

Characterizing Early Medieval Indian Polity

The Case of Dakṣiṇa Kośala and Beyond*

Serious efforts at defining early medieval Indian polity in structural terms, historiographically speaking, can be dated to the later part of the 1950s and onwards. As against the earlier narratives, which were variations of the same theme, the writings 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.¹ This enabled historical explanations, including transitions in Indian history, and raised discussions to the level of conceptualizations. Thus was born the school of Indian feudalism, distinguishing the early historical from early medieval society and equating the latter with feudalism.² What came to be perceived as feudal social formations is rich in empirical details, be it in the domain of economy or society, thanks to the contributions of many eminent historians. In the process of delineating and accounting for change this historiography created large, durable, common institutional structures with pan-Indian/supra-regional reach, across centuries. By the middle of the 1970s and clearly by the early 1980s the intellectual unease with the feudal framework manifested itself in alternative paradigms such as the segmentary state model authored by Burton Stein³ and the integrative paradigm of state formation put forward by Hermann Kulke and B.D. Chattopadhyaya.⁴ At this juncture two brief but obvious clarifications

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may be necessary. First, we have deliberately refrained from touching upon pre-1950 frameworks of analysis, including the centralized, bureaucratic, imperial type, because these are no more a part of serious discussions and therefore need not engage us here. Secondly, the opposition to Indian feudalism did not wait to surface until the 1970s, almost immediately after the publication of Sharma's *Indian Feudalism* the formulation was contested.⁵ The adherents and opponents of the thesis grew in course of time. The ensuing animated but informed debate, it is said, had both empirical and ideological foundations. However, what merits attention is that while the early oppositionists even in arguing against Indian feudalism followed the terms of discussion already set by its advocates and helped in the making of a stereotype, the later exponents of alternative frameworks changed the discursive ground, without necessarily being polemical. That is a story to which we shall soon return. The second major concern of the paper, besides evaluating the state of the competing conceptualizations, is to map the trajectory of the evolution of the structure of polity in early medieval Dakṣiṇa Kōśāla and parts of Orissa; in the wider context of contemporary material culture and socio-political processes. Juxtaposing the emerging patterns with the on going debate, it is hoped, will help us to have a better understanding of early medieval Indian polity.

ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTS

There are three different contending explanatory models for understanding early medieval states in the Indian situation. The Indian feudal model of decentralized feudal states; the model of segmentary state focusing on the pyramidal repetition of the structures in the numerous autonomous segments, as were available in the core; and the framework of integrative state formation demonstrating the phased structural evolution of imperial kingdoms or regional/sub-regional states across regions. At present the first and the third formulations are the contentions for the main focus of people, while the second framework has having 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 centrally governed unitary states for the medieval regional kingdoms as for North as well as South India.⁶

The origins of Indian feudalism is located in land grants to brāhmanas 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, hierarchized foci of power, different grades of sāmantas (such as *mahāmandaleśvara*, *maṇḍalika*, *mahāsāmanta*, *sāmanta*, *laghusāmanta*), and graded land rights are perceived to be the result of state activity, that is, land grants.⁷ 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.⁸ In this case land grants were allegedly made to neutralize the pervasive social crisis, but it is another matter that they went on to usher in significant socio-political changes. 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 Mukhia⁹ raised important questions relating to the absence of structured dependence of the early medieval Indian peasantry and their subsistence requirements, compared to those in feudal Europe, and queered the pitch. This was soon followed by the works of Stein, Kulke, and Chattopadhyaya. The idea of Indian feudalism in general, with bearing on its political dimensions, have been persuasively argued for and defended by K.S. Sharma, B.N.S. Yadava, M.G.S. Narayanan, D.N. Jha, R.N. Nandi, and Kesavan Veluthat,¹⁰ among others. Nevertheless, the economic and social dimensions seem to have largely subsumed the political. This is not to say that there are no works on feudal polity but the problem I am trying to point to is perhaps best manifested in the entry 'How Feudal was Indian Feudalism?' by R.S. Sharma, in a volume on the state published in 1995.

The origins of Indian feudalism still remain to be satisfactorily explained. The problems concerning towns, trade and money, among other issues, have been discussed earlier by D.C. Sircar, B.N. Mukherjee, John Deyell, and K.M. Shrivastava and an assessment of the situation is available in the writings of Chattopadhyaya.¹¹ 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 brāhmaṇas, related to the issue of patronage in a situation of competition from the 'heretical' sects and/or an ingenious invention of the brāhmaṇas to make people conform to Brāhmaṇical ideological norms in an age characterized by economic growth, social change and the spread of state societies within the Brāhmaṇical framework.¹² The 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 Kuṣāṇas and Sātavāhanas; 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 of the empire, and a different perspective of post Mauryan states disturb this understanding.¹³ Similarly, the brāhmaṇas and religious institutions, instead of being perceived as agents of decentralization have been relocated productively as pace makers of royal authority.¹⁴ The related issues are the object of donation, which were usually a *grāma*, *palli*, *pāṭaka*, *padara*, measures of land, and so on, the quantum of such donations and their relationship vis-à-vis the land under cultivation across regions. These are important for the characterization of the donees and the emergent social formation. One may add that the early assignments were to the brāhmaṇas 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 *grāma*, a part of it or less 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 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 super-ordinate and the genesis of feudal polity have not been satisfactorily answered either in the case of north 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 contestations and engagement with the cultural domain.¹⁵ Peoples and cultures are varied, lively and dynamic, not static. The variations in time and space 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 looking for processes to explain it, rather than the other way round;¹⁶ and this it appears is being gradually recognized at least in the case of south India.¹⁷ 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'.¹⁸

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 envisaged 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*.¹⁹ The Cōḷa 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 sovereignty. In this system of replication of uniformity across the numerous peasant locality units or *nāḍus* the Cōḷa 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 Cōḷa kings are supposed to have exercised. Their political competence and precedence was linked to their patronage of Rājarājeśvara or Brihadeśvara 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 *prāśastis* 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 400 years, has come in for major criticism.²⁰ So has the perception of the *nāḍus* as continuous unchanging, autonomous units. 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.²¹ For certain periods of the history of the Cōḷa state empirical evidence provides a different picture.²² Spencer's²³ idea of the politics of plunder is certainly not a sufficient long-term explanation accounting for the stability of the political structure. 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.²⁴ Again, he conceded ground on the question of the supposedly immutable *nāḍus*.

Criticisms apart, 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 *nāḍus* 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 charters.

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 during different stages in the regions, mostly outside the Gaṅgā valley, and then moves on to work out the emerging structure of polities in time and space. 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 organized 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 Kulke²⁵ 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, were published in the early 1980s.²⁶ Significantly, 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 BC in the mid Gāṅgā valley, 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 *mahājanapadas* converged well with the recent perspectives of the Mauryan state.²⁷ Similarly, the differential levels of interaction of the core of the Mauryan state with the far flung areas of the empire largely owing to uneven 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.²⁸ Developments such as these did not end with the coming of the Gupta period, they continued throughout Indian history.

From the Gupta period onwards there was an immense acceleration in the spread of state societies largely owing to the on-going process of local state formation. The Maitrakas of Valabhi, Vākātakas in the Deccan and Vidarbha, Kadambas of Banavāsi, Pallavas of Kañchi, Ikṣvākus and Viṣṇukuṇḍins of Andhra, the Māṭharas and Early Eastern Gāṅgās of Kalinga, and the Śarabhapuriyās of Dakṣiṇa Kośala are good examples of early local dynasties in the varied regional contexts. Examples such as these can be multiplied. However, the more general point one is trying to make is that these states emerged not from the fragmentation of any erstwhile large kingdom but from change coming from within local societies.²⁹ The gradual political and territorial integration of the states together with their structural evolution in early medieval India was built on this foundation. The envisaged stages of structural evolution though remain the same are expressed differently, either as chiefdoms, early kingdoms and imperial kingdoms or as local, sub-regional and regional/

supra-regional polities by Kulke and Chattopadhyaya respectively. The compulsions of the *rājās* 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.³⁰ 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 (from autochthonous deities to Brāhmanized state deities and monumental temples with wide regional appeal). They did not, and could not, remain the same all through.

Integration was never complete or perfect. Contestations 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. Nevertheless, such spaces did not remain eternally so. They existed in situations of interaction with peasant/state societies and of course changed with time. Spaces and people transformed from jungles to jungle kingdoms, and even evolved state societies.³¹ The state in this perception was not a static entity. It was dynamic, multi-layered, polycentred, and expanding or shrinking regularly; and as Tilman Frasch (of the Manchester Metropolitan University, UK) once remarked it was very much like an octopus. The little king and the little kingdom became structural constituents of such states with the passage of time.³² The works of S.K. Panda on Orissa, Swapna Bhattacharya on Bengal, Nandini Sinha Kapur on Rajasthan, Cynthia Talbot on Andhra, and James Heitzman on Tamil Nadu,³³ among others, easily tie up with this frame of analysis. The Integrative model did not invent everything anew. What is interesting is that the authors brought new perspectives to bear on some of the already existing ideas. The idea of segments was accepted devoid of its entirely autonomous and immutable character. It now reads *segmentation and integration*. The role of the sacred domain in the constitution of political authority was acknowledged. However, it was no substitute for it. Again, brāhmanaṅas 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, provided grand genealogical linkages, and disseminated the dominant ideology.

Theoretically speaking, broadly within this framework there is a coherent explanation of the state from the early historical to the early medieval times and beyond. Neither is the state seen to be the end result of changes in other spheres (iron-productivity-surplus-state) nor is it the harbinger of all other transformations (land grants-political decentralization-feudalism). In this perspective the state was influenced by as well as simultaneously impacting the multiple processes of societal change. 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, within this perspective, are far more comfortably negotiated, both empirically and conceptually.

Criticisms are the spice of life. Only when empirically valid sound theoretical formulations acquire visibility by entering the domain of contestation 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 Chattopadhyay'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. The first, we have already drawn attention to. In the second category there are broadly three kinds of reservations: first, that the economic dimensions need to be addressed,³⁴ 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.³⁵ It is widely admitted that the conceptual framework under discussion focuses on the protracted evolution of the state, instead of giving it a spatio-temporal fixity and treating it as static. The question is how else does one address, for example, states such as those of the Colas in the south and the Later Eastern Gaṅgās 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 Cēras of Mahodayapuram and Mewar in Rajasthan are there for all to see.³⁶ The nature of differences in the organization of chiefdoms and early

kingdoms, and the latter and imperial kingdoms have been dealt with in some detail since the mid-1990s, if not earlier.³⁷ One needs to say what perhaps is obvious. Regions are a legitimate category of historical studies, a way of arranging the data. The emergent picture across several regions then could be culled together to engage in wider generalizations. This is unmistakably different from macro-generalizations based on a part of the country and regionalism. Regionalism has to do with emotions, not reason but human capidity. From this perspective, localities, sub-regions, and regions are not concepts just denoting scale; they mostly define historically constituted spaces. Kuntala, Vidarbha, Dakṣiṇa Kośala, Kaliṅga, Varendra, Bundelkhaṇḍ, and Mālwa 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 webs 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 made. Kulke only mentioned it briefly earlier and developed it a bit more later, whereas Chattopādhyaya's writings in the first half of the 1990s unambiguously made the state and economy interrelationships clear.³⁸ The story of phased economic growth and structural evolution of the state can also be seen in the context of Tamil Nādu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Orissa, Assam, and Rajasthan, for example.³⁹ The gradual growth of markets and merchants as well as the state's interest in *hāṭṭas*, *mandis*, and *panṭhās* has also been worked out. The gradual spread of irrigation networks, opening up of agrarian localities, shift in the boundary markers of donated areas (from stones, anthills and rivers to settlements and others' plots), and the rise in the number of settlements from around the tenth century onwards across regions clearly point to the gentle historical transformation of space.⁴⁰

The debate surrounding the characterization of early medieval polity over the last thirty years has enriched our understanding of the times. Today it is agreed that these polities were graded, multi-centred and continuously waxing and waning. 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. However, that said, it is also necessary to recognize the

differences between them. They relate to the movement from processes to structure or the other way round, the idea of India as historically forged and constructed or something given and encountered, and the perception of continuity and change in Indian history as fact and value. The case studies that follow, it is hoped, will open up these issues; and drive home the benefits of this lively, but informed debate spanning about three decades.

DAKṢIṆA KOŚALA

The territories encompassed by the administrative units of Chhattisgarh and Orissa have attracted greater scholarly attention in recent years. However, neither of them, as in the case of many reorganized states of modern India, constitutes a historically evolved socio-cultural entity. Western Orissa and parts of northern Chhattisgarh together represent an early cultural region/sub-region, which was forged historically and is popularly known as Dakṣiṇa Kośala.⁴¹ That perhaps explains some of the problems associated with the modern state of Orissa, which again is shaped by the coming together of many localities and sub-regions. Much of the work focusing on Dakṣiṇa Kośala revolve around problems of chronology, genealogy, the capital city, and what may broadly be termed as aspects of cultural history.⁴² These concerns, important as they certainly are, do not seriously address issues related to political processes and social formations, not to speak of the state and state formation, including its temporal, spatial and least of all structural dimensions. What ever little is available on polity goes on to uncritically reinforce the familiar centralized, bureaucratic and homogeneous constructs, whose genesis may be traced to the Nationalist historiography. Statements such as the Śarabhapurīyas' 'imperial sway over south Kośala' or references to their 'central structure' in an essentially contrived, neat hierarchized construction of the constituents of their polity⁴³ not only point towards the abhorrence for gaps but also the continued influence of empire centred totalizing discourses. This section attempts to situate the evolution of the structure of polity in early mediæval Dakṣiṇa Kośala, with reference to the Śarabhapurīyas and Pāṇḍuvamśīs, in the larger context of contemporary socio-political processes.

The earliest epigraphic reference to the region perhaps comes from the Aśokan inscriptions which mention about the forest dwellers (*atavī*),