

# The Early Textbook Controversy and R. S. Sharma's Concept of Indian Feudalism: Some Historiographic Reflections

*Hermann Kulke*

## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this paper is neither a detailed presentation of R. S. Sharma's involvement in the textbook controversy nor an in-depth depiction of his concept of Indian Feudalism. Its intention is to highlight R. S. Sharma's unique and even dominant role as a politically active intellectual and as a research scholar. This is paradigmatically comprehensible by his active role in the textbook and Babri Masjid controversies and by his creation and shaping of Indian Feudalism, doubtlessly India's most important concept of post-colonial historiography. Another concern of this paper is that contrary to the frequently expressed opinion, R. S. Sharma not only took note of critique but was also willing to integrate new ideas in his allegedly monolithic concept. This will be illustrated by a short analysis of his last major publication, a selection of his articles under the title 'Early Medieval Indian Society. A Study in Feudalization' (2001). The term "feudalisation" instead of "feudalism" is indicative of the progression of his concept.*

As a historian of Early Medieval India it is a pleasure for me to contribute an article on R. S. Sharma to the Festschrift of Gita Dharampal-Frick with its focus on Modern History. Ram Sharan Sharma, commonly known as R. S. Sharma (1919–2011), was not only, together with Romila Thapar, the most prominent and influential historian of pre-colonial Indian history in post-independence India. He was also, again together with Romila Thapar, an outstanding intellectual and virulent critic of Hindu nationalism and its cultural 'saffronisation' and the 'Aryan myth' of the Indus Civilization (Thapar 1989a and 1989b, Sharma 1989 and 1995). And, as will be shown below, as the chief editor of *A Historians' Report to the Nation* Sharma also fought, although finally in vain, against the destruction of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya in December 1992 (Sharma 1991b, 2001b).

### R. S. Sharma's *Ancient India* and the Early Textbook Controversy

R. S. Sharma's political-intellectual fame since the seventies was closely associated with the 'textbook controversy'. Since the late sixties the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) published textbooks for different classes in schools. With her textbooks for class VII on *Ancient India* and *Medieval [Muslim] India* in 1966 and 1967 Romila Thapar was among the first. In the seventies Sharma, S. Chandra and B. Chandra followed with textbooks on *Ancient India*, *Medieval India* and *Modern India*. These textbooks and their secular-leftist and Marxist authors soon became the target of Hindu nationalist accusation. They were blamed for their allegedly anti-Hindu and anti-national depiction of Indian history and culture, e.g. by denying India as the homeland of the Aryans and claiming that they were beef-eating in ancient time (Rudolf 1983; Jaffrelot 1996, R. Kulke 2008). It came to heated controversies in the parliament and Parliamentary Consultative Committees about the demand to correct the textbooks. But the acute textbook controversy was sparked off soon after the publication of Sharma's *Ancient India* for class XI. Only few months after Moraji Desai and his Janata Party had come to power in March 1977, an anonymous memorandum was handed over to Desai with severe criticism of "anti-national" textbooks and the demand to withdraw them from the schools. Desai forwarded the memorandum to the Minister and suggested the withdrawal. The heated debates in the parliament and general public were further boosted by the publication of Sharma's *Ancient India* in November 1977. As he had meanwhile become the dominant historian-cum-intellectual of the allegedly anti-national secular leftist-Marxists, he became the main target and in July 1978 his *Ancient India* was withdrawn from the syllabus (R. Kulke 2008: 58–61). Sharma was prohibited by the Government to participate at an international conference of historians in the Soviet Union and answered with his well-balanced booklet *In Defence of Ancient India* (Sharma 1978). *Ancient India* was several times reprinted<sup>1</sup> and Sharma republished it in 2005 thoroughly revised and enlarged under the title *India's Ancient Past*. It's worth quoting its Preface at some length because it depicts in a nutshell Sharma's personal history of the textbook controversy.

*"The present book is based on a good portion of my Ancient India, which was first published by the National Council of Educational Research and Training*

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<sup>1</sup> Only during my working on this paper, I rediscovered that Prof. Sharma presented me the second reprint of his *Ancient India* (1991) during a meeting at the JNU with the dedication "For Professor Kulke with best wishes. RS Sharma 14 Nov 1992" – just few weeks before the destruction of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya.

*in 1977, but the obscurantist elements got it withdrawn from the circulation by the same body in 1978. The book was restored in 1980 [after the fall of the Janata Government], and several lacs were printed for school students. However, when in 2001 the NCERT published it, some passages were removed without the author's consent. Finally in 2002 the NCERT withdrew the book because of extreme conservatism.<sup>2</sup> When the Oxford University Press approached me for publication, I decided to get a revised copy of the existing edition published by them. I substantially revised the book and added four new chapters to it. In doing so I took account of new ideas and material available to me.” (Sharma 2005: v)*

**The Background of R. S. Sharma's Concept of Indian Feudalism:  
Colonial Historiography, A. L. Basham and D. D. Kosambi**

The intention of writing this article is not to highlight again well-known details of Sharma's concept of Indian Feudalism. While 'revisiting' Sharma in his writings during the preparation of this paper I realized again the one-sidedness of the general appraisal and evaluation of his feudalism concept largely or even solely on the basis of his magnum opus, *Indian Feudalism: c. 300–1200*. I was surprised to detect distinct evidence of an advancement of his perception of Indian feudalism, without, however, deviating from the central points of his concept. And I was again fascinated by his openness to accommodate other historians and their views, including those who contested aspects of his ideas of Indian feudalism and, on the other hand, to enter into heated debates with historians who flatly denied the existence of feudalism in India.

Therefore I made up my mind to trace certain aspects of Sharma's concept with an emphasis on his modification in his later publications. In order to assess them in the context of his core statements it is unavoidable to have at least a short look at its early development. The starting situation of the feudalism debate in the late fifties of the last century is well known. Suffice it to mention that on the one hand there existed the British colonial historical writings on India that ignored or even disdained the early medieval regional kingdoms. Thus Vincent A. Smith's hegemonic *Oxford History of India: From the Earliest Times to the End of 1911* devoted the same number of pages to the five hundred years of these kingdoms as to Alexander's Indian campaign. And the 2<sup>nd</sup> volume of the multi-volume *Cambridge History of India* which was supposed to

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<sup>2</sup> It is significant that Sharma uses the term conservatism instead of nationalism here. It is left to us to speculate whether he denies BJP and its excesses nationalism at all or whether he, being himself an Indian national, denies the Hindu nationalists the legitimacy to eliminate his work as anti-national.

comprise the post-Gupta period until the Delhi Sultanate, was 'under preparation' since 1922, but never appeared. On the other hand there existed the Indian national 'imperial model', depicting the pre-colonial Indian state as a powerful unitary, territorially clearly defined state, centrally governed by a hierarchically organized administration. This concept emerged during the Indian freedom movement, when Indian historiography became a major ideological tool of the national claim that classical Indian culture had produced political and social institutions that were equal if not superior to those of their imperial masters. But it has to be mentioned that this school also produced excellent standard works, too, like e.g. K. A. N. Sastri's and A. S. Altekar's histories of the Cholas and the Rashtrakutas.

Since the late fifties and in the sixties, research on early medieval India witnessed a significant paradigmatic change. A strong impetus came from A.L. Basham at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London. In the 'Basham School', the historiographic focus shifted from dynastic-political to economic and social history for the first time. His Indian students authored significant dissertations on the economic and social history of early India that, for the first time, were based on a systematic analysis of the epigraphic sources. Apart from Romila Thapar's standard work on *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas* (Thapar 1961), of particular note are the works by A. L. Adhya on the pre-Gupta economic history of North and West India (Adhya 1967), by S. K. Maity on the economy during the Gupta period (Maity 1957) and by L. Gopal on the economy of early medieval North India (Gopal 1965). It is not surprising that out of this circle also R. S. Sharma's work on Indian Feudalism emerged which became the most influential and lasting contribution to the reorientation of present day studies of early medieval India.

Early colonial administrators had referred to a 'feudal system' in India in their reports as, for instance, James Tod in his *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (Tod 1832). Even Max Weber assumed feudal structural elements to have existed in most parts of India during the medieval period (Weber 1978: 1054f). But in 1956 Daniel Thorner still rightly asserted in his essay 'Feudalism in India', published in the volume *Feudalism in History*, edited by R. Coulborn, that 'there is no single work solely devoted to feudalism in India; nor is there even a single article on the place of feudalism in the historical evolution of India' (Thorner 1956: 133). It is a curious coincidence that in the same year D. D. Kosambi initiated the debate on Indian feudalism with his essay 'On the Development of Feudalism in India' (Kosambi 1956b) and in his *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (Kosambi 1956a). As it is well known, he differentiated between 'feudalism from above' in the early medieval Hindu kingdoms from

the sixth to the thirteenth centuries, and 'feudalism from below' during the period of the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire.

Kosambi's book was reviewed in the first volume of the *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* (JESHO) by A. L. Basham, one of its founding board members. It is worth quoting his review at some length, as it predicted the further course of the debate on Sharma's *Indian Feudalism* and Kosambi's role in this debate:

*"Kosambi's book will find numerous critics both in India as elsewhere. Many Indian historians, writing in a period of resurgent nationalism, will be horrified at Prof. Kosambi's attacks on many dogmas cherished in the undergraduate classes of Indian history. Marxists of the orthodox school may well find fault with several of his conclusions. Many passages of the book will be found irritating by non-Marxists while professional Indologists will be quick to point out errors in detail. In fact the book will please no one [...] Nevertheless, we believe that this book is in its class, a great book"* (Basham 1957: 341–342).

In the following years, *JESHO* published two more of Kosambi's papers on Indian Feudalism that, too, did not tally with the mainstream of the Marxist debate on feudalism in India. His paper on Indian feudal trade charters emphasized the administrative decentralization through *samanta* chiefs whose rise in the post-Gupta period accelerated the conversion of communal property into feudal property (Kosambi 1959). His second article on social and economic aspects of the *Bhagavadgita* stressed cultural values, particularly *bhakti*, fostered by India's medieval feudal regimes (Kosambi 1961). Kosambi may have to be regarded as the first historian to draw attention to the political dimension of *bhakti* faith when he wrote: "To hold this type of society and state together, the best religion is one which emphasizes the role of *bhakti*, personal faith". It is worth mentioning that Kosambi emphasized in his writing the importance of the *samantas* and of *bhakti* for the nature of Indian Feudalism that were taken up only later and stepwise by adherents of Indian Feudalism. Although Kosambi is considered as father of Marxist historiography in India, his undogmatic interpretation of Indian Feudalism found only little support from Marxist historians. It is remarkable that the two Kosambi commemoration volumes, published in 1974, don't refer in detail to his concept of Indian Feudalism (Prof. D. D. Kosambi Commemoration Committee, 1974; R. S. Sharma 1974). I. Habib rightly pointed out in his article in one of these volumes: "Interesting as this [Kosambi's] theory is, there has been no adequate discussion of it so far"

(Habib 1974b: 278).<sup>3</sup> In his edition of Kosambi's articles, B. D. Chattopadhyaya, too, points out that "there has hardly been an attempt to analyze them [Kosambi's ideas on Indian feudalism] in the context of the differences of approach" (Chattopadhyaya 2002: xxiii ff).<sup>4</sup>

### **The Impact of R. S. Sharma's Indian Feudalism on Post-colonial Indian Historiography**

The following years witnessed instead the seemingly irresistible rise of Sharma's concept of Indian Feudalism based on the orthodox Marxist progressive modes of production and the rebuttal of the Asiatic Mode of Production, "the unfortunate theses that Marx had once propounded" (Habib 1974a: 38).<sup>5</sup> Already in 1958, in the first volume of *JESHO* in which Basham had also reviewed Kosambi's *Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Sharma published his first article on the origins of feudalism in India between 400 and 650 CE (Sharma 1958). It was followed by an article on 'Land Grants to Vassals and Officials' in the fourth volume of *JESHO*, a particular controversial aspect of his concept (Sharma, 1961). The successive issues of *JESHO* contain several important articles by L. Gopal, N. Karashima, U. Thakur, V. K. Thakur that support directly or indirectly Sharma's concept of Indian Feudalism, – and also one "dissenting vote" by B. Prakash (see Kulke 1994). In 1974 Sharma and D. N. Jha took up again in *JESHO* the whole range of different issues of the debate in a comprehensive article (Sharma & Jha 1974a). It is noteworthy that during the early years of the Indian Feudalism debate *JESHO* played an important role and became its international forum for a short time – a role that, as will be shown in a moment, was soon taken over by its new Indian mouthpiece, the *Indian Historical Review*.

Sharma's early contributions to *JESHO* were followed by a series of new articles (e.g. Sharma 1960) that were partly revised and included in his magnum opus, *Indian Feudalism*. Published in 1965, it covers the period between 300 and

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<sup>3</sup> Habib even concluded: "Sharma appears to reject – for he does not explicitly take issue with Kosambi on this point – the supposition." (Habib 1974: 278).

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting that K. M. Shrimali, too, does not refer to Kosambi's ideas of Indian Feudalism in his review of Chattopadhyaya's edition of Kosambi's writings (Shrimali 2002).

<sup>5</sup> I. Habib clearly explicates this point: "Certain Marxists of western European countries have begun to insist that they know better and have 'reopened' the debate on the subject themselves. [Habib refers in a fn. to Hobsbawm and M. Goldelier]. [...] The essential purpose in the attempted restauration of the Asiatic Mode is to deny the role of class contradictions and class struggles in Asian societies, and to emphasize the existence of authoritarian and anti-individual traditions in Asia, so as to establish that the entire past history of social progress belongs to Europe alone" (Habib 1974a 38f).

1200 CE and became the classical standard work of the 'Indian Feudalism School'. As Sharma points out, the growth of Indian feudalism can be traced back to the third and fourth centuries CE during the decline of pan-Asian trade and urban economy. The direct cause for the emergence of economic and social (and consequently political) feudal structures were the steadily increasing number of land endowments to Brahmin, religious institutions and, albeit less often, to court officials. This created a class of landowners who were not cultivators, yet eternally furnished with innumerable immunities similar to those in the European medieval period, as for instance, the right to levy taxes and pass laws. The transfer of these rights to landlords and the increasing commitment of the village population to the tracts of land cultivated by them resulted in a gradual bondage and enslavement. This development led to an increasing fragmentation and weakening of political power, caused by the widespread practice of granting big and small territories to vassals and officials who entrenched themselves territorially and ended up as independent potentates (Sharma 2001: 77–118). Later on, Sharma substantiated his theory with several important detailed studies on particularly controversial aspects of his concept like 'Paucity of Metallic Coinage between 500–1000' (Sharma 1968 and 2001: 119–163) and particularly in 1987 on '*Urban Decay in India (c. 300–1000)*' which has to be regarded as one of his most important contributions to Indian history. Both publications doubtlessly strengthened his thesis, although, as predictable, also raised vehement objections. Few of them may be correct in certain details (e.g. Chattopadhyaya 1974). But more important is that these publications, too, are "bold ventures" (U. Singh 2011) which led to serious theoretical debates about hitherto neglected issues of central importance for early Indian history.

### **The 'Indian Feudalism School' and its Conceptual Discourses**

Already shortly before its expected publication, Sharma's *Indian Feudalism* aroused a strong controversy. During the conference on 'Land System and Feudalism in Ancient India', organised by himself at Calcutta University in December 1964 (Sircar 1966a), it was not only met with approval (e.g. B. P. Mazumdar and B. N. S. Yadava) but also with vehement rejection (e.g. S. K. Maity). The critique was most explicitly brought forward by D. C. Sircar in his essay 'Landlordism Confused with Feudalism'. He concluded that feudalism was 'a misnomer in the early Indian context' (Sircar 1966b: 62). In the ensuing dispute during this conference, the carefully nurtured unity of Indian historians during the independence struggle fell apart in two feuding groups with a national-conservative and a 'progressive Marxist' focus.

Except for an irritating schoolmasterly review of Sharma's book by R. Coulborn (Coulborn 1968), the debate on Indian feudalism appears to have calmed down considerably over the following years. The discussion gathered momentum again in the early seventies. A strong impetus came in 1973 from B. N. S. Yadava's study on northern India during the 12<sup>th</sup> century. It focused more strongly on European theories of feudalism than Sharma ever did. Yadava quotes in detail the list of social divisions in European feudalism as described by Marc Bloch in his seminal work *La société féodale*. Yadava demonstrates how Bloch undermined Marx's position as a relevant theoretical source of the Indian Feudalism School. Under the influence of Bloch as well as that of Max Weber, Yadava located the focus of his analyses on the political dimensions of feudal structures. Thus he pointed out that the position of the subordinated but largely autonomous Samanta chieftains may be held as the "key word of Indian feudalism" (Yadava 1973: 136). 'Samantisation' of the early medieval states has therefore been regarded as an 'Indian variant' of feudalism (Gopal 1963; Kulke 1995: 11). Moreover, Yadava emphasized with reference to Kosambi that "the doctrine of bhakti with the unflinching loyalty to a god suited the feudal ideology in which loyalty linked together in a chain serfs and retainers to feudal lords, barons to duke and king" (Yadava: 378). He was the first to take up Kosambi's ideas about the political and ideological dimensions of *samantas* as chieftains and little kings and of devotional *bhakti* religion. But, as will be pointed out soon, it took some time until they entered the mainstream of feudalism debate.

Already a year later, in 1974, Indian feudalism returned clearly and noticeably into the limelight of India's historical discourses through the new journal *The Indian Historical Review* (IHR). It was published by the newly established Indian Council of Historical Research with R. S. Sharma as its first Chairman and, together with V. Jha, the Editor of the *IHR*. Not surprisingly, the *IHR*, particularly its first volume, became the new mouthpiece of the Indian Feudalism School. But it also allowed dissenting votes like B. D. Chattopadhyaya's article on 'Trade and Urban Centres in Early Medieval North India' (Chattopadhyaya 1974).

Even more important was that during the next two years altogether three Presidential Addresses were devoted to the theme of Indian Feudalism at the Indian History Congress, by D. N. Jha and H. Mukhia in 1979 and by B. N. S. Yadava in 1980. Indian Feudalism had clearly become the major issue in pre-modern India's historiography during these years, although in 1980, too, a new and competing concept of early medieval state formation in south India had entered the stage with B. Stein's segmentary state theory put forward in his magnum opus (Stein 1980).



In all the three Presidential Addresses certain theoretical deficiencies in the Indian Feudalism discourses were admitted. D. N. Jha pointed out that “the explanation of feudal development only in terms of foreign trade, whose decline to a large extent depended on factors external to the Indian situation [...] has recently led to a rethinking on the part of the exponents of the Indian feudal model from the vantage point of internal social contradictions” (Jha 1979: 6). However he justified the application of the concept of feudalism to Indian history with amazing openness in the following words: “What needs to be adequately appreciated is the fact that Indian Marxist historiography, opposed to the British view of Indian [unchanging] past, has used the European model of feudalism to explain social change in India from the middle of the first millennium” (Jha 1979: 11). Yadava adopted a more critical tone when he stated that the study of Indian Feudalism “has yet to achieve greater theoretical sophistication in historical analysis” (Yadava 1980). As the feudal mode of production coexisted in India with non-feudal elements, its socio-economic structure was not as pronounced as in medieval Europe. He rightly demanded to look more closely for the causes of the subjection of peasants by landlords through non-economic coercion, thus underlining again the relevance of religion in Indian feudalism.

Whereas Jha and Yadava tried to advance Marxist as well as non-Marxist theories in defence of the concept of Indian feudalism, H. Mukhia on the other hand fundamentally questioned the very existence of feudalism in India in his Presidential Address with the suggestive title ‘Was there Feudalism in Indian History?’ (Mukhia 1979). After a detailed classification of various theories about the origin of feudalism, he pointed out that it had emerged in Europe from a social crisis and far-reaching social transformations. And he doubted that serfdom was a dominant feature in medieval India. Sharma and his followers, on the other hand, defined the excessive increase of land endowments as the primary cause of the emergence of feudalism in India. But according to Mukhia, a complex social structure like feudalism could not have been caused by administrative measures of the state. He thus questioned the very sense of a concept “which has so little relevance to our history.”

Mukhia’s critique caused a strong dismay in the Indian Feudalism School<sup>6</sup> as it was brought forward “in a strongly assertive Marxist mould” (Mukhia 2000: 9).

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<sup>6</sup> This became again evident by K. M. Shrimali’s review of Sharma’s anthology of articles (Sharma 2001): “Sporadic critiques apart, 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. This led to the now famous ‘Feudalism Debate’ carried in *The Journal of Peasant Studies* in 1981 [...]. Prof. Sharma’s intervention ‘How

Unlike earlier, the controversial debate on this issue of Indian feudalism was for the first time of great interest for international Marxist circles, too. After intensive preparation, a special issue of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* was edited in 1985 by T. J. Byres and H. Mukhia under the title *Feudalism in Non-European Societies*. As stated in its introduction, it took the controversy on Indian Feudalism “to a new level within a Marxist analysis” (Byres & Mukhia 1985: 2).

By no means beaten, the Indian Feudalism School was quick to react. In his well known disputatious mode, R. S. Sharma came forward with his seminal article ‘How Feudal was Indian Feudalism’ (Sharma 1985), published in the volume of the *Journal of Peasant Studies* just mentioned as a “spirited and eloquent defence of [Indian] feudalism”, as Byres remarks in his Introduction. In this comprehensive article Sharma took up the gauntlet not only against H. Mukhia but especially against B. Stein’s segmentary state concept that he denounced as an ‘Asiatic Mode of Production’ concept in disguise. Stein reacted in the same volume with a vehement defence of his ‘Segmentary State’ concept and a harsh rejection of Sharma’s concept of the Indian Feudalism by an article with the explicit title ‘Politics, Peasants and the Deconstruction of Feudalism in Medieval India’ (Stein 1985). This confrontation between Sharma and Stein reminds one of the textbook controversy in the late seventies, however, this time fought out by the concerned scholars in a “strongly assertive leftist-Marxist mould”.

Mukhia’s rejection of an Indian feudalism and his “faulty premise of the absence of a dependent peasantry” in India was again heavily criticised in 1989 by V.K. Thakur in his *Historiography of Indian Feudalism* (Thakur 1989). But otherwise one gains the impression that the feudalism debate lost its vigour since the late 1980s and in particular during the 1990s. This holds true, at least partly, as the great encounters had been fought out. But more momentous was the rise of a new political Hindu nationalism with different foci, like ‘epic archaeology’ and the imagined Ramajanmabhumi at Ayodhya. I remember very well the atmosphere in India in 1992 when I stayed as a visiting fellow at JNU. Heated debates about ‘nationalistic images’ of Indian history continued to absorb the scholarly and ‘civic energy’ of the adherents of Indian Feudalism and non-Marxist sympathisers before and after the painful destruction of the Babri Masjid on December 6<sup>th</sup>. Already in October 1989 twenty-five scholars of the Centre of Historical Studies at JNU had come forward with the comprehensive brochure *The Political Abuse of History. Babri Masjid-Rama Janmabhumi Dispute* and in May 1991 R. S. Sharma submitted together with D. N. Jha, A. Ali

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Feudal was Indian Feudalism?’ effectively demolished the model of the ‘free peasantry’ by invoking unimpeachable data” (Shrimali 2001).

and S. Bhan to the already mentioned the paper *Ramjanmabhumi-Baburi Masjid. A Historians' Report to the Nation* to the central Government (Sharma 1991). The four authors of the *Historian's Report to the Nation* also acted as nominees of the 'All India Babri Masjid Action Committee' in the negotiations with the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. Although finally unsuccessful in preventing the destruction of the Babri Masjid in December 1992, these reports about political abuse of imagined history continued to remain influential statements against Government sponsored political abuse of 'epic archaeology'. Sharma continued his critical assessment of the 'Ayodhya fallout' (Sharma 2001). But a main concern of his research activities in the 1990s became the thorough survey of the linguistic, literary and archaeological data of the Aryans in the Euro-Asiatic context and their advent to India as breeders of horses that were unknown in the Indus Civilisation. As expected, his two small but comprehensive books raised again controversial debates that are, however, beyond the scope of this paper (Sharma 1996<sup>7</sup> and 1999).

During the late 1980s and in the following years the Indian Feudalism School kept silent by no means. The debates continued in a kind of fine-tuning of important conceptual aspects as can be detected in two anthologies of its two leading exponents. The first volume, edited by D. N. Jha (1987), comprises a large number of articles by different authors, whereas the second one contains a collection of R. S. Sharma's articles, edited by himself. D. N. Jha had obviously an essential concern to compile and edit his volume *Feudal Social Formation in Early India* (Jha 1987). As perceivable in his comprehensive Introduction (Jha 1987: 4–41) he emphasized again his thesis that external factors (e.g. the decline of international trade) and state measures (e.g. conferring land tenure to Brahmins) were not the main causes of the emergence of feudalism in India. The volume contains three major sections. Its first, 'Transition to Feudalism', is silent about 'external factors'. The two papers of Sharma (1982) and Yadava (1979) emphasise instead social unrest and peasant uprisings and the socio-economic crisis of the Kali age. The second part on 'Feudal Society and Economy' repeats well-known concepts, though based partly on new material. The final section on 'Feudal Ideology' contains articles on religious-ideological issues like K. Veluthat's paper (jointly with Narayanan 1987) on the Bhakti Movement in South India and R. S. Sharma's meanwhile famous article 'Material Milieu of Tantrism' (Jha 1987: 376–390). These subjects were not completely new. After all, already Kosambi had emphasized the significance of bhakti

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<sup>7</sup> This book was reviewed in *IHR* 1992: 121–124 by Suraj Bhan, Archaeologist of Kurukshetra University and co-author of the *Historians' Report to the Nation*.

for the ideology of feudalism. But initially religious topics were not part of the mainstream debates of Indian feudalism.

The thoroughly revised new edition of this volume of the year 2000 confirms and strengthens this new trend (Jha 2000). Thus the last chapter on Feudal Ideology contains six instead of four articles, adding Sharma's new important 'The Feudal Mind' and R. N. Nandi's article on the 'Origin of the Virasaiva Movement'.

### **New Ideas: R. S. Sharma's Advancement of his Concept of Indian Feudalism**

Even more gainful observations can be made from Sharma's *Early Medieval Indian Society. A Study in Feudalisation* (2001), the long-standing desideratum of his articles. His short but profound introduction situates his concept in the context of more recent Marxist and non-Marxist theories of Indian feudalism (Sharma 2001: 1–14). As the book had come out more or less exactly on the fiftieth anniversary of Sharma's 'initiation' into the study of feudalism at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University, it reflects not only the larger part of his own career, but also comprises in a nutshell the history of the most controversial concept of India's modern historiography since the publication of his seminal monograph *Indian Feudalism* (Kulke 2002: 157).

The particular relevance of this anthology is further enhanced by the fact that Sharma revised and enlarged several papers substantially for this coherently edited volume. Therefore they not only provide updated versions. A comparison with their original versions offers the opportunity to detect interesting aspects of the advancement of Sharma's concept of Indian feudalism. We may not be wrong to regard his *Study in Feudalisation* as his new magnum opus on this topic.

Let me explain this by a few examples. In his Introduction Sharma confirms the focus of his earlier writings: "In my understanding of feudalism I give the greatest weight to the economic factor". However, he adds that he "also included material on the social and cultural aspects of the early medieval period" (Sharma 2001: 1) Already Sharma's first article, 'Transition from Ancient to Medieval', is indicative. It consists of his extensively enlarged, in fact tripled, lead-article of the first volume of the new *Indian Historical Review* (Sharma 1974c) and reveals interesting modifications and enrichments of his concept. In both versions he repeated his thesis that the transition to the Middle Ages and the emergence of feudalism in India results from the practice of extensive land grants. But in the revised version he comes to a significant new conclusion that the practice of landgrants was also a measure to overcome, "a serious crisis that

affected the production relations” (Sharma 2001: 18). To my mind, this ‘interpolation’ reflects a paradigmatic change as it explains landgrants no longer primarily as an administrative measure of a ‘moneyless’ state administration, but as a reaction to the deep social crisis. This observation applies also to his newly added short concluding subchapters on ‘Rise of Regional and Linguistic Units’, ‘Trends in Art and Architecture’ and ‘Bhakti and Tantrism’ (see also Sharma 2005: 299–306).

The second chapter ‘The Kali Age: A Period of Social Crisis’ provides another case of ‘comparative studies’. Originally published in the A. L. Basham Festschrift (Sharma 1982) and republished as the lead-article of the D. N. Jha’s anthologies (1987, 2000), it has now been thoroughly recast and, according to the newly acquired conceptual status of the Kali age crises, its size has nearly been doubled. One may not go astray to argue that this article has now become a genuine contribution to social history of early medieval India. This is illustrated, for example, by two of its newly added passages which deal with “peasantisation of sudras” (Sharma 2001: 54 ff) and the growing importance of trade in the initial stage of the Kali age crisis (Sharma 2001: 56f). Sharma argues that, “traders in their anxiety to acquire a higher social status, assumed a leading role in fostering disaffection”, and even infers from “repeated references to their predominance that traders and artisans had their hand in the social disorder”.

The last chapter ‘The Feudal Mind’ has been published originally in *Social Science Probings* (Sharma 1996) and was reedited in Jha’s revised anthology (Jha 2000: 455–467). It constituted another significant and fairly new – one may even add overdue – amendment to his concept, implemented by himself. It highlights the means to validate and legitimise social and economic inequalities of feudal hierarchies through ‘ritual arrangements’ and Bhakti. Particularly interesting is his observation that social inequality and feudal hierarchy seem to have been articulated and thus validated by the position and size (and thus hierarchy) that were allotted to various deities in the reliefs of temples (Sharma 2001: 267). Sharma admits in this article that religion and ideology had a much stronger share in the nature of Indian feudalism than suggested in his early conceptual writings, particularly in *Indian Feudalism*. His statement “Bhakti helped strengthen the existing feudal relationship” (Sharma 2001: 281) and the introductory sentence of his very short concluding chapter ‘Summing-Up’ that “the social crisis of the Kali age paved the way for the beginning of the early medieval period” (2001: 283) signify an important enhancement of his concept of Indian Feudalism and characterize the openness of his own ‘feudal mind’.

Let me conclude with a few additional remarks. Like R. S. Sharma, D. N. Jha adopts the designation 'Early Medieval India' in the new title of his revised anthology *The Feudal Order. State Society and Ideology in Early Medieval India* (Jha 2000). for the first time The concept of Early Medieval India was introduced and defined by B. D. Chattopadhyaya in his Presidential Address at the Indian History Congress in 1983 (Chattopadhyaya 1983). It has finally been accepted since the publication of his seminal work *The Making of Early Medieval India* in 1994. It was a necessary amendment to the conventional tripartite periodization of the Indian History Congress of Classical, Medieval and Modern Indian History in order to do justice to the period of the post-Gupta regional kingdoms. This change of nomenclature by Sharma and Jha may not be a mere coincidence but indicates, to my mind, an intended conceptual improvement. It clarifies the period to which the model of Indian Feudalism applies and, hopefully, facilitates the overdue improvement of communication between 'feudalists' and 'early medievalists'. After all, there are rays of hope that this may be possible. In his Presidential Address at the Andhra Pradesh History Congress 'Reflections on Recent Perceptions of Early Medieval India', K. M. Shrimali criticised Chattopadhyaya for speaking of a "samanta system rather than feudal polity" and for viewing "this system as an instrument of political integration and a counterpoint to the decentralized polity of the feudal" (Shrimali 1994). However, he concludes with the unexpected question: "Aren't the so-called alternative paradigms of 'segmentary state' and 'integrative polity' merely extensions of semantic differences rather than connoting any substantive departure from the feudal model?" Nevertheless, one could easily retort to this question in the opposite direction. D. N. Jha, however, seems to be still rather reluctant to reduce this controversy to mere semantic differences. But he, too, admits that "the responses of Stein, Kulke and Chattopadhyaya to the feudal state model, it would appear, have at least one point in common: they all perceive the early medieval period as one of parcellized sovereignty and this brings them quite close to the idea of a feudal state" (Jha 2000: 24). There exists indeed closeness between these three models of state formation in early medieval India. They all are alternative models of the traditional model of unitary, centralized and territorially clearly defined kingdoms.

Feudalisation, as analysed by Sharma in his *Study of Feudalisation* pertains to processes that are indeed also central to the "processual model of integrative state formation" and related concepts of state formation in early medieval India from local chieftains to early and imperial kingdoms (Chattopadhyaya 1983, 1994; Kulke 1984, 1995; Panda 1990; Sahu 2012, 2018; Singh 2011). Even a kind of 'demilitarization' of the 'feudalist war' against Burton Stein and his segmen-

tary state model could be helpful as a closer de-ideologized analysis of his studies on rituals and nuclear areas might be quite revealing, too, as has recently been pointed by this author (Kulke 2012). And there are several other promising arenas for conceptual negotiations with processes of feudalization and integration, like ‘feudal mind’ and ideology, processes of legitimation, the political role of religious movements, institutions and sectarian leaders, integration and ‘Hinduization’ of tribals and their ‘castification’, the extension of the ‘state society’ into the periphery of royal centres, the role of ‘little kings’ and *saman-tas*, agrarian extension and urbanization – to mention only few. No doubt, Sharma’s *Study of Feudalisation* opens new doors for promising future studies of early medieval India beyond conceptual barriers.

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