfeudation, especially from the eighth century onwards.<sup>21</sup> Subinfeudation gave rise to graded types of landlords, different from the actual tillers of the soil. Such a process seems to be in line with a significant generalisation made by Marx about feudalism. According to him "feudal production is characterised by division of soil amongst the greatest possible number of subfeudatories".<sup>22</sup>

The peasantry was divested more and more of its homogeneous and egalitarian character. Many indications of unequal distribution of land in the village are available. We hear not only of Brahmanas but also of the chief Brahmana, *mahattama*, *uttama*, *krsivala*, *karsaka*, *ksetrakara*, *kutumbin* and *karuka*, land endowed Brahmanas and *agraharas*. We also hear of *ksudra prakrti* or petty peasants, not to speak of *Meda*, *Andhra* and *candala*. It is obvious that certain people in the villages had a greater share in the sources of production and apparently possessed more than they could manage directly. It is also obvious that such people got their lands cultivated by petty peasants either through lease holding or through sharecropping or through the system of serfdom. We have therefore no means to establish that most peasants living in the villages were in 'complete' control of the means of production.

Terminological studies throw interesting and revealing light on

the relation of the peasant to the land in early India. The English term peasant, which literally means rustic or countrymen, can be translated into *janapada*, which means an inhabitant of the countryside. That the *janapada* or the territorial unit formed by the countryside was considered to be a source of revenues is well known. Among the other qualities of a *janapada* are those of possessing active peasants capable of bearing taxes and fines (punishments).<sup>23</sup> Naturally when the peasantry was oppressed it led to the revolt of the peasants (*janapada-kopa*), which term occurs in the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya.<sup>24</sup> Curiously the term *janapada* is not in much use in medieval Sanskrit literature although it occurs in early medieval inscriptions. In medieval times *jana* came to mean a dependent who was valued and acquired because of his labour power. Thus he could be a servile peasant. What is more significant, in several Indo-Aryan dialects of Bihar the term means field labourer. In practice some of these labourers are given small patches of land to earn their subsistence. This practice is apparently a survival of the medieval system according to which *jana* or field workers were possessed by and transferred to landed magnates, as can be inferred not only from inscriptions but also from works on horoscopy.<sup>25</sup> This would show that the tribal *jana* with egalitarian ethos is reduced to almost a serf.

The terms for the peasant used in medieval texts, and particularly in inscriptions, indicate the change in the nature of the peasant's relation to the land he cultivated. From the age of the Buddha to the advent of the Gupta period taxpaying Vaisyas continued as an omnibus order, comprising mostly peasants. But by early medieval times they were reduced to the position of the Sudras who, in spite of having acquired peasantry, continued to bear the hallmark of servitude.<sup>26</sup> *Gahapati*, literally head of the household, was the term used for the landowning peasant in early Pali texts<sup>27</sup> typical of the middle Gangetic plains which witnessed the rise of the first large states. He seems to have enjoyed substantial autonomy in his unit of production. But the term almost disappears in land grant inscriptions. *Gahapati* or *grahapati* becomes village headman in later texts.<sup>28</sup> A clear term for peasant is *ksetrika* or *ksetrin*,<sup>29</sup> which means controller of land, but even this is sometimes understood as an agriculturist or cultivator in later texts and lexicons. From *ksetrika* in Assamese is derived *khetiyaka*,<sup>30</sup> which means cultivator or husbandman, and is not necessarily the owner of the field. A common term used for the peasant in many grants, especially in those from eastern India, is *ksetrakara*,<sup>31</sup> which literally means cultivator. The term *shetkari* in Marathi is probably derived from it,<sup>32</sup> and does not always mean the owner of the land. Some other terms used in inscriptions are *karsaka*<sup>33</sup> and *kutumbin*.<sup>34</sup> The term *kutumbin* gives some indication of an autonomous peasant family, but it occurs mainly in early land records from eastern India and Madhya Pradesh. In later grants from eastern India it is replaced by *ksetrakara* or *karsaka*. In Gujarat and Rajasthan the *kutumbika* loses his status,

for he is sometimes transferred to the beneficiary along with the land.<sup>35</sup> According to Yajnavalkya (c A D 300) the *karsaka* is a mere cultivator in the service of the landowner or *ksetrasvamin*, whose field lay under the general control of the king (*mahipati*).<sup>36</sup> In the Candella grants in eastern Madhya Pradesh the *karsaka* was made over to the assignee along with the village.<sup>37</sup> Land grants also use the term *halika*<sup>38</sup> or ploughman. Sharecroppers are indicated by *arddhika*, *arddhasirika* or *arddhasirin*. In literature the word *kinasa* is also used.<sup>39</sup> Evidently these terms have nothing to do with control over land. The term *kisan*, so common now in India, is derived from *krsana* or one who ploughs. The word *krsivala*<sup>40</sup> or cultivator is also frequently used in medieval texts. The term *langalopajivin* or one who lives by ploughing is used in *Brhat Samhita*.<sup>41</sup>

A review of the terms used for the peasant in medieval inscriptions and literature fails to present the peasant's image as a controller of land. On the other hand we have such technical terms as *bhokta*, *bhogi*, *bhogika*, *bhogijana*, *bhogapati*, *bhogapatika*, *bhogikapalaka*, *bhogirupa*, *mahabhogi*, *brhadbhogi*, *brhadbhogika* etc, used generally for those who enjoyed landed estates.<sup>42</sup> Here we have not taken into account many other terms connected with *raja*, *ranaka*, *samanta*, *mandalesvara*, etc, who happened to be large landed intermediaries. The contrast between the two types of terms is obvious. Some people are meant for cultivating, and some meant for enjoying the fruits of production. There is nothing to show that the peasants who produced were in firm and independent control over their holdings. And finally there was the state symbolised by the king, whose general authority over land was recognised by numerous epithets used for him in early medieval records.<sup>43</sup>

### Control over Land and Seigniorial Rights

The point that there were superior and inferior rights in the same piece of land was made much earlier,<sup>44</sup> but the common phrase 'means of production' was not used in that context. It may be added now that the practice of granting a village with all possible taxes and impositions and with all its resources created a kind of feudal property in contrast to peasant property and communal rights. The new phenomenon caused headache to medieval jurists and law commentators, who found neither much of a sanction nor a precedent in the early law-books. Therefore Vijnanesvara, the famous author of the *Mitaksara*, which enjoyed authority in a large part of the country in legal matters, propounded the principle of the popular recognition of property. He and his followers, including Mitra Misra, maintained that property had its basis in popular recognition without any dependence on the *Sastras*.<sup>45</sup> Commenting on a passage of Gautama,<sup>46</sup> Haradatta of about the twelfth century expressed a similar view. According to him even short enjoyment of *bhumi*, which is explained as cultivated field (*ksetra*) and orchards, gardens, etc. (*aramadika*) confers property-rights on the

enjoyer.<sup>47</sup> Short enjoyment probably means a period of less than ten years.<sup>48</sup> The complexities caused by the superimposition of new rights on the means of production hitherto effectively controlled by the peasants, also because of their free access to various village resources, baffled the medieval jurists who had to recognise the multiplicity of rights in the same piece of land. It is worth reproducing a question, which was used by me earlier. 'The Indian jurists took it for granted that the incidents of particular manifestations of ownership might differ, while the *svatva* (rights)<sup>49</sup> of the king, the *svatva* of the landowner, the *svatva* of the tenant-farmer, and in an extreme case, even the *svatva* of the mortgagee in possession (as against a trespasser) were all comprehensible under the single term of property.'<sup>50</sup> It has been shown that in law as well as in actual practice these rights were graded. In the Indian context one could therefore talk of the varying degrees of control over land, which was the primary means of production, and not of exclusive rights of either the landlord or the peasant. But the grants show an increasing tendency to establish the superior rights of the landlord at the cost of both the king and the peasantry so much so that ultimately assignments are converted into virtual estates.

More effective control over the means of production obtained in such cases as transferred plots of land to the beneficiaries. Many big plots of land in Vidarbha and Maharashtra were assigned to gods and Brahmanas under the Vakatakas and also under the Rastrakutas. For example, eight thousand *nivartanas* of land was granted to one thousand Brahmanas by Pravarasena.<sup>51</sup> Similarly four hundred *nivartanas* of land was granted to a single Brahmana.<sup>52</sup> Again the same measure of land was granted to a god.<sup>53</sup> Further 2052 *nivartanas* of land was granted to Brahmanas.<sup>54</sup> We learn from earlier authorities that in the Deccan land measuring 6 *nivartanas* was considered to be sufficient for maintaining a family of a Brahmana which may have consisted of 5 to 8 members. But the instances given above refer to large stretches of land, which could not be cultivated by the Brahmana beneficiaries themselves. Even if labour in a Brahmana family was available for smaller pieces of land, they would not actually cultivate it because of social inhibitions. But, more importantly, grants of large plots introduced an element of direct control of the beneficiary over the means of production.

An important factor which gave the beneficiaries general control over the means of production was the conferment of seigniorial rights on them. The charters authorised the beneficiaries to punish people guilty of ten offences,<sup>55</sup> including those against family, property, person, etc., and to try civil cases.<sup>56</sup> Further royal officers were not allowed to enter their territory<sup>57</sup> and cause any kind of obstruction in their functioning.<sup>58</sup> All these are as good as manorial rights, and might even enable the beneficiary to force the peasant to work in his field. It would appear that the right to try cases on the spot involving the imposition of fines could seriously interfere with the process of

production. It is therefore obvious that the political and judicial rights, which were non-economic rights, helped the beneficiaries to carry out the economic exploitation of the peasants in an effective manner living in his estate. This may have been a successful way of governing the vast population because the crimes could be nipped in the bud on the spot. But at the same time these non-economic rights served to enforce the general economic authority of the beneficiaries over both the means and the processes of production. It may further be noted that in many cases the beneficiary was empowered to adopt all measures to enjoy the village, and the term used for this was *sarvodaya-samyuktam*.<sup>59</sup> He was also authorised to enjoy the fruits according to his sweet will. If we carefully examine the phrase *sambhogya yavadichcha kriyaphalam*<sup>60</sup> it would mean that the donee could even intervene in the process of production. If a person is entitled to the enjoyment of the fruits of the process of production according to his discretion, he may develop a natural tendency to control the process (*kriya*) itself on which the nature and the amount of yield depend. Sometimes whatever belonged to the village (*svasambhoga sametah*) was to be enjoyed by the beneficiary.<sup>61</sup> The beneficiary was also granted the village along with all its products (*sarvotpattisahitah*).<sup>62</sup> The Candella charters from eastern Madhya Pradesh name the crops that were produced in the donated villages. Does it mean that the peasant could not alter the pattern of crops? At any rate all such provisions could create the interest of the landed beneficiary in the means and process of production. It would be really extraordinary if the beneficiary does not keep an eye over the resources, processes and fruits of production in such cases.

It is not clear how the peasants were provided with agricultural implements. The charters authorise the beneficiaries to enjoy all that is hidden under the earth. This will amount to giving the mining rights to the beneficiaries. It is well known that the mining rights belonged exclusively to the king. The king may have acquired this monopoly at the initial stage as the head of the tribe or the community. Once this exclusive control over iron and other types of mines passed into the hands of the beneficiaries, they could also control the supply of agricultural implements to the peasants. But in pre-feudal times the big landowners did not have such rights in lands. Mining rights belonged to the king who symbolised the community, and the peasants may not have experienced difficulties in procuring agricultural implements.

Not only are the successors of the king and people in power asked to observe the terms of the grants<sup>63</sup> but also all those who would upset the grant are threatened with the use of force.<sup>64</sup> In some warnings corporal punishment (*sariradandam*) is clearly mentioned.<sup>65</sup> The threat to use force is found mostly in the grants from Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Andhra and Karnataka, and the earliest example belongs to the fourth century in a Pallava grant from Guntur district. In

addition, the enemies of the land grant were invested with all kinds of curses and most heinous sins. The idea that a peasant was the complete master of the means of production is also belied by the philosophical teachings found at the end of most grants. The grants underline the instability of life. Apparently this instability of life is based not merely on the idea of death which overtakes everybody ultimately but also on the fickleness of fortune. The concept of the fickleness of fortune (i.e., mobility of Laksmi) is mainly derived from the frequent transfer of control over the means of production from one hand to the other. It would therefore appear that ideology, derived from the relations of production, strengthened the general control of the beneficiaries over the means of production. Ideology was used for indoctrinating the producers in ancient times also. Through ideology and administration, the priests and warriors regulated production and distribution in pre-feudal times, but now they acquired an effective hand in the mode of production because of their general, superior control over land, which was the chief means of production. The beneficiary started with the state-sanctioned title to various types of dues delivered by the peasants to the state, but in course of time his claims were made so comprehensive that because of his local presence and delegated administrative powers he could convert his title into possession and could treat the donated village as his estate. It is clear that the peasants had to reckon with the control of the donee over the village resources.

The real problem therefore is not to demonstrate the autonomy of peasant production which in any case was drastically curtailed in the land grant areas. But it is more worthwhile to determine the extent and impact of peasant population working in the land grant areas and that of similar people working in the non-land grant areas in medieval times.<sup>66</sup> Since references to palm-leaf (*talapatra*) and birch-bark (*bhurjapatra*) *sasana* charters even for religious purposes are found in Assam and Madhya Pradesh, it is likely that many such grants were issued in favour of both religious and secular parties. We learn how these *patra* grants were burnt and replaced by copper plate charters in Assam<sup>67</sup> and Madhya Pradesh.<sup>68</sup> Another important problem is to identify and plot on maps the donated villages or plots of land region-wise within a short time bracket (say within half a century or so). We have shown earlier that in the donated villages the beneficiaries enjoyed superior authority in the means of production. Donated fields, many of them very large in area, were without doubt under the direct and complete control of the beneficiaries, who manipulated its production resources and processes.

## Surplus Collection and the Pattern of Production

It is argued that landed beneficiaries were mainly concerned with the problem of surplus collection. But the question of surplus collection/distribution cannot be viewed in isolation from that of the pattern of

production. In a feudal system of production we expect the lord's share called rent, in labour and cash/kind, and this is coupled with a patron-client system of distribution, primarily between the peasant and the landlord. For surplus collection superior rights in the land of the peasants become the pre-condition. More surplus seems to have been extracted because of more product. In pre-Gupta times the surplus was mainly collected by the agents of the state in the form of taxes, or by priests in the form of gifts. There were a few landowners working with the help of slave and hired labourers in the age of the Buddha. We hear of state farms in the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya. But state control could operate only in small areas. By and large the settled part of the country had independent units of production and was also blessed with some amount of market economy. But market economy was not so strong as would enable the rich landowner to invest his capital in new enterprises and work for profits, and would thus eventually lead him to the capitalist path. At best a millionaire such as Anathapindika would purchase land for donation to the Buddha. There could be other such examples. Payment in cash could be made for the sale of cereals and for the purchase of petty commodities by the peasants. Generally, in pre-feudal times the priests, warriors and administrators were entitled to the surplus in the form of taxes and gifts for services rendered, but a good deal of these payments was made in cash. Peasant units of production first appeared in the age of the Buddha and not in post-Maurya times. Slavery was neither preponderant nor negligible in production. Large holdings, including Maurya state farms, were worked by slaves and hired labourers, in the middle Gangetic plains, but big landowners were swamped by peasants. The Vaisya, who was almost identical with the peasant, was the principal taxpayer. His counterpart in the Buddhist idiom was a peasant householder who contributed to the increase in cereals and paid taxes to the state (*gahapatiko karkarako rasivaddhako*). Thus the peasant units of production functioned more or less effectively in pre-Gupta times. But after that the authority of the peasants over these units suffered erosion because of the appearance of landed beneficiaries supplemented by large disappearance of trade and urban centres. In India the problem of the rise of the landed magnates is not connected with "the decomposition of the slave mode of production" but with the decreasing control of the peasant over his unit of production, coupled with his restricted access to the communal agrarian resources. As will be shown later, overtaxation and imposition of forced labour by the state created such problems as called for new remedies.

To think that the fight for a share in the cake does not necessarily affect the production of the cake is to ignore historical examples. It is true even of capitalist societies in which such fights eventually lead to structural changes. In conditions of early medieval times the beneficiary demanded his pound of flesh because he claimed superior rights in land.

If the object of the grant was the maintenance of the beneficiary and the provision of requirements either for worship or for domestic purposes the peasant could be compelled to produce certain cereals which were badly needed by the donee.

If parts of the products are placed at the disposal of the grantee, what is the difference between enjoying the means of production, that is, land, and the fruits of production? Land does not mean anything without its products. Whoever seizes land rich with crops (*sasyasamrddam vasundharam*) is guilty of great sins, so goes the medieval saying. Thus land carried meaning in the context of its products. Surplus was collected not only after production but also in the course of production. On-the-spot collection and quick administration could be the most effective way of managing a large population.

### The Question of Serfdom

On the basis of the land charters we can say that in the donated areas the landed beneficiaries enjoyed general control over production resources. Of course they did not enjoy specific control over every plot of land that the peasant cultivated. But there is nothing to question their control over the plots of lands that were directly donated to them by the king, sometimes along with the sharecroppers<sup>69</sup> and weavers and sometimes along with the cultivators.<sup>70</sup> This raises the problem of serfdom. It is thought that feudalism was identical with serfdom, and there seems to be an assumption that serfdom was the only potent method of exploiting the peasants. It may be very effective, but other forms of servitude imposed on the peasantry did not prove inoperative and unproductive. After all what is the essence of serfdom? In this system small farm units are attached to big farm units, and the two are interdependent for purposes of production. Big farms are directly managed by manorial magnates but cultivated by those who possess small plots. Therefore serfdom means giving more of surplus labour than surplus produce. But in the Indian case surplus produce is extracted more through the general control exercised by the landed intermediaries than by their employment of serfs. A serf also occupies some land and provides his family with subsistence. But he not only pays rent in cash or kind for exploiting his unit of production but also spends extra hours labouring on the field of his lord. However, if these extra hours of his are used on the field occupied by him the extra yield does not necessarily stay with the cultivator. On the other hand, it enables him to pay more rent in cash or kind to his lord.

It has been argued that serfdom is an incidental feature in the case of India.<sup>71</sup> But the evidence cited so far would show that it is more than incidental.<sup>72</sup> In any case if the lord gets his share without reducing too many people to serfdom, what basic difference does it make to him or to the social pattern? Both systems are concerned with extracting the lord's share; in both the cultivator is a dependent peasant

under the exploitation of his lord, and in both cases the social structure is beset with the internal contradiction between the landlord and the actual tiller. A beneficiary may not possess big plots but he possesses too many plots which make management difficult. In fact laws of partition of land became effective in Gupta and post-Gupta times<sup>73</sup> and they may have contributed to the fragmentation of land. Fragmentation of land is also indicated by epigraphic sale transactions found in Bangladesh.<sup>74</sup> Therefore if a landlord possesses too many plots, tenantry and sharecropping may be more convenient than getting the land cultivated through the deployment of serfs.

It is argued that because soil in India was very fertile, there was no scope for the rise of serfdom or forced labour.<sup>75</sup> But we have indications of forced labour in the middle Gangetic basin where the soil is the most fertile. Till recent times poor tenants, belonging to lower castes, were forced by landlords from upper castes to work in the fields at meagre wages.<sup>76</sup> Peasants were compelled to plough the land of the landlords and do various kinds of odd jobs for the sake of the landlords in other fertile areas. This is known as *hari* and *begari* in the whole Gangetic basin area. The medieval term for the first is *halikakara*,<sup>77</sup> and for the second is *visti*, from which *bethbegari* is derived. The Pala charters found in Monghyr, Bhagalpur, Saharsa and Nalanda districts, all forming parts of the middle Gangetic plains, mention the term *sarvapidaparihrta*. This means that the peasants were subjected to all types of forced labour and oppressions, but when the village was transferred to a beneficiary he became entitled to these advantages without the interference of the state. Forced labour may have originated in less populated areas but not necessarily in less fertile parts. In any case, once its usefulness was recognised it spread to more populated parts.

Feudalism flourished in paddy producing areas. Paddy production requires 50 per cent more man hours than wheat production. According to a popular saying in Patna and Gaya districts, wheat cultivation can be undertaken even by a widow, who represents an image of helplessness in the countryside. Evidently wheat requires less and barley requires least labour. Therefore paddy transplantation would mean scarcity of labour in peak season; and it could be necessary to take to forced labour. We need not add that the term *satpadyamanavisti* is used frequently.<sup>18</sup> It has been translated to mean the use of forced labour as occasions arise. But since the term qualifies the donated land or village, it might mean the labour generated or produced by the village in future.<sup>79</sup> This was a significant development in a good part of the country. It would imply that besides customary sources of forced labour new sources could be exploited by the beneficiaries according to their needs. Unfortunately these sources are not specified in medieval records. That there were various types of forced labour is clear from the use of the term *sarvavisti*<sup>80</sup> in many land grants, particularly in Vakataka grants. It is

obvious that these many types may have included the use of labour in the fields. The evidence from the *Skanda Purana* produced by B N S Yadava leaves little doubt that hundreds of people were compelled to do forced labour and this was evidently meant for production.<sup>81</sup> Hence serfdom cannot be dismissed as an incidental feature.

If serfdom is understood as compulsive attachment of the peasants to the soil, it prevailed in good parts of Madhya Pradesh, eastern India, Chamba and Rajasthan. In many cases the charters clearly transfer the peasants, artisans and even traders to the beneficiaries.<sup>82</sup> In most charters they ask the villagers, the peasants and other inhabitants of the villages to stay in their villages and to carry out the orders of the beneficiaries. This fact of immobility of peasants and artisans has not been contested by anybody so far. However, it is argued that even if these people were allowed to move, what purpose it would have served. If such a view is taken, then what is the point in underlining the absence of serfdom in the Indian context? After all, in conditions of serfdom a peasant has to be tied to his piece of land and when that piece of land is transferred the peasant is automatically transferred. This practice prevailed widely in early medieval times. Nevertheless, they were not engaged widely in agricultural operations in the fields of their landlords. If it is argued that peasants were not employed in production but in building forts, roads, temples, massive and impressive structures, then we may say that all such grandiose projects were undertaken by the landed aristocracy, chiefs and princes, to strike the people with their awe and majesty. They could be of great indirect help in collecting taxes and presents from the peasantry. Some of them, such as building of roads, could be eventually useful from the point of production. The employment of forced labour therefore did not depend on the fertility of the soil but on the realisation of its usefulness by the landlords. There is no doubt that the rural aristocracy led an ostentatious and luxurious life requiring much consumption. Although we cannot measure the rising expectations of the landlords we notice indications of growing luxurious living.

The practice of forced labour, sharecropping or the leasing of land was promoted and supported by social institutions and inhibitions. The law-books ask the Brahmanas not to take to the plough. It seems that the upper caste people could not transplant paddy.<sup>83</sup> Naturally even in a small holding which could be managed by their family labour, such people would need some labour which could be either forced labour or sharecropping. In such a case it is immaterial whether the soil is less fertile or more fertile, for at any rate labour will have to be drafted from outside the family unit. Lack of labour power and plenty of land create conditions for introducing an element of compulsion. But this can happen only in a particular socio-economic formation. We have lack of labour in socialist and even capitalist countries, but that does not necessarily lead to forced labour.

The idea that the gap between the labour potential of the family and the land it has leads to feudal conditions may be far from true. Underutilisation of labour capacity may not necessarily produce demand for such labour in the form of forced labour. This labour can also be invested in auxiliary crafts in response to agricultural and domestic demands. But, what is more important, if the needs of the landlord are met otherwise through rents and presents, why should he assume direct and onerous responsibility for cultivation and mobilise labour power for that purpose? At present we have no means to measure the needs, demands and expectations of the landlord, which may vary region-wise. These needs could be easily met by the landlords because of the provisions of the charters empowering them to depart from customary and established taxes and impose and introduce new levies and new forms of forced labour.

### Social Crisis as the Origin of Land Grants

It is repeatedly stated that no new mode of socio-economic formation can appear as a result of political, administrative and juridical measures,<sup>84</sup> little realising that the colonial system in India owed its origin largely to such measures. The king in ancient India symbolised state authority, and the state was backed by priests and warriors who lived on the surplus produced by the peasants and further supplied by the artisans. This kind of state and society appeared in the age of the Buddha. It continued to function more or less smoothly till the 3rd century A D. But there are many passages in the epics and the Puranas, which speak of a kind of social crisis symbolised by the Kali age. These passages are ascribed to the second half of the 3rd century A D and the beginning of the 4th century A D. They depict a state of affairs in which rural people were oppressed with taxes and forced labour,<sup>85</sup> which was considered an important element of the military power. The oppressions of the state coupled with the havoc caused by natural calamities created a state of chaos, and the lower orders, particularly the Vaisyas and the Sudras, refused to perform the functions assigned to them. On top of it the peasants refused to pay taxes.<sup>86</sup> The *Manu Smṛti*, *Santi Parva* and other texts suggested two measures to overcome this social crisis. One was the use of force or *danda*, which is glorified in these texts. The other was the restoration of the *varna-sramadharmā* which was considered to be the bedrock of the class-based and state-based society. Obviously these measures alone could not cope with the critical situation. Since it became difficult to collect taxes it was not possible to run the state and to pay the priests, administrators, the army and numerous officials. Apparently, as an alternative, the practice of land grants, which was not unknown in early times, was adopted on a wide scale in a major part of the country, particularly from the 4th–5th century A D onwards. It will therefore appear that we have an indication of a crisis in production relations, which may not

be unconnected with changes in the mode of production. The fact cannot be discounted that trade<sup>87</sup> and urbanism<sup>88</sup> suffered a distinct decline, and the absence of gold coins for three centuries between the 7th and the 10th and paucity of other types of coins<sup>89</sup> are well known. There is practically no indication of the use of slaves in production. All these are presages of change in the methods and relations of production. Hence the production system as a whole was afflicted with certain maladies, which compelled the state to convert land/land revenues into a general mode of payment for religious and administrative services. The grant system relieved the state of the heavy responsibility of getting the taxes collected all over the countryside by its agents and then of disbursing them in cash or kind. On the other hand, priests, warriors and administrators were asked to fend for themselves in the villages assigned to them for their enjoyment. The system also relieved the state of the responsibility of maintaining law and order in the donated villages which now became almost the sole concern of the beneficiaries. Therefore it would be wrong to assume that political, administrative and juridical measures, which created new property relations in land, were undertaken by the state entirely on its own.

The social crisis apparently led to the withdrawal of slaves from production, and to the provision of land for them as tenants and share-croppers. This explains to a good extent the elevation of Sudras to peasantry and their participation in rituals. It seems that landowners converted Sudra labourers into peasants and themselves became landlords living on rent. The substantial *gahapatis* of the age of the Buddha probably turned landlords. That the village headman tended to become landlord has already been shown,<sup>90</sup> although the causes for this transformation need investigation.

### Conflicts within the New Formation

The new socio-economic formation that emerged as a result of the appearance of a class of landlords and that of a subject peasantry had its own limitations. The peasants were accustomed to give certain taxes and services to the state, and if the demand of the beneficiary was confined to those claims, in normal times the routine payment could continue. But the beneficiary would impose proper and improper taxes, fixed and unfixed taxes, would collect all kinds of taxes and, what is worse, they could make additional impositions which were covered by the term *adi*, ie, et cetera. In certain areas they could also introduce new forms of forced labour. On top of this all communal and agrarian resources hitherto enjoyed by the peasants were transferred to the landed beneficiaries who were ever present on the spot. This situation caused constant conflict between those who claimed rent on the strength of their royal charters and others who claimed immunity on the basis of customary and immemorial rights which would be certainly known to local people but because of their illiteracy could not

be shown in black and white. Hence there was bound to be constant friction, tensions and struggle between the landed beneficiaries and the servile peasantry. This might lead to litigations between the beneficiaries, and also between the beneficiary and the peasants.<sup>91</sup> Because of the common practice of land grants and the enormous advantages derived from them the Brahmanas forged many charters (*kuta-sasana*) and claimed enjoyment of villages on that basis. But there were so many valid charters that the conflict between the landlord and the peasant was an ever present possibility. In order to settle this conflict Narada, Brhaspati, *Agni Purana* and other authorities give the final authority to the royal charter in case of dispute. They lay down that if there is a conflict between the religious right (*dharmā*), contract (*vyavahara*) right, customary (*carita*) right and the right derived from the royal charter (*rajasasana*) the royal charter will override all the other sources of the law or authority.<sup>92</sup>

But it seems that this overriding power of the royal charter did not work in all cases. We have the case of the Kaivartas, a fishing and cultivating community in Bangladesh, who rose against Ramapala in the 11th century A D. They fought with bamboo sticks riding on buffaloes. So powerful was their revolt that two dozen vassals had to be mobilised by Ramapala in order to put down the Kaivarta rebellion. This is an important example of peasant revolt.<sup>93</sup> The possibility of clash is also indicated in some Bengal grants which mention the term *karsanavirodhi sthana*.<sup>94</sup> At least two grants take pains to show that they do not clash with the existing cultivating rights of the peasants. Therefore the possibility of clash between the peasants and the incoming beneficiaries is clearly visualised. Similarly in many grants from Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra the people are warned that if they tried to upset the grant in any manner then they would be punished with force.<sup>95</sup> This point is stated repeatedly<sup>96</sup> in many inscriptions. In some cases this threat is directed towards royal officials, but mostly it is a general threat meant for all. Again in the texts of this period, *brahmahatya*, that is, killing of Brahmana, is considered to be a great sin and it occurs in many Puranas. Why does the murder of Brahmana become so important in early medieval times? Apparently it is because of his becoming a landed beneficiary and therefore an oppressor. If we look at the distribution of hero stones in Karnataka and other parts of South India it would appear that some of them are found in the *agrahara* areas.<sup>97</sup> This would again suggest that open frictions appeared between the beneficiary of the *agrahara* and the peasants living there. In the case of Karnataka, R N Nandi has collected certain evidence which suggests some kind of collaboration between the Brahmanas and the peasants in the beginning, but eventually shows open conflict between the two.<sup>98</sup> D N Jha refers to several instances of conflict between the peasants and the beneficiary landlords in Cola inscriptions, particularly after 1000 AD.<sup>99</sup>

Although we can see and visualise polarity between the central

state and smaller states, polarity between various types of beneficiaries, and polarity between landed magnates and the cultivator, the human factor operating in these polarities does not come out clearly in our sources. It is thought that the peasant's independent control over his process of production prevented acute social tensions.<sup>100</sup> But as shown earlier, this control was more dependent than independent. The multiplication of the existing units of production in new areas could obviate occasions for open conflicts leading to changes. But to a good degree the seeming stability was prompted by other factors which were closely linked with the system of production, especially with production relations. First, the caste system with the features of hierarchy and superiority, not to speak of untouchability, provided ritualistic sanction for the production and distribution system. It seems that the *jajmani* system developed in this period and was part of a more or less self-sufficient economy. At the end of harvesting, on the threshing floor, portions of paddy were given to gods, Brahmanas, rulers and the various kinds of labourers, indicated by the term *bhrtyavargaposanam*.<sup>101</sup> The Brahmanas, who controlled many 'estates', played a crucial ideological role in penetrating the consciousness of the peasantry and making them behave as they liked them to do. Some medieval religious reform movements apparently sought to improve the status of those who really produced and suffered, but those movements were manipulated to contain the conflicts and scotch the tension; they could not rouse the peasantry to realities. In certain parts of the country, survivals of the bonds of kinship also helped to keep people together. This may have particularly happened in Rajasthan and Himalayan areas. Classes with conflicting interests were kept together through the performance of *puja*, *japa*, *vratas*, *tirthas*, *samskaras*, *prayascittas* and through prospects of heaven and hell. The all-pervasive influence of astrology (*jyotisa*) and that of the doctrine of Vedanta kept the people reconciled to their lot. All these factors brought the people of opposite interests together.

### Agricultural Expansion

It is held that lack of 'concentrated social effort' blocked changes in the means, methods and relations of production.<sup>102</sup> We may not have much idea about the social effort, but we can certainly identify significant changes in the mode of production in early medieval times. This period was undoubtedly an age of larger yield and a great agrarian expansion. It is possible to count hundreds of states, particularly in those areas which had never witnessed the rise of full-fledged states. A state presupposes an assured source of income which will enable it to maintain a good number of managerial staff. This could not be possible unless the agrarian base was strong enough to pay for the priests, officers, army men, etc.

A few technological innovations contributed to rural expansion. Apart from the use of the *araghatta*, the Persian wheel, the early Middle

Ages saw several changes in agriculture. The importance attached to agriculture in this period is indicated by the fact that several texts were composed on it such as *Krsiparasara* in the north and Kamban's book in the south. Kasyapa's *Krsisukti* has been found in the south,<sup>103</sup> but it may have belonged to some paddy producing area either in the north or south. It prescribes three methods of lifting water (i.e., using the *ghati-yantra*) by men, oxen and elephants.<sup>104</sup> That certain persons were engaged in working the 'Persian' water-wheel can be inferred from the use of the term *arahattiyana* in a lexicon of the twelfth century.<sup>105</sup> The *Vikṣa Ayurveda* of about the tenth century recommends recipes for treating the diseases affecting the plants.<sup>106</sup> Apart from special attention being given to horses,<sup>107</sup> because they were used by chiefs and princes, animal husbandry was improved because of the care given to the treatment of cattle diseases.<sup>108</sup> In addition, detailed instructions regarding agriculture appear in the *Bṛhatsamhita* of Varahamihira, the *Agni Purana* and the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purana*.<sup>109</sup> Three crops, first mentioned by Panini, were known widely,<sup>110</sup> and better seeds were produced.<sup>111</sup> Meteorological knowledge, based on observation, was far advanced in the *Krsiparasara*. The knowledge of fertilisers improved immensely and the use of the compost was known;<sup>112</sup> and, what is more important, irrigation facilities were expanded. The law-books lay down severe punishments for those who cause damage to tanks, wells, ponds, embankments, etc.<sup>113</sup> The construction of *vapi* became very popular in Rajasthan and Gujarat. Its importance is also underlined in the work of Kasyapa.<sup>114</sup> In his doctoral thesis V K Jain has prepared a map in which he has shown the distribution of the *vapis* (step wells) in western India in the 11th-13th centuries.<sup>115</sup> It is interesting to note that the term *vapi* is derived from the Sanskrit root *vap* which means to sow. So it is clear that step wells were meant for irrigating the fields. Of course the use of iron implements attained a new peak in this period. In the *Paryayamuktavali*, a medieval lexicon whose manuscripts have been found in West Bengal and Orissa, as many as half a dozen types or grades of iron are mentioned.<sup>116</sup> The use of iron became so common that it began to be employed for non-utilitarian purposes. Several pillars, including the Mehrauli pillar in Delhi, were erected to mark the conquests of victorious princes. The increase in the number of the varieties of cereals including rice, wheat and lentils as well as in fruits, vegetables, legumes, etc., is striking. These can be inferred not only from the *Amarakosa* but more so from the *Paryayamuktavali*.<sup>117</sup> According to the *Sunya Purana* more than 50 kinds of paddy were cultivated in Bengal.<sup>118</sup> Apart from the foundation of numerous states the various medieval texts suggest an enormous increase in agricultural production. Therefore agricultural technology in terms of a single major break may not be striking,<sup>119</sup> but the overall effect of various measures and improvement seems to have been substantial. However mere increase in production may lead neither to stability nor to structural changes. For this certain other conditions

including the rousing of the necessary consciousness may be needed.

### Concluding Observations

Feudalism in India therefore was characterised by a class of landlords and by a class of subject peasantry, the two living in a predominantly agrarian economy marked by a decline of trade and urbanism and by a drastic reduction in metal currency. The superior state got its taxes collected and authority recognised by creating a number of inferior power blocs or even states (that is, landed priests, *mathas*, *viharas*, *basadis*, temples, *agraharas*, *brahmadevas*, etc.) who generated the necessary social and ideological climate for this purpose. Unlike the European system most of the power structures within the state did not have to pay taxes. West European feudal lords granted land to their serfs in order to get their own occupied land cultivated. But Indian kings made land grants to get the taxes (surplus) collected. In their turn the grantees collected rents from their tenant-peasants who could be evicted and even subjected to forced labour.

Our comments are couched sometimes in terms of probabilities and reservations, because the nature of sources does not admit of clear and categorical statements. Nevertheless they raise some theoretical issues. The position of class is to be located in the overall system of production. But if a class covers those who either exclusively control the means of production or those who are completely deprived of such control, such a thing can happen only in a full-fledged capitalist system. The application of such a concept to pre-capitalist societies is riddled with difficulties, for even in the feudal society of Western Europe the serf enjoyed day-to-day control over his bit of the means of production.<sup>120</sup> In such a society class is best seen in the context of the unequal distribution of the surplus, which was eventually given a lasting basis by the unequal distribution of the means of production and strengthened by ideological and juridical factors. Secondly, ecological factors influence the development of material culture. But we find several countries with similar climatic conditions but dissimilar social structures. Therefore to attribute such structural phenomena as the absence of serfdom or the longevity of peasant autonomy to the carrying capacity of the soil would be going too far.

*(This paper was written for publication in the forthcoming number of the Journal of Peasant Studies. We thank the editors of that journal as well as the author for allowing us to publish it here as well)*

- 1 D C Sircar, *Landlordism and Tenancy in Ancient and Medieval India as Revealed by Epigraphical Records*, Lucknow, 1969, Also see *Journal of Indian History*, XLIV, 1966, pp 351-357; LI, 1973, pp 56-59; *Journal of Ancient Indian History*, VI, 1972-73, pp 337-339; D C Sircar (ed), *Land System and Feudalism in Ancient India*, Calcutta, 1966, pp 11-23. Irfan Habib discusses "Indian Feudalism" in *The Peasant in Indian History*, Presidential Address, the Indian History Congress, 43rd Session, Kurukshetra, 1982.

- 2 "Was There Feudalism in Indian History?", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol 8, no. 3. April 1981, pp 273-310. In this paper the whole medieval period is discussed but I will confine myself primarily to early medieval times (5th to 12th century), about which I have some idea. My task has been made easy because Dr Mukhia's criticisms have been effectively met by B N S Yadava in *The Problem of the Emergence of Feudal Relations in Early India*, Presidential Address for Ancient Indian Section of the Indian History Congress, 41st Session, Bombay, 1980. In a similar address delivered at the 40th Session of the Indian History Congress held at Waltair in 1979 D N Jha anticipated and answered many of these objections in *Early Indian Feudalism: A Historiographical Critique*. Also see Suvira Jaiswal, "Studies in Early Indian Social History", *Indian Historical Review*, VI, 1979-80, pp 18-21.
- 3 Marx-Engels, *Pre-Capitalist Socio-Economic Formations*, Moscow, 1979, p 23.
- 4 Muthia, *op cit*, p 310, fn 225. In the discussion on variants Indian feudalism is seen as a distinct possibility.
- 5 Kosminsky's views based on Marx and expressed in his *Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the Thirteenth Century*, Oxford, 1956, are summarised and discussed in Barry Hindess and Paul Q Hirst, *Pre-Capitalist Modes of Production*, London, 1975, pp 222-223, 234-235.
- 6 Marx considers tenants to be an object of feudal exploitation. According to him the feudal lord differs from the bourgeois in that he "does not try to extract the utmost advantage from his land. Rather he consumes what is there and calmly leaves the worry of producing to the serfs and tenants", Marx-Engels, *op cit*, p 20. In the 1880s Engels also concluded that serfdom is not solely a "peculiarly medieval-feudal form", *ibid*, p 23. This implies that the feudal formation could have other features.
- 7 Mukhia, *op cit*, pp 275, 290, 291, 293.
- 8 I owe this to Ranjit Guha.
- 9 The king is called *bhuvamin* by Katyayana, a law giver of about the sixth century (P V Kane, ed, verse 16).
- 10 R S Sharma, "From Gopati to Bhupati" (a review of the changing position of the king), *Studies in History*, II (2), 1980, pp 6-8.
- 11 *yasya yasya yada bhumi, tasya tasya tada phalam*, D C Sircar (ed), *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization*, Vol I, University of Calcutta, 1965 (abbrev. as *Sel. Inserr.*) Bk III, p 49, line 26.
- 12 The terms used are *sarvoparikarakaradanamasametah*, *sarvakarasametah*, *sarvakaravisarjitah*, etc. See Balachandra Jain, *Utkirna-Lekha*, Raipur, 1961, pp 56-57. The terms *samastapratyaya* and *sarvayasameta* also occur (Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, 2nd edn, p 100). Also see *sarvadanasmagrahya*, *Epigraphia Indica (EI)*, V, no. 5, line 41.
- 13 Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, 2nd edn, p 98.
- 14 The phrase used is *niyataniyatasamastadaya*, all specified and unspecified ducs. *EI*, no. 21, line 26.
- 15 *Epigraphia Indica*, XXIX, no. 7, line 42; Jain, *op cit*, p 52.
- 16 Mukhia rightly postulates that the village potentates would be the first to notice the rise in productivity and the first to demand a greater share in the peasant's produce. *Op cit*, p 309, fn. 214.
- 17 The phrase *ajnasravanavidheyibhuya* is common in north Indian grants.
- 18 The point has been discussed in R S Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, 2nd edn, Delhi, 1980, pp 38-39.
- 19 The distinction is brought out clearly in P N Sen, *The General Principles of Hindu Jurisprudence*, Tagore Law Lectures, 1909, University of Calcutta, 1918, p 42.
- 20 *Sel. Inserr.*, Bk III, nos. 16, 18, 19, 41, 42, 43, etc.
- 21 Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, 2nd edn., pp 73-75, 185-187.
- 22 Marx-Engels, *Pre-Capitalist Socio-Economic Formations*, p 22.

- 23 ...*sadandakarasahah karmasilakarsako' balisasvamyavaravarnaṣrayo janapadasamṣat, Arthaśāstra* (of Kautilya), R P Kangle's edn., VI. 1.
- 24 *As*, I. 13. The term *praktikopa* or revolt of the subjects is used in V. 6 and VII. 6.
- 25 B N S Yadava, *The Problem of the Emergence of Feudal Relations in Early India*, p 7, contains several references to the acquisition of *jana*.
- 26 R S Sharma, *Sudras in Ancient India*, 2nd edn, Delhi, 1980, Ch III.
- 27 The term used is *kassako gahapati*, cultivating family head. *Angustara Nikaya* (Pali Text Society, London), i, 239-240. But *gahapati*, in the sense of substantial peasant, is used in Pali texts at many places.
- 28 *s r griha*, Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, Oxford, 1951.
- 29 R L Turner, *A Comparative Dictionary of the Indo-Aryan Languages*, Oxford, 1973, no 3736.
- 30 *Ibid*.
- 31 R Mukerji and S K Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions bearing on History and Civilization of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1967, no. 18, line 45; no. 22, line 46; no. 28, line 52; no. 30, line 48; no. 36, line 36; no. 37, line 32.
- 32 Turner, *op cit*, no 3736.
- 33 Mukerji and Maity, *op cit*, no 47, line 50.
- 34 *Ibid*, no 7, line 3; no 9, line 3 (p 59).
- 35 Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, 2nd edn, pp 188-189.
- 36 *Ibid*, p 38.
- 37 *Ibid*, p 188.
- 38 *Ibid*, p 98, fn 3, 99.
- 39 It is taken in the sense of a ploughman. See B N S Yadava, *The Problem of the Emergence of Feudal Relations in Early India*, p 25.
- 40 *s v Krsivala*, Monier-Williams, *op cit*.
- 41 B N S Yadava "The Problem of the Emergence of Feudal Relations in Early India", p 32,
- 42 Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, 2nd edn, pp 12-13, 216.
- 43 These terms are *avanisa*, *avanindra*, *ksitipati*, *ksitendra*, *ksitisa*, *ksiteradhipa*, *parthiva*, *prthivipati*, *parthivendra*, *prthivinatha*, *bhupa*, *bhupati*, *bhubhuj*, *bhumipa*, *bhumisvara*, *mahipa*, *mahipati*, *mahipala*, *mahindra*, *mahamahendra*, *urvipati*, *vasudhadhipa*, *vasudhesvara*, *samanta-bhumisvara*. etc. R S Sharma, 'From Gopati to Bhupati', *Studies in History*, II (2), 1980, p 8 with fns 81-82.
- 44 R S Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, Calcutta, 1965, Ch IV.
- 45 P N Sen, *The General Principles of Hindu Jurisprudence, Tagore Law Lectures*, 1909, University of Calcutta, 1918, pp 42-43, 46. The theory of popular recognition, which gives preference to unwritten laws, is known as *laukika svatvavada*, (*ibid*, p 42). Several logicians such as Guru, Kumarila Svami and Parthasarathi Misra, who interpreted the Dharmasastras according to the canons of *mimamsa* also supported the popular recognition theory. Jimutavahana, Dharmesvara etc., supported the *sastric* view (*ibid*, p 42). The difference does reflect conflicting claims to land control in early medieval times.
- 46 *Gautama Dharmasutra* (Varanasi, 1966), 11.3-36. The passage reads *pasu bhumistri-namanatibhogah*.
- 47 *alpenapi bhogena bhoktuh svam bhavati*. Commentary on *Gautama* 11.3.36. By this interpretation cattle and women slaves are also covered. It is interesting that a ten-year limit of enjoyment is set for acquiring ownership over the property of others in several cases by the commentator. Comm. on *Gautama* 11.3.34-35.
- 48 Commentary on *Gautama* 11.3.34-35.
- 49 *Svatva* should be taken in the sense of property rights, as has been done by P N Sen, *op cit*, p 42.
- 50 J D M Derrett in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, XVIII, 489.
- 51 V V Mirashi, *Inscriptions of the Vakatakas, Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*,

- Vol V, Ootacamund, 1955, no. 6, lines 19-20.
- 52 *Ibid*, no. 12, lines 20-21.
- 53 *Ibid*, no. 13, lines 22-23.
- 54 *Ibid*, no. 14, lines 22-32
- 55 Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, 2nd edn, p 3; the common term used is *sadanda-dasaparadhah*.
- 56 *Ibid*. The term *abhyantarasisiddhi* is used.
- 57 *Ibid*, p 2.
- 58 *Sel Inscr*, Bk III, no. 62, lines 21-22,
- 59 Mukerji, and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions*, no. 47, line 62.
- 60 *Ibid*, line 63.
- 61 *Ibid*, no. 46, line 22.
- 62 *Epigraphia Indica*, V, no. 20, line 54. The village, situated near Nagpur, was granted by Krsna III in 940-941.
- 63 *Sel. Inscr*. Bk III, no. 49, lines 18-28; no. 50, lines 15-24.
- 64 ...*sadandanigraham karisyamah*. This phrase is found, with slight variations in many charters, *Ibid*, no. 61, 11.22-24; no. 62, 11.32-34; no. 64, 11.21-24; no. 65, 11.39-41; no. 67, 11.24-25.
- 65 *Ibid*, no. 67, 11.24-25.
- 66 In the context of slave society it is held that if 20 per cent of people are engaged in production as slaves in a society, it should be considered a slave society. Five such societies have been identified. Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*, Cambridge, 1978, pp 99-100. But the qualitative place of slaves or other categories of servile people in the total mode of production deserves equal consideration.
- 67 D C Sircar, *Indian Epigraphy*, Delhi, 1965, p 97, fn 2.
- 68 Balachandra Jain, *Utkirna-Lekh*, Raipur, 1961, no. 3, 11.6-11, (p 8).
- 69 *Sel Inscr*, Bk III, no. 65, 11.38-39.
- 70 *Ibid*, no. 61, 1.15.
- 71 Mukhia, *op cit*, p 286.
- 72 R S Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, Delhi, 1980, pp 19, 31, 40-43, 56, 60, 67-68, 99-101, 109, 195-198; B N S Yadava, *Society and Culture*, pp 164-169; "Immobility and Subjection of Indian Peasantry in Early Medieval Complex", *The Indian Historical Review*, I, 1974, 18-27. A good deal of evidence can be obtained from G K Rai, *Involuntary Labour in Ancient India*, Allahabad, 1981, but the passage from Vatsyayana's *Kamsutra* (V. 5.5) is inaccurately construed and translated.
- 73 Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, 2nd edn, pp 118-119.
- 74 *Ibid*, p 49.
- 75 Mukhia, *op cit*, pp 286, 289, 303, fn 124.
- 76 This was the case in my own village Barauni (District Begusarai, Bihar) till 1950 when the Permanent Settlement was abolished.
- 77 Y B Singh, "Halika-kara: Crystallization of a Practice into a Tax", paper (unpublished) presented to the 43rd Session of the Indian History Congress, Kurukshetra, 1982.
- 78 Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, 2nd edn, pp 99-100.
- 79 The term *utpatsyamana* would suit this interpretation better, although even *utpadyamana* means the same thing. I owe this suggestion to Professor R C Pandeya. Palaeographically there is very little difference between the two terms.
- 80 *Sel Inscr*, Bk III, no 61, line 19; no 62, line 28.
- 81 *Society and Culture in Northern India*, pp 164-166.
- 82 Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, 2nd edn, p 199 with fn 6.
- 83 The passage *pankisah panktiso bhrtiyaih vinyaset samabhumike* (verse no 431) occurs in the context of paddy transplantation in the *Kasyapiyakrsisukti*, (ed) Gy Wojtilla, *Acta Orientalia Huno*, XXXIII (2), 1979, 209-252. The frequent use

of the term *krsivala* for the peasant shows that the text belongs to some paddy producing area either in south India or in some other part of the country, and contains much medieval material. Verse no 450 speaks of the employment of the classes of agricultural labourers in weeding operations. *trnakosthan nirasyatha panktisah panktisah kramat, bhrtiyavargaih, praty aham va vairicchedah prasasyate*. If we look at the survival of the transplantation practice, it would appear that this use of labour was made by the upper caste people in medieval times.

- 84 Mukhia, *op cit*, pp 274, 286.
- 85 This Kali passage in the Cr edn of the *Mahabharata* (III. 188. 71) amended by me on the basis of the Gita Press edn reads: *nirvivesa janapada karavistibhirarditah*. Apparently taxes (*kara*) affected the Vaisyas and forced labour (*visti*) the Sudras.
- 86 I discussed the Kali problem in some detail three years ago in a paper "The Kali Age: A Period of Social Crisis" meant for the A L Basham Volume, which has not been published so far. But see my *Sudras in Ancient India*, 2nd edn, Delhi, 1980, pp 233-239.
- 87 In addition to the material presented about the decline of trade in my *Indian Feudalism*, 2nd edn, Chs I and III, further evidence appears in B N S Yadava, *Society and Culture in Northern India in the Twelfth Century*, pp 270-275. Speaking of early medieval Bengal Dr M R Tarafdar says: "The period between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries shows distinct signs of the decay of trade and urban centres, a process which must have started earlier" ("Trade and Society in Early Medieval Bengal", *Indian Historical Review*, IV, January 1978, 282). However in western India trade shows revival in this period (V K Jain, "Trade and Traders in Western India", Ph D thesis, Delhi University, 1983); so also seems to be the case with south India (Kenneth R Hall, *Trade and State Craft in the Age of the Colas*, New Delhi, 1980). We postulate decline of trade mainly in the 7th-10th centuries.
- 88 Although the decline of urbanism has been sometimes doubted (B D Chattopadhyaya, "Trade and Urban Centres in Early Medieval North India", *Indian Historical Review*, I, 1974. 203-219) progress in historical archaeology in the Gangetic zone and elsewhere since 1971, coupled with further research in literary texts, confirms what I stated earlier ("Decay of Gangetic Towns in Gupta and Post-Gupta Times", *Journal of Indian History*, Golden Jubilee Volume, 1973, pp 135-150). Almost all Satavahana towns decay and disappear after the 3rd century A D. Professor A H Dani informs me of a similar fate of the Kusana towns in Pakistan, and the Soviet archaeologist Professor V Masson tells me that five central Asian urban centres of about 1-4th century A D became either villages or castles afterwards. In two Patna University doctoral theses (Om Prakash Prasad, "Towns in Early Medieval Karnataka", 1978, and B P N Pathak, "Society and Culture in Early Bihar", 1983) the phenomenon of decay comes out very clearly. Dr R N Nandi convincingly shows that many of these decaying towns were converted into *tirthas* or places of pilgrimage in early medieval times ("Client, Ritual and Conflict in Early Brahmanical Order", *Indian Historical Review*, VI, 1979, pp 80, 100, 103-109). Additional evidence has been collected on the decay of towns (*Ibid.*, 74-80).
- 89 R S Sharma, "Indian Feudalism Retouched" (review paper), *Indian Historical Review*, I, 1974, pp 320-330. For additional evidence regarding paucity of coinage, see M R Tarafdar, *op cit*.
- 90 Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, 2nd edn, pp 41-42.
- 91 In 1214 a temple in Karnataka claimed the land of its neighbours, but the local authorities decided against the temple. S Settari and G D Sontheimer (ed), *Memorial Stones*, Dharwar, 1982, p 303.
- 92 R S Sharma, "Rajasasana: Meaning, Scope and Application", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 37th Session, Calicut, 1976.
- 93 R S Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, 2nd edn, Delhi, 1980, p 220.
- 94 Mukerji and Maity, *Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions*, no 6, line 18; no 7, line 19.

- 95 *Sel Inscrr*, Bk II, no 61, lines 22-24.
- 96 *Ibid*, no 62, lines 32-34; no 634, lines 21-24; no 67, lines 24- 25.
- 97 S Settar and Gunther D Sontheimer (ed), *op cit*, p 223.
- 98 His manuscript entitled "Class, State and Family in Early South India" is yet to be published.
- 99 D N Jha, "Section I: *Ancient India Presidential Address*", Indian History Congress, XL Session, Andhra University, Waltair, 1979, p 18.
- 100 Mukhia, *op cit*, p 293.
- 101 Gy Wojtilla (ed), *Kasyapiyaksrisukti*, *op cit*, verses 491-492.
- 102 Mukhia, *op cit*, p 292. However this statement is qualified by the phrase "change completely" (*ibid*).
- 103 Gy Wojtilla, *Kasyapiyaksrisukti*, *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hung*, XXXIII, Fax. 2, 1979, pp 209-252. The usual term for cultivator in this text is *ksrivala*, which occurs in early medieval texts and inscriptions. Most material in this text probably belongs to medieval times.
- 104 Gy. Wojtilla, *op cit*, verses 167-168. The *ghati-yantra* operated by oxen is considered to be the best, that by men to be worst and that by elephants to be of the middling quality.
- 105 B N S Yadava, *Society and Culture in Northern India in the Twelfth Century*, p 259.
- 106 D N Bose and others (ed), *A Concise History of Science in India*, New Delhi, 1971, p 362,
- 107 *Ibid*, p 255.
- 108 *Ibid*, pp 363-364.
- 109 *Ibid*, pp 358, 361, 365.
- 110 *Ibid*, pp 356, 361.
- 111 *Ibid*, pp 358-359.
- 112 *Ibid*, pp 358-360.
- 113 These texts belong to the early centuries of the Christian era. See, R S Sharma, *Light on Early Indian Society and Economy*, Bombay, 1966, pp 90-111.
- 114 Gy Wojtilla, *op cit*, pp 219-220.
- 115 "Trade and Traders in Western India", Ph D thesis, University of Delhi, 1984.
- 116 The text was edited by T Chowdhury in *Journal of Bihar Research Society*, XXXI (1945) and XXXII, (1946). The earliest ms. used by him belongs to 1851-52. Composed by Haricaranasana the text is based on the *Paryayaratnamala* of Madhavakara (*JBR*S. XXXII, 1945, Introduction. p i), Since it is strikingly indebted to Amara in chs 22 and 23 (*ibid*) and since potato and tobacco are not mentioned in it, it seems to be pre-Mughal. The synonyms for iron and other metals are found in ch. (*varga*) 6 (*JBR*S, XXXI, 1945).
- 117 Ch. 18 (*JBR*S, XXXI, 1945, 31-33) speaks of 24 types of *simbisukadhanyagana* (p 33), but the varieties, when counted, come to nearly 110 types of cereals including wheat, barley, lentils, etc. Ch 19 (*ibid*, 33-34) speaks of 10 types of *salidhanya* (transplanted paddy) and 19 types of *trnasalidhanya* (untransplanted? paddy), but on counting various types of paddy and allied cereals come to nearly 64.
- 118 T C Dasgupta, *Aspects of Bengali Society*, Calcutta, 1935, pp 249-250 quoted in B N S Yadavs, *op cit*, pp 258, 305 fn. Yadava has cited several other pieces of evidence, *op cit*, p 251-259.
- 119 Mukhia, *op cit*, p 292.
- 120 Yadava, *The Problem of the Emergence of Feudal Relations in Early India*, p 46, fn 1. draws attention to the position of the serf as stated by E J Hobsbawm on the basis of Karl Marx: "The serf, though under the control of the lord, is in fact an economically independent producer", Karl Marx *Pre-capitalist Economic Formations*, London, 1964, p 42.