UNIT 13 THE PROBLEM OF URBAN DECLINE: AGRARIAN EXPANSION, LAND GRANTS AND GROWTH OF INTERMEDIARIES

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13.0 INTRODUCTION

In this unit we will be discussing one of the most controversial questions in the early medieval context of Indian history, the ‘Urban Decay’. The issue is controversial for several reasons. The question of ‘urban decay’ is directly linked with the nature of social relations in that context. The debate on ‘feudalism’ too revolves around the urban decay. We also need to take into account the third wave of urbanization that spread across the sub-continent.

Our objective is to understand these debates and not to arrive at any mechanistic generalizations, or to ‘solve’ the problem of the urban decay. We rather would try to understand the nature of the debate on the urban decay and the issue of feudalism from that standpoint. In order to have a proper discussion on the same the unit is divided into five sections. In the first section we would be discussing the context in which the debate is carried out. The subsequent sections then would look at the genesis of the debate, the question of feudalism and its links with the land grants and the question of intermediaries. In the last sections we would take up the alternative formulations on the same construct.

In the context of the post early historic period there appear to be two contrasting perspectives with regard to the period between the 4th to the 14th centuries of the Christian era. We need to take a dispassionate look at the debate on ‘Urban Decay’ in the early medieval context. We do also need to look at the ‘Land Grant’ economy and the terms of argument for it. The entire debate on the issue of both revolves around the ‘Feudal Social Formation’, its protagonists and antagonists. Within this debate there are other possibilities as well that we need to look at.

13.1 URBAN DECAY

The first Indian Marxist historian to have referred to the growth of feudalism in India was B.N.Datta. D.D.Kosambi subsequently developed the idea and posited two stages (‘feudalism from above’ and ‘feudalism from below’) in the evolution of feudal social formation in early medieval India. However, it was only with the detailed and richly documented theory of ‘Indian Feudalism’ by R.S.Sharma that the idea not only gained popularity but also attracted staunch detractors. In the process, the early medieval Indian historiography has tended to be divided among those who support this
Early Medieval Societies theory and those who do not. Opposition and criticism notwithstanding, the feudal framework has come to dominate the study of almost every aspect of early medieval India.

Central to the first formulations of the transition to feudal mode of production was the decline of external trade, demonetization, and the consequent relapse to a self-sufficient economy. Critics pointed out the theoretical inadequacy of the schema that explained critical stages of change almost exclusively in terms of external factors. Following on that the model for Urban Decay as a symptom of the then existing social formation that was feudalism has been reworked considerably. Let us briefly list out the empirical details of the argument.

1) The new state structure post-Mauryan period, that consolidates itself around the 4th 5th centuries AD is characterized by decentralization, and hierarchy, as suggested by the presence of the samanta, mahasamanta and other raja-purusa.

2) The emergence of the land grant economy and the coterminous rise of the landed intermediaries along with it is considered as the hallmark of Indian feudalism. This is directly linked to the erosion of the direct authority of the king over his subjects. This also assumes a change in the structure of the agrarian relationships. This class of landed intermediaries is assumed to be absent in the imperium of the Mauryas.

3) The third aspect of urban decay is supposed to get reflected in the nature of monetization. Recent evidence indicates that the actual coinage drops sharply in the post-Gupta period. This some have argued is a true indicator of decline in trade and thus a consequent decline in the urbanism as a phenomenon.

13.2 INDIAN FEUDALISM

Daniel Thorner mourned that ‘there is no single article on the place of feudalism in the historical evolution of India’ Ironically exactly in the same year that Thorner could not detect a single work devoted to feudalism in India, Kosambi published two articles on feudalism, and later that year the famous Introduction... came out. Damodar Dharmanand Kosambi suggested a two fold feudal formation for the post early historic phase. What he described as ‘feudalism from above and feudalism from below’ has never been understood adequately. Subsequently R.S. Sharma began to publish articles on the origin and development of feudalism in India. Later these were enlarged and supplemented by new studies and Indian Feudalism appeared in the sixties.

Feudalism as a theoretical construct remains the most controversial construct in the debate on periodisation in Indian history. What is at stake in the debate around the feudal question is not so much the use of the term, ‘feudalism’ per se as the differing perceptions of the substance of political and property relations. This often leads to a lot of confusion. This debate also directly impinges on the issues such as the nature of the State in early medieval context and the process of state formation in the early medieval India. Let us briefly understand what happens at the level of society and polity when the feudal structures emerge on the ruins of Early Historic State in India. Decentralization and hierarchy characterize the new state structure. This is suggested by the presence of a wide range of semi autonomous rulers such as the Samantas, mahasamantas, mahamandalesvara and so on.

Further, the emergence of the landed intermediaries is considered the hallmark of Indian feudal social formation. This of course is linked with the disintegration and decentralization of state authority and with significant changes in the agrarian structures and relations of productions. The emergence of this landed gentry/intermediary is causally lined with what is now known as the land grant economy.
The third reflection relates to the change in the nature of economy where the urban monetary economy gives way to ruralization and villages becoming ‘self-sufficient’. This also ushers in an ‘Urban Decay’, a marker of the feudal process. In the peasantry this results in something close to serfdom, characterized by immobility, forced labour and exorbitantly high rates of revenue. Taken together, these three points enumerate the feudal model that explains the state formation as well as the nature of state in early medieval India. Thus, the descriptions of Kali age in the epics and the Puranic literature served as the pointer of a ‘deep social crisis’ that gripped the Indian society in late third and early fourth centuries. The most significant element of this crisis was the phenomenon of varnasamkara, literally, an intermixture of the varnas. In a system where the vaishyas and the sudras were engaged in production and paid taxes, argues Sharma, ‘varnasamkara would also imply the refusal of the peasants and traders, called vaishyas, to pay taxes and would thus put in jeopardy the very fabric of society and polity’ Thus, a new mechanism of surplus extraction had to be deployed: steadily the state started assigning land revenue directly to priests, military chiefs, administrators and the others. The advent of the decadent Kali age (ascribed to the third and fourth centuries) is seen as symptomatic of fissures in the varna-based social order. The wealth-producing lower orders did not perform their assigned functions and refused to pay taxes to the rulers. Consequently, the rulers granted land for services on a large scale. This indeed was also the time when strong coercive measures are suggested, turning the king and his officers into oppressors. A significant suggestion has been made that the vaishya dynasty of the Guptas possibly emerged in the early fourth century as a reaction against oppressive rulers. Eventually, however, the Guptas were validated and legitimized by Brahmmins who saw them as the protectors of the varna order prescribed in the Dharmasastras. The Kali Age is the period when the pace of transition from the classical varna model to the modified one of feudal type was accelerated, insofar as the rajashasanas undermined peasant control over land and transformed the peasant into a tenant of the landlord. Not just that, large landed estates, which rested on the exploitation of the peasants, were fortified by the property laws of early medieval time.

The level of monetization has been an important link in the chain of arguments about the emergence of the feudal order in early medieval India. Beginning with the thrust on “paucity” of metal money and its links with the relative decline in trade and urbanization between circa A.D. 600 and 1200, the construct of Indian Feudalism has negotiated some alternative paradigms that have questioned the aforesaid early formulations. John S. Deyell sought to demolish the paradigm of Indian Feudalism by quantifying coin data to debunk the notion of “paucity”. Andre Wink, on the other hand, is convinced about the relative absence of an indigenous coinage tradition. But he locates the pivot and driving force of early medieval economy and trade in the “world embracing exchange circuit with a unified monetary constituent,” for which no empirical evidence was adduced.

Grossly unequal rights in the matter of distribution of land and agricultural produce marked the early medieval socio-economic formation. Embedded in this exploitative system were the seeds of popular protests. Several instances of violent conflicts between landlords, who were Brahmmins, and the peasants in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu between the 11th and the 13th centuries are on record. There are a few instances of tribal peasants rising in revolt against the landed powers. In Bengal, the protracted revolt of the Kaivartas, who were absorbed into brahmanical society as a low mixed caste, was in some measure a spontaneous expression against the oppression of the Palas and their landed beneficiaries, leading to the supplanting of Pala rule for a brief period.

That the feudal ethos marked by inequality and hierarchy conditioned the contemporary Indian mind is reflected in the domains of culture and divinities as well. Tantras, along with the contemporary and perhaps equally pervasive current of Bhakti, provided means to uplift the lower orders by allowing them to worship the various deities, for
which Vedic forms of initiation or mantras were found to be inadequate and irrelevant. Are the proponents of the Vedic culture as the ‘Hindu’ culture listening?

Both Tantrism and Bhakti, however, became ideological constructs to consolidate the feudal space. The orientation towards servility, hierarchy, destiny and favour seeking seems to be so strong that the egalitarian ethos associated with peasants and the tribal people do not make their presence really felt. The existing social formation was fed on and nurtured by the dominant ideas of the feudal ruling class. The feudal ideologues also used language to promote social distancing. They worked out different modes of addressing superior lords.

13.3 THE FEUDALISM DEBATE

The first major offensive against the feudal paradigm was undertaken in 1979 when Harbans Mukhia sought to establish that a “free peasantry” existed in the relevant period. Harbans Mukhia argued that the European notions of feudalism heavily influenced the model established by votaries of ‘Indian Feudalism’. Reconsidering class in the pre-capitalist context, Sharma focused on the unequal distribution of surplus. Coming down heavily on Mukhia, he says: “To attribute such structural phenomena as the absence of serfdom or the longevity of peasant autonomy to the carrying capacity of the soil is to ignore the potentialities of social dynamics.”

As one critic pointed out, this framework assigned the state ‘the role of a prime mover in the entire gamut of socio-political change, including even the curious decision to preside over its own demise, by unleashing the processes of political fragmentation and parcellization of sovereignty’. It is possible to argue that the prime mover is not state in this scheme of analysis but the said social unrest and the consequent politico-fiscal crisis to which the state responded. A greater problem, however, is to decide on a uniform chronology for the alleged transition to feudalism.

In the context of the above it would be important for us to understand the nature of the state formation in the early historic period. The entire model of ‘Indian Feudalism’ pre-supposes a certain structure of the early historic state and its linkages with the emergence of feudalism. Indian Feudalism was a distinct phase in the post early historic phase of Indian history is not a foregone conclusion. Let us understand the context of the debate before we move on to the issue of urban decay and its linkages with this debate.

While the earlier interpretation of Asoka and his social policy remains largely the same, the understanding of the nature of the Mauryan State has changed considerably. The model of a highly centralized empire with complete control over uniform structure in a vast territory gives way to systems of uneven development, coordinated by the centre aimed at the control of the resources at the different parts, of course of varied nature. This is an extremely important revision, not only for the understanding of Mauryan India but also in explaining what came later. For instance, one does not have to look for similarities among the Sungas, the Sakas, the Satavahanas and the Kalingas, whom an earlier historiography had taken as so many “successors” of the Mauryas. The relatively uncomplicated picture of Mauryan India in an earlier fashion of historical writing, with only one shade on the map, gives way to a complex situation with a metropolis, core areas and peripheries. When the core areas graduate, the metropolis loses its relevance. That explains the diffuse nature of the politics in the post-Mauryan period as something more than a relapse into anarchy and darkness. This politics is explained within the context of the extensive trade that India had with the western and eastern worlds. The political processes in the Northwest, the Gangetic heartland, Western Deccan, the Mahanadi valley and the Deep South are taken up for a meaningful treatment within this framework. The new insights regarding megaliths and the Roman trade are just two cases in point.
The Asiatic Mode of Production and the jingoistic theory of the nationalist historians form the other two streams regarding the nature of social formation. At this point we only need to consider another formulae, that of Stein’s Segmentary State, which along with ‘Feudalism’ will have to be regarded a major conceptual contribution to the contemporary debate on the nature of social formation in India in the early medieval context. Stein in his ‘Interim Reflections’ reaches for a theoretical merger between three parallel strands of Segmentary State, Integrated Polity and Processual model of Integration. Stein visualizes a meeting point for all the three as necessary step to arrive at the alternative framework to understand state formation in India.

Stein formally introduced his concept of ‘The Segmentary State in South Indian History’ in the late seventies. Stein’s own terms clarify his own position. “In a segmentary state sovereignty is dual. It consists of actual political sovereignty or control, and what Southall terms “ritual hegemony” or ritual sovereignty”. These correspond in the Indian usage to Ksatra and rajadharma respectively. In the segmentary state there may be numerous centres of which one has primacy as a source of ritual sovereignty, but all exercise actual political control over a part or segment of the political system encompassed by the state. The specialized administrative staff what in some unitary states would be called the bureaucracy is not an exclusive feature of the primary centre, but is found operating at and within the segments of which the state consists. Subordinate levels or zones of the segmentary state may be distinguished and the organization of these is pyramidal. That is the relationship between the centre and the peripheral units of any single segment is the same –in reduced form-as the relationship between the prime centre an all peripheral focuses of power… In the Indian context this principle is expressed in the terms little kingdoms and little kings to describe a local ruler whose kingly authority is that of any great king but more limited in scope.”

Stein had applied his segmentary state concept to the Chola State by the eighties he had applied to the Vijaynagar too. Stein’s segmentary state as a model is considered as an ‘immensely powerful deconstructive tool’ against the conventional theories. It is the most important contribution to the South Indian historiography since K.A.N. Sastri’s work on the Cholas. Yet it is conceded that the segmentary state cannot explain certain aspects of state formation in South India.

Criticisms of this model come from within the anthropological use of the term and its adoption by Stein to its outright rejection by both the Feudalism school and the votaries of integrated polity. Integrated polity looks at the issue of state formation as a process to be understood and explained rather than theorized. We need to understand the issue of integrated polity as well before we move on to the urban decay and urbanization issue. This is important as the nature of social formulation plays a major role in the process of ‘urban decay’. A feudal social formation may not result in urbanization but would surely be an indicative of an urban decay. It is therefore important to internalize the context of the social formation in the early medieval India.

Let us now round this off with a look at the other side of the hill as it were. So far the state formation has been considered from the perspective of fragmentation and segmentation of political authority (i.e Feudalism and Segmentary State) we can also look at the same process as an integrative, processual and centralization process. The process of integration implied a transformation of ‘pre-state polities into state polities and thus the integration of local polities into structures that transcended the bounds of local politics. This integrative process was accompanied by a series of other initiatives, extension of agrarian society through peasantization of tribal groups, improvements in the trading networks, expansion of the caste society and the emergence of spatial extensions of the ruling lineages by the processes of what Kulke calls Kshatriyaization or Rajputizaton. These measures affected the pre-modern state in two significant ways. The dynastic nuclear area came under bureaucratic control.
of the central lineage/dynasty. Secondly the politically controlled area expanded through a process of integration into its hinterland. In this the Samanta, the Rajas and the maha mandaleshvaras played a pivotal role, one that was played later on by the Yadava Bhojale’s of Singhnapur of Maharashtra.

The religious institutions played a major role in this process of state formation. Of course the influence of religion on the polity was well known to the earlier generations of historians, but it was only after the feudalism and segmentary state system model that this was properly internalised by the historians. Segmentary state in fact argues for localized segmentary structure of the state and its ritual sovereignty. In the second millennium AD there is a clear shift of the royal patronage form ‘rural brahmana villages to the urban temple complexes and temple cities. This was to derive among other things a greater legitimacy for the rule and to exercise the ritual sovereignty.

This formulation is a departure from both the Feudalism model as well as that of the segmentary state. The point of departure however does not lie in the feudalism or the segmentary state either. It lies in the way periodisation is understood and operated in Indian history.

13.4 THE ALTERNATIVES

Instead of contextualising the land grant economy and the issue of urbanization in the context of just decay, it might be useful to analyze them as a process that had its antecedents in the transformation of the polity. What then are these processes and can we very specifically arrive at any pan Indian generalization in the context of urban decay is the real issue.

It had been once argued that the breakdown of the once centralized, bureaucratic and wedded in singular polity that was the Mauryan imperial system resulted in the fragmentation of the polity and ushered in the feudal social formation. In this formation the class of intermediaries emerged that stood between the supreme political authority and the peasant. The monarchy as it were presided over its own demise.

It is now being realized that the Mauryan imperial system was not a unitary centralized administrative structure. The imperial system of the Mauryan encompassed many a political formations within its holds, the tribal chieftdoms the local chiefs, the regional rulers and even in some cases larger kingdoms. The Mauryan system was an amalgamation of all and not a merger of the same. The decline of the Mauryan dynasty in fact unleashed these forces that were already growing up in the vast territories which formed the imperial systems of the Mauryas. Thus the Satavahanas emerge in the Deccan and the Kalinga assert themselves. Thus there seems to be little possibility of an arrested growth.

Let us consider another important aspect of the issue in the context of the nature of the social formation. It is now being established that the early medieval period is marked by what is characterized as the third wave of urbanization in the sub-continent. The evidence for this is largely epigraphical and literary, nevertheless is convincing. The third phase of urbanization does not point towards an ‘urban decay’. It actually points towards maturing of systems and forces that were unleashed after the imperial system of Mauryas transformed into regional and local polities. This phase is more prominent in the peninsular India. This raises yet another issue. On the basis of the availability of evidence that is largely from Indo-gangetic basin, it may not be prudent to arrive at pan Indian formulations, especially with regard to the social formation.

We also need to consider the issue of pastoralism and what would that entail in the context of feudalism and the land grant economy. If we consider the Deccan as a case in point, then in the large areas of the Deccan, we do not come across any major land grants being given over a period of time. We do however come across grants to the temples, as well as references and evidences that point to a largely a pastoralist dominated economy. A case of the Yadavas in the Deccan would be a
good illustrative example. Thus the revenue divisions of the area were also unsettled till the 14th century A.D. What kind of a land grant economy would exist in a pastoral dominated area? Would the generalization of a feudal social formation remain valid. In one interesting argument a large number of sites in the Deccan have been explored, and excavated belonging to western Maharashtra, Vidarbha and Marathawada. Mate, in an incisive study demonstrates a very strange feature as resulting from the archaeological perspective. “All the sites that have been explored and excavated reveal a significant gap in occupation. “Many of the sites go back to the chalcolithic phase assigned to the 15th-14th centuries BC and have debris coming down to the 18th century AD – but with a wide gap of seven to eight centuries between the 5th to the 13th centuries AD”. It is in this period that the famous dynasties of the Deccan have flourished the Calukyas, the Rastrakuta and the Yadavas of Devagiri. What has the absence of the archaeological record meant in terms of the existence of pastoralism and its impact on the nature of the social formation in the Deccan?

Thus the question of the urban decay in the context of the early medieval India cannot be answered in a simplistic formulation.

13.5 SUMMARY

In this unit we familiarised you with various arguments on urban decay. Historians have been arguing from the point of view of feudalism, integrated polity and the segmentary state on this matter. Their debate brings out the complexity and nuance of this phenomenon in our period.

13.6 GLOSSARY

Demonetization : This refers to the phenomenon in which a process of moving away from an economy characterised by an exchange with money. This has been positive as one of the major evidences urban decline and decay in our period.

13.7 EXERCISES

1) Discuss the pros and cons of the existence of Feudalism in Indian society.
2) What is the relationship between the concept of feudalism and urban decay.