CHAPTER-III

Feudatory families ; General Observations

The term feudalism is used in different quarters with different connatations. It was originally applied to a peculiar system of landlordism in medieval Europe which created a class of influential families which occupied prominent place in the society and the local political set up. It can in general be stated that this was a class of people who held exclusive ownership of large pieces of land and yielded enormous influence on the tenants of the lands which they owned and their relationship with the ruling monarch was such that they enjoyed certain privileges as against the taxes or tributes they paid to him. They were known as feudal lords and they enjoyed the privileges hereditarily.

From a very early period in Indian history we see a class of rulers in different regions who had administrative control over big and small regions as subordinates of the ruling monarch. Such rulers were called Śāmantas and Mandālaśvāras and many times Mahāśāmantas, Mahāmandālaśvaras and the like, indicating their relative position and power in a given empire. They can be described as subordinate rulers. This office was hereditary.
Some of the early scholars like Fleet called such subordinate rulers as feudatories and of late there has been considerable discussion on this system. This system has been traced by some scholars to the system of granting lands to groups of people or individuals by the ruling monarchs. Therby they associated this system with the so called landlordism. It is also pointed that such a system arose especially from the days of the Guptas, as the custom of granting lands became more and more common in and from that period. In course of time that is how we see the rise of different families holding overall charge of the different regions hereditarily and owing allegiance to their ruling masters. Such families ruled over their regions almost independently but recognising the superior authority of the rulers, by paying tributes and lending assistance in times of need. That is how this institution came into existence and it became a common feature of the Indian polity in the subsequent centuries.

It is necessary here to examine this institution of feudatory chiefs or rather the subordinate rulers in Indian history, with particular reference to Karnataka, and try to know its general nature, functions and role in Indian political set up.
Origin of the Institution

As observed above, this institution of subordinate rulers was in existence from a very early period in Indian history and it can be traced to the days of the Mauryas, if not earlier.

The origin of this institution can be traced to two circumstances. Firstly, when an empire was very vast it was divided into different administrative units and each such unit was kept under the administrative charge of officers appointed by the king. This arrangement was necessary for the obvious reason that the king at the centre would not be able to control the remote corners of the kingdom, himself, or his officials at the centre. Many times, the sons, brothers and other relatives of the ruling king were placed in charge of such units. While the officers were prone to transfer from one unit to another, normally, the relatives of the king established themselves in an area as governors of the regions holding the region as personal fief. Naturally, their office tended to be hereditary. That is how we find the rise of different families holding an overall charge of different regions hereditarily owing allegiance to the ruling master. Such families ruled over the region almost independently but recognising the superior authority of the rulers by paying tributes and lending assistance in times of need. Thus this institution came into
existence and it became a common feature of Indian political life in the subsequent centuries.

Another circumstance which led to the rise of such families was the rewards received by some gallant heroes by their masters for their services rendered on the battlefield. Such heroes were rewarded by the ruling king by granting villages as personal fiefs and also making them heads of administrative units. These privileges were enjoyed by the members of the family of the heroes hereditarily and thus came into existence many families of subordinate rulers.

Yet another reason for the rise of such families appears to be considerate approach of the victorious rulers to the local chieftains who held some authority over small jurisdiction. In the course of Digvijaya conducted by the ambitious king, such chieftains would normally submit to the king and accept his suzerainty. The victor would graciously accept their submission and would allow them to continue their authority over those areas, While this was in consonance with the concept of Dharmanvijaya, it was a practical necessity also since it would be difficult to manage entirely all such conquered territories. Depending upon the political conditions, the opportunity provided and the personal ambition and ability of such chiefs, Many subordinate families rose to prominence.
and there are instances when they rose to imperial status as well.

In the recent times efforts have been made by scholars to study this system of the so called feudalism. Prof. R.S. Sharma has tried to trace the origin of this institution to the custom of donating lands to the Brahmans. He further holds that when such lands were granted, the rulers surrendered not only the revenue of the land, but the administrative control also. But such a contention has no basis.

It is indeed true that the ruling kings would in accordance with the tradition made grants of vast areas of land and even villages to the groups of the Brahmans for conducting educational and religious activities. We have evidence to show that when such grants were made the revenue was allotted to the donees for their maintenance. But there are no instances of the donees becoming the rulers of such grant-lands. The oft repeated expression Achāta Bhagya Karavēga - a sort of prohibition of entry by the government officials in a grant-village does not certainly mean that the donor, the king surrendered the administrative control. Further, we have no such instances of Brāhampārī donees or the Brāhamedēya holders developing as families of feudal lords. Moreover such donations were made to groups of Brahmans belonging
to different families and gotras. Which of the families could assume rulership of such lands?

Another reason ascribed for the creation of such feudal lords appears to be the lack of trade activities and the lack of coinage and the consequent payment to the officers in the form of land rather than in cash. This surmise also has no basis. It is to be noted that the purpose of such grant lands was mainly the maintenance of the grantees and that did not indicate the surrender of administrative rights as Prof. Sharma puts it. If this contention is accepted then there would have been as many feudatory families as there are grants; and they were innumerable. Almost every king donated lands to the Brahmanas and instituted Brahmādeva and acrāhāras. If all such donees had grown into feudal lords we would have found in our history the existence of thousands of thousands of them. But we are not finding so many. The feudatory families rather than the subordinate families, we across in history, especially in Karnataka did not belong to the priestly class at all. Thus it can be concluded that the grants of land had little to do with the so called rise of feudalism in India.

The position and powers of the subordinate rulers

As pointed above, the rise of the subordinate families in India particularly in Karnataka was a natural phenomena,
due to the political conditions and customs and practices, the rise of such families led to the decentralisation of power with different subordinate rulers holding charge of different territories with an overall control of the ruling king. The normal position of such rulers or chiefs was one of clear subordination to the ruling monarch. Normally, therefore, such a subordinate was called पदेश पदेशीवि i.e., the worshipper of the feet of the ruling king. Their relationship between the ruling king and such chiefs was that of a master and a servant, but the latter enjoyed the position of dignity in the royal court. The strategic position held by some chiefs, their ability and the political conditions contributed to the growth of importance of many such families and they gradually rose to more and more prominence. Chiefs on the bordering areas of the kingdom who played an effective role in guarding the frontiers, or chiefs who took active part in the battles on behalf of the king and earned victory for him, chiefs who by dint of their personal ability yielded greater influence, earned the favour of the ruling king and enjoyed a position of privilege in the royal court. They enjoyed the confidence of the king so much so, they entered into matrimonial alliance with the royal family. Many of them were described as दक्षिणे भुवेन्दिग or the right hand of the king or रूपे भुवेदार्ग राजा or responsible for the prosperity of the empire. Examples can be quoted of the
subordinate rulers like the Sindas who stood by the successive rulers of the Chālukya family, the Gangas who supported the Rāṣṭrakūtas, the Guttas, the Pāṇḍyas and the Śilāhāras who fought many battles on behalf of their masters and the Sēṇas who zealously guarded the northern borders of the Rāṣṭrakūta and Chālukya rulers.

It is also to be noted that many such chiefs took advantage of the prevailing political conditions and pushed themselves up to the status of independent rulers. The Kalachuris, the Sēṇas and the Hoysalas are good examples on this point.

The relationship between the subordinate and the master was normally cordial. The former pleased the master by a share in the revenue of his territory, by tributes and by military assistances at times of need. The master on the other hand pleased his subordinate by occasional awards of titles, grants of fiefs and by allowing full freedom in his jurisdiction. Thus it was normally a relationship of mutual appreciation and cooperation. There are exceptions as well. Occasionally they would become militant like Hoysala Vishnuvardhana or a revoler as it happened with Kalachuri Bījāla. The history of Karnataka is replete with examples of loyal subordinates contributing to the growth of the empire and of
unruly subordinates who were subdued with the help of other such rulers. There are also examples of the subordinates who were responsible for the ousting of the ruling dynasty itself. The changeover of the dynasties in the history of Karnataka is almost due to this reason only viz., a turbulent subordinate rising against the master, taking advantage of the weaknesses of the latter and establishing himself as an independent ruler. Activities of Pulakesi II, Bhattadurgad, Taila II, Kalachuri Brijala, Soma Dhillana, Hoysala Ballala II in the Karnataka history best illustrate of this point.

Such subordinate rulers were normally known by the titles Samanta, mandalika and mandalesvara depending upon their position and power. They many times bore the high sounding titles like Mahasamantadhapatii and Mahamandalesvara as mark of their enhanced prestige and position. The title Samadhitata pancha mahasabda borne by such subordinates is interesting. It looks as though this title refers to the investiture of a chief to this office by formally honouring him with certain privileges of using different musical instruments as a mark of prestige and honour. Possibly when a chief went on a tour he would be heralded with the sound of such instruments. Such a custom of announcing the arrival of a dignitary with a sound of musical instrument was prevalent in many parts of our country till recent times.
The role of subordinate chiefs in the political history of Karnataka

The above brief discussion indicates the signal role the subordinate families played in the politics of the early days. From the point of view of position they were practically independent in their jurisdiction. Virtually they were full-fledged masters of their territory with all the branches of a full-fledged government including the army. In relation to the ruling king they were the protectors of the integrity and unity of the kingdom and they maintained law and order in their respective territories. On their cooperation depended the growth and prosperity of the kingdom and if the kingdoms like those of the early and later Chalukyas, the Rashtrakutas and the Hoysales have left an indelible mark on the pages of history. It is because of the support and cooperation of such subordinate chiefs. This peculiar system of dual administration, one at the centre and the other in a subordinate territory has contributed most to the preservation and growth of political, social and cultural institutions. With their full control over their territory, they followed all the traditions of the rulers such as fostering religion, encouraging art and literature and maintenance of law and order. Even when the ruling powers at the centre became weak or even changed, these subordinate families in the history of our
country, more so in Karnataka, can be described as pillars that sustained the political, social and cultural traditions. Hence they deserve an independent study.

Finally, it may be noted that from the days of Fleet, such families are being called feudatory family in the sense that they were subordinate to the ruling monarch, though the concept of the western feudalism has nothing to do with the growth of this institution in India. Of late some scholars are designating them as minor dynasties. It is perhaps proper to designate them subordinate families, because after all, it is difficult to decide as to which of them was minor and which major. But since such families are known as feudatory families and are familiar as such in Indian history, I have used the term feudatory families, study throughout this work.

A Note:

In the above brief discussion of the nature, position, power, and the role of the feudatory families, I have heavily depended upon the works of Prof. R. S. Sharma (Indian Feudalism, and Calcutta, 1965), Dr. D. C. Sircar (The Emperor and the subordinate rulers, Visva Bharati Santiniketan, 1982). I am beholden to these scholars and to my guide Dr. Shrinivas Ritti, whose thoughts and ideas have gone into this discussion.