Brajadulal Chattopadhyay, *The Making of Early Medieval India*


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History as a subject needs time periods for understanding historical change.

- Periodization of history is indispensable for historiographical purposes.

- Even Indian scholars of the British period like Rakhaladas Banerjee, K.A. N. Sashtri, R.S. Tripathi and R.C. Majumdar extend the discussions about Ancient India till 1206.

1. Can ‘early medieval India’ be considered as a separate time period?

2. If so then what are the characteristics of this phase?

3. How was it different from its previous phase?

4. Lastly, how did the transition from ‘ancient’ to ‘early medieval’ occur?
Early medieval

• History of the evolution of the term.

1. Ramesh chandra Majumdar’s view in ‘The Struggle for Empire’ vol 5 in 1957

2. ‘Early medieval’ is used for referring to the period stretching from the Arab invasion of Sindh and Gujarat in early eighth century to the decline of Delhi Sultanate in 1974 by Mohammad Habib.

3. Brajadulal Chattopadayaya, however, treats the six hundred years stretching from the 7th to the 13th centuries as early medieval India.


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But what constitutes ‘ancient India’?

B.D. Chattopadhyay considers that the term ‘Early Historical period’ [আদি ঐতিহাসিক সময়কাল] stretching from 5th century B.C. till 4th century A.D. should be considered as the reference point.

On the basis of current historiography based mainly on the analysis of Ram Sharan Sharma, the main characteristics of early historical India are-

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<tr>
<th>Political</th>
<th>Economic</th>
<th>Social</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Centralized Bureaucratic states with paid officers</td>
<td>• Monetized economy</td>
<td>• Varna system of society existed with Brahmans and Kshatriyas as surplus appropriators</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Ruled by Kshatriya kings</td>
<td>• Urban civilization with a strong craft and artisanal production</td>
<td>• Vaishyas were the main agricultural, artisanal producers, and traders.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. No existence of landholders</td>
<td>• Agriculture and craft production was characterized by strong communal rights</td>
<td>• Sudras laboured as slaves.</td>
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Other views –

H.C. Roychoudhury [Political History of Ancient India]

Nihar Ranjan Ray [‘The Medieval Factor in Indian History’]. According to him ‘medievalism’ in the Indian context had three separate phases:

1. 7th to the 12th century.
2. 12th to the first quarter of the 16th century.
3. First quarter of the 16th century to the close of the 18th century.
The main characteristics of medievalism according to N.R. Ray that reflected similarities with European history

1. All ruling dynasties became regional like the contemporary European nation-states.

2. The character of the economy changed from a ‘money economy’ to a ‘natural economy’.

3. Regionalism in various modes of social communication like script, language and literature.

4. Religion began to develop into sects and sub-sects.

5. Regional schools of art developed like Orissan, Pallava, Chola, etc.

These generalizations which were based on European similarities in the feudal context have changed after 1967. N.R. Ray underlined the fact that medievalism in India began before the Muslim conquest.

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• How did the change from early historical to the early medieval occur?

• Historians such as RS Sharma speak of the ‘breakdown of the civilizational matrix’

• According to Niharranjan Ray it was the result of the Huna invasions into North India.

• Ramendra Nath Nandi in his various books [State formation, agrarian growth, and social change in feudal South India, c. AD 600-1200, 2000 and article ‘Growth of Rural Economy in Early Feudal India’] and BNS Yadava consider the breakdown of the trading economy of ancient India as the main cause of change.

• From the 1950’s various ideas about Indian Feudalism were forwarded by R.S. Sharma that culminated with the 1965 book ‘Indian Feudalism’.
On the basis of Ram sharan Sharma’s analysis certain features of the structure of early medieval India have been highlighted:

1. Political decentralization-
2. Emergence of landed intermediaries-
3. Ruralization-
4. Subjection of the peasantry-
5. Proliferation of castes-
6. Growth of a feudal ideology- bhakti to the King through loyalty and devotion.
At present there exist at least **three different structural models** for the early medieval Indian kingdoms.

i) the conventional model of a rather unitary, centrally organized kingdom with a strong central bureaucracy

ii) the Indian Feudalism model of decentralized feudal states

iii) the model of a Segmentary state

The processes which worked towards administrative decentralization are essentially seen to have derived from

a) the practice of making land grants along with administrative privileges.

b) the break down of the state’s monopoly over the army.

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• The understanding of the feudal political set up is also linked up with the **changing socio-economic and cultural situations** in the early medieval times.

• For instance, The **puranic depiction** of the
  
  a) weakening of the political authority ,
  
  b) non-observation of the *varnasrama* dharma, etc is taken to have represented a deep-seated social crisis.
  
  c) The political fallout of the crisis is seen in the inability of the rulers to exercise their coercive authority (*danda*) and to collect resources by revenue measures.

• According to the Feudal hypothesis the hall mark of the early medieval polity is placed in the **samanta system**. The term **samanta** originally denoted a neighbouring king. But gradually it assumed the sense of a vassal.

• **No less than seven grades of samantas** are represented in **Banabhatta’s Harshacharita**.
Problems with the feudal hypothesis

1. The evidence of the growing number and influence of the samantas in early medieval polity is seen as both the cause and effect of the decentralized political power.

2. The feudal polity is considered to be symptomatic of the absence of a paramount power and synonymous with political fragmentation. The construction of feudal polity would suggest that it is primarily based on data pertaining to north India.

3. A major disadvantage of the theory of Indian feudalism is the preponderance of its conceptual framework of decentralization and political fragmentation.
The integrative polity approach or the processual approach

- This non-aligned group is reluctant to accept any models. They focus on structural developments and changes within a given state system.

- The model of integrative state formation is a fairly recent construction.

- Herman Kulke

- B.D. Chattopadhyaya even stated: “I posit political integration as a counterpoint to the decentralized polity of the feudal model” and he termed the early medieval Indian state as an “integrative polity“.

- Bhairabi Sahu Sahu

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• This approach sees political processes in terms of parallels with contemporary socio-economic and religious developments.

• It tries to focus on the development of pre-state societies into state societies and the integration of local polities into a structure that went beyond the local boundaries. Its basic features are-

1. **Expansion of state society - Horizontal spread of rural agrarian settlements.**

2. **Peasantisation of tribes and horizontal spread of the dominant ideology of social order based on varna division.**

3. **Cult appropriation and integration - Integration of local cults, rituals and sacred centers into a larger structure.**
• The validity of using the very term ‘medieval’ has been questioned by some historians.

• **Timothy Reuter**, argues that the term ‘medieval’ is too conventionalized to be of much use for the purpose of dialogue between medievalists of different geographical locales, since “it does not clearly define either a social formation or a stage of development.”

• **B.D. Chattopadayaya**, in his work on early medieval India, contends that ‘continuing with the term ‘early medieval’, rather than using terms such as ‘late Hindu’ or ‘late classical’, has an advantage.

• This term goes beyond the narrowly political and cultural dimensions of history, and further, it clearly projects continuities in the operation of major societal processes well into later phases of Indian history.

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