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Debating Feudalism and Trade in Early Medieval India: Land Grants, Economy, and Commerce (A.D. 750–1000)

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Abstract

This article examines the economic and trade dynamics of India between 600 and 1000 CE, focusing on the impact of land grants, the decline in long-distance trade, and the rise of a self-sufficient village economy. It explores the hypothesis of Indian feudalism, highlighting the scarcity of metallic currency and the emergence of an enclosed agrarian economy. The article also challenges the "monetary anaemia" thesis, presenting evidence of continued commercial activity, particularly through overland trade routes and flourishing ports. The role of nagarams in South India and the involvement of the Chola state in promoting trade networks are discussed as key factors in sustaining and expanding regional commerce. Overall, the article offers a nuanced understanding of India's economic transformation during the early medieval period, emphasizing both the decline and resilience of trade and commerce.

Introduction

The period between 600 and 1000 CE in India marked a significant transformation in the country's economic, political, and social landscape. This era witnessed the emergence of a feudal system, with land grants becoming a common practice among rulers, priests, temples, and warrior chiefs, leading to the development of a hierarchical landowning class. The economic consequences of these changes included the rise of self-sufficient villages and a decline in long-distance trade, which was compounded by a scarcity of metallic currency. The notion of a 'monetary anaemia' emerged as a key explanation for the economic shifts, suggesting that a lack of money and the decline of commerce resulted in a decentralization of power and the rise of feudal relationships.

However, recent scholarship has challenged the traditional view of a complete economic decline, pointing to evidence of continued trade in certain regions, including the growth of commercial networks, the persistence of overland trade routes, and the development of important ports. In particular, the Chola state and the emergence of nagarams in South India played an active role in fostering trade and economic growth. Despite challenges such as the decline of India's commerce with the Roman Empire, India’s economy continued to evolve, reflecting resilience and adaptability during a time of significant transition. This study examines the complex dynamics of trade, feudalism, and the shift in India's economic foundations between 600 and 1000 CE, highlighting both the challenges and the ongoing commercial activities that shaped the early medieval period.

The A.D. Era. 750-1000 observed a common tradition not only of granting land to priests and temples, but also to warrior chiefs and state officials. Which led to the emergence of a hierarchy of landlords. R.S.Sharma on the crystallisation of Indian Feudalism opined the origin of the system of land grants had economic implications like ruralization of the economy. This led to self-sufficient villages becoming the central units of production, where all activities—from production to consumption—were largely confined within the village. Consequently, trade experienced a significant decline, which also contributed to a noticeable reduction in urban centers. Additionally, many scholars argue that between 600 and 1000 CE, the decline of India's robust commerce with the Roman Empire had a profoundly negative impact on the country’s commercial economy. Thus, to the supporters of the feudalism thesis, money was intrinsically incompatible to the interests of a land grant economy.

Proponents of the Indian feudalism model further argue that the decline in trade and the scarcity of metallic currency led to the emergence of a predominantly self-sufficient and isolated village economy. D.N. Jha " says that the adverse impact of a languishing commerce and the paucity of coinage were not just limited to economics, but paved the way for a decentralised polity and 'parcellised sovereignty'. They feel that a not-so-active commerce resulted in an acute dearth of metallic currency. This led to great difficulties regarding the payment of royal functionaries in cash. It was this that resulted in the practice of providing the more highly placed officers with service-grants in lieu of cash. Over time, these influential functionaries accumulated substantial wealth from the territories allocated to them, which significantly enhanced their power and influence. This undermined the authority of the ruler as the apex political authority.

But this 'monetary anaemia thesis', fundamental to the formulation of Indian feudalism, has been questioned by John S. Deyell."Deyell has concerns about the assertion of the shortage of money during the early mediaeval period. He says metals are like gold. Silver or copper were not the only types of money in medieval societies and cowries functioned well as an exchange medium in the Arab world in the sense of an acute silver crisis. In support of this claim, Harbans Mukhia illustrated that almost anything could function as an exchange medium in medieval Europe. He indicates that the procurement of cowries in India actually involved long-distance trading of cowry shells collected from the far-off Maldives and this helps to emphasise their importance.

To many historians India's long distance trade revived after the tenth century mainly because of an expanding trade with the Arab commercial network. V.K. Jain has shown that during the eleventh-thirteenth centuries in Western India there was rapid growth of commercial and trading activities largely due to the development of foreign trade. At the same time he considers the growth of population as an important factor for the development of trade. The author argues that the growth of population led to an enhancement in the number of rural settlements and agricultural goods. After 1000 AD, 'waste and virgin land' were brought under cultivation so there was a sharp increase in agricultural production of grains and commercial crops like
sugarcane cotton and indigo. This, in turn, resulted in the growth of commercial contact between town and countryside. Historians like Ranabir Chakravarti and B.D. Chattopadhyaya has provided evidence to argue that trade had flourished in several regions of India long before the feudalism proponents set a deadline for its revival around the 1000 AD.

Recent studies have established that in the south-eastern parts of Bengal many silver coins were in a constant state of being issued, particularly in the period between the eighth to the thirteenth centuries. It is significant that there are several early medieval coin hoards in northern India especially in the Ganga-Yamuna doab area, which was under the Gunara-Pratihara hegemony.

There was no dearth of currency in the Gurjara-Pratihara kingdom. Thus, recent researchers have challenged the 'monetary anaemia' and decline in trade theory' with much evidence.

The landowning class, alongside the existing ruling and mercantile classes, began to demand both luxury items and essential goods. Religious institutions, in particular, became major consumers of various marketable products. As a result, large temples with vast resources and significant needs played a crucial role in fostering the growth of commercial activities.

Lallanji Gopal's book in his book The Economic life of Northern India opined that inter-state trade continued during the early medieval period, which is evident from the fact that many significant items of daily use like spices, luxury goods, metals and salt which were used all over India came from different regions (Gopal,1965, 90-104). Other traded products of daily use were food-grains, oil, butter, jaggery and madder etc. The references of these, paying tolls and taxes, showed the existence of commercial activities.The merchants anticipating inter-state trade generally traveled in groups and were termed as caravan traders.

There existed a vast network of roads connecting ports, markets and towns of different regions, which encouraged the exchanging trade relations between them. Detailed information of several overland trade-routes within India are given in Arabic and Persian records of different travellers such as Xuanzang and Albiruni.

Detailed descriptions are provided of the routes linking Khurasan, the trans-Indus and cis-Indu regions, and Sind to the interior of India, which demonstrate the regular mercantile, cultural, political, and military interactions between India and the Islamic world. Additional overland routes are also highlighted, such as those connecting Bihar to Tibet and China. Other trade routes include those from Bayana in Rajasthan to Karachi in Sindh, and from Mathura to the western coast via Ujjain. During the 8th century CE, the emergence of nagarams in South India played a significant role in the production and exchange of goods at local, regional, and international levels. In the Chola state, urban growth was accompanied by direct royal involvement in promoting trade and exchange networks, with nagarams serving as key agents in state-driven economic activities.

There are references of the presence of the Indian foreign trade via land and sea. Regarding foreign trade, the northwest frontier of India served as a crucial link, featuring several passes that facilitated the establishment of overland trade routes with regions such as China, Persia, Arabia, and Asia Minor. Between 650 and 750 CE, this area became the focal point of a four-sided power struggle involving the Turks, Tibetans, Arabs, and Chinese, each vying for dominance over Central Asia.

Many historical sources refer to a number of ports on the east and west coasts of India. At the end of Indus was an important port of Debal which was visited by ships from Arabia, China and other ports. Important ports of Gujarat coast were Somanatha, Cambay and Broach. Sopara and Thana were also major ports in western coast of India. In Bengal, earlier Tamralipti and later Saptagrama port gained prominence with the trade with South-East Asia. Other important ports of eastern coast were Puri, Kalinga, Cikaculi , Banpur and Ramesvara. Tamil merchants actively expanded their commercial ventures across the Indian Ocean, particularly through the ports of Anuradhapura and Mahatittha. The Malabar and Coromandel coasts also emerged as major commercial hubs, frequented by large ships transporting diverse goods for trade. In Malabar Coast, the most important port was Quilon where a large number of trading activities took place by the foreign merchants. Arab writers mentioned other ports of lesser importance on the western coast such as Kudafarid, Sinjili, Tandiyur , Manjarur and others.The significant ports of Gujarat were Bhrgukaccha, Broach, Cambay, Somnath and Sthanaka Samyana , Surparaka , whereas Chemuliya , Chandrapura The port of Debal at the mouth of the Indus river was significant for Arab and Chinese traders. In the Coromandel Coast were several premier ports for overseas trade. Puri and Kalingapattam were chief ports on the Orissa coast. The Bengal coast was an important port which was called Samandar (near Chittagong in Bangladesh) by Arabs.

Foreign accounts provide detailed descriptions of goods exported from various Indian ports. Sind specialized in exporting items like costus, canes, and bamboo, while Gujarat supplied Arabia with significant quantities of indigo, red kino, myrobalans, and multicolored cotton fabrics. The Rashtrakuta kingdom was known for its export of teak, and slaves were also traded from the Gujarat coast to Persia. Additionally, India exported a variety of textiles, aloeswood, teak for shipbuilding, coconut coir, grains (especially various types of rice), and spices, both indigenous and imported from Southeast Asia. By the eleventh century, key exports to China included horses, sandalwood, gharuwood, sulphur, frankincense, elephant tusks, sappanwood, rosewater, rhinoceros horns, spices, camphor, ivory, putchuck, and cinnabar. During the latter half of the 13th century CE, cotton fabric from Bengal, Coromandel and Malabar became one of the most prominent Indian exports to Chinese markets.

India imported a wide range of commodities in exchange for its exports. Key imports included incense from the Middle East, copper and lead from the western regions, and ivory, which reached India via the route from Oman. Dyes were imported from Persia, while Arabia supplied horses. From China, India acquired silk, gold, silver, and smaller quantities of iron. Southeast Asia contributed items such as porcelain-ware, camphor, rhubarb, beeswax, cloves, lump-camphor, sandalwood, cardamoms, gharuwood, and various spices. Notable among these were cloves, spikenard, and other fine spices that arrived in Malabar from Java and Sumatra, alongside silk and metals like gold, silver, copper, and blue vitriol.India received pearls, dry ginger, tin and fine fabric from Ceylon. Many of these items were re-exported to the Arabian world while others were consumed in India. The demand for war horses in India was huge, so during 600 CE from Arabia, Persia and Syria. Early medieval Bengal was also famous for trade in horses.

Meera Abraham conducted extensive research on the inscriptions of the Ayyavole guild, highlighting a transition from the trade of luxury items to more essential goods. These included commodities like textiles, dyes, processed iron, yarn, pepper, and horses. During the early medieval period merchant guilds were an important element of the economic life of the period. Various guild names included the: Nigama, Shreni, Samuha, Sartha, samgha etc. The guilds set up their own rule and regulation regarding the membership and the code of conduct. They fixed the prices of their goods and could decide that its specific commodity would not be sold on a particular day by its members. They could even refuse to trade on a particular day or in a particular area or locality if they found the local authority hostile or uncooperative. Guilds also acted as the custodians of religious interest.

In conclusion, the period between 600 and 1000 CE in India saw significant shifts in economic, political, and social dynamics. The decline in long-distance trade, the scarcity of metallic currency, and the rise of a land-based economy contributed to the crystallization of Indian feudalism. However, evidence also suggests that trade continued to thrive in certain regions, with the development of new commercial networks, the persistence of overland trade routes, and the growth of important ports. The emergence of nagarams in South India and the active role of the Chola state in promoting trade demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of India's economy during this period. Ultimately, while challenges like declining commerce with the Roman Empire and the shift toward self-sufficiency marked the era, India’s commercial and cultural exchanges continued to evolve, laying the foundation for future economic growth and regional integration.

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