CHAPTER I

CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE PHENOMENON OF NOBILITY

The phenomenon of nobility is a concept and reality of the middle ages. The nobility in that age was a dominant group in the society, in the west as well as in the east. The institution of nobility essentially possessed a legality of its own which provided it with a superior status in the socio-political situation. Thus, the nobility, though a social group, was nevertheless interminably connected and based upon the edifice of politics and the state. The legality of the position of the nobility was essentially and basically hereditary. It was also essential that the nobility should be a restricted and constricted body. In other words, the nobility denoted a privileged section of the society which was naturally small in circumference. It enjoyed social interests and privileges, while the theory and practicality of hereditary succession was provided to it by the state and through the state.

The period from the ninth unto the eleventh centuries is generally identified as the first feudal age in Europe. During this period, the term, 'noble', had not acquired any distinctive sense of legality. It existed at the conceptual level only. Ideologically, the nobility was characterized by the

distinction of birth. It also implied that the nobility possessed a certain amount of wealth and property. During this period, the nobility signified groups of influential people who had come to acquire a dominating position in the social hierarchy, due to the fact that the governments had weakened up in Europe, with the result that the protective ties had become extended. The nobility was composed of the landed gentry, because the nobles used to get land revenues by exercising their influence over the land.

During the later feudal age in Europe, the distinctive meaning of the term 'nobility', underwent significant modifications. The later feudal age in Europe commenced from the thirteenth century. During this period, the term, 'nobility', came to signify a distinguished sense of a legal monopoly. The position of the nobility during the early feudal age was de-facto, whereas during the later feudal age this position changed into being de-jure. During the first feudal age in Europe, the nobility was based upon vassalage. But due to contradictory nature of the terms of vassalage, while during the later feudal age, the terms of vassalage were done away with from the institutionalization of the nobility. Thus, theoretically, the nobles ceased to be vassals. Now it was only on the basis of birth that a noble could own up an independent fief. In spite of the fact that there prevailed numerous common features such as military functions, and the general mode of life, the de-facto nobles of the first feudal age and the de-jure nobles of the
later feudal age were very different when looked upon from the point of view of an egalitarian society. The chief differences prevailed in matters of wealth and property, and power and privilege. Thus a hierarchical set-up of the institution of the nobility was evident. These differences were there, tacitly recognizable in the beginning but later on they were confirmed through statutes and customs.

The emergence and institutionalization of the nobility in India, during the medieval period, was far different from the European nobility. The nobility in Europe was not 'created' in an artificial and deliberate manner. It emerged out of the exigencies of the times. The chief factor for the emergence of the nobility in Europe was the all pervading weaknesses of the kingship therein. As a result, the European kings began to share state-powers with the influential section of the state, due to which the nobility was institutionalized therein. On the contrary, the institution of nobility was a deliberately created one in India so that it could be utilized as a potent factor in the work of the building up of the Indian empire alongwith its consolidation, because, these were the political processes in existence in India throughout the medieval period. The basic cause behind this was that the medieval Indian state was perpetrated by the Central Asian Muslims who were in effect, foreigners in India. The Delhi

2. Ibid, P.332
3. S.B.P. Nigam, Nobility under the Sultans of Delhi, Delhi, 1968, P.185.
Sultans during the early Muslim period and the Mughal kings during the later Muslim period, were all foreigners.

The Indian nobility during the Delhi Sultunate period influenced the state affairs to a great extent. The nobility during the Delhi Sultunate and the Sultans of Delhi were always inter-locked in a grim tussle for the exact determination of their two-fold relationship. Islam has evolved a definite theory of state and politics. It provides a semi-divine position to an elected Amir-ul-mominin.

Speaking of the character of the nobility during the Sultunate period, an authority writes as such.

"Immediately below the Monarch came his nobles. They usually supported him in power, but at times usurped his functions, and if a ruling dynasty grew weak and effete they stepped into its shoes, and founded a new ruling dynasty of their own. Even if a noble was deposed or otherwise robbed of his position and power, the traditions of former dignity and social honour were unfailingly handed on to his descendants, and with the approbation of the people, who tenaciously adhered to the hereditary principle, restoration to former power was only a question of time and opportunity". 4

4. K.M. Ashraf, Life and Conditions of the People of Hindustan, Delhi, 1970, P. 84
Thus we see that the theory of the election of the Amir-ul-mominin was a misnomer. There was lacking any workable democratic machinery for election. In actual practice, military superiority was the chief arbiter which decided the political complexion of all Muslim communities. Thus a powerful person who had established his superiority over others through the means of arms, used to surround himself with a halo of divine sanctification, so that he be taken to be somewhat different and above his personal rivals. The Delhi Sultans also tried to enhance their position by allowing themselves divine sanctity. But the nobility under them did not recognize this. The nobility on its own part declared that the Sultans were only one among themselves; members of the noble class itself. As such, the nobility declared the Delhi Sultans to be first among equals or as the saying goes, the Sultans were just primus inter-pares. During the medieval age in India, the Islamic state existed because it recognized the nobility as co-sharers in the administration of political power alongside the emperors. Thus it may be stated that a constitutional monarchy was prevailing in medieval India.

The privileges and power of the contemporary nobility got recognition, as it was essential for the inner balancing and cohesion of the Islamic medieval Indian state, more so far the latter's consolidation and stabilization.

5. S.B.P. Nigam, op.cit, PP.182-83
As an authority has so aptly stated,

"Islam, like Christianity, prescribes no political system and the hadises of the Prophet are remarkably silent on the question. Nevertheless the Quran, which claims to be "a guide and a cure for those who believe", had to lay down the basic principles of the Muslim politico-social order. These principles as we have already seen, are — (a) government must be based on common discussion, and the Prophet is directed by the Quran to consult the Mussalmans in their affairs; ............. "6.

Again, the same authority states,

"So monarchy and a governing class came into existence and continued for centuries; only in the present generation are the Muslim countries learning how to do without them. Now the Prophet's Shariat does not know of either institution,

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6. K.A. Nizami, ed; Politics and Society during the early Medieval period, Collected works of Prof. Mohammad Habib, (Vol. I), Delhi, 1974, p. 95.
though later legists recognize them as facts. The Shariat, which does not recognize monarchy, has no law for the succession to the throne; the matter had to be regulated by custom and convention or decided by wars of succession.  

I.H. Siddiqui writes in this context,  

"The early Sultans of Delhi always paid close attention to the composition and organisation of the nobility, as the entire functioning of the state machinery and the defence of the Empire depended upon the co-operation of the nobles. For this reason the Sultans had to take different factors into consideration with regard to the recruitment of the nobles. They also promoted nobles belonging to different social groups to high positions with a view to maintaining a balance of power among them. The Lodi Sultans whose ancestors had been accustomed to the Indian political system under the Tughlaks, also followed the traditions of their predecessors in this regard."  

7. Ibid. P.99  
The precise character of the Turkish nobility in India was neither feudal nor bureaucratic. However, it can be maintained that those territorial assignments assigned to it which were called 'fiefs', were comparable to the feudal assignments extended to the European feudal lords and barons. Still, the nobility under the Delhi Sultans was not feudal. Because, the nobility was deliberately created by the Delhi Sultans and they did not spring up from any of their weaknesses like its European counterpart. Also, the powers and privileges enjoyed by the nobility during the Delhi Sultunate were granted to it through the state itself, unlike the European feudal powers and privileges which were gathered against the interests of the state.

Thirdly, the feudal lords in Europe were empowered with landed privileges, whereas the Turkish nobility was handed over with official powers and privileges. However, there was one striking similarity between the two in way of the fact that in times of need, both extended military assistance to the kings because both had access to military powers⁹.

During the later period of medieval Indian history, i.e. the Mughal period, the institution of the nobility as it was, was also not either comparable to the Roman nobility or the medieval European nobility of the feudal times. The

⁹ S.B.P. Nigam, op. cit. PP. 185-86
Mughal nobility comprised state-officers who were in the service of the Monarchs. At the same level they also constituted the superior class in the political order. The Mughal nobility, unlike its European counterpart, was not a landed gentry. Because, the jagirs or the revenue assignments of the Mughal nobility were transferable from place to place all over India. As a particular social class, the Mughal nobility could be very easily labelled as an aristocratic socio-political class. But rather a more truthful statement would be that it was a governing class. It exercised an interacting relationship with the Mughal kingship, because the nobility exercised autonomous authority within its own jurisdiction, and also exercised its own restrictions on the authority of the kingship because it acted as a powerful force of decentralization of the governing authority. The nobility helped the Mughal kings with its administrative cooperation and efficiency, while the emperors had also the satisfaction of having submitted the nobility to their own submission and authority. The Mughal state activity was, as can be stated here, in just maintaining the status-quo, by maintaining law and order through civil and military administrations. In this, the nobility participated and thus justified its own situation.
The extent of the Mughal nobility's administrative role extended up to the Mansabdari organization, appertaining to jagirdari and zamindari orders. The military obligation extended up to extra military duties of finance, (diwan) and police, (kotwal). Zamindari, though basically denoted administration of agrarian relations, nevertheless implied military functions. Thus the judiciary, because it was specialized and independent, remained out of the nobility's administrative capacities. By turning the Mughal nobility into an all-India service obligation, its coherence, governing character, and administrative capacity, was kept in tact for a considerable period. However, the policy of maintaining the status-quo followed by the Mughal emperors, which influenced the nobility's role and character, proved to be detrimental in the end. This situation intensified unscrupulousness among the nobility's ranks, limiting in many ways any steadfast loyalty towards the crown, thus brewing up a political crisis for the Mughal empire.

The study of the institution of nobility from the socio-political angle also makes it imperative for us to study the institution of feudalism from an exacting viewpoint. It may be stated that the mode of production has been different in the different ages. In ancient times the production was carried on by the institution of slavery as it was when the
Slaves did the production work. In the modern times the mode of production has been capitalistic. During the medieval times, the mode of production was based upon the institution and productive system which is known as feudalism.

Under feudalism, the economic pattern of life was based in the villages. The society was compartmentally comprising the peasants and the feudal lords. Local consumption of the produce was very much in use and trading facilities were less. Feudalism was characterised by its chief feature which was the exploitation of the peasantry. In Europe, this exploitation of the peasantry was so acute that it took on the form of serfdom. Likewise in India, the nobility, especially the zamindars, partook of a huge amount of the peasant's produce, although, the situation of the Indian peasants was not that of serfs.

The term 'feudal', is derived from the work 'feudum', which originally indicated a 'fief'. In other words, the situation signified lands held on condition of services. Under the feudal system, land had become the real source of power. The crippled peasantry contributed their part of the produce to the lords as tax or rent, or it also had to work for the lords free although their labours were always there.

The European feudal system was based upon a hierarchical socio-political order. At the top of the order stood the Monarch. He distributed the fiefs to the Earls and Dukes, who handed them over to the Barons. The knights were the lowest class of the feudal lords. All this portrayed a system of vassalage which was gradual and hierarchical. During the time of any emergency, such as a war, the king used to demand military help from the vassals depended upon him. Because all feudal lords were powerful within their fiefs, by virtue of having possessed soldiers, also by the levying of taxes within their own fiefs, and also by acting as judges and executing punishments and fines against whom complaints were in any case levelled. In Europe, soon enough, the feudal system became hereditary. It assumed a strict and rigid social outlook which were based on the crystallization of the class-differences.

The peasantry under the feudal system signified the lowest but on the other hand, the largest class, numerically. The peasantry was too divided into various categories. The first category of the peasants may be stated that of the free-holders. The free-holders received land from the lords and managed them on their own. They did not work for the lords but instead paid them taxes. The second category of peasantry

was called the villeins\textsuperscript{13}. The villeins gave a part of their produce to the lords. They also worked on the fields of the lords for a definite period, although most of the time they worked on the land which they had received from the lords. The category of peasants which came at the bottom but was strongest of all in number was known as the serfs\textsuperscript{14}. The serfs worked wholly on the lords' lands. They performed several services for the lords, for example, repairing a house or a road. These services were forced labour, because the lords would ask for these services at any time without even paying back the labourers. The serfs suffered from and were handicapped from many restrictions and impositions. They were forever tied to the land which belonged to the lords. They could not either change their masters, which was possible only if the lands changed hands. The serfs could not leave the land and whenever apprehended in this act, they were severely punished.

The European feudal system was based upon the manorial pattern\textsuperscript{15}. The Manor was the domain of the lords which contained farms, pasture grounds and common woods. The manor used to support all those who used to work on it. All the activities of economic character, for example, agriculture and artisinal activities were done within the manor itself.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, P.129  
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, P.130  
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, P.131
It can be maintained that the feudal system was successful in creating security and orderliness in the medieval society. The system was instrumental in decentralizing power in-between the kings and the lords. But along with the few merits it had, the feudal system also presented itself with several demerits. It created a strict class system in the medieval social structure. The nobles were oppressive. The system gave incentive to economic stagnation, because all the personal initiative regarding the different economic activities of the peasantry and the artisans was checked in the very start.

However, from the eleventh century, towns and trade once again began to thrive in Europe. The lords now desired for luxury goods which the village-based self-sufficient village economy was unable to provide to them. Due to the Holy wars the west came into contact with the east and this created a situation for the demands of eastern luxury articles. Due to the enlargement in cultivation and agricultural improvements, the peasantry started to exchange their agricultural products with non-agricultural goods. These activities promoted trade and crafts which in turn led to urbanization. All these factors contributed to the decline of the feudal system. The subsequent increase in trade and commerce and the specialization of industries encouraged the merchants to
organize themselves in guilds. In Europe, all this made
the merchant elements very important in the society, while
at the same time modelled the feudal pattern of economic life.

Feudalism in India developed in a far different manner
as was the case with Europe. The two characteristic features
of the Manorial system and serfdom which had impregnated the
European system were lacking in Indian feudalism. It has been
remarked very aptly that evident tremendous differences
prevailed between the different feudal systems the world over.

Feudalism has been analysed as being,

"Virtually identical with what we generally
mean by force and independently of its own
volition to fulfill certain economic demands of
an over-lord, whether these demands take the
form of services to be performed or of dues to
be paid in money or in kind."

The classic form of feudalism was possessed of
these chief characteristics. First, a low level of technique
with simple instruments of production which are also
inexpensive, while the act of production itself is predomi-

      P.137
18. Maurice Dobb, Studies in the development of Capitalism,
      London, 1953, P.35
nantly individual in character, the division of labour is at a primitive level of development. Secondly, the production work is done for the immediate requirement of a household or a village community, and is not done for a wider market. Thirdly, demesne-farming is executed with. The farming of the lords' estate is done on a larger scale by compulsory labour-services. Fourthly, there exists political decentralisation. Fifthly, there is conditional holding of lands by the lords on some kind of service-tenure. And sixthly, the lords possess judicial or quasi-judicial functions to the dependent population.

It can be maintained that Indian feudalism too possessed several of these characteristics. The Kushana period in India heralded the feudal age. But from the Gupta period, particular feudal practices became apparent. By Harsha's time they became very solid. From then, Indian feudalism came to rest on the low level of technique, as was the case with classic feudalism. Moreover, the production work in India was also done for the immediate use of the village community and not for the market. However, the system of demesne-farming was not in exercise in India. In fact, the absence of the system of demesne-farming gave to Indian feudalism an important outlook. The battles in Indian feudalism were waged not between the claimants of any plough and any sword, but between the claimants

19. Ibid, PP.36-37
20. R.S. Sharma, Aspects of political ideas and institutions in ancient India, Delhi, 1959, PP.236-37
of two swords alone. The village community, especially the peasantry remained to be all the way passive in the conflict over the booties of such battles. This situation speaks of the static and stable situation of the Indian village community. The process of political decentralization had been started by the system of land-grants which were specially provided to the Brahmans. These land-grants helped in the decentralization of the sources of revenue along with the police and administrative functional duties. This was made easy by the class of intermediaries who had emerged in the shape of the brahmin feudatories. The contemporary central control of the Mauryan times had in this way given place to decentralization of power during the post-Mauryan and Gupta periods. An intermediary class of a warrior type came into prevalence. The term 'Samanta', signified independent neighbours during the Mauryan period but later on during the sixth century A.D. it signified conquered feudatories\(^\text{22}\). Onwards the Gupta period, the titles of bhogike, bhogipatika, and so on, refer to the emergence of a new official class who lived on the action of the collection of revenue\(^\text{23}\). Political decentralization was carried on by this official class. From the above mentioned reference, it may be said that the fourth, fifth, and the sixth characteristics as mentioned by the scientist Maurice Dobb, were present in the Indian feudal system. However, in spite of

\(^{22}\) R.S. Sharma, op. cit. P. 212

\(^{23}\) Ibid, PP. 207-12
such similarities, the chief difference between Indian and European feudal systems lay in the village community system. The Indian village community system in its particular socio-economic set-up, was relatively impressionable so far as the Indian feudal system was concerned. It had an equitable combination of agriculture and handicrafts for its economic pattern which in turn provided an equilibrium to the society. The social set-up which was formed of caste-structure and caste-ideologies, checked the different pieces from joining and thus colliding against each other. The Indian village-community, as compared to the European village-community, was very conservative and change-resisting. But it is also correctly stated that the European village community was more brittle than its Indian counterpart. The Indian village-community was self-sufficient and thus was not dependent on anybody else, and stuck to its own inspite of internal and external forces. It was like a republic having imbibed all things within itself. It changed as late as the nineteenth century when the onslaught of British machine-made goods, began.


25. Ibid, P.35
According to Karl Marx,

"Those small and extremely ancient Indian communities, some of which have continued down to this day, are based on possession in common of the land, on the blending of agriculture and handicrafts, and on an unalterable division of labour, which serves whenever a new community is started, as a plan and scheme ready cut dried." 26

Again,

"The simplicity of the organisation for production in these self-sufficing communities that constantly reproduce themselves in the same form, and when accidentally destroyed spring up again on the spot and with the same name - this simplicity supplies the key to the secret of the unchangeableness in such striking contrast with the constant dissolution and refounding of Asiatic states, and the never-ceasing changes of dynasty. The structure of the economical elements of society remains untouched by the storm clouds of the political sky." 27

27. Ibid, pp.392-94
Indian feudalism, due to its differences from classic feudalism, has also been described as quasi-feudalism or feudalistic.28

"The basic requisites of a feudal system were present in India. The king granted the revenue from varying proportions of land to his officers or selected holders, who were the equivalent of vassals elsewhere. The tendency from the seventh century onwards of granting land in lieu of cash salaries intensified the feudal process... The feudatories could hire out their assigned land to cultivators, from whom they collected the revenue agreed upon. Part of the revenue from the land they sent to the king. Out of the revenue retained by the vassal he was expected to maintain the feudal levies which, underlying his oath of loyalty to his king, he was in duty bound to furnish for the king's service."29

29. Ibid, P.242
Land-grants and subinfeudation during early medieval India, "led to unequal distribution of land and power on a large scale and created new social groups and ranks which did not quite fit in with the existing fourfold varna system". Speaking of the period A.D.500-1200, the same authority writes of the feudal situation, as consisting of eight categories of feudal vassals of a typical feudal court. The samrat or the king had 4 Mandelesvaras; 12 Mandalikas, 16 Mahasamantas, 32 Samantas, 160 Laghusamantas, and 400 Caturasikas, below them coming the rajaputras.

Thus both India and Europe underwent periods of feudalism extending up much the same periods. Indian feudalism possessed both common and uncommon features with European feudalism. The basic difference between the two was the fact that Indian feudalism was based upon the village community system. Land in Indian village economy had belonged to the village and not to the private individuals. But from the fourteenth century onwards, new elements came forward in the Indian social set-up. This brought forth the feudal integument. In the economic sphere constant interference by the state, in the village economic structure, for the

30. R.S. Sharma, Social changes in early medieval India, Delhi, 1969, p.6
31. Ibid, p.7
extraction of more surplus loosened up the autonomous walls of the village republic. Later on, during Sher Shah and Akbar, direct contracts for revenue collection were made with the cultivators. The payment of revenue in cash instead of kind, made easy commodity circulation in villages. Moreover, the Bhakti movement which grew from the rising classes of artisans and traders, gave death-bloows to the rigid class and caste structure within the village. The peasant uprisings during the later period of the Mughal empire further corroded the remaining feudal strength. All these factors ultimately worked for the inevitable decline of feudalism in India.