

Feudal Lords and Feudalism in South India: A Glimpse

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Feudalism has to be seen as a mode of distribution of the means of production and appropriation of the surplus¹. In laymen sense Feudalism appears in a predominately 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 method, which is mainly called extra economic control². Feudalism brought a class of intermediaries between the state and the common peasantry and it is seen differently in different parts of world. In some parts, these intermediaries were associated by religion while in some other parts it is associated non-religious practices. The feudalism was called an agrarian economy, with the fairly cohesive ruling class siphoning off the agrarian surplus through the covert and overt force³. The question of labour is seen differently in both the European and in Indian context, as forced labour in India is very rarely used for purpose of production, as there was absence or minimal references of serfdom in India. HarbansMukia said that the peasant in medieval India enjoyed an autonomy of production because they had complete control over means of production. But it is quite controversial as the peasant enjoyed inferior rights while the landlord enjoys immense rights on their land. However, the land grants systems confirm that the landlords enjoyed a large chunk of control on the means of production. The question about the ownership of the land lies with the answer of hierarchical control which was created by large scale sub-infeudation and this sub-infeudation gave rise to graded types of landlords. The weapon of sharecropping or lease holding which is done to harass the common peasant. And by that big landlords project their supremacy and entrusted the subjugation of peasantry. The seigniorial rights also make the peasant to work on the land of these intermediaries and it was again subsided with that political and judicial right which were non-economic rights, helped the beneficiaries to carry out effective exploitation of the peasant in the estate⁴.

In Indian scenario the free labour was that who is quite independent of his social or juridical status, earn his and family's subsistence off his own (including his family's) material resources and labour. In other words, the peasant doesn't render any labour to anyone else either in performance of labour service or for wages. Payment of taxes implies general control over the labour power of the peasant and undoubtedly labour is an essential ingredient of the means of production which finally resulted in seigniorial rights to the landlords by which they compel the peasant to produce those cereals or cash crops which they need. The taxation also made the static feudal system, as these impose restrictions on the mobility of peasant as well as forced them for continuous tilling of the

village land. Thus, it is primarily the economic, more than the legal, which confined the immobility of the peasant. Moreover, the caste system in particular appears to have maintained the economic and social disparities, especially in making landless agricultural labour available for the cultivation of the land of big land owners.⁵

Seeing the feudalism and economy with the specs of south India, as there were wet grain, mixed wet and dry ecotype which included more variegated, often competitiveness social units where it was not possible to have single hierarchy nor could be easily managed by chiefs or kings. Here also there were Brahman and his settlements which is called Brahmadaya, commodity production, especially of textiles and metal craft, more articulated trade networks, and a tendency for local groups engaged in agricultural production and those engaged in commodity production to form hostile alliance formations, usually denominated as castes of the right, called valangai and other was caste of the left i.e 'idangai'.

The south Indian agrarian organisation is seen to be based upon a variety of adaptations by south Indian peasant groups to their environment and corporate institutions which provide cooperation and continuity necessary for agrarian production. The 'relative stability' of agrarian history here was endangered, not by fertile soils and low subsistence need, but by historically evolved and localised forms of cooperation among people with a high degree of social differentiation and with a level of living which, in general, cannot be considered low⁶. The fundamental unit of society in the south India was the 'Nadu', an ancient term which denoted a locality of cultivation in contrast to non-arable tracts called kadu⁷. Nadu also denotes an assembly, a corporate body of sharers of communal property in field and irrigated sources. The benefits from each Nadu as well as their protection was collective, although there were limited rights of individual alienation by chiefs and other notables. Special settlements within a Nadu were also established, some as centres for commerce designated as 'nagaram' where traders involved with commodities of the locality were accorded privileges of self-government, and some of brahminical ritual which was the Brahmadeya constituting gifts to support the rituals, learned and educative functions of brahmanas⁸.

The special status for trade settlements resulted from commercial conditions led to formation of armed, itinerant trade groups [guilds] bearing commodities from afar were deliberately restricted in their local contracts to the Nagaram of a locality. Along with the prominent prestigious brahman village, the dual division of peasant and non-peasant castes is known in the south Indian texts.

¹R S Sharma, 'How feudal was Indian feudalism' pp-83

² Ibid pp-86

³ R S Sharma, 'How feudal was Indian feudalism' pp-89

⁴ Ibid pp-91

⁵ HarbansMukia, 'Was their feudalism in Indian history' pp-56

⁶ Burton Stein 'The deconstruction of feudalism' pp-216

⁷ Kadu Siddhappa, By. 133.

⁸ Ibid pp-221

Burton Stein talks about the Pyramidal segmentation system⁹. All nadus had at least one of each of these kinds of settlements; it also seems that these settlements, while selfgoverning, in contrast to ordinary peasant settlements, were ultimately under the political control of the 'nattar' and dependent, as all of the locality were, upon the latters' management of locality production. The state control was maintained over the lives of the people within those segments. Accordingly, he denies the existence of a bureaucracy and state administration in the Chola state¹⁰. In this period south india is characterised by the plathora of centers. The agrarian history of cholas with compares to vijaynagara empire differs as during the twelfth and thirteenth century a new agrarian institution came into being which extended the reach and dominance of ancient nattar chiefs. The economic and political penetration at the time of vijaynagara empire seen in entire sothern peninsula¹¹.

With respect to economic relations, the town-centered trade relations had created different conditions among cultivating groups and, of course, between cultivating and non-cultivating groups. Petty commodity production and exchange, was limited to narrow localities before but during that time it extended to town markets. The town based merchant replaced the existing guilds corporations^{12,13}.

The temple in south India was a major institution for extending money-mediated exchange. As the most important source of our knowledge of vijaynagara society, temple inscriptions record a major shift in funding, but these same inscriptions and other evidence suggest further, that the temples may have generated much of the economic change of the age¹⁴. The lands granted¹⁵ to the Temple had two functions: (i) to yield an income with which to maintain a specified ritual service in the name of the donor of the land; (2) to provide a productive place to invest funds granted to the Temple for the performance of services in the name of the donor of the money¹⁶. There were four basic forms of land tenure at medieval times: (i) crown lands (bhanddravada) which were under the direct revenue administration of the imperial government and from which the government received an important part of its revenues; (2) lands held on military service tenure (amaram) by local chieftains and tributary rulers (ndyakas), who sent part of the income of their amaram villages to the imperial treasury and retained part to defray the costs of maintaining a body of soldiers; (3) lands held on

eleemosynary tenure by Brahmans (brahmaddya), devdana and land to the educational institutions¹⁷.

Brahmadeya (land granted to Brahmins) and the temple led to the extension of agricultural activities in a more intensive organisation of production geared to support large populations. The institutional growth of the temple was closely associated with and dependent on the kind of agricultural program carried out by the temple. Effective management was the key to economic organisation of these institutions¹⁸. The management of brahmadeyas and temple settlements could be on the hands of brahmanas, who, were organisers and managers of production in the brahmadeyas, on the basis of their specialised knowledge of astronomy, they have also introduced an element of predictability in yields, on the basis of seasonal sowing and cropping patterns as well as effective management of water resources and irrigation system^{19,20}. The temples play a pivotal role in economy and control over the means of production, the temples might also be called the new feudal lords of that period. It controls most of part of agrarian economy and also a source of banking and financial funding of that period.

The temple with the religious centre in south India also influenced the polity and economy of medieval time. In the circumference of temple entire economy revolve. The feudal society with the pyramidal head associated the temple. Temple had various endowments and funding which will be used for further wealth generation and the had control over the means of production as well as surplus of the economy.

References

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⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ 10th century A.D. Record of the Chola king Rajakesarivarman in his twentieth year, registering that a certain merchant of Tanjore named Karunataka- Pulalayasetti built the temple called Pulala-Vinnagar and set up the God; that he purchased the land adjoining the temple and presented it, thus signifying the growing power and wealth of mercantile community. 325 of 190318

¹¹ Burton Stein 'The deconstruction of feudalism' pp-212

¹² Mula-Visa (a contribution on merchandise made by guilds. and merchant 369 of 1859

¹³ Ibid pp-215

¹⁴ Ibid pp-216

¹⁵ 555 0/1911. (Tamil.) On the same wall. An incomplete record of Tribhuvanachakravartin Konerimelkondan, dated second year. Records gift of land for offerings to the temple of Srilpativinnagar-Alvar at Rajaraja-chaturvedimarigalam

¹⁶ Burton Stein, *The Economic Function of a Medieval South Indian Temple*, The Journal of Asian Studies, Vol.19, No.2 (Feb., 1960), pp-163

¹⁷ 139-B. On a slab lying in a field. Undated. Gift of lands to the local Ganesa temple. Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid p.164

¹⁹ 96 of 1914. (Tamil.) On the north wall of the central shrine. A record, dated in the twenty-third year (of a certain king), regarding the construction of, and the opening of, a channel for irrigation, on payment of 410 kalanjus of gold.

²⁰ R.Champakalakshmi, *Urbanisation in South India: The Role of Ideology and Polity*, Social For Scientist, Vol.15, No.8/9 (Aug-Sep., 1987)