

belonging to the two lower *varṇas* appear in Orissa and Andhra under the Gangas. But by and large landlords in the country as a whole are *kṣatriyas* and *brahmaṇas*. Most peasants are regarded as *śūdras* who are divided into numerous castes based on ritualistic grading, which makes it difficult for them to come together. But since the Landlords belong to the higher castes and the peasants to the lower ones, it becomes easier for the former to command the obedience of the latter.

Hierarchy started as a trait of Indian society with the rise of the *varṇas*. The pre-feudal hierarchy was based on the collection of gifts, taxes, tributes from the *vaiśyas* and extortion of labour service from the *śūdras*. This inequality was legitimatised through ritualistic arrangements. The post-feudal hierarchy is based on merit, open competition and public examination system. Though a good number of people cannot take advantage of competitive examinations because of limited access to education or of its complete lack, there is considerable scope for mobility in the modern bureaucratic hierarchy. The feudal hierarchy had its own distinct character. It was based on unequal distribution of land, and since it was combined with the caste system, there was little scope for mobility in it. This hierarchy gripped the mind of the people in a manner which left no room for equality or democracy. Now and then religious reform movements propagated egalitarian ideas, but social realities proved stronger than the call for religious equality and the new sects had to fall in line with the ideas and institutions of the feudal ruling class.

The idea of social inequality and landed hierarchy seems to have been articulated through the medium of religious art and architecture. The earliest relief and panel sculpture belonging to pre-Gupta time do not show much difference between the size of various figures of god and men that are represented. The second-first centuries B.C. *Jātaka* panels found at Sanchi, Bharhut, Bodh-Gaya, Amaravati, etc., do not exhibit any marked difference in the size of images appearing in them. Sharp differences in the sizes of the divinities appear in Gupta and post-Gupta time. This may be partly explained by the structure of a patriarchal family in which the authority of the head of the family is unquestionable and in which

sons and daughters have to obey their parents, wives have to obey their husband and the younger brothers have to submit to their elder brothers. In order to emphasise the idea of *parivāra* or *paricara* members of the pantheon are represented on a scale smaller than that of the central god. But this cannot apply to those gods and goddesses who are not the kith and kin of the central god in the pantheon. They are placed in smaller sizes because they are considered of less social consequence. Important deities such as Śiva, Viṣṇu and Durgā come to have their own pantheons in which the gods and attendants show as many as five-six types of size. The Buddha also gets his pantheon comprising *Bodhisattvas* and *arhats*. In the Hindu Tantric pantheons old gods were given subordinate positions as vassals, servants, doorkeepers, *dikpālas*, etc., while Śiva and Viṣṇu, reflecting the new social relationships, occupied the centrestage. The icons of smaller size in a pantheon outnumber those of larger size. In the Tara-centred pantheon of Patna Museum (Archaeological no. 6502) we notice the large medium and small sizes of the icons. While we find only one large size icon, i.e. Tara, and a couple of medium size icons, icons of the small or the third size count 17. This is in tune with the social structure in which the peasants greatly outnumber the landlords. The pantheons indicate the nature of the household and the social stratification that were emerging. Biologically all human beings may not have the same size but generally there cannot be very vast differences between their sizes. However, gods, goddesses and human beings in mediaeval pantheons have sharply unequal sizes.

The idea of marked social inequality and hierarchy is also articulated in architecture, though to a lesser extent. The *Vaikhānasa Āgama* prescribes seven structures of the temple, each meant for housing gods, goddesses and attendants who constitute the *parivāra devatā* of Viṣṇu². We find the practice of building *pañcāyatana* or five shrines. The central shrine is a larger structure located in the middle and at the four corners of the complex appear four subsidiary shrines. Obviously the central shrine houses, the major god and the

² GOPINATH RAO, *Elements of Hindu Iconography*, Vol. I, pt. II, App. A, pp. 1-2.

four subsidiary shrines house the minor gods. The practice of having *pañcāyatana* complexes becomes common in northern India with the end of the ninth century. Mediaeval temples possess huge *vimānas* in the form of tiered pyramids. Thus in the temple of Śiva called the Rājārājosvara or Br̥hadiśvara, at Tanjore we find as many as 14 tiers in the *vimānas* capped by a *śikhara*. These pyramids were typical of the south Indian temples after the tenth century, though they seem to have appeared in the Bhitargaon brick temple in Kanpur around the sixth century. Bhitargaon shows as many as nine tiers. Tiers, which were meant for decoration, fit in with the tiers that arise in a land grant society.

The idea of hierarchy influenced the organisation of tantricism as well as the Jaina monasticism. Although tantricism accommodated *śūdras*, tribal people and women, eventually it followed the pattern of organisation typical of the feudal polity and society. In course of time the tantric religious order was organized on hierarchical lines. The tantric did not have the same status, the ordinary initiate formed the lowest rung in the ladder. He was called *sādhaka* above whom stood five other grades including the *upādhyāya* and the *ācārya*. This kind of grading also appears in mediaeval Jainism. Apparently this kind of grading could not be based on the *varṇa* hierarchy which had scope for only four grades. It can be better linked up with the landed hierarchy where about half a dozen grades can be noticed. However three grades were well established. It is significant that the tantric divine hierarchy shows three successive strata according to the *Parānanda Sūtra*. This text states that the highest self is one, that there are seven lords comprising Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Sūrya, Gaṇeśa, Śakti and Bhairava and that individual souls are countless³.

In early mediaeval mythologies the divinity which occupied the central position appeared as a kind of paramount deity which received gifts or tributes in the same manner as a superior feudal lord received them from his vassals and feudatories. We have the

³ *ekaḥ paramātmā. īśvaraḥ saptaḥ. asaṃkhyajivāḥ* quoted in P.V.KANE. HDS, ii, Pt. II. Poona, 1977, p.1053, fn. 1698.

example of Durgā who received the trident from Śiva, the discus from Viṣṇu, the *vajra* from Indra and other weapons from other gods⁴. This appears like vassals and feudatories supplying soldiers to their paramount lord.

Some early mediaeval inscriptions represent the relation between the king and the god in the same manner as between the lord and his vassals. The king appears carrying out military obligations imposed on him because of this relationship. This is particularly true of the Gaṅga kings who ruled in Kalinga. From the 12th century onwards the Gaṅga inscriptions call the king *rauta* or the son (*putra*) of the god *puruṣottama*⁵. The term *rauta* is taken to be a deputy⁶. But it is derived from the term *rājaputra*, and really means a military vassal who is granted land. The Candella and Gāḥaḍavāla inscriptions leave little doubt about it⁷. As a *rauta* the king is granted the kingdom by the god in the same manner as a vassal is granted land by his lord for military service. As a vassal the king is supposed to fight the god's wars.

The idea that the king appears as the vassal of the god can be also, inferred from the titles assumed by the Coḷa rulers. Thus *Rājārāja* calls himself *Śivapada śekhara* which means that he places his crown at the feet of god Śiva. This is clearly a feudal practice.

The idea of hierarchy appears in several mediaeval mythologies. According to a moral maxim Gaṅga comes out of *svargadvāra*, falls on the head of Śiva, then on the mountain, next on the earth and finally into the ocean, these might indicate stages of successive degeneration in the status of the Gaṅga⁸. This status idea can be linked with the feudal hierarchy that exists in mediaeval times. The

⁴ Ibid., Vol. V., Pt. I., pp. 155-156.

⁵ HARMANN KULKE, *The Cult of Jagannāth and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*, Bhubaneswar, p. 139; M. MUKUNDA RAO, *Kalinga under the Eastern Gangas*, B.R. Publishing, Delhi, 1991, p. 202.

⁶ M. MUKUNDA RAO, *Kalinga under the Eastern Gangas*, Delhi, 1991, p. 172-173.

⁷ R.S. SHARMA, *Indian Feudalism*, Delhi, 1980, pp. 137-38, 140. There is a current saying in Maithili that does can be collected from a *rauta* only through the use of force (*lathi hathe raut bebak*).

⁸ *Bharṭṭhari Nitiśataka*, verse 11.

idea of a three or four tier structure comes up repeatedly in other myths. It is stated that Śeṣa, the Serpent, bears the row of the worlds on his expanded hoods. He is held by the Lord of Tortoise or Viṣṇu on his back, and Viṣṇu is taken in its lap by the Ocean⁹. Thus we find four tiers starting with the ocean and ending with the row of the worlds. The Moon, called the lord of herbs, is followed by a hundred physicians, and he is the crest ornament of the head of Śiva¹⁰. Here we see a hierarchy headed by Śiva, followed by the Moon, who is attended the physicians. It is stated in a moral maxim for a happiness that a person has to propitiate Hari so that his desires are fulfilled and he gets a generous master, an honest servant, a loving wife, a well-behaved son and an affectionate friend¹¹. Thus, maxim provides, for a hierarchy which, besides Hari, comprises the master, the master's man, and the man's servant. Rāhu is considered superior to the Sun and Moon, who are held superior to five or six planets including Brhaspati¹². This structure also consists of three tiers. The Horāśāstra of Pṛthuyāśas, son of Varāhamihira (sixth century), shows an eight-tiered hierarchy among the planets. Except Ketu, they are arranged in the ascending order i.e., Saturn, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Moon, Sun and Rāhu¹³.

In some respects there is not much difference between feudal and prefeudal ideas. Both stress contempt for manual work, domination of man over woman, and support divorce between manual work and education. But certain ideas seem to be more typical of the feudal set-up. Thus in the feudal situation agriculture is considered to be most important, trade to be middling in value, service to be contemptible and begging to be a course adopted in despair.

⁹ *Bhartṛhariśataka*, verse 29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, verse 89.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, verse 3 adopted by Kale in the body of *Nitiśataka*, (p.234).

¹² *Ibid.*, verse 28.

¹³ *Horāśāstra of Pṛthuyāśas (son of Varāhamihira)*, ed. and tr., P.V. SUBRAHMANYA SASTRI, Bangalore, 1949, III.32f. I owe this reference to Professor B.N.S. Yadava.

Since the feudal phase is marked by constant military activity which becomes the exclusive sphere of man, there is a tendency to degrade the position of woman more and more and to consider them items of property. Strong male domination appears to be a characteristic of the feudal phase, and absolute male domination leads to the imposition of all kinds of disabilities including the performance of *sati*. *Sati* deities and temples become common in Rajasthan. The early mediaeval economic system had very little scope for the operation of the market economy. Coins were used on a sparingly very limited scale and payments for services had to be made in kind, particularly in land grants. Landed classes served as the axis of the socio-economic formation, which was perpetuated through the practice of land gifts. In an economy in which the climate for trade and commerce is not so favourable, the system of distribution is based on the gift system. Gifts were important for the redistribution of the surplus collected by the landed groups who shared a part of their resources with those who were either landless and or not in a position to earn their livelihood. Whereas land and other gifts may have brought status and prestige to the donors, the absence of market economy compelled them to share their wealth with their clients and subordinates. The early mediaeval set-up ensured the presence of mutual and unilateral gifts on a large scale. Therefore this practice was justified and lauded on spiritual and other grounds, and its merit (*mahīmā*) was extolled in many mediaeval texts.

The discourse on gifts making acquires special importance in early mediaeval times. Gift or *dāna* is called typical of the Kali age; on the other hand *tapas* or toil is called typical of the *Kṛta*, metaphysical knowledge of the *Tretā*, and sacrifice of the *Dvāpara*¹⁴. As shown earlier, in the earliest Kali is associated with the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 4th century A.D. We find an elaborate treatment of gift making from the Gupta period onwards. A good portion of the *Anuśāsana Parvan* of the *Mahābhārata* is devoted to this subject. After the sixth century AD

¹⁴ P.V. KANE, HDS, Vol. II. Pt. II, p. 837.

or so the merits and procedure of making gifts are treated at great length, and texts are written exclusively for this purpose.

The literature on *dāna* becomes extensive and enormous. Together with the *Mahābhārata*, the *Mātsyā*, the *Agnī* and *Virāha Purāṇas* devote numerous verses to *dāna*. Several digests were compiled on the subject of *dāna*. On them, the *Dāna Kāṇḍa* of the *Kṛtyakalpataru* of Lakṣmidhara (12th century), Ballālasena's *Dāna-sāgara* (12th century), the *Dānakhaṇḍa* of the *Caturvargacintāmaṇi* of Hemādri (14th century), the *Dānavākyavalī* of Vidyāpati (14-15th centuries), the *Dānaprakāśa* of Mitramiśra (17th century) and the *Dānamayūkha* of Nīlakaṇṭha (17th century) are considered very extensive and important¹⁵.

Of various kinds of gifts, that of land is regarded as the most important¹⁶, though this also applies the gift of cow and knowledge (*vidyā*)¹⁷. The gift of land is regarded as the most meritorious act. This kind of propaganda about the land gift is in tune with the early mediaeval polity and economy. A whole chapter in the *Anuśāsana Parvan* of the *Mahābhārata* early is devoted to the lauding of the land grants (*bhumidāna-prasaṃsa*). The earlier texts speak of five types of *dāna*, but the early mediaeval texts mention sixteen types of *dāna*¹⁸. The 16 types are now called great gifts or *mahādānas*. Mentioned in the *Purāṇas*, several of them are concerned with land grants directly or indirectly. The five-ploughshare (*pañcalāṅgalaka*) gift involves the gift of a *Kharvaṭa* or a *Kheṭa*, or a village or 150 *nivartaṇas* of land¹⁹. In the man-weight gift of gold (*tulāpuruṣa*) the donor may give away a village to the *guru* and other priests²⁰. The earth-gift called *dharādāna* is only symbolically connected with land for the earth is made of gold²¹; so in the case with the gift of the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 841.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 848.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ D.K. RAJANĪTIKĀṆḌA, Vol. IV, Pt. IV, Contents, p. 14; also see *ibid.*, pp. 1952-55.

¹⁹ P.V. KANE, HDS, Vol. II. Pt. II, pp. 875-876.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 872.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 876.

seven oceans called the *saptasāgaraka*²². Apart from this, the land gifts were made by the kings who performed the *tulāpuruṣa*, *gosahasra*, *hemāsvaratha* and *pañcalāṅgalaka* gifts²³.

The concept of property mainly in the form of land prevalent till recent times is a legacy of pre-industrial society. According to a popular rhyme found in the rural areas of northern and eastern Bihar property means either land or cow; to some extent it connotes gold whereas all the other items are worthless²⁴. This clearly shows that people attach importance to either agricultural or pastoral possessions; trade is taken to be of marginal value. It is likely that this popular rhyme quoted by us may have been derived from some Sanskrit verse, but I have not been able to trace it.

Although gifts were an integral part of the exchange system in pre-feudal times those covering immovable property, especially land which was the chief means of production, assumes a new dimension. The Anuśāsana Parva of the *Mahābhārata* declares the land gift to be the best of the gifts including those of gold and cattle. The land-giver is called a donor, a kinsman, a real man, a pious person, a descendant of high lineage and a man of prowess²⁵. The donors part with their land under certain compulsions and land grants presuppose bilateral obligations. But the obligation of those who receive land, food and other items seems to be more important than that of those who give. It amounts to expecting unilateral gratitude. The idea of contract underlies the relationship between equals or between the vassals and their superior lords, but that of gratitude governs the relation between the landlord and his peasants.

That a person should not see his superior empty-handed is a mark of both gratitude and submissiveness. During the feudal age peasants or vassals would invariably carry some presents for their superiors. This seems to have been derived from the idea of *bhoga*. Both the landlords as well as various types of divinities were entitled

²² *Ibid.*, p. 877.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 870.

²⁴ *dhan māne dharatī dhan māne gāy: kuch-kuch sonā aur sab chāy.*

²⁵ *Mbh.*, XIII. 62.45.

to *bhoga*. It reminds us of commendation according to which a person surrenders his body and also makes presents to his superiors. Of course on ceremonial occasions the superiors reciprocate by feeding visitors or distributing gifts among them.

The institution of intermediary is embedded in the feudal mind. Because of the rise of a class of the landed magnates between the king and the ordinary peasants we find the presence of numerous intermediaries in the agrarian structure. This phenomenon influences the relation of human beings with the god. It is thought in mediaeval sects especially in tantricism, which affected all the sects, that nobody can attain *siddhi* or spiritual experience or *mokṣa* without the blessings of a *guru*. According to P.V. Kane amongst tantric writers sometimes the respect for *guru* reached extreme and disgusting lengths²⁶. The disciple must keep secret the *pūjā* and the *mantra*, imparted by the *guru*²⁷. He has to place the *guru*'s feet on his head and surrender his body, wealth and even life to the *guru*²⁸. The whole process looks like commendation and underlines the importance of the intermediary in religious relationships. Further, the *guru* is higher than all the other men, *mantra* is higher than the *guru*, the deity is higher than the *mantra*, and the highest self is higher than the *devata*²⁹. Thus the hierarchy shows five successive strata. Therefore, apart from the priests there arises a class of *gurus* in the feudal set-up. The priests are meant for helping the performance of various religious *saṃkāras* and ceremonies, but the *guru* is meant for instructing the disciple in spiritual knowledge so that the latter may have access to god. This is true of almost all the sects that appear in mediaeval times. In them the access of devotee to the god is mediated through the efforts of his *guru* who acts as an intermediary.

The feudal mind was a localised mind. Since there was less of trade and commerce in the early phase of feudalism contacts

²⁶ *gururbrahmā gururviṣṇurgurururdevo maheśvaraḥ, gurureva param brahma tasmai śrī gurave namaḥ*, (*Līṅga Purāṇa*, I. 85. 164-65).

²⁷ P.V. KANE, HDS, Vol. 11, Pt. II., Poona, 1970, p. 1072, fn. 1735.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1071.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1055.

between various sections of people living even in a kingdom were intermittent. Mobility was confined to the migration of a limited number of the brāhmaṇas and to the march of army. This bred insularity, and the ruling class resisted change. They were not receptive to any technological change. Thus although the printing press and time keeping mechanical clock were presented to Akbar, these inventions were considered to be useless.

Land grant was attributed to the favour of the lord (*prabhu-prasāda*). Its continuous and widespread practice generated the idea that favour and patronage were all important and action did not matter. The assignment of land to a nonreligious party is represented as a *prasāda* or favour from the king in many grants of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in central and western India³⁰. The social, economic and political rise of a person was related to the favour showered on him. Everything depended on the favour of the lord and nothing on the action of the individual.

It may be fruitful to find out the frequency of the terms which convey a sense of dependence and subservience in early mediaeval texts. In the feudal hierarchy those who are placed in the lower rungs look up to their superiors for favour, patronage and donations. There is very little of the assertion of the right to subsistence. All categories of landlords and peasants, together with priests and artisans involved in the *jajmānī* system, feel that they do not owe their sources of livelihood to their labour; but to the favour of their superiors, mostly landlords. Unequal distribution of land and its products is considered a natural phenomenon. Therefore, such terms as *anukampā*, *anugraha*, *audārya*, *karuṇā*, *kṛpā*, *dāna*, *dayā* and *prasāda* gain more currency in the mediaeval vocabulary.

It was really the *kṛpā* or the *prasāda* that mattered and not the *puruṣārtha* of a person. This was bound to breed a sense of strong servility. A person would not explain his gains and losses rationally. The priests propagated the idea of rebirth according to which the miseries from which the people suffered in the present life were ascribed to their misdeeds in the past life. In some ways the idea of

³⁰ R. S. SHARMA, *Indian Feudalism*, Delhi, 1980, p. 101.

rebirth appears in the *Jātakas*, but in the feudal phase the theory of *punarjanma* is propagated in a sustained manner. The idea of rebirth to inculcated in the mind of the peasant masses through religious stories or *kathas* which are passed on from generation to generation by priest and elders. The peasants or the landlords who take to *puruṣārtha* to violate the provisions of the land charters are threatened with the prospect of hell after death. It is repeatedly stated at the end of the land charters that those who violate them live in hell for 60,000 years and those who grunt them live in heaven for the same period. Thus hell and heaven are created to compel the peasantry and other people to accept the norms of a feudal patriarchal society. The illusion seems to have been particularly developed in early mediaeval times to protect the landed property of the *brahmaṇas* and others against encroachment by rival priests and by the peasant masses.

The idea of *puruṣārtha* was further blunted by the propagation of belief in destiny. To the theory of destiny or *daiva* a section is devoted in the *Nitiśataka* of Bhartṛhari³¹. We are told that *karma* or action is induced by destiny³². Hence destiny is the ultimate cause of what happens. Because of the ideas of heaven and hell, destiny and rebirth the peasants developed an attitude of do-nothingness, helplessness and submissiveness. Such attitudes strengthened and sustained the idea of inborn superiority claimed by the landlord class who either generally belonged to higher castes or were regarded higher. The favour or the superiority of the landlord articulated itself through the concept of fatherhood. The ruler and patron were regarded, as father, as appears from, a popular verse probably composed in mediaeval time³³. The idea was that like the father the local lord or *rājā* looks after all his subjects.

The idea of ranking penetrated the rural ethos. Ordinary peasants and others consider the head of the village or its richest

³¹ It is called *daiva-paddhati*, verses 83-92.

³² This is shown in *karma-paddhati*, verses 93-102.

³³ *vidyādātā janmadātā kanyādātā tathaiva ca, annadātā bhayatrātā pañca pitarah smṛtāḥ*.

person us their *rājā* and call themselves *prajā*. The idea of looking upon a local potentate as a *rājā* is basically feudal. At one time the *rājā* indicated the head of a republic, at another time a local feudal lord. This kind of relationship seems to have been the result of the socio-economic formation in which the *sāmantas* recognise the authority of superior vassals who in their turn recognise the authority of the *rājā*. The *rājā* may belong to the same caste as the *prajā* or to a higher caste. If the *rājā* is originally a lower caste person he would be ritually upgraded and would be regarded as belonging to a higher caste.

The feudal ideologues use language to promote social distancing. In pre-feudal times women and *śūdras* speak Prakrit, and men of higher *varṇas* and status speak Sanskrit. But even kings and gods are addressed in the same form of the second person. Vedic or classical Sanskrit, shows little difference in terms for addressing various categories of people. We have only one kind of term in the second person, i.e. *tvam* but in mediaeval Sanskrit the term *bhavān* is used to indicate respect for people of a higher category. The term *bhavān* is used in plural to indicate respect for persons of a much higher category. The kings and superiors are addressed in terms of respect and in that context passive voice is used in order to indicate the social distance between the ordinary people and people of superior grades. Thus three graded categories of people can be seen clearly. Later in regional dialects this tendency of social distancing is sophisticated further. The Maithili language shows four types of addresses in the second person which obviously correspond to various grades of people. Generally, the system of addressing in Indian languages speaks of a three-tier society. This applies to Marathi, Bengali, Telegu. (I have not made enquiries about other languages). Changes in the forms of address in the second person correspond also to age groups and caste groups, but basically they stem from a feudal mind which always thinks in terms of a three-tier society.

The notion of subservience is evident in the terms that are used frequently in land charters. Those who are granted land are described as people living on the feet of the overlord (*pādopajīvī* or

pādapadmopajīvi). They are also depicted as lying bent and prostrate (*praṇata*). Such expressions used in the family or religious context may indicate real respect for elders, divinities and religious teachers. But in the secular context they suggest an attitude of servility towards the king, the lord or the overlord.

Landed magnates believe in ostentation. Because of this they spend lavishly on the occasion of marriage and similar other domestic ceremonies. The Maithil *brahmaṇas* are arranged ritually in four categories. The higher the category, the more the courses provided in the feast. Landlords spend beyond their means to impress their inferiors, with their majesty and generosity about which legends are created. This tradition may have been derived from the tribal phase in which we find the "bigman" idea. But in the feudal phase landlords borrow and squander to such an extent that sometimes they lose their estate to the creditor.

Similarly, the landed magnates show a heightened sense of self-respect amounting to vanity. They always think in terms of their high status. Since the landlords, whatever their rank, are considered the fountain-head of all favours, they develop a sense of great egoism and terms indicating prestige and authority, which are generously applied to the lords by their priests. The terms *vikrama*, *pratāpa*, etc., are frequently used. Even now the king of Nepal bears more than a dozen titles. According to Bhartṛhari, a great person, even when he is in straitened circumstances, should behave according to his status. He adds that even a hungry lion does not eat dried straw³⁴. Similarly, age is not considered superior to rank. We are told that a lion's cub attacks an elephant and not a dog or jackal when he needs food³⁵. These analogies taken from the animal world show the nature of the mind working behind the existing social hierarchy.

Bhakti seems to have been a distinctive feature of early mediaeval society. The idea of complete self-surrender of the individual to his god appears in the *Bhagavad-gītā*, a work of about

³⁴ *Bhartṛhari Nīṭisataka*, verses 23-24.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, verse 32.

the fifth century. A later text called the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* speaks of several forms of *bhakti*³⁶, but considers *ekāntika-bhaktiyoga*³⁷ to be the best. Its essential element was desireless service (*sevanam*) to god in preference to even liberation³⁸. *Bhakti* thus came to be identified with service, and liberation was relegated to the background. This religious ideology may reflect the concern for securing the services of dependant peasants and artisans in the early mediaeval period.

It is significant that the cult of the *bhakti* spread in the country from about the seventh century onwards when the feudal social structure had been almost established. The *bhakta* or devotee made offerings to the god in return for which he received the favour or the *prasāda* from the god. A Paramāra inscription of the 11th-12th centuries speaks of a vassal reobtaining *prasāda* of his overlord through *bhakti buddhi* and *parakrama*³⁹. According to the *bhakti* cult the devotee completely surrendered to his god and was intensely loyal to him. A devotee imagined that he had developed intimate personal relationship with the god and depended completely on him. The ideas and practices associated with the *bhakti* cult can be compared to the complete subjection of the tenants to the landlords. The tenants offered a part of their produce and rendered labour services to the lord. In return they received land and protection as a kind of favour from him. This kind of relationship was intensely personal. A similar relationship came to be set up between the individual and his god.

It is true that the peasant practised devotion to gods even in pre-feudal times, but his relationship with the god was patterned on the basis of that subsisting between the tax-paying peasant and the king. The peasant gave loyalty to the king, but he was not so intimate with him because of the lack of opportunity for constant personal interaction; the king's officers collected taxes from him.

³⁶ III. 29. 7.

³⁷ III. 29. 14.

³⁸ III. 29. 13.

³⁹ *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, 7.2 no. 76, verse 11. I owe this reference to Vishwamohan Jha.

But in the feudal set-up in most cases the landlord happened to be the man on the spot and thus came into constant personal contact with the peasant. The *bhakti* cult was therefore immeasurably strengthened by the close relationship between the peasant and the lord. The *bhakti* bond was further cemented by the close tie between the vassals or the feudatories on the one hand and the paramount ruler on the other. The vassals sought royal charters (*śāsana-yācana*) for the legitimisation of their position in relation to the peasants. This kind of mutual relationship must have influenced the cult of *bhakti*.

We notice selfless (*nikāma*) *bhakti* which does not expect anything from the god, and also reciprocal *bhakti* which aims at fulfillment of desires by the lord. Both types of *bhakti* were practised, side by side. The first seems to set the ideal for the semi-serf like peasant bonded to the vassal or the landlord, and the second, for ordinary peasants tied to the vassals and also for the vassals tied to the overlord. The second type of *bhakti* can be clearly seen in the *Durgāsaptasatī* of the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa*, a text of about the sixth century.

Whatever may be the social context of its different forms in mediaeval times, by the 14th century *bhakti* came to be regarded as the most potent method for attaining salvation (*mukti*). The paths of action (*karma*) and knowledge (*jñāna*) lost in importance. The *Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* states that, combined with devotion (*bhakti*) knowledge, special expertise and renunciation enabled a person to attain salvation⁴⁰. A person bereft of *bhakti* cannot approach the god by means of sacrifice, gift, ascetism and study of the Vedas.

Because of the persistence of feudal elements for a long time, *bhakti* came to be deeply ingrained, in the Indian mind. What is worse, the idea that loyalty superceeds both action and knowledge persists till today.

⁴⁰ *ato madbhaktiyuktasya jñānaṃ vijñānameva ca, vairāgyaṃ ca bhavēcchigrahā tato muktimāpnuyāt.* (*Adhyātma Rāmāyaṇa* with Hindi commentary by CHANDRAMA PANDEY, Varanaseya Sanskrit Samsthan, Varanasi, Samvat, 2041, *Aranya Kāṇḍa*).

Bhakti helped strengthen the existing feudal relationship. The devotees were passionately attached to their god, who was conceived as father, mother, kinsman, companion, wealth and learning. His constant imaginary company was regarded as a great solace for those who experienced grim exploitation and hardships arising out of the increasing burden of payments in early mediaeval times. Since the elements of feudalism persisted in the country for a long time, *bhakti* came to be deeply ingrained in the Indian ethos. In course of time it came to be regarded as an autonomous ideology. Even when feudal conditions disappeared, the practice of cultivating the various gods continued. Deeply religious men believed that what they achieved was not by their own efforts but by the grace of the god.

The orientation towards servility, hierarchy, destiny and favour seeking seems to be so strong that egalitarian ethos associated with the peasants and tribals do not make their presence really felt. Tantric and *bhakti* movements made women, *śūdras* and others equal in the eyes of the divinity but here the matter ended. Though restrictions regarding food and marriage were discovered by tantric sects, the movement for equality was not extended to the economic or political plane. The existing social formation was fed and nurtured by the dominant ideas of the feudal ruling class in which the caste complex of inferiority, superiority and hierarchy played an important part.