

# **Early Medieval India, Indian Feudalism and Alternative Histories**



**Subject: History**

**Unit: Towards Early Medieval India**

**Lesson: 8.1: Early Medieval India, Indian Feudalism and Alternative Histories**

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# Early Medieval India, Indian Feudalism and Alternative Histories

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# Early Medieval India, Indian Feudalism and Alternative Histories

## 8.1: Early medieval India, Indian feudalism and alternative histories

### Introduction

The post Gupta period ranging from about the sixth to the thirteenth century has been seen to constitute the early medieval period in Indian history. It is seen as a stage anticipating the transition to the medieval times. Serious efforts at defining the early medieval period can be dated to the later part of the 1950s onwards. The works of D. D. Kosambi and R. S. Sharma together with those of Lallanji Gopal and B. N. S. Yadava inaugurated a trend which focused on the interrelationship between economy, society and polity. This helped the explanation of historical developments, including transitions in early India, and raised discussions to the level of conceptualizations. Thus was born the school of Indian feudalism, which distinguished the early historical from the early medieval and equated the latter with feudalism. In the course of discussing and accounting for change this historiography enriched the understanding of society and economy of the times within wider generalizations, thanks to the contributions of many eminent historians. This historiography identified large, durable, common institutional structures with trans regional reach, spread over centuries. By the later 1970s and early 1980s the intellectual unease with the feudal framework resulted in alternative models or explanations of state and society. While Burton Stein argued for a peasant state and society, leading to a segmentary state, Hermann Kulke and B. D. Chattopadhyaya put forward their integrative model. At this juncture two brief but obvious clarifications may be necessary. First, the opposition to Indian feudalism did not wait to emerge till the late 1970s, almost immediately after the publication of Sharma's *Indian Feudalism* the idea was questioned by D. C. Sircar in 1966. The believers and opponents of the formulation grew in course of time. The long debate had both factual and ideological foundations. However the long drawn debate on terms set by its proponents almost up to the end of the 1970s led to the making of a stereotype. The later alternative frameworks avoided it by shifting the ground of discussion and focusing on the processes at play. We shall return to it soon. Secondly, it may be necessary to clarify what is meant by alternative histories. Alternative histories also concentrate on similar issues and concerns, but they do it differently by addressing the sources with new sets of questions and perspectives.

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There are three different contending explanatory models for understanding the early medieval Indian situation. The Indian feudal model of self-sufficient, relatively closed rural economy characterized by an essentially bipolar world of lords and peasants and proliferation of castes as also decentralized feudal states; the model of 'peasant state and society' visualizing a Brahmana-peasant alliance and segmentary state focusing on the pyramidal repetition of the structures in the numerous autonomous segments (*Nadus*), as were available in the core; and the model of integrative state and social formation demonstrating the phased structural evolution of imperial kingdoms or regional/supra regional states and societies across regions. At present the first and the third formulations are in contention for the minds of people, while the second framework, which had generated interesting debates in the 1980s, suffered relative eclipse owing to the dearth of passionate adherents. Notwithstanding their relative merits, these concepts "succeeded in effectively destroying the 'conventional' picture of the medieval regional kingdoms as centrally governed unitary states for North as well as South India". They also undid the notion of the Dark Ages which was usually ascribed to the early medieval centuries by focusing on the processes and potentials of change. These centuries are increasingly being seen as dynamic, generative and foundational.

## Indian feudalism

The origins of Indian feudalism is located in land grants to brahmanas and temples from the Gupta period onwards, and later to state officials, involving the alienation of fiscal, administrative and judicial rights. The emergence of multiple centres of power and a great deal of decentralization, consequent to continuous, systematic **parcellization of sovereignty** or state power which increasingly devolved on to the donees, making them independent lords, has been identified with feudalism. The many, hierarchised centres of power, different grades of *samantas* (such as *mahamandalesvara*, *mandalika*, *mahasamanta*, *samanta*, *laghusamanta*, etc.), and graded land rights are perceived to be the result of state activity, i.e., land grants. Decline of long-distance and maritime trade, paucity of money, and urban shrinkage apparently nicely rounded off the argument. However the decline of trade-towns-money thesis leading to the emergence of Indian feudalism had its share of ideological problems from the beginning, insofar as an external factor such as trade was perceived to account for momentous internal developments invoking the transition to a new social formation. Not surprisingly therefore in the late 1970s and early 1980s the idea of the **Kaliyuga** crisis was posited as an alternative or supplementary causative factor explaining the passage to feudalism. In this case land grants were allegedly made to neutralise the pervasive social crisis, but it is another matter that they went on to usher in significant socio-political changes, including relatively closed,

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self-sufficient villages. The growth of localism, regionalism and closed mindsets are ascribed to these developments. Notwithstanding the proliferation of castes and the emergence of new social categories such as the Rajputs and Kayasthas, society is usually perceived in bipolar terms, the lords and the peasants. The peasants we are told were subjected to several exactions, including forced labour, loss of community rights to forests, pasture, ponds and grazing grounds, and even eviction. Sharp social divisions, we are told, led to peasant unrest. Besides, there is also a tacit assumption that the land grants across regions were made from an epicenter with uniform consequences. While the idea of Kali Age crisis was redeeming Indian Feudalism, almost simultaneously Harbans Mukhia raised important questions relating to the absence of **structured dependence** of the early medieval Indian peasantry and their very little subsistence requirements compared to those in feudal Europe and queered the pitch. This was soon followed by the works of Burton Stein, Hermann Kulke, and B. D. Chattopadhyaya. The idea of Indian feudalism in general, with bearing on its varied dimensions, has been persuasively argued for and defended by R. S. Sharma, B. N. S. Yadava, M. G. S. Narayanan, D. N. Jha, R. N. Nandi, and Suvira Jaiswal, among others. Nevertheless, the economic and social dimensions seem to have largely subsumed the political.

The origins of Indian feudalism still remain to be satisfactorily explained. The problems concerning the idea of the decline and decay of towns, trade and money, among other issues, have been discussed earlier by D. C. Sircar, B. N. Mukherjee, John Deyell, and K. M. Shrimali and an assessment of the situation is available in the writings of Chattopadhyaya in the mid 1990s. While the exponents and adherents of Indian feudalism argue for shrinkage in the non agricultural sector of the economy during the seventh-tenth centuries, others have tried to see the forms in which trade and urbanism survived in the early medieval times. Similarly, by shifting the focus from coin typology and dynastic issues to volumes it has been pointed out that metallic coins were nearly as plentiful as in the early historic period. The dominant understanding of rural settlements and rural society as closed and self-sufficient has been questioned in the works of N. Karashima, Jan Breeman, and Chattopadhyaya. They point to the plurality of rural settlements and the variation in their spatial and social composition. All settlements did not have a tank and temple for example, and the same social groups did not live in every settlement. The wide ranging inter-village cooperation and rural interactions as well as the complexities of rural life have been highlighted. That brings us to the theory of *Kaliyuga* crisis. It has been unmistakably demonstrated that the alleged crisis was not a historical crisis. It was at most a crisis of confidence on the part of the brahmanas, related to the issue of patronage in a situation of competition from the 'heretical' sects and/or an ingenious invention of the brahmanas to make people conform to Brahmanical ideological norms in an age characterized by economic growth, social change and the spread of state societies within the Brahmanical framework outside Gangetic north India. The thesis of decentralized, fragmented feudal polity rests on the presupposition of an evenly spread Mauryan empire of uniform administrative depth across the country, which did not change much under the Kushanas and Satavahanas

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leading up to proto feudal Gupta times. However, recent writings on the nature of the Mauryan state questioning the assumed degree of centralization and standardization or homogenization of the empire, and a different perspective of post Mauryan states focusing on uneven developments and plurality of cultures disturb this understanding. The continuous moving of the peasant frontier and enormous socio-cultural changes are reflected in the systematization of the idea of *varnasamkara* and the invention of new ones such as *apaddharma*, Kali yuga, as well as the emphasis on duty or *dharma*. Similarly, the brahmanas and religious institutions, who were recipients of royal land donations from the Gupta period onwards, instead of being perceived as agents of decentralization have been revisited and seen as pace makers of royal authority. The related issues are the object of donation, which were usually a *grama* (village), palli (hamlet), *pataka* (part of a village), measures of land, etc, the quantum of such donations and their relationship *vis-a-vis* the land under cultivation across regions. For example, one is not sure how seriously a brahmana donee with some land or a part of the village would effect agrarian relations in the settlement. The rich peasants in the settlement could have had similar quantities or more land. Similarly, one needs to rethink the consequences of a few brahmanic settlements in a larger agrarian locality. These are important for the characterization of the donees and the emergent social formation. One may add that the early assignments were to the brahmanas and religious establishments, while the service assignments followed and did not precede the beginnings of 'feudal' polity. The question then is can the religious donees with a *grama*, a part of it or more be perceived as feudatories? In case grants to them symbolized the economic and political undoing of the state it is not intelligible as to why king after king and dynasty after dynasty continued with the phenomenon. That apart, the regional distribution of early land grants clearly suggests their local origins, mostly being made by one local dynasty or another in a general context of local state formation. The case of the Matharas of Kalinga, Vakatakas of Vidarbha, Kadambas of Kuntala, and the early Pallavas, for example, easily makes the

point. The spatial and temporal correspondence between land grants and the spread of state societies points to their mutually beneficial, and not antagonistic, relationship.

Questions related to the hierarchy of feudatories and the making of the pyramidal political structure, resource transfer from the subordinate to the superordinate and the genesis of feudal polity have not been satisfactorily answered in the case of north India or south India. Likewise, the people have been taken for granted and the need to open bridges or establish a chord with them has not been considered to be sufficiently important within this historiography. There has been some engagement with Bhakti as ideology of the feudal order. However it needs recognition that legitimation of power or the constitution of authority involves continuous negotiations with popular aspirations and engagement with the cultural domain. Peoples and cultures are dynamic, not static. The variations in time and space across cultures need to be recognized and appreciated. The problem largely seems to be, as has been pointed out, the consequence of first creating the structure and then

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looking for processes to explain it rather than the other way round, and this it appears is being gradually recognized at least in the case of south India. Briefly stated, "if there is need to look at change in early Indian history, it is necessary that historians too occasionally introduce some change in the way they see the past".

### Value addition: what the sources say

#### Ratnagir plates of Somavamshi Karna

"In the province of Uttara-Toshali (*there is a village called*) Kona-gram (consisting of eighteen parts); having honoured the brahmanas of that *khanda* (district), we declare this charity (*and order*) before the offices (*such as*) the *samaharti*, the *niyukta*, the *adhikarika*, the *dandapasika*, the *pisuna*, the *vetrika*, the *avarodhajana*, the *rajni*, the *ranaka*, the *rajaputra*, the *rajavallabhas*, the *bhogjanas* etc. and before all the inhabitants (of the district).

That this village, together with the lands, the water, the tanks, the marsh, the various kinds of trees including the mango and *madhuka* in the boundaries, (also) with the *upanidhis*, the *hasti-danda* (elephant stick?), the oxes, the *chittola* (?), the *andharua* (?), the *pratiandharua* (?), the *adatta* (?), the *padatijvya* (right to maintain foot-soldiers ?), the *antarabaddi*, the *rintakabaddi* (?), the *Vasavaki* (?), the *vishayali* (?), the *ahidanda* (serpent-stick ?), the *hala-danda* (plough-stick ?), the *vandha-danda* (?), the *vandapana* (receiving of sacred honour), *vijaya-vandapana* (receiving of sacred and victorious honour, etc including many margganis), (and also with the rights of) collecting assessment in future, (expressing power on) the *Khandapalas*, with prohibition of all sorts of oppression.

**Source: *Ratnagir plates of Somavamshi Karna* in Rajguru, S. 1966. Bhubneshwar: Orissa State Museum, 10, vol. IV.**

### Peasant state and society

Burton Stein's segmentary state model in south Indian history is an important conceptual contribution to our understanding of early medieval Indian polity. The basic argument was published in the form of a substantial article in 1977 and the formulation continued to be a part of his *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*. The Chola state, it is said, was characterized by limited territorial authority as one moved from the core to the periphery, through the intermediate zone. In fact, in the periphery it shaded off into ritual

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sovereignty. In this system of replication of uniformity across the numerous peasant locality units or *nadus* the Chola centre had no monopoly of legitimate state authority. To elaborate Stein makes a distinction between political authority and ritual sovereignty, and it is the latter that the Chola kings are supposed to have exercised. Their political competence and precedence was linked to their patronage of Rajarajesvara or Brihadeshvara at Tanjavur, who enjoyed a preeminent position in relation to the other deities and cults at various levels in the region. The land grant charters with their long *prasastis* seem to have spread the message of royal greatness and augmented the constitution of ritual sovereignty. This explanation of ritual sovereignty, as distinct from political authority, as the major sustaining factor of the state, spread over four hundred years, has come in for major criticism. So has the perception of the *nadus* as continuously unchanging, autonomous, harmonious peasant units, characterized by brahmana-peasant alliance. Clearly, there are difficulties in accepting the suggestion that the peasants collaborated in their own exploitation or that they could not see beyond their immediate self interest because of which the peasant localities or *nadus* did not change for centuries. The abstraction of the political and economic dimensions of the state and the underplaying of significant issues such as resource mobilization and the sustenance of the political order, especially in a period of enormous agrarian expansion and commercial growth, have attracted the attention of a number of historians. For certain periods of the history of the Chola state empirical evidence provides a different picture. In fact, four phases have been delineated in the trajectory of the evolution of the Chola state. G. W. Spencer's idea of the politics of plunder is certainly not a sufficient long-term explanation accounting for the stability of the political structure, and in this case lasting for about four centuries. Wars can be a short-term tactics, not long-term strategy. It needs to be mentioned that subsequently Stein understood the problems inherent in dichotomizing ritual and political sovereignty. He admitted that in the Indian situation the statement had to be modified because kingship combined both ritual and political authority. Again, he conceded ground on the question of the supposedly unchanging *nadus*.

Criticisms apart, and there has been no dearth of it, it needs to be recognized that the model of segmentary state administered the necessary shock treatment to historians of south India in particular and stirred them to the problems and possibilities of early medieval south Indian history. In focusing on the *nadus* and ritual sovereignty, Stein drew attention to the peasant localities as the basic building blocks in the construction of the history of the regions, as well as the importance of the sacred domain in consolidating temporal power. He also deserves our gratitude for drawing attention to and highlighting the political function of royal *prasastis* (eulogies) engraved on copper-plates or stone temples. Recent writings in the area, bearing on the structure of polity, seem to have been directly or indirectly influenced by his intervention.



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## The integrative framework

The integrative model of state formation in early medieval India is an integral part of the processual approach. Unlike the feudal model it locates the political processes at play in the regions, mostly outside the Ganga valley, and then moves on to work out the emerging structure of polity and society. Within the regions the sub-regions and localities receive the necessary attention. This follows from the recognition of the fact that regions are not given but historically constituted entities. In other words instead of simply asserting a paradigm from the top the framework takes cognizance of the developments from below. Integration operated not only at the territorial and political levels, but also in the economic, social and cultural spheres. State formation involves the emergence of state polities in pre-state territories and their structural evolution in the larger context of simultaneous socio-economic and cultural transformations. The beginnings of the approach may be situated in the early works of Chattopadhyaya and Kulke in the early and mid-1970s, in Rajasthan and Orissa respectively. The first conceptual papers synthesizing the implications of their findings in the wider context of comparable perspectives from other regions was published in the early 1980s. Through that decade it became obvious that there was a remarkable correspondence between these findings and the conclusions drawn from independent researches on the middle of the first millennium B.C., Mauryan and Post Mauryan times. A long-term interconnected vision of Indian history looking at change through continuity began to emerge. Stated briefly, the idea of structurally different *mahajanapadas* converged well with the recent perspectives of the uneven presence of the Mauryan state across regions. Similarly, the differential levels of interaction of the core of the Mauryan state with the far flung areas of the empire largely owing to dissimilar patterns of historical growth tied up quite well with the process of secondary state formation in Kalinga, Andhra and the Deccan in the subsequent centuries. Change in these areas, even if uneven, was a result of their interaction with the Mauryan state and internal evolution of local societies rather than administrative integration. Developments such as these did not end with the coming of the Gupta period, they continued through out Indian history.

From the Gupta period onwards there was an immense acceleration in the spread of state societies largely owing to the process of local state formation. The Maitrakas of Valabhi, Vakatakas in the Deccan and Vidarbha, Kadambas of Banavasi, Pallavas of Kanchi, Ikshvakus and Vishnukundins of Andhra, the Matharas and Early Eastern Gangas of Kalinga and the Sarabhapuriyas of Daksina Kosala are good examples of early local dynasties in varied regional contexts. Examples such as these can be multiplied. However the more general point is that these states emerged not from the fragmentation or break-up of any erstwhile large kingdom but from changes taking place within local societies. The gradual

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political and territorial integration together with the structural evolution of the states in early medieval India is built on this foundation. The envisaged stages though remain the same are labeled differently, either as chiefdoms, early kingdoms and imperial kingdoms or as local, sub-regional and regional/supra-regional polities by Kulke and Chattopadhyaya. The compulsions of the *rajās* and other structural features of the state at different stages (such as the coming together of nuclear areas, enlargement of the core region, shifting of the capital to a more central place, change in the structure of legitimation, etc.) have been convincingly addressed. The stages in the evolution of the state converged with many, simultaneous processes of change in the economic, social and cultural domains. The numerous peasant segments or localities were not unchanging entities; they were continuously integrated with larger units. The legitimatory strategies, which are culture sensitive, also changed with time and context. There was a movement from local, autochthonous deities to Brahmanized state deities and subsequently monumental temples with wide regional appeal. The forms of legitimation did not, and could not, remain the same all through.

Integration was never complete or perfect; it was, as it usually is, a continuous process. Conflicts and challenges apart, there were always autonomous spaces within the ambit of the state, pointing to the futility of looking for the uniform, homogeneous presence of the state. Such spaces did not remain eternally so. They existed in situations of interaction with state societies and of course changed with time. Spaces and peoples transformed from jungles to jungle kingdoms, and even evolved state societies. The state in this perception was not a static entity. It was dynamic, multi layered, polycentered, and expanding or shrinking regularly. The works of several scholars on Orissa, Bengal, Rajasthan, Andhra, and Tamil Nadu, among others, easily tie up with this frame of analysis. The Integrative model did not invent everything anew. What is interesting is that they brought new perspectives to bear on some of the already existing ideas. The idea of segments was accepted devoid of its entirely autonomous and unchanging character. It now read *segmentation and integration*. They

gradually became part of larger entities. The role of the sacred domain in the constitution of political authority was acknowledged. However the religious domain was no substitute for actual authority. Again, brahmanas and religious establishments instead of being perceived as agents of political disintegration came to be seen as factors facilitating the extension and consolidation of royal power insofar as they helped the extension of the agrarian frontier, invented origin myths for royalty, provided grand genealogical linkages to ruling families, and disseminated the dominant ideology.

Theoretically speaking, there was a coherent explanation of the state from the early historical to the early medieval and beyond. Neither was the state seen to be the end result of changes in other spheres (iron-productivity-surplus-state) nor was it the harbinger of all

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other transformations (land grants-political decentralization-feudalism). In this perspective the state was influenced by and impacted the multiple processes of societal change. As against the feudal framework which visualizes a decline in arts and crafts during the period A.D. 600-1000 and then a revival in their fortunes around the turn of the millennium, the integrative model locates the gradual rise of artisanal and crafts production in the larger context of the phased growth of rural economy. The emergence of markets and merchants, from weekly *hattas* and rural fairs to nodal exchange centres and long distance trade, have been seen to be related to agrarian expansion and increased crafts production; going beyond the confines of temples and monasteries. There were as many grades of traders like *purasreshthi* and *rajasreshthi*, among others, as trading centres. This dynamism had a bearing on the growth and spread of occupational and caste groups, which has usually been expressed in terms of the proliferation of castes (*jatis*). In everyday life the world of the peasant, craftsman, merchant, brahmana and king continuously interacted. Simply put, this marks the movement away from mono-causality towards causal plurality and helps the cause of a long-term vision of Indian history. The transitions in early Indian history, from pre state to state society, early historical to early medieval, and even the movement towards the medieval, within this perspective are far more comfortably negotiated and explained.

Criticisms are the spice of life. Only when empirically valid sound theoretical formulations acquire a following and emerge as an alternative, are they discussed, even criticized. The integrative paradigm in the 1980s itself met with some constructive criticisms. However from the middle of the 1990s onwards when it began to emerge as a serious alternative, especially with the publication of Chattopadhyaya's *The Making of Early Medieval India* and Kulke's *Kings and Cults* and *The State in India, 1000-1700*, the framework has generated, as always with anything new, conflicting responses. It has had both admirers and critics as well. Regional studies by a host of younger historians on Orissa, Andhra, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu. in the later part of the 1980s and 90s adopted and endorsed the integrative framework. Among the criticisms there are broadly three kinds of reservations: first, that the economic dimensions need to be addressed, secondly that it is essentially a narrative of regionalism, and finally that one does not get very much about the structural features of the state apparatus. It is widely admitted that the conceptual framework under discussion focuses on the continuous evolution of the state, instead of giving it a spatio-temporal fixity and treating it as static. The question is how else one addresses, for example, states such as those of the Cholas in the south and the Later Eastern Gangas in Orissa which spanned almost four centuries each. The benefits of such studies discerning structural evolution of the state( instead of freezing it in time) in the above two cases as well as Kerala under the Ceras of Mahodayapuram, Andhra under the Kakatiyas and Mewar in Rajasthan are there for all to see. The nature of differences in the organization of chiefdoms and early kingdoms and the later and imperial kingdoms have been dwelt in some detail since the mid-1990s, if not earlier. One needs to say what perhaps is obvious. Regions are a legitimate category of historical studies, a way of arranging the data. The

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emergent picture across several regions then could be culled together to engage in wider generalizations. This is unmistakably different from macro-

generalizations and regionalism. Generalizations based on perspectives derived from either Gangetic north India or the Kaveri valley in the south surely have their share of problems. Regionalism has to do with emotions, not reason but human cupidity and imagined identities. In the integrative perspective locality, sub-regions and regions are not concepts just denoting scale, they mostly define historically constituted spaces. Kuntala, Vidarbha, Dakshina Kosala, Kalinga, Varendra, Bundelkhand, and Malwa are good examples of such historical and cultural units. Besides, it is not only regional history but also questions related to identity formation, the making of regional and pan Indian traditions through complex networks of interrelationships between the local, regional and trans-regional elements, mediated by multilateral transactions involving giving and borrowing, which interest these historians. Admittedly, state formation and socio-economic transformation are inextricably linked, and the point has been convincingly and repeatedly made. Kulke only mentioned it briefly earlier and developed it a bit more later, where as Chattopadhyaya's writings in the first half of the 1990s unambiguously made the state and economy interrelationships clear. The story of phased economic growth and structural evolution of the state can also be seen in several writings in the context of Tamil Nadu, Andhra, Karnataka, Orissa, Assam and Rajasthan, for example. The growth of agrarian economy leading to marketable surplus and the emergence of markets and merchants as well as the state's growing interest in *mandis*, *hattas*, *penthas*, and *nagarams* ( in north India, the Deccan and the south respectively) has also been worked out across regions. The gradual spread of irrigation networks, opening up of agrarian localities, shift in the boundary markers of donated area from stones, anthills and rivers to settlements and others plots, and the rise in the number of recorded settlements from around the tenth century onwards in region after region clearly point to the gradual historical transformation of space.

### Value addition: what the sources say

#### The description of the Shrikantha region in the Harsha-Charita

There is a certain region named Shrikantha, peopled by the good, a heaven of Indra, as it were, descended upon earth, where the laws of caste usage are for ever unconfused and the order of the Krita age prevails. Owing to the number of its land lotuses the ploughs, whose shares uproot the fibres as they scar the acres, excite a tumult of bees, singing as it were, the excellencies of the good soil. Unbroken lines of *Pundra* sugar-cane enclosures seem besprinkled by the clouds that drink the Milky Sea. On every side its marches are packed with corn heaps, like extemporized mountains, distributed among the threshing floors. Throughout it is adorned with rice crops extending beyond their fields, where the ground bristles with cumin beds watered by the pots of the Persian wheel.

Source: Cowell, E. B. & F. W. Thomas. 1993. *The Harsa-Charita*. Delhi: Motilal

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Banarsidas, reprint.

## Value addition: what the sources say

### The description of the Vindhyan forest in the Harsha-Charita

The next day he set out with the horse in search of his sister, and in a comparatively few days' march reached the Vindhya forest referred to. Entering, he saw while still at some distance a forest settlement, distinguished by woodland districts turned grey by the smoke from granaries of wild grain in which heaps of burning *Sastika* chaff sent up a blaze. Wherein were huge banyans, encircled with cowpens formed of a quantity of dry branches; tiger-traps, constructed in fury at the slaughter of young calves; zealous foresters violently seizing the axes of trespassing woodcutters; and Durga arbours built of tree clumps in the thickets. The outskirts being for the most part forest, many parcels of rice-land, threshing ground, and tilth were being apportioned by small farmers, and that with no little vigour of language, since it was mainly spade culture and they were anxious for the support of their families. No great amount of coming and going tramped the earth owing to the difficulty of ploughing the sparsely scattered fields covered with Kaca grass, with their few clear spaces, their black soil stiff as black iron.

**Source: Cowell, E. B. & F. W. Thomas. 1993. *The Harsa-Charita*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, reprint.**

## Summing up

The debate surrounding the characterizing of early medieval India over the last thirty years has enriched our understanding of the times. Today it is agreed that it was the formative period in the making of regional societies. These centuries were marked by agrarian growth and spread of the peasant frontier, peasantization of the tribes, emergence of new social groups and their placement within the *varna/jati* framework, local state formation and the extension of state society into pre-state areas, and the integration of local indigenous deities into Hinduism through a process of universalization or Brahmanization. The Indian feudalism model and integrative paradigm derive themselves from the same social formations approach, the latter amending and refining some of the positions of the former. The latter does not stand in opposition to the former. Its explanations are differently nuanced. They relate to the movement from processes to structure and not the other way round, the idea of India as historically forged and constructed instead of it being perceived as a reality given and encountered, and the conception of continuity and change in Indian

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history as fact and value. The integrationists recognize change within continuity. Changes took place in all spheres of life; slowly and surely. This has had a bearing on our understanding of the stages in early Indian history. If today the seventh-tenth and tenth-thirteenth centuries are recognizable stages within the early medieval period, there is a felt need to similarly delineate stages within what is broadly termed the early historical. Local state formation and the extension of state societies across regions between the fourth-seventh centuries inaugurating the movement towards the early medieval selects itself to constitute a separate stage. Likewise the period from the middle of the first millennium B.C. to the fourth century A.D can be sub-divided on considerations of the emergence of the *mahajanapadas* and making of an empire, and subsequent secondary state formation. In this narrative the repeated overlaps and the absence of disjunctures or break downs certainly attract attention.

## Summary

- Early medieval India cannot be equated with the idea of Indian feudalism.
- Early medieval society was not essentially characterized by lords and peasants, it was far more complex.
- The concept of the *Kaliyuga* did not represent a historical crisis. It was actually a Brahmanical ideological invention.
- Brahmanas, temples and monasteries helped social, economic and political integration.
- The early medieval centuries were marked by the gradual shaping of regional societies.

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## 8.1: Exercises

### Essay questions

- 1) Give an assessment of the Indian feudalism framework to understand the early medieval period.
- 2) Examine the contributions of Burton Stein to our understanding of south Indian history.
- 3) Is it possible to equate early medieval India with Indian feudalism?
- 4) Do you agree with the view that the early medieval centuries were marked by greater social and economic complexities?
- 5) What are the basic features of the integrative framework?
- 6) Does the integrative framework take care of the problems associated with the Indian feudalism model?
- 7) Is it possible to separate one approach from another entirely? Elaborate.
- 8) How has the role of ideology and legitimation in the early medieval times been viewed?
- 9) Do you agree with the view that the fourth-thirteenth centuries were an undifferentiated period?
- 10) The debates surrounding early medieval India have enriched our understanding of the times. Comment.

# Early Medieval India, Indian Feudalism and Alternative Histories

## Objective questions

Question Number	Type of question	LOD
1	True or false	1

### Question

- a) The Indian feudalism model represents the first effort to conceptualize early medieval India.
- b) Early medieval India was marked by the decay of towns and absence of coins.
- c) Burton Stein introduced the idea of peasant localities.
- d) Local state formation was the result of the break up of an earlier empire.
- e) The early medieval period was characterized by several changes happening at the same time.

### Correct Answer / Option(s)

a) True b) False c) True d) False e) True

### Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

- a) Before the use of the idea of Indian feudalism, the early medieval period was not captured by any other meaningful concept.
- b) The decay of towns, coins, markets and trade in early medieval India is a much debated theme.
- c) Stein was the first to use the idea of localities and he characterized the south Indian *nadus* as independent peasant localities.
- d) Several states were locally formed across regions as a consequence of change



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coming from within local societies.

e) The movement of the agrarian frontier, the peasantization of tribes, and the emergence of states in pre-state areas happened simultaneously.

## **Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer**

Reviewer's Comment:

## **Glossary**

**apaddharma:** *dharma* in situations of crisis

**Kaliyuga:** the last of the Puranic *yugas* (ages), when there is only one-quarter of the righteousness that existed in the *Kritayuga*

**parcellization of sovereignty:** a situation where power is shared by many, instead of being concentrated in the hands of the king alone

**perspective:** a representation influenced by a set of ideas

**secondary states:** states which came later than the earliest states, which are seen as primary states. Secondary states are the result of change coming from within local societies and influences from developed societies outside.

**structured dependence:** a situation where dependence is built into the given system. The manorial system in medieval western Europe is a good example.

**varnasamkara:** inter-mixing of *varnas* which is usually not permitted

## **Further readings**

Chattopadhyaya, B. D. 1994. *The Making of Early Medieval India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Sharma, R. S. 2001. *Early Medieval Indian Society – A Study in Feudalization*. Delhi: Orient Longman.