Feudalism in India

Feudalism in India refers to the societal structure dating all the way back to the Gupta Empire to the Mughal era in the late 16th century. Along with the Guptas, it was the Kushanas as well who played a leading role in introducing feudalism to India

Although the term 'Feudalism' is more associated with the social structure commonly in practice in Europe, there were remarkable similarities between Indian and European feudalism with few minor differences.

This article will give details about Feudalism in India within the context of the IAS Exam.

Overview of Indian Feudalism

As in the case of Europe, feudalism is a concept where the landed nobility owned lands in the name of the king/queen in exchange for raising an army in times of war. The lands owned by the nobility were in turn looked after and laboured upon by tenants, who shared produce with the nobles in return for military protection.

The likely origin of feudalism was during the post-Mauryan period in the empires of the Gupta's and the Kushanas.

Indian feudalism is commonly associated with the following terms:

1. Taluqdar
2. Zamindar
3. Jagirdar
4. Sardar
5. Deshmukh
6. Chaudary
7. Ghatwals

All the above would be major sources of revenue for the ruling dynasties in the Indian subcontinent and would continue to function even during the British rule, only being ended following the independence of India.

Structural makeup of Indian feudalism

The term 'Samantha' (neighbour) had its origins during the Gupta era, when it came to refer to the feudatory rulers of the time. Weak enforcement of power over the conquered regions led to the resumption of independence and some high administrative positions became hereditary.

There is much speculation among historians on how much the feudatory system in India can be described as feudalism due to the lack of an economic relationship between king, vassal and serf. However, there are enough to describe it as feudalism. The chief element of feudalism present in both the Indian subcontinent and Europe was the decentralization of power.

Feudal lords in India were obligated to pay a small fraction of revenue, a small fraction of revenue and provide troops for the overlord.

In time the feudal lords began to abuse their own authority leading to fragmentation in local authority and general breakup of unity among the populace. Such conditions would be fertile grounds for future invasions such as the Arab and Turkish Invasions of India

Features of Indian Feudalism

Vassalage: Vassalage expressed the relation of personal dependence and loyalty between the lord and his vassals.

Hierarchy of feudal lords: Different titles signified the position and powers within the rank of feudal lords.

Hereditary administrative positions: Weak enforcement of power led to the resumption of independence and some high administrative positions became hereditary.

Decentralisation of Power: Samantas were granted lands instead of salary and proceeded to seize ownership of the area while continuing to refer to themselves as vassals of their rulers.

Oppressive tax system: Imposition of proper and improper taxes, fixed and unfixed taxes along with rent exploited the labour class.

Prosperity was not shared equally: It was believed that some people were meant for cultivation of land and some for enjoying the fruits of production and hence, prosperity was not shared equally.

Fragmentation of social formation: Castes were split up into thousands of other castes and subcastes.

Manorial system: Under the manorial system, the landlord granted lands to persons who would render different services including labour on the lands of the lords in exchange for land.

There were few differences between Feudalism in India and the one in Europe, some of them are as follows:

- Indian feudalism was divided on a caste-basis such as Brahmanas, Kshatriya, Vaishaya and Shudras, while European feudalism was divided on the basis of class as in nobility, clergy and commoners

*Candidates can know the difference between Class and Caste by visiting the linked article.

- Unlike the European variety of feudalism, not many of the power structures did not have to pay taxes
- Western European Feudal lords granted lands to their serfs in order to get their own land cultivated, but Indian Kings made grants to collect taxes and surplus.
- Different ecological factors contributed to the nature of social structure and dynamics and hence the difference in European and Indian feudalism