THE ORIGINS OF FEUDALISM IN INDIA
(c. A.D. 400-650)

BY
R. S. SHARMA
(University of Patna)

I

It is very difficult precisely to define the term feudalism, which is attributed to stages of historical development far removed from one another in time and place, such as the Interregnum (2475-2160 B.C.) after the Old Kingdom in Egypt and the Chou period in China (C. 1122-C. 250 B.C.); but generally it is applied to society in mediaeval Europe, from the 5th to the 15th century A.D. It is therefore in the light of certain broad features of feudalism in the last sense that we will investigate the origins of feudalism in India.

From the post-Maurya period, and especially from Gupta times, certain political and administrative developments tended to feudalise the state apparatus. The most striking development was the practice of making land grants to the brāhmaṇas, a custom which was sanctified by the injunctions laid down in the Dharmasāstras, the didactic portions of the Epic, and the Purāṇas; the Anuśāsana Parva of the Mahābhārata devotes a whole chapter to the praise of making gifts of land (bhūmi-dāna-praśaṃsā). The early Pāli texts of the pre-Maurya period refer to the villages granted to the brāhmaṇas by the rulers of Kosala and Magadha, but they do not mention the abandonment of any administrative rights by the donors. The same is the case with the earliest epigraphic record of a land-grant, a Sātavāhana inscription of the 1st century B.C., which refers to the grant of a village as a gift in the aśvamedha sacrifice.1) Surprisingly enough, administrative rights were perhaps given up for the first time in the grants made to Buddhist monks by the Sātavāhana ruler Gautamiputra Sātakarnī in the 2nd century A.D. The land granted to them could not be entered by royal troops, molested by government

---

1) Sel. Inscr., p. 188, e. 11.
Two significant features of such grants, which became more frequent from the 5th century A.D., were the transfer of all sources of revenue, and the surrender of police and administrative functions. The grants of the 2nd century A.D. mention the transfer of the king’s control only over salt, which implies that he retained certain other sources of revenue. But in later grants, from the time of Pravarasena II Vakāṭaka onwards (5th century A.D.), the ruler gave up his control over almost all sources of revenue, including pasturage, hides and charcoal, mines for the production of salt, forest labour, and all hidden treasures and deposits. The Raghu-vamśa states that, among other things, mines constitute the wages (vetana) of the king for protecting the earth. According to some grants of the 4th and 5th centuries A.D. the brāhmaṇas were granted the right of enjoying the hidden treasures and deposits of the villages; this meant the transfer of royal ownership over mines, which was an important sign of the king’s sovereignty. Equally important is the fact that the donor not only abandoned his revenues but also the right to govern the inhabitants of the villages that were granted. The Gupta period furnishes at least half a dozen instances of grants of apparently settled villages made to the brāhmaṇas by the large feudatories in Central India, in which the residents, including the cultivators and artisans, were expressly asked by their respective rulers not only to pay the customary taxes to the donees, but also to obey their commands. In two other land-grants royal commands were issued to government officials employed as sarvādhyakṣa and also to regular soldiers and umbrella-bearers that they should not cause any disturbance to the brāhmaṇas. All this provides clear evidence of the surrender of the administrative power of the state. Nevertheless, the inscriptions of the 5th century A.D. show that the ruler generally retained the right to punish thieves, which was one of the main bases of the state power. The process of disintegration reached its logical end when in later times the king made over to the

1) Ibid., pp. 192, 194-5.
2) Ibid., p. 422, ll. 26-29.
3) XVII. 66.
4) CII, iii, No. 41, l. 8; Sel. Inscr., p. 422, l. 29.