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Feudalism in Indian History: A Weak Center, Not a Strong One

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Feudalism in Indian History: A Weak Center, Not a Strong One

Practice: 8 MCQs

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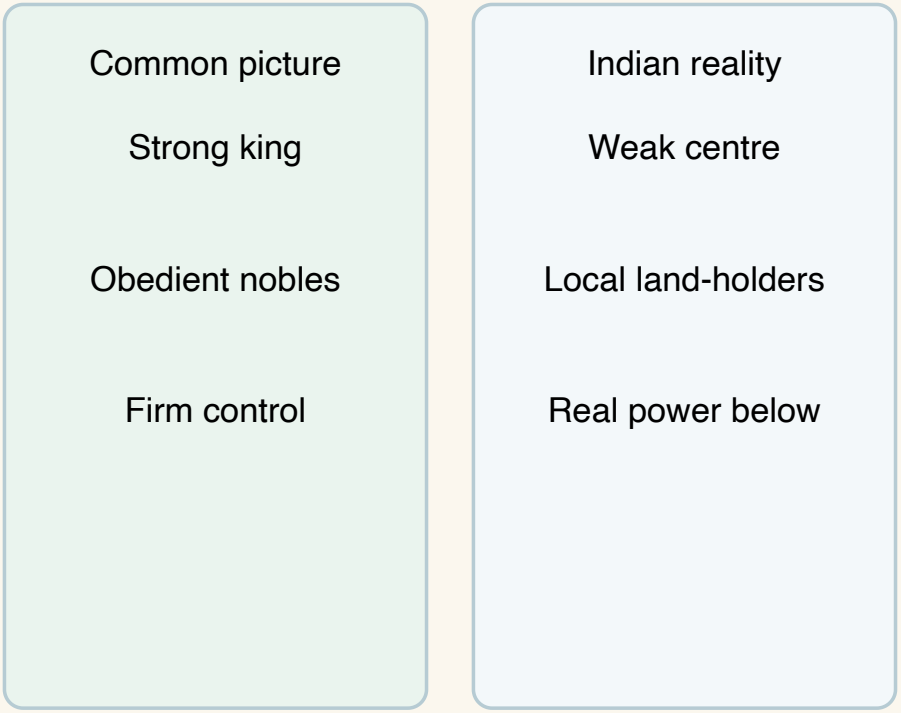
What Does Feudalism Mean in Indian History?

1. Why Is "Strong King" the Classic Wrong Answer?

Students often link feudalism with a mighty ruler. The word suggests order, ranks and loyal servants. That picture misleads in the Indian case.

Historians describe early medieval Indian polity as **decentralised**. Power moved away from the capital to local holders of land. UPSC tested this trap in 2015.



The classic exam trap. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

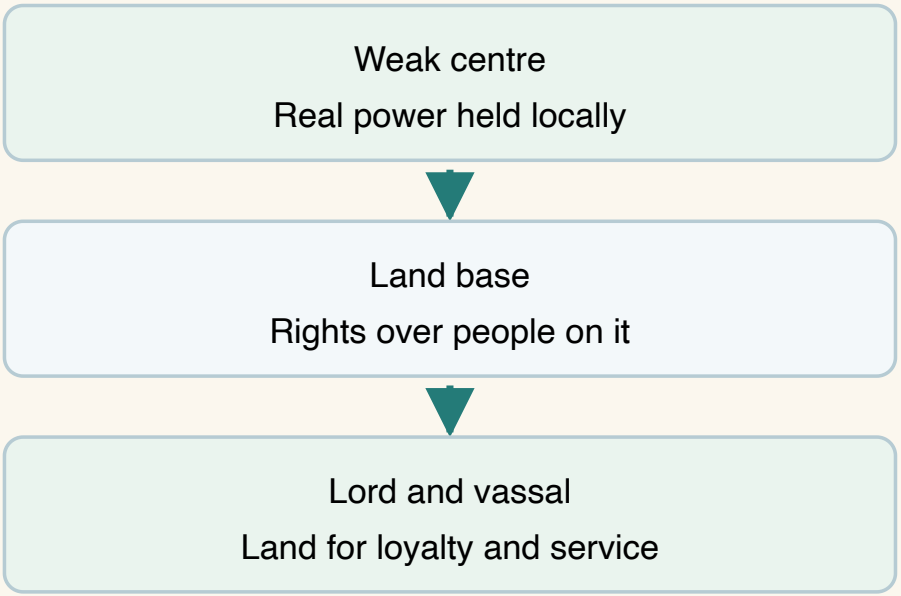
- UPSC CSP 2015 paper
- Calicut University study material

2. What Are the Marks of Indian Feudalism?

Three ideas define the term in exam books.

- **A weak centre.** The king's order ran firmly only near his own base.
- **Land as the base of power.** Whoever held the land also held rights over the people on it.
- **Lord and vassal.** Land passed down the ladder in return for loyalty and service.

Each rung owed something to the rung above it.



Three marks to remember. Original explanatory diagram.

A very strong central authority is a defining mark of Indian feudalism. True or False?

Sources:

- UPSC CSP 2015 paper
- Calicut University study material

3. Where Did the Word Come From?

The word is European. In medieval Europe, nobles held land from the Crown in return for military service. Vassals were tenants of those nobles. Peasants, called villeins or serfs, lived on the lord's land. They gave labour, homage and a share of the crop.

Historians borrowed this picture for India. Whether it fits is the debate in group 5.

Europe	Borrowed for India
Nobles hold land for service	Landed chiefs
Vassals are tenants	Land grants
Serfs work the lord's land	The fit is debated

A European idea applied to India. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

- Wikipedia: Indian feudalism

4. Who First Used the Word for India?

Colonel James Tod did so early in the nineteenth century. He wrote the annals of Rajasthan. For Tod, the lord-vassal bond was the core of feudalism.

In his picture the lord guarded the safety and living of his vassals. The vassals gave military and other service. Loyalty tied them together for life.

Sources:

- Calicut University study material

5. Which Centuries Are We Talking About?

The answer depends on the historian. R.S. Sharma's book title says **c. 300 to 1200**. Textbooks often place the early medieval phase at about **600 to 1300**.

NCERT's chapter on kings and kingdoms begins in the seventh century. Treat the dates as a range, not a fixed line.

Sources:

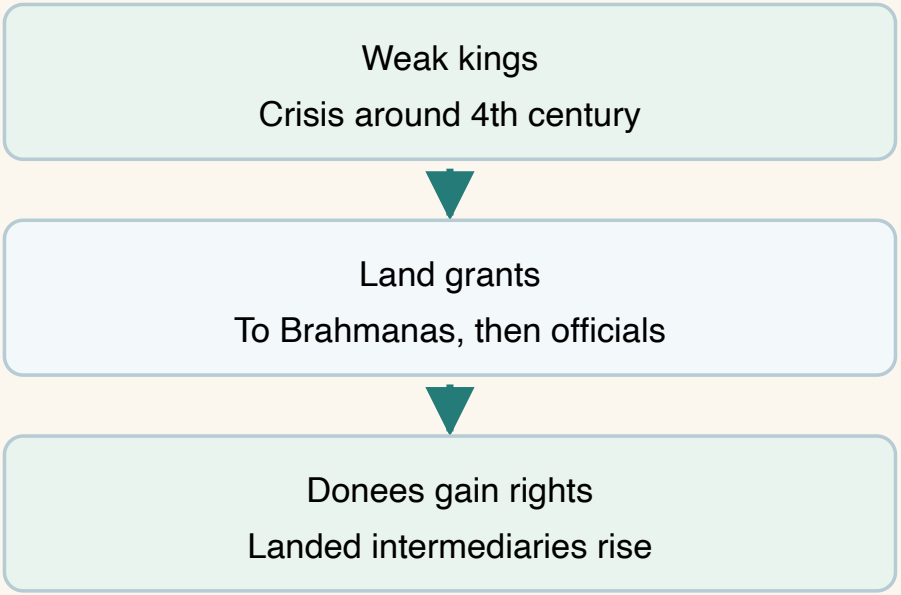
- Wikipedia: Indian Feudalism (book)
- Calicut University study material
- NCERT Class 7, Chapter 2

How Did Land Grants Create a New Power Class?

6. Why Did Kings Give Land Away?

NCERT says kings often rewarded Brahmanas with land. The grants were written on copper plates.

R.S. Sharma gave a deeper reason. He argued that rulers could no longer collect resources by force and revenue as before. So they gave land to religious donees. Later, he said, a shortage of coins pushed rulers to pay officials in land instead of cash.



One historian's explanation. Original explanatory diagram.

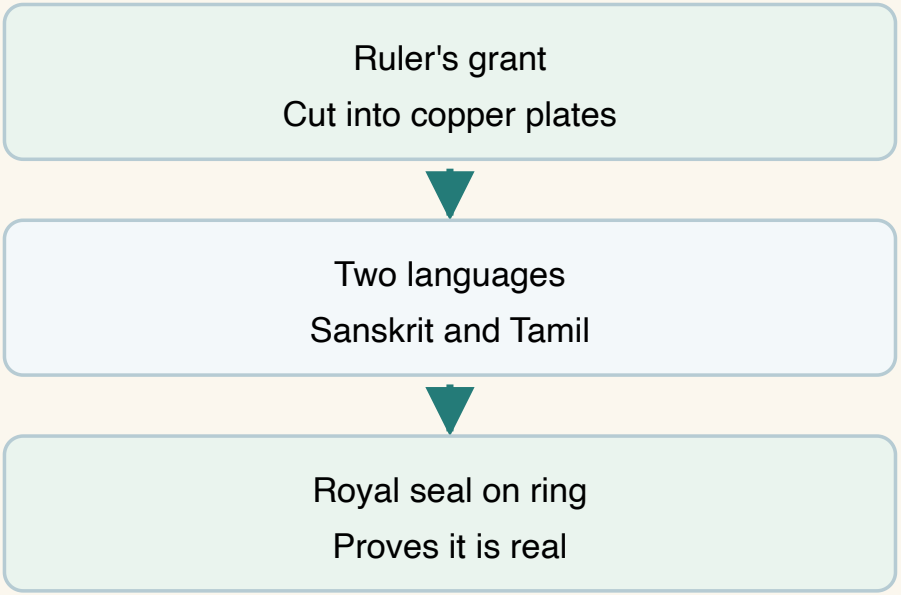
Sources:

- NCERT Class 7, Chapter 2
- Calicut University study material

7. What Is a Copper-Plate Land Grant?

It is a legal deed cut into metal. NCERT shows a ninth-century set of plates written partly in Sanskrit and partly in Tamil. A ring holds the plates together. The ring carries the royal seal, which proves the deed is real.

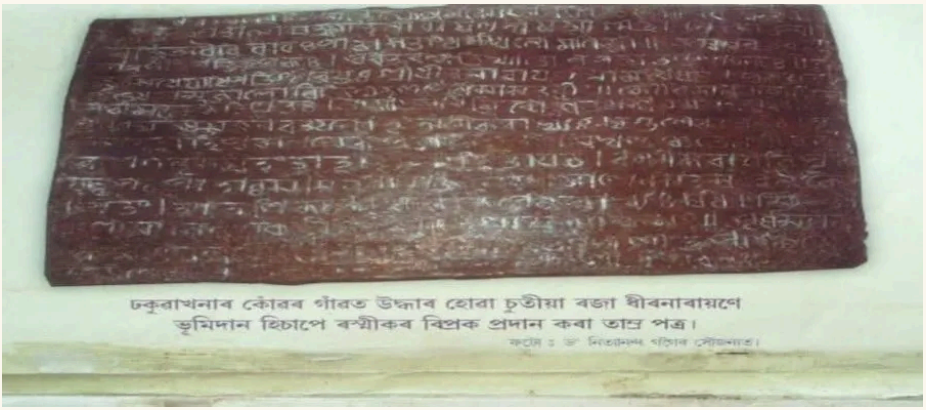
Metal lasts far longer than paper. That is why so many grants survive today.



A deed in metal. Original explanatory diagram.



Charter issued by the Chola king Rajendra Chola I (r. 1012-1042), British Library Or. 1687. CC BY 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.



Copper plate of a land grant made in 1522 by the Chutia king Dhirnarayan. Photo by Dimbeswar Gogoi, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons.

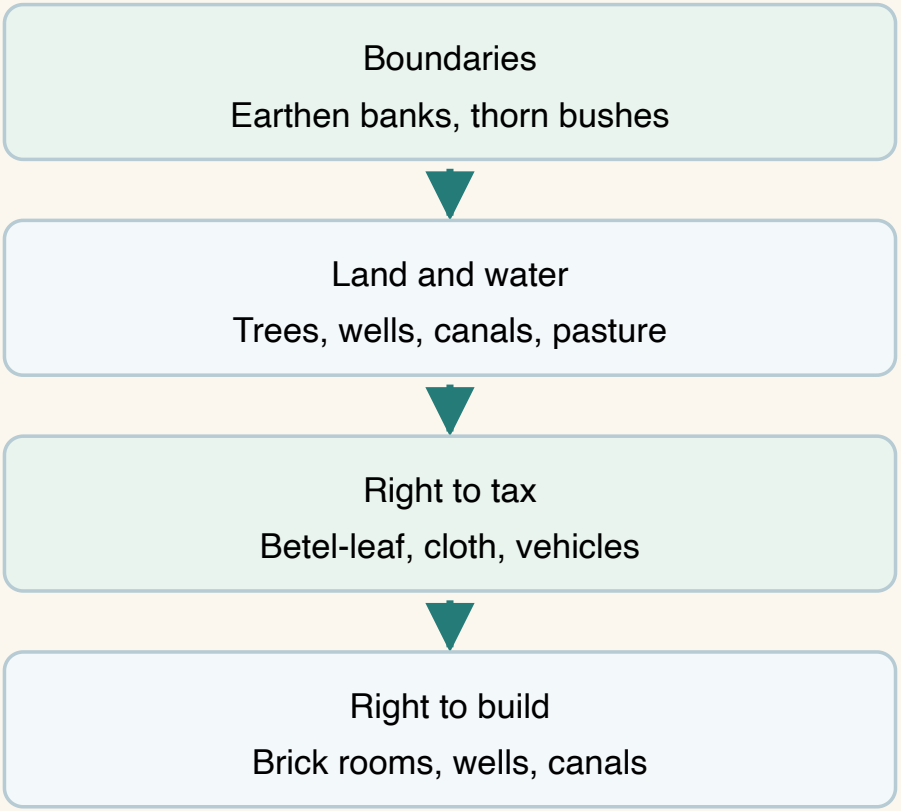
Sources:

- NCERT Class 7, Chapter 2

8. What Came With the Land in a Chola Grant?

NCERT quotes a Chola grant in Tamil. The boundaries were marked with earthen banks and thorny bushes. The land came with fruit trees, water, gardens, wells, pasture, a village and canals.

The receiver could collect taxes from it. He could tax betel-leaves and woven cloth. He could build upper rooms of baked brick, dig wells and cut canals.



More than bare soil. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

- NCERT Class 7, Chapter 2

9. What Was a Brahmadeya?

A **brahmadeya** was a tax-free land gift to Brahmanas. It could be one plot or whole villages. The donee received the taxes of the land. Kings and feudatories lost the right to take it back.

The earliest royal grant that uses the word dates to the third century CE, under the Brihatpalayana king Jayavarman. In the fifth century the Vakataka king Pravarasena II gave land to 1,000 Brahmanas in one district.



A one-way gift. Original explanatory diagram.

A brahmadeya was a land gift made to Brahmanas, free of tax. True or False?

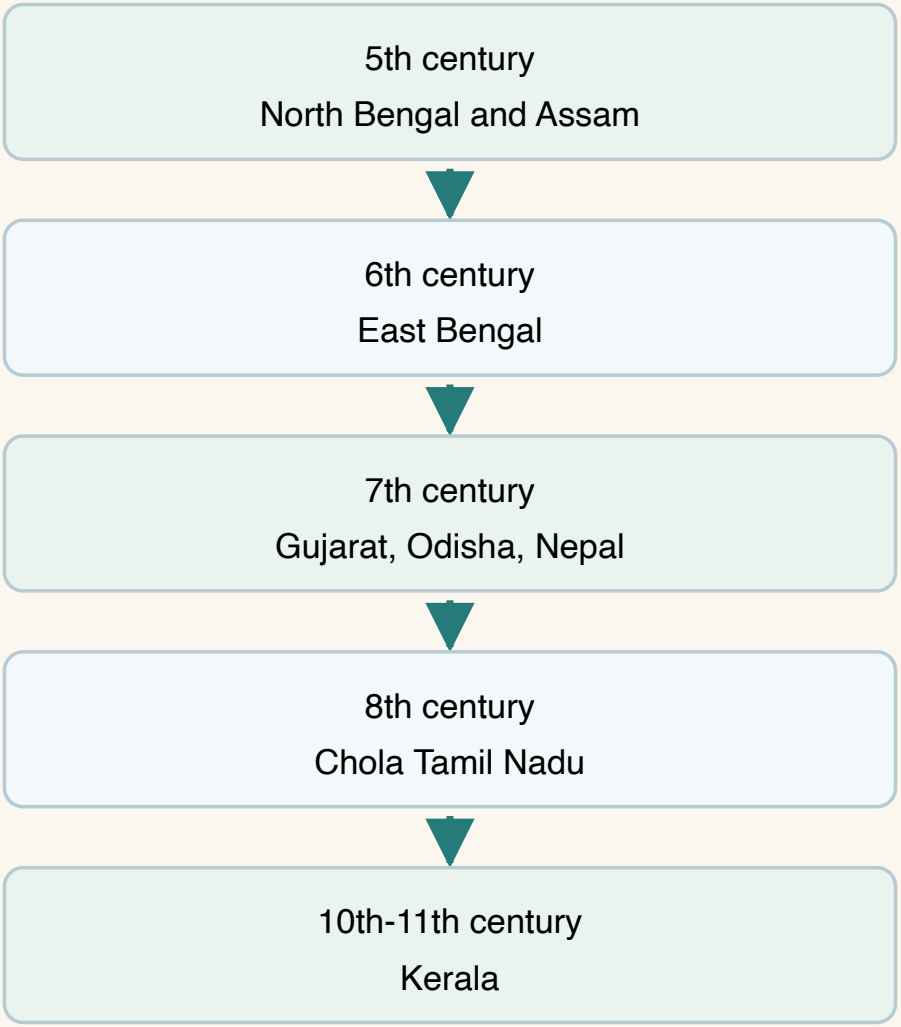
Sources:

- Wikipedia: Brahmadeya

10. How Did Land Grants Spread Across India?

Grants did not appear everywhere at once. They moved region by region over many centuries.

- **Fifth century:** northern Bengal and Assam.
- **Sixth century:** east Bengal.
- **Seventh century:** Gujarat, Odisha, Kangra, Chamba and Nepal.
- **Eighth century:** Chola rulers in Tamil Nadu began settlements.
- **Tenth and eleventh centuries:** large grants in Kerala.



A slow spread over centuries. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

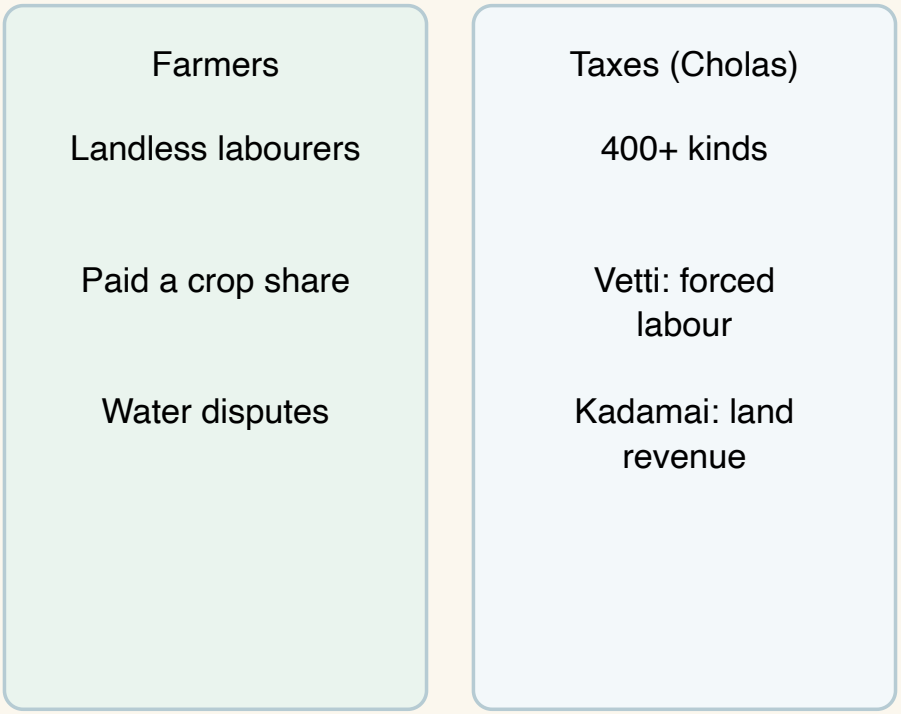
- Wikipedia: Brahmadeya

11. What Happened to the Farmers on Granted Land?

Sometimes farmers, artisans and their dues were handed over with the land. In brahmadeya villages the villagers were landless labourers. They were paid a part of the crop they grew.

Water caused the sharpest fights. An inscription of 1080 CE at Hasan records a water dispute. One of 1230 CE records two farmers who died over land rights.

NCERT adds the burden of tax. Chola inscriptions name more than 400 kinds. One was **vetti**, paid as forced labour. Another was **kadamai**, the land revenue.



The cost fell on the farmer. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

- Wikipedia: Brahmadeya
- NCERT Class 7, Chapter 2

Who Were the Samantas, the Vassals of Kings?

12. Who Was a Samanta?

A **samanta** was a vassal or tributary chief. The title was used mainly from the fourth to the twelfth century CE. The word comes from a root that means “neighbour”.

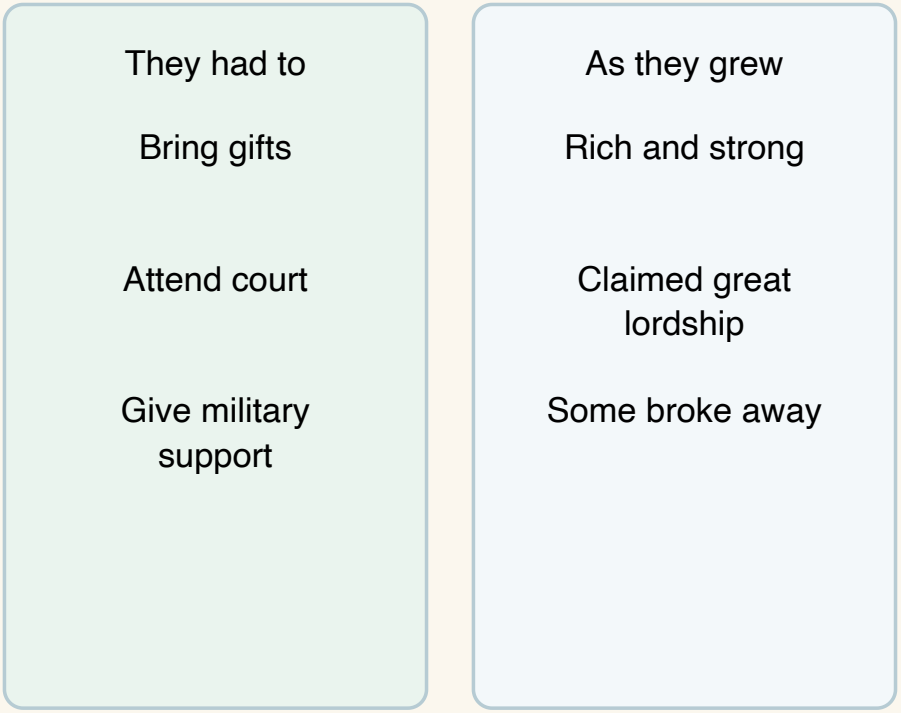
In Mauryan times a samanta was a free ruler next door. By the end of the Gupta age he had become a vassal who owed his king loyalty.

Sources:
- Wikipedia: Samanta

13. How Does NCERT Describe Samantas?

NCERT says that by the seventh century big landlords and warrior chiefs held power in many regions. Kings accepted them as subordinates, or samantas.

They had to bring gifts, attend the royal court and give military help. As they grew rich, many declared themselves great lords of a region. Some broke away from their overlords.



Duty first, then ambition. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

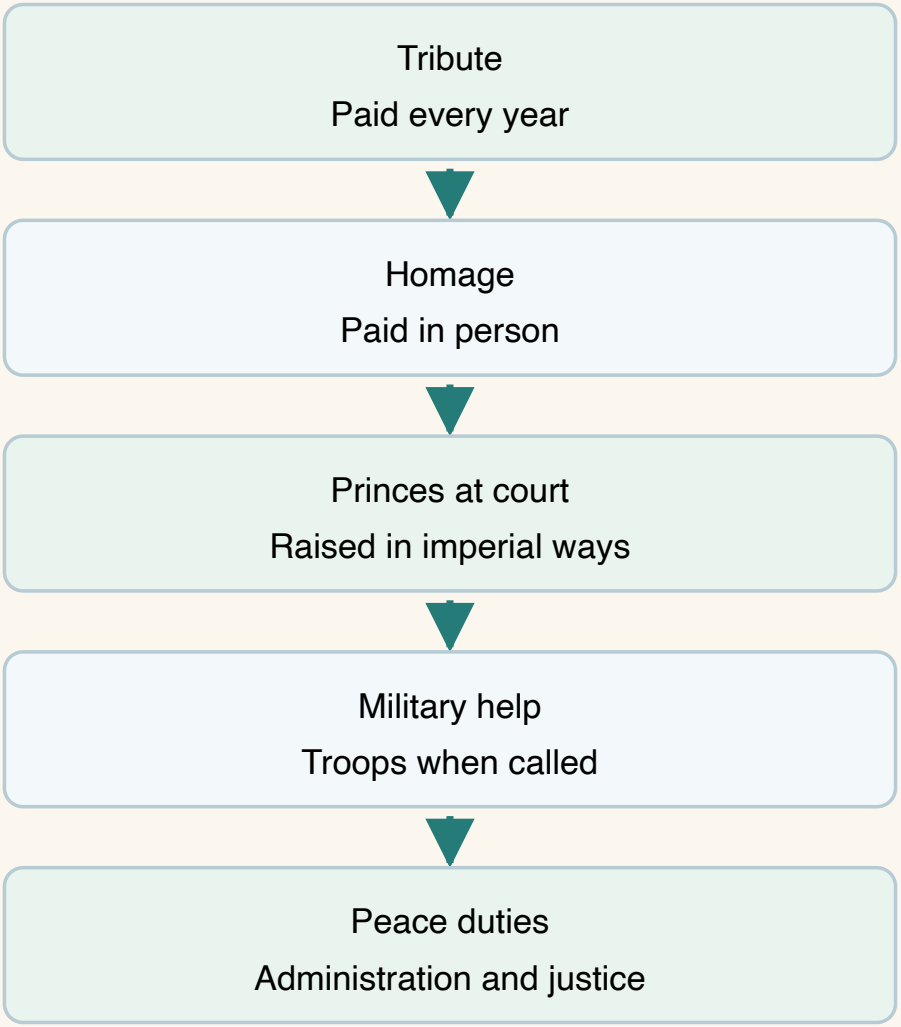
- NCERT Class 7, Chapter 2

14. What Did a Samanta Owe His King?

The Harshacharita lists five duties.

- Pay tribute every year.
- Pay homage in person.
- Send sons and young princes to be raised at court, after a defeat.
- Give military help.
- Handle administration and justice in times of peace.

The first, second and fourth match NCERT's gifts, court attendance and military support.



What a vassal owed. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

- Wikipedia: Samanta

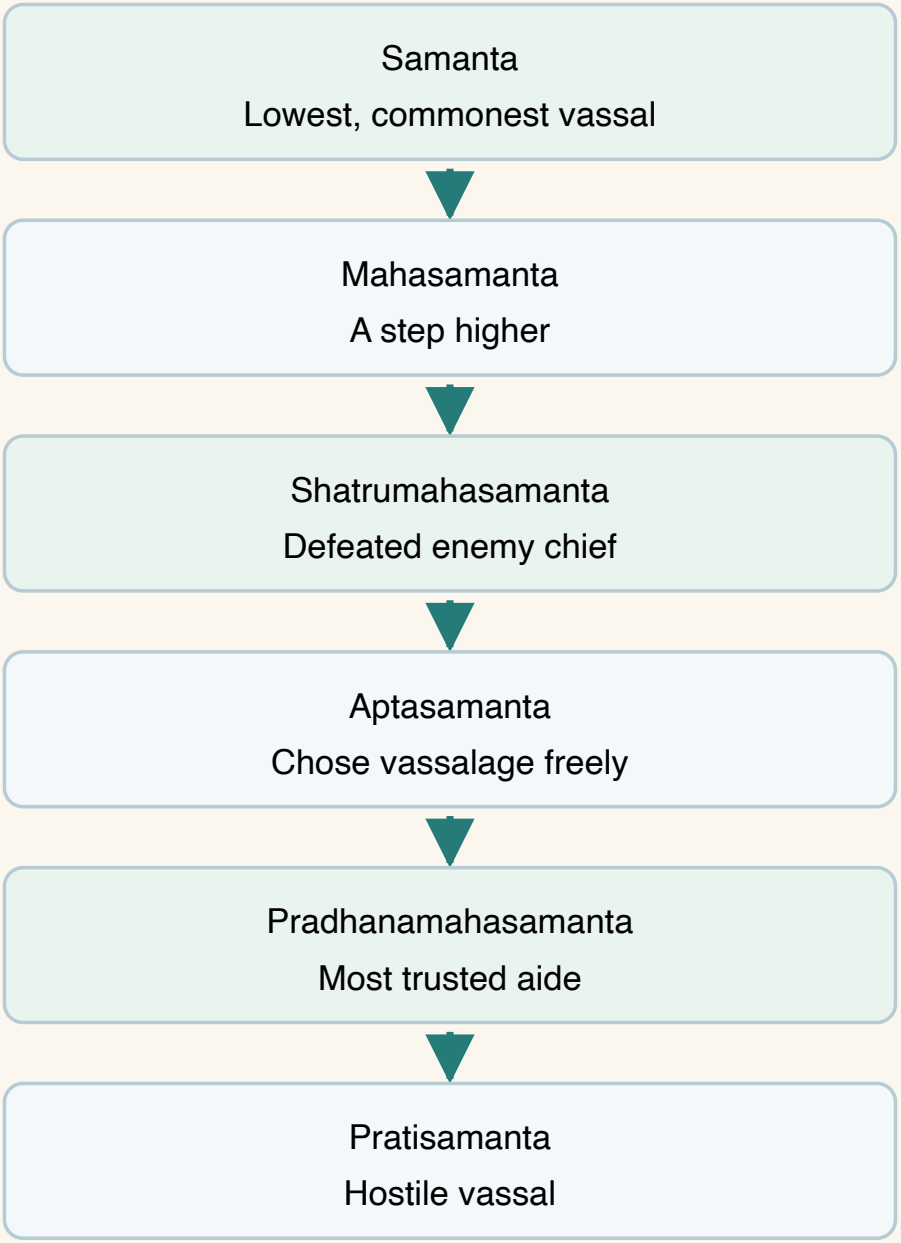
- NCERT Class 7, Chapter 2

15. What Ranks of Samanta Did Banabhatta Name?

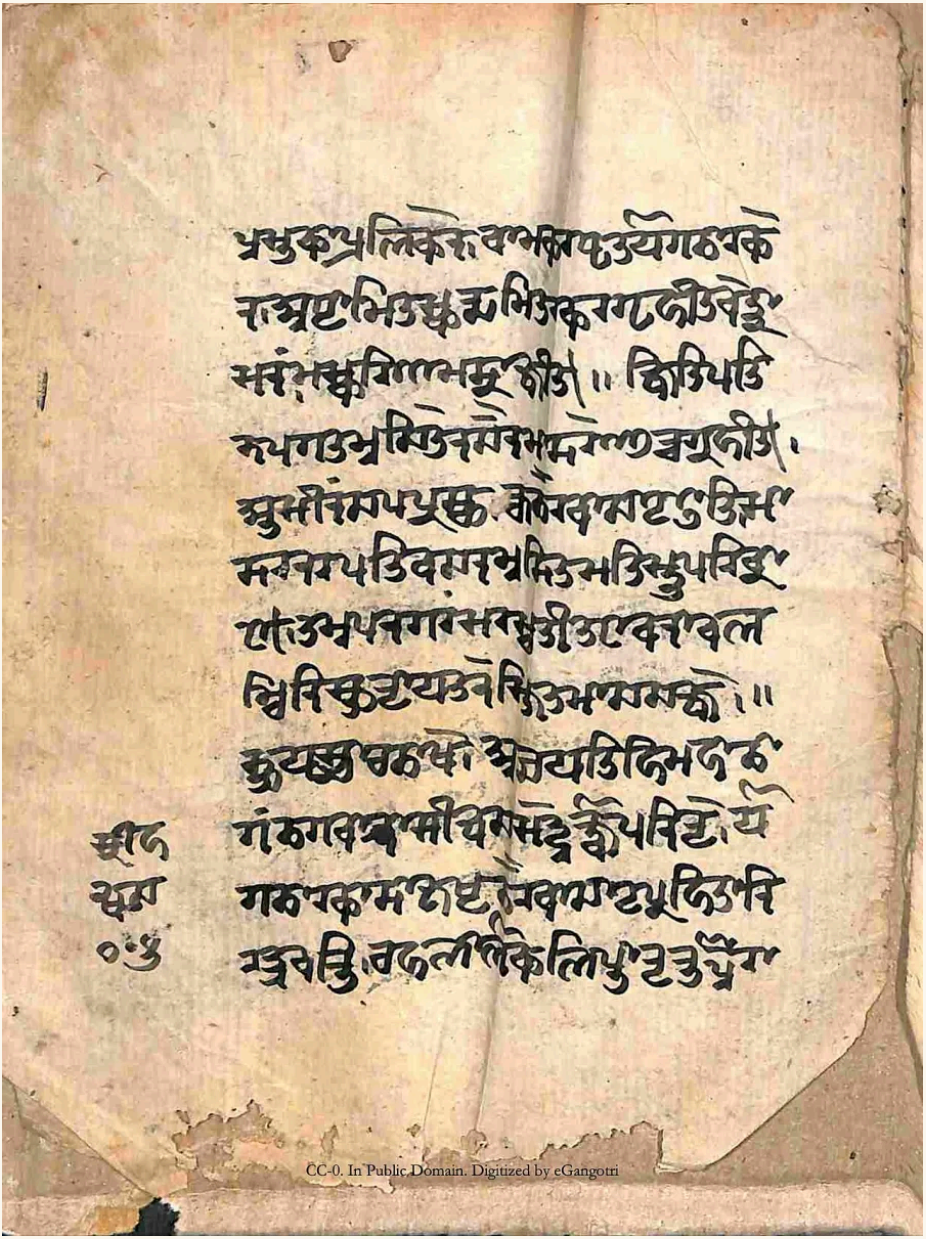
Banabhatta, Harsha's court writer, named several kinds in the Harshacharita.

- **Samanta:** the lowest and commonest vassal.
- **Mahasamanta:** a step higher.
- **Shatrumahasamanta:** a defeated enemy chief.
- **Aptasamanta:** one who chose vassalage willingly.
- **Pradhanamahasamanta:** a most trusted aide.
- **Pratisamanta:** a hostile vassal.

Even hostile samantas had military duties. A king could seize the land of one who failed them.



A ladder of vassals. Original explanatory diagram.



A folio of a manuscript of the Harshacharita by Banabhatta, written in Sharada script. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Sources:

- Wikipedia: Samanta

16. How Did Harsha Handle His Samantas?

Harsha ruled from Kannauj from April 606 to 647. He tied some vassals to the court by giving them posts. Bana mentions many conquered Mahasamantas in the royal camp. They were waiting to be given new duties.

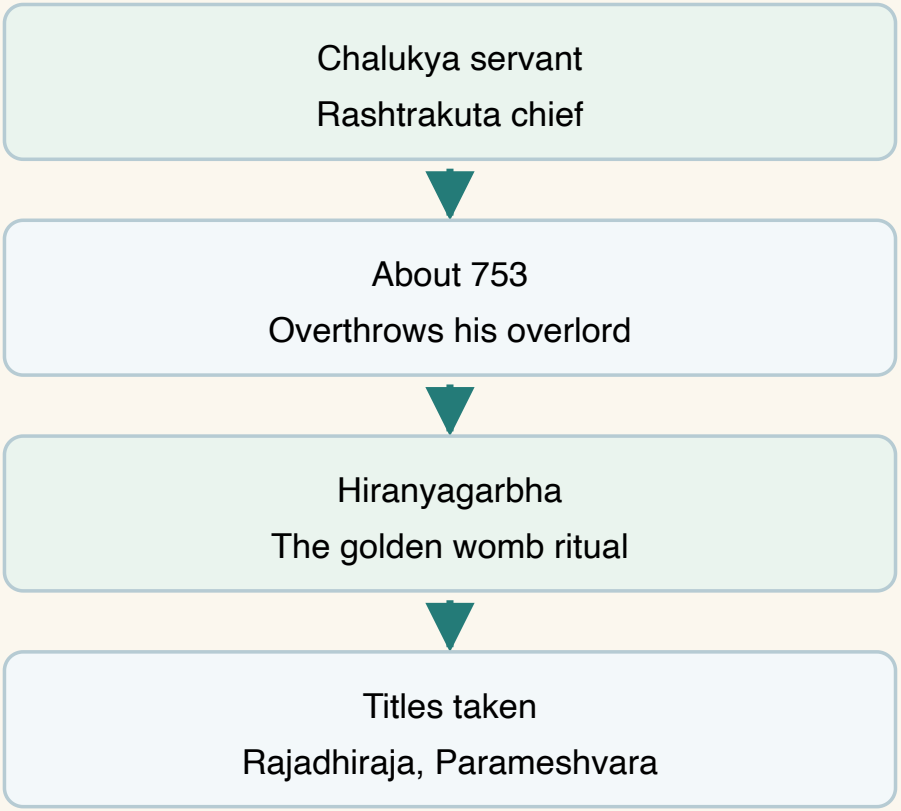
Sources:

- Wikipedia: Samanta
- Wikipedia: Harsha

17. When Did a Samanta Become a King?

The Rashtrakutas show how. At first they served the Chalukyas of Karnataka. In the mid-eighth century the chief **Dantidurga** overthrew his Chalukya overlord.

NCERT says he then performed the **hiranyagarbha** ritual, the “golden womb”. With Brahmanas’ help it was believed to make the performer a Kshatriya, even if he was not born one. He reigned from about 753 to 756 and took the titles Rajadhiraja and Parameshvara.



From vassal to king. Original explanatory diagram.



The Kailasa Temple at Ellora (Cave 16), cut in the eighth century under a Rashtrakuta king. Photo by Rohit Sharma, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Sources:

- NCERT Class 7, Chapter 2
- Wikipedia: Dantidurga

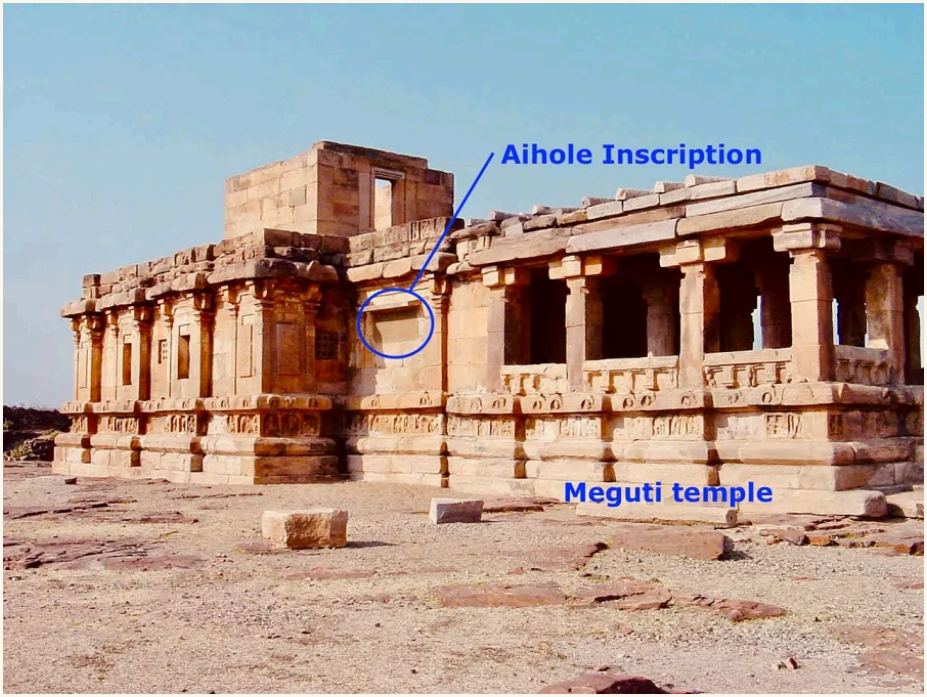
18. Did the South Have Samantas Too?

Yes. An inscription from the time of Santivarman (455 to 470 CE) calls one chief “best among feudatories”. Later, under the Hoysalas, samantas served as hereditary governors.

The Chalukya king Pulakeshin II boasted of conquered rulers too. His Aihole inscription of 634-635 CE credits him with subduing the Latas, Malavas and Gurjaras.

South Inscription, 455-470: 'best among feudatories' Hoysala: hereditary governors	Aihole, 634-635 Pulakeshin II Subdued Latas, Malavas, Gurjaras

Samantas across regions. Original explanatory diagram.



The Aihole inscription of Ravikirti, 634 CE, at the Meguti Jain temple. Photo by Ms Sarah Welch, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons.

Sources:

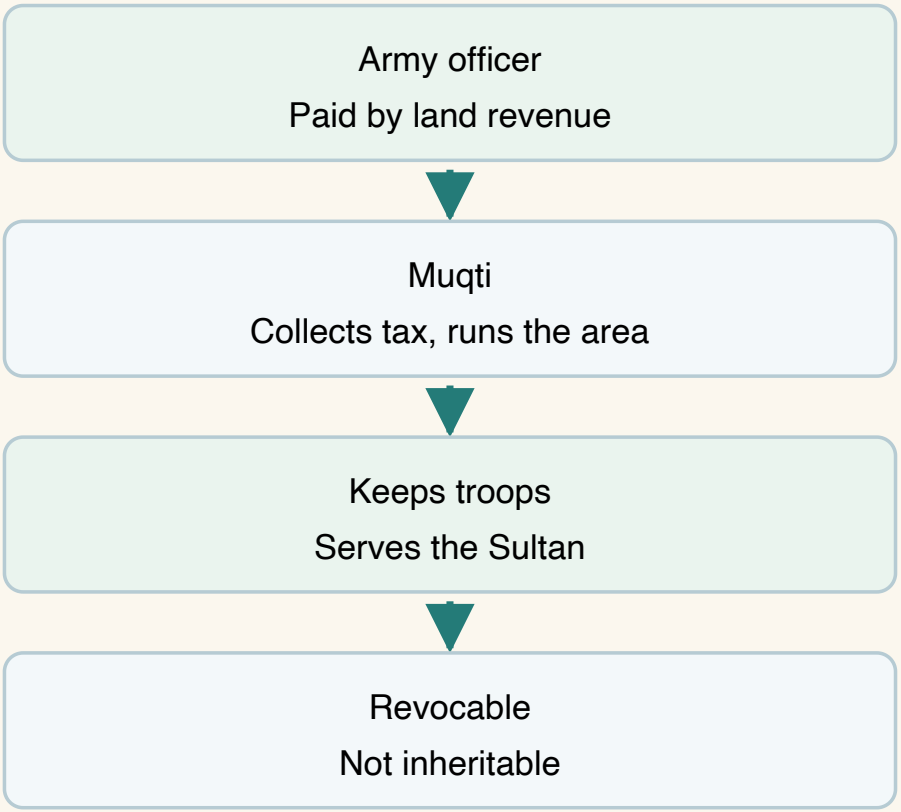
- Wikipedia: Samanta
- Wikipedia: Pulakeshin II

How Did Iqta, Jagir and Zamindari Carry the Idea Forward?

19. What Was an Iqta?

An **iqta** was a grant of tax income from land. It went to army officers for a time, in place of a regular wage. The holder was called a **muqti**.

A muqti collected land revenue and looked after local administration. He also kept troops for the Sultan. Iltutmish set up the system in Delhi. Balban opposed making iqtas hereditary.



Land income as salary. Original explanatory diagram.

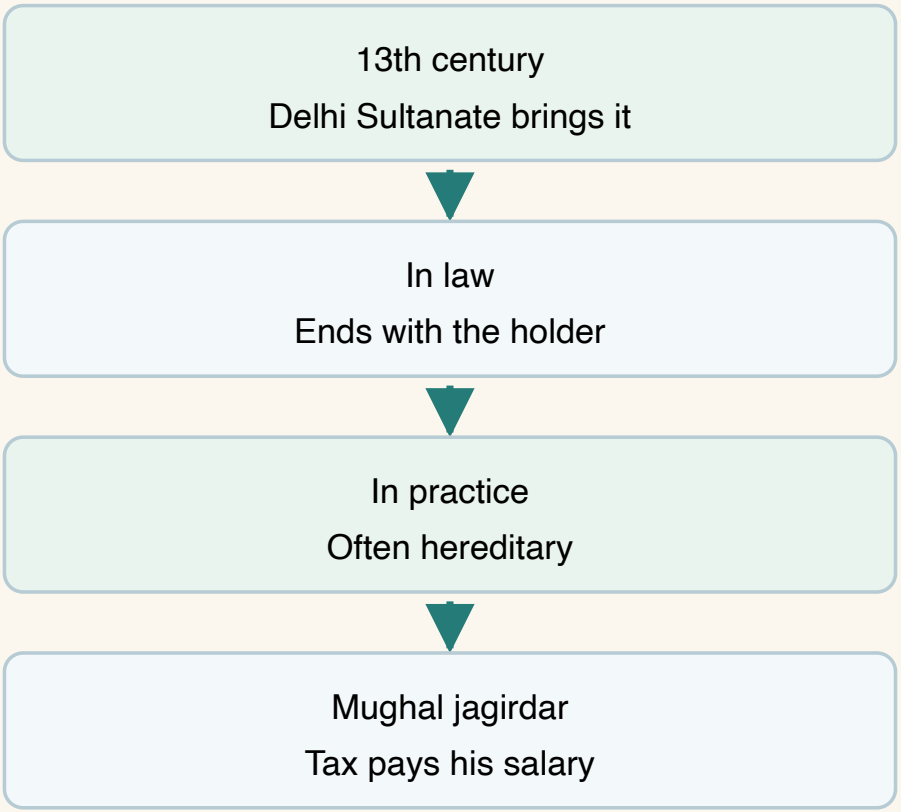
Sources:

- Wikipedia: Iqta

20. How Was a Jagir Different?

Jagir is a Persian word that means “place holder”. The Delhi Sultanate brought the system in the early thirteenth century. In law a jagir ended with its holder, and the land went back to the state. In practice it often became hereditary.

Under the Mughals the jagirdar collected taxes. They paid his salary, and the rest went to the treasury. Administration and military command lay with a separate Mughal appointee.



A life grant that drifted. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

- Wikipedia: Jagir

21. Who Held More Power, a Muqti or a Jagirdar?

The muqti held more. He combined revenue, local administration and the command of troops. The Mughal jagirdar mostly held a revenue right.

The Mughals deliberately split these powers. A jagirdar could not easily build a private kingdom. This is why exam books call the Mughal system less feudal.

Muqti	Mughal jagirdar
Revenue	Revenue mostly
Local rule	Another officer rules
Troops	Another officer commands

Mughals split the powers. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

- Wikipedia: Iqta

- Wikipedia: Jagir

22. Who Was a Zamindar?

Zamindar is the Persian word for landowner. Under the Mughals, however, a zamindar was not a proprietor. The emperor was seen as the supreme owner of land.

A zamindar had the right to collect revenue from peasants. His office was nominally hereditary and needed imperial approval. Some zamindars were autonomous chiefs who ruled from forts and kept their own armies.



Collector, not owner. Original explanatory diagram.

Under the Mughals a zamindar was the legal owner of the land. True or False?

Sources:

- Wikipedia: Zamindar

23. How Do Jagirdar and Zamindar Differ?

The two are often confused in exams. Think of **who gives** the right.

The state gave a jagir for a lifetime. A zamindar's claim usually passed down his family. Both lived on land revenue. Neither was, at law, the owner of the land in Mughal times.

Zamindar, jagirdar and mansabdar are seen as rough later counterparts of the samanta. That is why historians compare them with feudal ranks.

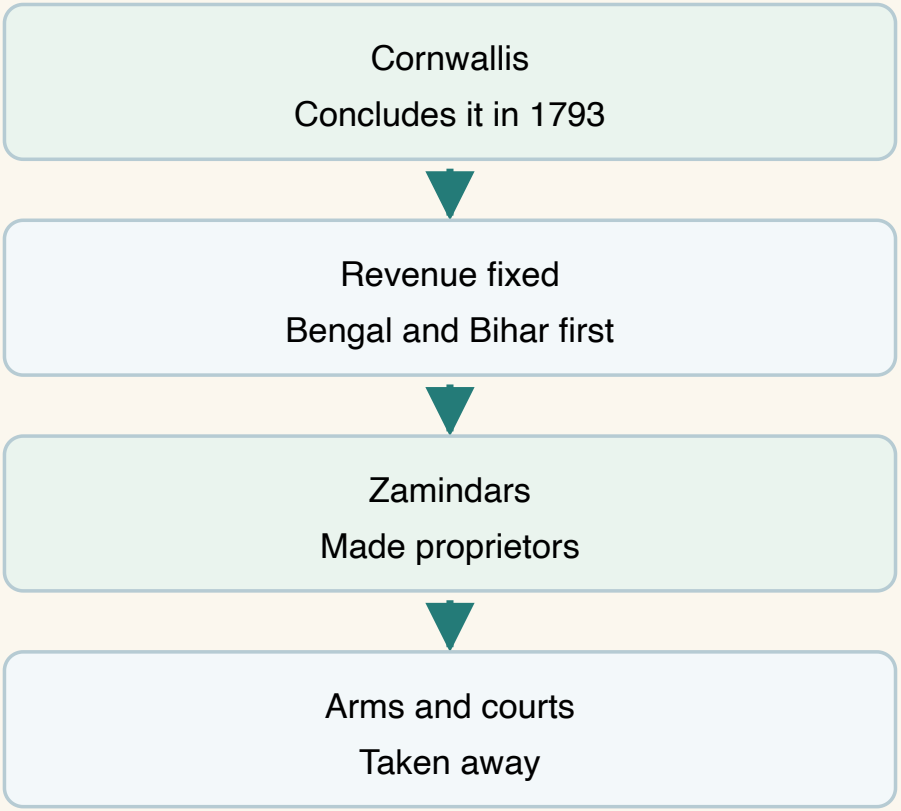
Sources:

- Wikipedia: Jagir
- Wikipedia: Zamindar
- Wikipedia: Samanta

24. What Did the Permanent Settlement of 1793 Change?

Lord Cornwallis concluded the **Permanent Settlement** with the landlords of Bengal in 1793. Revenue was fixed. In return, zamindars were made proprietors of their land.

It began in Bengal and Bihar. It also took away their armed forces and their courts. The old Mughal revenue collector became a British-backed landlord.



A new landlord class. Original explanatory diagram.



Portrait of Charles, 1st Marquess Cornwallis, engraved by Samuel Andrews after John Smart. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Sources:

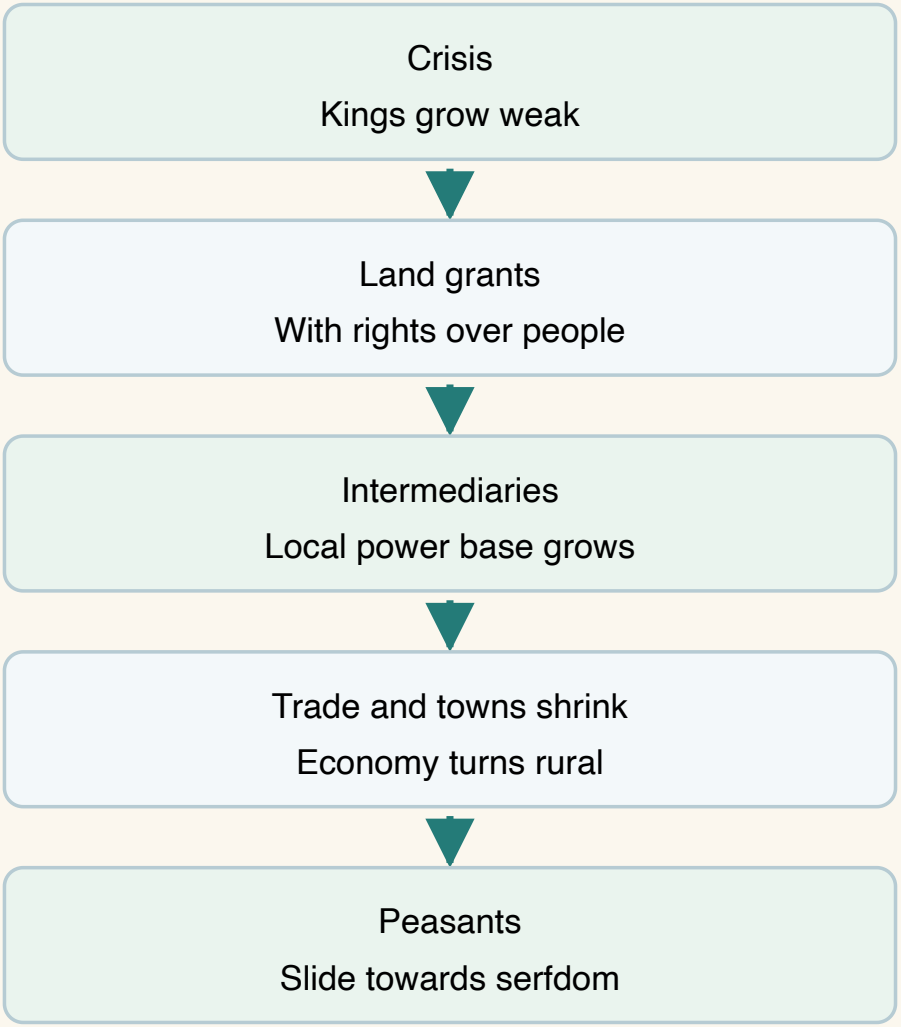
- Wikipedia: Permanent Settlement
- Wikipedia: Zamindar

Was India Ever Really Feudal? The Historians' Debate

25. What Did R.S. Sharma Argue in 1965?

Sharma’s book *Indian Feudalism, c. 300 to 1200* came out from the University of Calcutta in 1965. It caused a furore among historians.

His chain of argument ran like this. A crisis around the fourth century weakened kings. They gave land to Brahmanas with administrative and judicial rights. These donees became **landed intermediaries**. Trade and towns shrank after the Guptas. Peasants slid towards serfdom.



Five links in a chain. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

- Wikipedia: Ram Sharan Sharma
- Calicut University study material

26. How Did Sharma Defend and Refine His Thesis?

Critics said Sharma blamed everything on state action. He replied in a paper titled “How Feudal Was Indian Feudalism?” There he treated feudalism as an economic formation that grew out of wider crises.

He saw the system fading around the eleventh century, when trade and towns revived. He pointed to the Kaivartya rising in Bengal as a sign of peasant protest. His book reached a third revised edition in 2005.

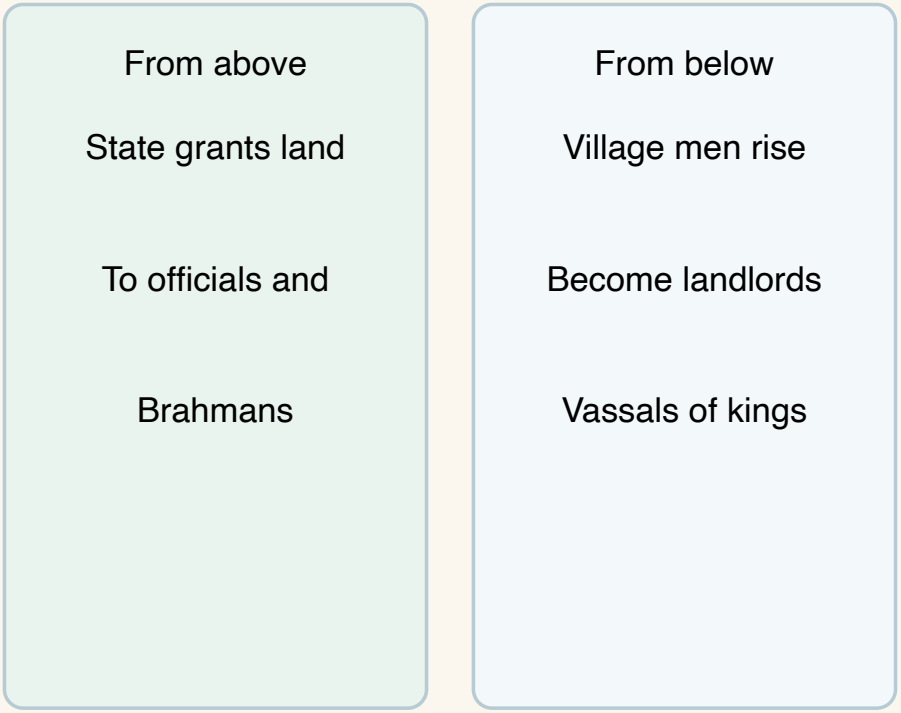
Sources:

- Calicut University study material
- Wikipedia: Indian Feudalism (book)

27. What Was Kosambi's Two-Way Idea?

D.D. Kosambi gave feudalism a place in Indian social history in his 1956 book. He saw two roads to feudalism.

From above, the state granted land and rights to officials and Brahmans. From below, village men with local power rose to become landlords and vassals of kings.



Two roads, one result. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

- Calicut University study material

28. Who Backed Sharma, and Who Pushed Back?

B.N.S. Yadava and D.N. Jha stood by the feudal thesis. Yadava added the Hun invasions as an Indian counterpart to the Arab pressure that shaped Europe.

D.C. Sircar disagreed. He said Marxist historians could not tell landlordism and tenancy from feudalism. Others asked a sharper question. Does passing revenue to a donee really weaken a king?

Sources:

- Calicut University study material

29. What Did Harbans Mukhia Say in 1981?

Harbans Mukhia asked a blunt question in his essay “Was There Feudalism in Indian History?” It appeared in the Journal of Peasant Studies in 1981. It began as an address.

He compared medieval Europe and India on three points. These were ecology, farming technology and the way labour was organised. His main objection was that Indian peasants were not serfs tied to a lord’s manor.



A three-point test. Original explanatory diagram.

Harbans Mukhia argued that the Indian case matched the European feudal model closely. True or False?

Sources:

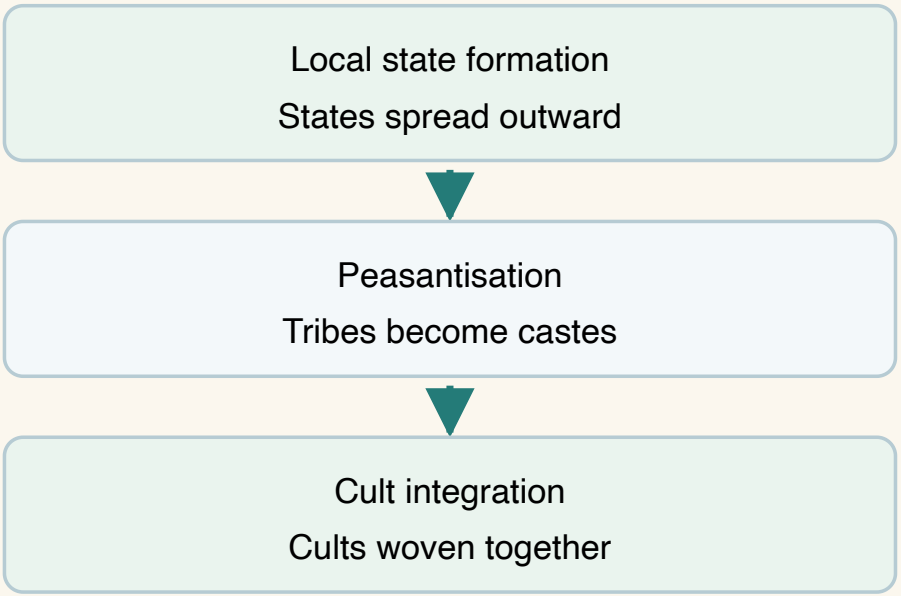
- Mukhia 1981 essay record
- Calicut University study material

30. What Did B.D. Chattopadhyaya Offer Instead?

B.D. Chattopadhyaya did not read the early medieval age as a crisis of an older social order. His book *The Making of Early Medieval India* first appeared in 1994.

He named three processes at work through Indian history.

- Local state formation spreading the reach of states.
- The “peasantisation” of tribes and the making of castes.
- Cults being taken up and woven into wider traditions.



Three long processes. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

- Calicut University study material
- Sahapedia: Hermann Kulke interview

31. What Is Burton Stein's Segmentary State?

Burton Stein studied South India. His book *Peasant, State and Society in Medieval South India* came out in 1980. He doubted that the Chola kingdom had a real bureaucracy.

He offered the idea of a **segmentary state**. Local power centres held real authority. The king’s grip was strongest in his core region and faded outward.



Power in segments. Original explanatory diagram.

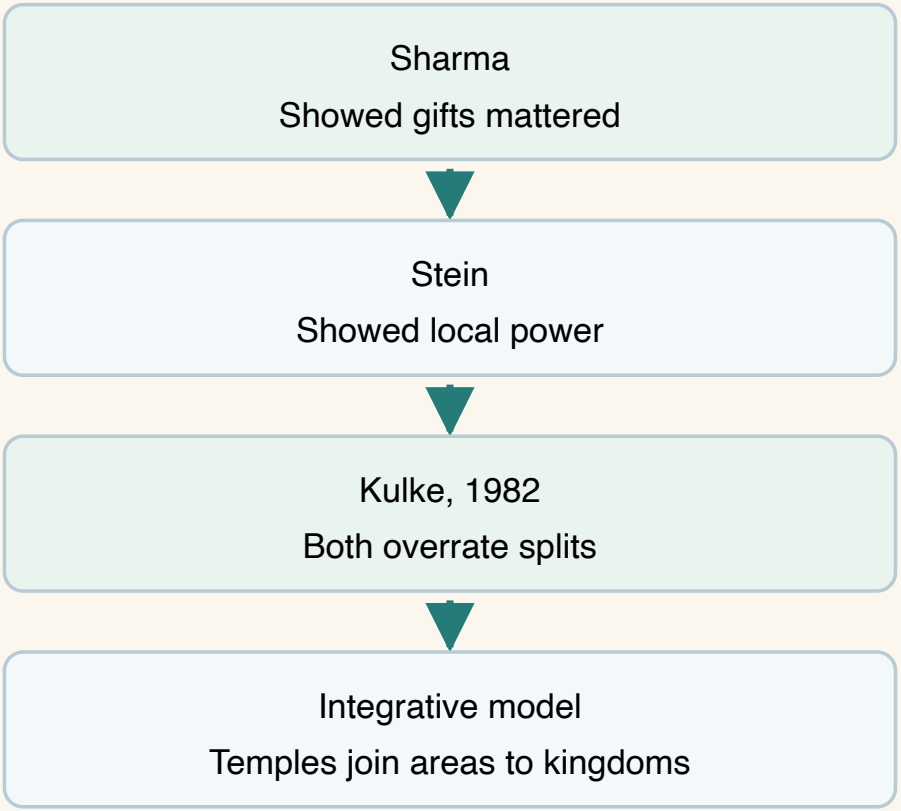
Sources:

- Wikipedia: Burton Stein

32. What Is Hermann Kulke's Integrative Model?

Hermann Kulke gave credit to both Sharma and Stein. Sharma showed how much religious land gifts mattered. Stein showed the weight of local authorities.

In 1982 Kulke argued that both overrated fragmentation. Temples and Brahmin gifts, he said, also **integrated** local areas into larger kingdoms. That is the integrative model.



Joining, not splitting. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

- Sahapedia: Hermann Kulke interview
- Wikipedia: Hermann Kulke

33. So Where Do Historians Agree?

Most agree that the post-600 state looked different from the one before. They also agree that land grants and local power were central. The fight is over the **label** and the cause.

An examiner rarely wants you to pick a side. Show the shared facts first. Then name the schools in one line each.

Agreed	Disputed
Post-600 state was different	The label feudalism
Land grants mattered	The cause
Local power was central	Fit with Europe

Shared ground first. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

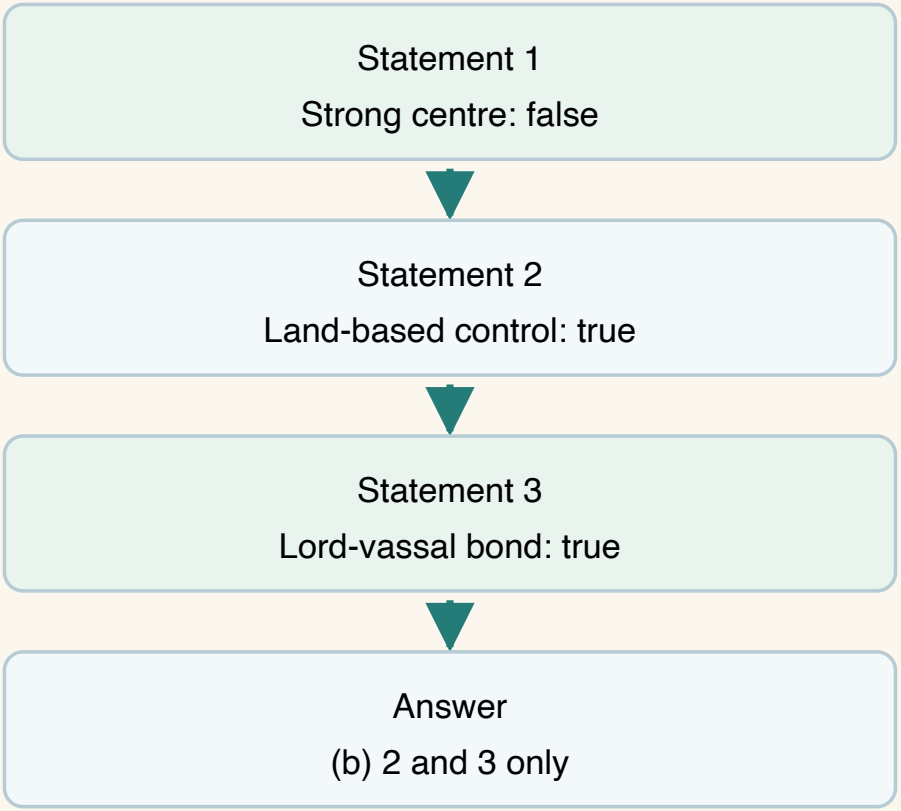
- Calicut University study material

What Do Examiners Ask About Feudalism?

34. What Did UPSC Ask in 2015?

UPSC CSP 2015 asked which statements describe essential elements of the feudal system in Indian history. The options were 1 and 2 only, 2 and 3 only, 3 only, and all three.

Statement 1 spoke of a very strong central authority. That is false. Statements 2 and 3 spoke of land-based administration and the lord-vassal bond. The answer is **(b) 2 and 3 only**.



The 2015 key. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

- UPSC CSP 2015 paper

35. Which Statements Are Safe to Write?

Use this quick sort when you revise.

- **True:** the centre was weak and local holders of land were strong.
- **True:** land grants tied loyalty and service to land.
- **True:** the term comes from Europe and is debated.
- **False:** a very strong central authority defines it.

- **False:** every historian accepts Sharma's thesis.

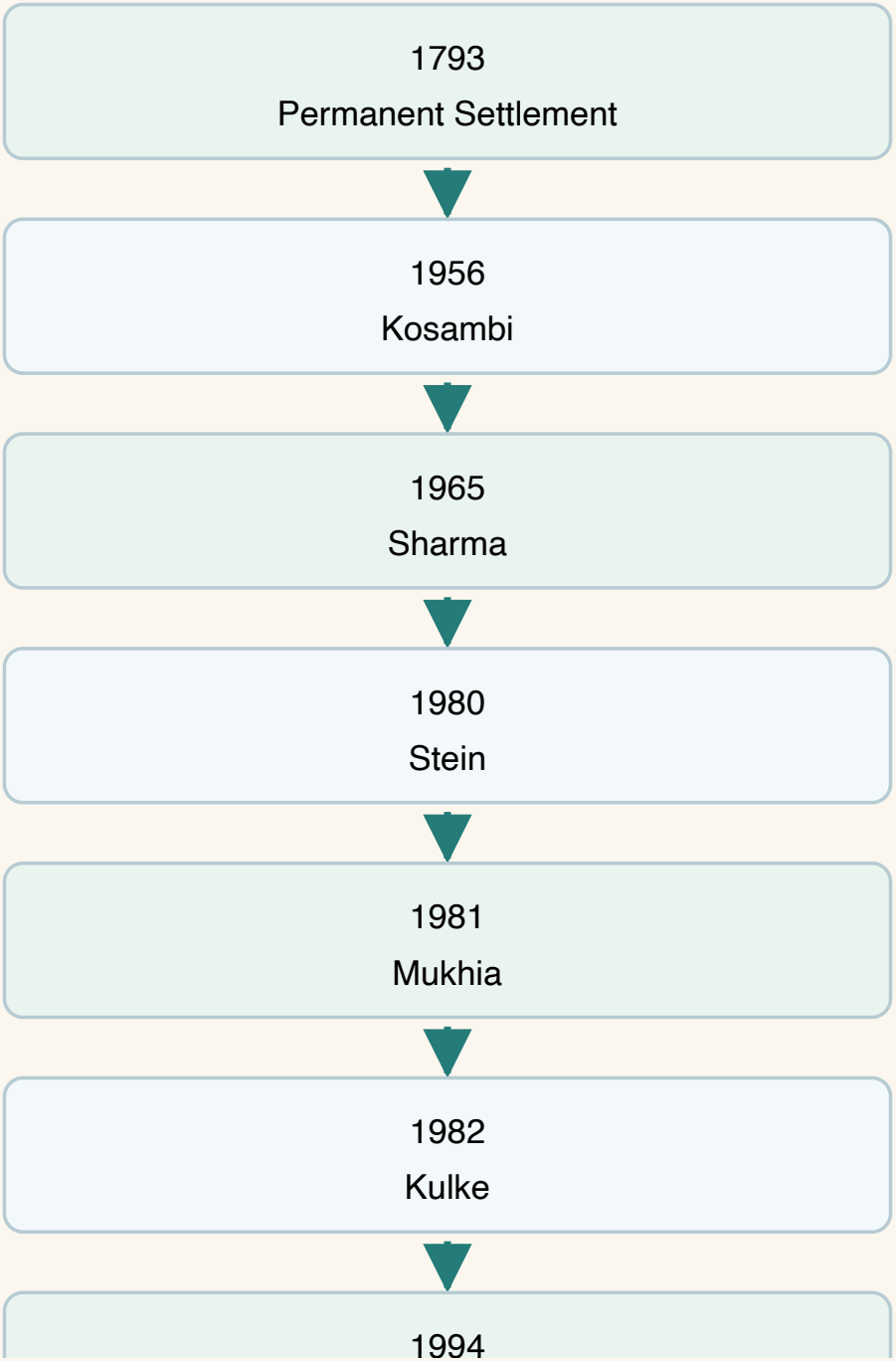
Sources:

- UPSC CSP 2015 paper
- Wikipedia: Indian feudalism

36. Which Names and Dates Should You Memorise?

Keep seven pairs in your head.

- **1956:** Kosambi's book.
- **1965:** Sharma's *Indian Feudalism*.
- **1980:** Stein's segmentary state.
- **1981:** Mukhia's essay.
- **1982:** Kulke's integrative critique.
- **1994:** Chattopadhyaya's book.
- **1793:** the Permanent Settlement.


1793
Permanent Settlement
1956
Kosambi
1965
Sharma
1980
Stein
1981
Mukhia
1982
Kulke
1994

Chattopadhyaya

A short memory list. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

- Calicut University study material
- Sahapedia: Hermann Kulke interview
- Wikipedia: Permanent Settlement

37. How Do You Answer a Mains Question on It?

Follow a five-step path.

1. Define the term and say it is borrowed from Europe. 2. Show the base: land grants and the weak centre. 3. Name the ranks: samanta, then iqta, jagir and zamindari. 4. Give the debate: Sharma, Mukhia, Stein, Kulke. 5. Close with the shared view: local power mattered, whatever the label.

Sources:

- UPSC CSP 2015 paper

Four questions to think through

Why would a king who gives away land become weaker?

The donee gained the taxes and often rights over the people on the land. The king lost that income. Over time the local holder became the stronger power.

Why did Dantidurga perform the hiranyagarbha ritual?

He had risen from a subordinate chief to a king. The ritual, done with Brahmanas, was believed to make a man a Kshatriya even if he was not born one. It gave his new rank a sacred stamp.

Why did the Mughals split revenue from command in the jagir system?

A jagirdar who also ruled and commanded troops could build a private kingdom. The split kept power with the emperor. A separate appointee ran administration and the army.

Why does the label matter less than the pattern?

Historians agree that land grants and local power were central. They disagree on whether to call it feudalism. An answer that shows the shared facts first will score well under either view.

Check your understanding

Your 4 quick checks Answered 0 of 4 · Correct 0
This score resets when the page reloads.

Continue to the 8 MCQs

Practise eight MCQs on Indian feudalism

Use the weak centre, the land grants, the samantas and the debate among historians to choose each answer.

Practice MCQs

1. Indian feudalism is best characterized by which kind of central authority?

A. A weak central authority, with real power held locally

B. A rotating, elected central authority

C. No central authority of any kind

D. A very strong, centralized authority

See answer ↓

2. What formed the basis of administrative power under India's feudal structure?

A. Control of maritime trade routes

B. Control and possession of land

C. Direct taxation by a central treasury

D. Command of a standing navy

See answer ↓

3. The lord-vassal relationship in Indian feudalism was built on which exchange?

A. Land granted in exchange for loyalty and service

B. Gold granted in exchange for trade rights

C. Titles granted in exchange for taxes only

D. Grain granted in exchange for votes

See answer ↓

4. Which later medieval institutions are often compared to feudalism's land-based basis of authority?

A. The East India Company's council

B. Zamindars and Jagirdars

C. Guilds of urban merchants

D. The Mughal mansabdari cavalry ranks alone

See answer ↓

5. What did a samanta owe his overlord under the feudatory system?

A. Nothing; the title was purely honorary with no obligations

B. Direct administration of a Bhukti as a salaried official

C. Personal attendance at court, tribute, and troops when summoned

D. A fixed annual cash salary paid by the imperial treasury

See answer ↓

6. Which historian proposed the "Indian Feudalism" thesis in his 1965 book?

A. B.D. Chattopadhyaya

B. R.S. Sharma

C. Harbans Mukhia

D. Romila Thapar

See answer ↓

7. Some historians see early medieval land grants as helping agrarian expansion, not causing decline.

Which option states that view?

A. Land grants were a form of foreign conquest

B. Land grants drove agrarian expansion, not decline

C. Land grants were purely religious, with no economic role

D. Land grants caused total economic collapse

See answer ↓

8. What was the real structural difference between a Delhi Sultanate muqti and a Mughal jagirdar?

A. A jagirdar held more land than any muqti ever did

B. Muqtis were always hereditary, while jagirdars were always transferable

C. A muqti held combined administrative and military authority; a jagirdar generally held only a revenue right

D. There was no real difference; the two terms describe the same role

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **A.** Indian feudalism points to a weak centre. Real power sat with local holders of land. A very strong central authority is the opposite and is the classic exam trap. UPSC tested exactly this in 2015. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** Power rested on control and possession of land. Whoever held land also held rights over the people living on it. Trade routes, a navy or a central treasury were not the base. ↑ Q2
3. **A.** Land passed from lord to vassal in return for loyalty and service. This lord-vassal bond is the core of the feudal idea. Colonel James Tod used it when he applied the word to Rajasthan. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** Zamindars and jagirdars are often compared with feudal land-holders. Both lived on land revenue. Historians also see them as rough later counterparts of the samanta. ↑ Q4
5. **C.** A samanta owed tribute and homage in person. He also gave military help when called. This matches NCERT's list of gifts, court attendance and military support. ↑ Q5
6. **B.** R.S. Sharma wrote Indian Feudalism, c. 300 to 1200, in 1965. He tied land grants to weaker kings, shrinking trade and powerful landed intermediaries. Harbans Mukhia challenged the thesis in 1981. ↑ Q6
7. **B.** Sharma linked grants to falling trade and towns. Others note that gifts such as the brahmadeya helped bring new land under the plough. That view stresses expansion, not collapse. ↑ Q7
8. **C.** A muqti collected revenue, ran local administration and kept troops for the Sultan. Under the Mughals the jagirdar mostly held a revenue right. Administration and military command lay with a separate appointee. ↑ Q8

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