



Unravelling the Feudalism Debate in Mediaeval Indian History: Contributions and Perspectives of R.S. Sharma, Burton Stein, and Hermann Kulke

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Abstract

The eminent historian R.S. Sharma maintained that a decentralised agrarian system, with landholding elites exerting political and economic control over their areas, best described feudalism in India. He emphasised the significance of caste-based relationships and the way feudal rulers took advantage of the people.

Another well-known historian, Burton Stein, found the concept of 'feudalism' insufficient to describe the sociopolitical processes of mediaeval India. He surmised that the Indian social structure did not cleanly fit the European feudal model and offered substitute notions like 'segmentary state' and 'stateless societies' to describe the convoluted political system of the time.

Indian history expert Hermann Kulke proposed an integrated processual approach to analysing feudalism in India. Kulke emphasised the need to comprehend the historical factors that contributed to the development and evolution of feudal ties in various geographic areas. His research on the development of feudalism and its interactions with various forms of power in mediaeval Indian culture brought to light the interdependence of economic, social, and political variables.

The points made in the feudalism discussion by Sharma, Stein, and Kulke are critically analysed in this study. It evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of each strategy and pinpoints points of convergence and divergence. By combining these ideas, the study aims to further our knowledge of feudalism in mediaeval India and illuminate the larger socio-political setting of the era.

Keywords: Feudalism, Debate, Segementary State, Integrated Processual Model, Medieval

The Feudalism Debate

According to R.S. Sharma, the emergence of feudalism in India can be traced back to the increasing number of land grants given to Brahmins, religious organizations, and government officials during the early centuries AD. These land grants came with various privileges and immunities, such as exemption from taxation and interference by royal officials. As a result, a class of landed intermediaries was formed, who acquired land and power at the expense of the ruling dynasty and the rights of the villagers.

The decline of urbanization, interregional trade, and the scarcity of currency further exacerbated the loss of central authority over land and people. This process led to political fragmentation and decentralization, with territories being granted to vassals and officials who eventually established themselves as independent rulers. The granting of extensive territories to these vassals and officials resulted in their territorial entrenchment and the eventual emergence of independent potentates. This decentralization of political power further contributed to the development of feudalism in India.

R.S. Sharma's analysis highlights the role of land grants, the privileges associated with them, and the resulting power dynamics in the formation of feudalism. The loss of central authority, the rise of landed intermediaries, and the political fragmentation shaped the socio-political landscape of ancient India.¹ The concept of Indian feudalism has been a subject of intense debate among scholars and historians even prior to the publication of R.S. Sharma's book. This debate was highlighted during a special seminar held in December 1964 at the Centre of Advanced Study in Ancient Indian History and Culture at the University of Calcutta. The seminar featured various lectures presenting arguments both in support of and against the theory of Indian feudalism.

In one of the lectures, delivered by D.C. Sircar, the idea that 'Feudalism is thus a misnomer in the early Indian context' was put forth. Sircar discussed the confusion between landlordism and feudalism in the Indian context, suggesting that the term feudalism does not accurately reflect the socio-economic and political structures of early India. This comment reflects a perspective challenging the applicability of the feudalism framework in early Indian history. It suggests that the specific dynamics of landownership, power structures, and social relations in ancient India differed significantly from the European feudal model. The seminar at the University of Calcutta illustrates the diversity of opinions and interpretations regarding the concept of Indian feudalism. It underscores the ongoing scholarly discourse and the need for nuanced understandings of the socio-political systems that existed in ancient India.² His primary argument against applying the idea of feudalism to Indian history is based on the evident dearth of inscriptions that award service tenure in comparison to the vast majority of land grants that were made to Brahmins and religious organisations.

According to Sircar, 'the majority of the numerous charters discovered all over the country grant land to gods and Brahmanas without stipulating any obligation of the donees to the donors³.' These stipulations would have bound the donees to the donors. It should come as no surprise that the priestly class was the one that was least suited to provide services of the feudal sort⁴.

When examining the early medieval Hindu kingdoms, where Brahmins played a significant role in the process of state formation, it is important to consider that this argument may miss a crucial point. However, within the specific context of early European feudalism and in a formal sense, it is undoubtedly accurate. Nonetheless, it should be noted that this argument may overlook an important aspect, as will be discussed later.

Contributions by Mukhia and Jha

The 'Indian Feudalism School' has contributed to the ongoing debate surrounding the validity of the prevailing conceptual framework of Indian feudalism. Scholars such as D. N. Jha and Harbans Mukhia, in their respective addresses at the Indian History Congress session in December 1979, raised intriguing challenges that question the applicability of feudalism as an idea in the Indian context. These scholars posed thought-provoking questions and challenged the viability of the feudalism concept in relation to India. Their contributions add to the scholarly discourse surrounding the understanding of socio-political systems in Indian history. The interventions by the 'Indian Feudalism School' highlight the ongoing debates and the need to critically assess the concept of feudalism in the Indian context. By questioning its viability, they prompt scholars to delve deeper into the complexities of Indian history and consider alternative frameworks for analyzing socio-political structures. In conclusion, while the formal sense of feudalism may align with early European contexts, its application to early medieval Hindu kingdoms in India requires careful consideration and further exploration. The challenges raised by scholars associated with the 'Indian Feudalism School' encourage a more nuanced understanding of Indian history and the socio-political dynamics that shaped the region⁵.

In his address to the Ancient India Section, D. N. Jha defended the concept of Indian feudalism. However, he also acknowledged a growing recognition of the theoretical limitations of explaining feudal developments solely in terms of foreign trade, which was influenced by factors external to the Indian context. This realization led to a reevaluation by proponents of Indian feudalism. Jha further elaborated on the idea of the Kaliyuga, which he argued represented a severe conflict between social classes in ancient Indian culture. This hostility contributed to the development of the feudal system, which later experienced a decline around 1000 A.D. due to a social crisis coinciding with a resurgence in commercial activity and urbanization. It is noteworthy that Jha correctly observed that the emergence of the land grant economy occurred on the periphery of regions with firmly established Brahmanical order, unrelated to the social crisis and decadence associated with the concept of Kaliyuga. This observation challenges one of the primary foundations on which R.S. Sharma's interpretation of the beginning of feudalism in India relies. Overall, D. N. Jha sought to reconcile the concept of Indian feudalism with Marxist

notions, aligning with previous efforts made by R.S. Sharma. He acknowledged the limitations of the foreign trade explanation, emphasized the significance of the Kaliyuga concept, and proposed a nuanced understanding of the socio-economic developments that led to the formation and subsequent decline of feudalism in India.

On the other hand, Harbans Mukhia raised extremely critical issues about the very existence of feudalism in India⁶. In India, the proponents of feudalism attribute its establishment primarily to state actions, such as granting land in lieu of salary or as charity, and the subsequent subjugation of the peasantry by the grantees through legal rights. They argue that feudalism developed through administrative and legal processes rather than as organic changes at the base of society, as seen in European feudalism derived from European medievalism.

While acknowledging the viewpoint of D. N. Jha that the development of feudal rule required serious social and production crises, they contend that administrative and legal procedures are not necessary for the establishment of feudalism. Harbans Mukhia, in contrast to Jha, disputes the existence of a fundamental crisis in the history of ancient and medieval India. He highlights the presence of a high agrarian surplus in the form of land revenues and cesses, which facilitated the state's exploitation of the peasant surplus under conditions of relative stability.

Mukhia argues that due to this relative stability and the absence of significant disruptions in agricultural production, the state was able to function effectively. He concludes that comparing Indian feudalism to its European counterpart is illogical and irrelevant in the context of ancient and medieval Indian history.

The debate between Mukhia and Jha raises questions about the applicability of the European feudalism framework to the Indian context. Mukhia emphasizes the unique historical conditions and stability that allowed the state to appropriate the peasant surplus, suggesting that the Indian experience differed significantly from the European model. Overall, the proponents of Indian feudalism highlight the role of state action, legal processes, and the absence of a profound crisis in shaping the socio-economic structures of ancient and medieval India. Their arguments challenge the direct comparison between European and Indian feudalism, emphasizing the distinct historical trajectories and contexts of each region.

Burton Stein's Intervention

In the context of South Indian history, the study of the structure of Hindu kingdoms that has been carried out both by traditional historians and followers of the notion of Indian feudalism has also been disputed by a group of American historians. This analysis has been carried out both by conventional historians and by adherents of the concept of Indian feudalism. The most notable figure among them is Burton Stein. He published an explanatory piece in which he presented the notion of 'nuclear areas,' which he identifies as a significant driving force in the historical progression of South India. According to Stein, the 'nuclear areas of corporate institutions' and high population density are fundamentally units of agricultural organisation that are mostly located in the drainage basins of the major rivers⁷.

Citing B. Subba Rao⁸ as a source, Stein presents his explanation of the historical progression of South India, emphasizing the role of these agricultural-focused 'nuclear areas' and their corporate institutions. This perspective challenges traditional interpretations of South Indian history and offers an alternative framework for understanding the region's development. Stein's analysis, supported by the concept of 'nuclear areas,' contributes to a deeper understanding of the socio-economic and geographical dynamics of South India. By highlighting the significance of these agricultural units and their organizational structures, Stein sheds new light on the historical processes that shaped the region.

According to Stein, the 'nuclear areas' within the South Indian political system were deliberately established by human agency. These areas consisted of Brahmin and Sat-Sudra communities that operated as relatively independent and self-governing entities with a significant degree of economic autonomy. The district assembly within these nuclear regions held full jurisdiction over the resources within their territories. It is worth noting that the nuclear regions had minimal, if any, connections to the prominent warrior families in Kanchi or Tanjore, the capitals of the Pallava and Chola dynasties. Drawing from these observations, B. Stein concludes that the political system in early medieval South India can best be understood as a multicentered distribution of power.

In this system, authority was dispersed among various centers rather than being concentrated solely within the ruling dynasties. This decentralized structure suggests that power was not solely vested in the central capitals but was also shared among the nuclear regions and their respective district assemblies. Stein's analysis highlights the existence of multiple power centers within the political landscape of early medieval South India. The presence of independent and self-governing nuclear regions, along with their economic autonomy, contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the political dynamics of the time. This multicentered system of power emphasizes the dispersed nature of authority and challenges the notion of a centralized political structure dominated solely by the ruling dynasties.⁹

In 1973, Burton Stein expanded upon his critical approach and published his significant work, titled 'The Segmentary State in South Indian History.' This thought-provoking book presented his findings and added depth to the understanding of South Indian history. Stein's work was well-received, and it was further presented at a conference titled 'Realm and Region in Traditional India,' held by Duke University in 1977. Stein's book challenged existing notions and offered a fresh perspective on South Indian history, particularly regarding the segmentary state. The segmentary state theory posits that political power was dispersed among multiple centers rather than concentrated in a single authority.

Stein's critical analysis and findings in his book expanded upon this concept, shedding light on the complexities of South Indian political systems. Presenting his work at the conference provided an opportunity for scholars and academics to engage with Stein's ideas and contribute to the ongoing discourse surrounding South Indian history.

The conference at Duke University served as a platform for intellectual exchange and further exploration of the realm and regional dynamics in traditional India.

Stein's book, 'The Segmentary State in South Indian History,' marked a significant contribution to the field of South Indian history and influenced subsequent research and scholarship in the area. The publication of his work and its presentation at the conference demonstrated the growing interest and importance of understanding the segmentary state and its implications in the historical context of South India.¹⁰

Burton Stein's development of the notion of the segmentary state was inspired by the work of anthropologist A.W. Southall and his research on the Alur civilization in Eastern Africa. Southall's findings provided a foundation for Stein to adapt the concept of the segmentary state to early Indian society. Stein acknowledges that introducing the concept of the segmentary state, which was derived from African material, to the study of South Indian society may cause a certain level of culture shock, both in general and particularly among students of South Indian society.

This statement emphasizes the significant departure from traditional approaches and the introduction of a new framework for understanding the socio-political dynamics of early Indian society. By adapting the concept of the segmentary state to the Indian context, Stein aimed to provide fresh insights and perspectives on South Indian history. This approach challenged established paradigms and encouraged scholars to reevaluate existing theories and understandings of the region's political systems. Stein's acknowledgment of the African origins of the segmentary state concept highlights his intellectual openness to drawing from diverse sources and applying them to the study of South Indian history. It demonstrates his innovative thinking and his willingness to bridge different academic disciplines to enrich our understanding of early Indian society.¹¹

According to Stein, the segmentary state can be viewed as a position along a continuum of governance formation. While displaying some characteristics of a unitary state, such as territorial sovereignty, centralized administration, a specialized administrative staff, and a monopoly of force, these attributes gradually become more symbolic and ritualistic as one moves away from the center of power. In the peripheral regions, there are multiple levels of subordinate foci organized in a pyramidal structure. The center of the segmentary state holds significant power and exercises full political control. It embodies the characteristics commonly associated with a unified state, including the ability to assert territorial authority and maintain a centralized administrative system. Here, the signs of a unitary state are tangible and practical. However, as one moves towards the periphery of the segmentary state, the authority and control become less concrete and more symbolic. The peripheral regions feature several levels of subordinate foci, organized in a pyramid-like structure. These subordinate units hold varying degrees of power and influence, with each level maintaining a level of autonomy and self-governance.

This pyramidal organization of power reflects the segmented nature of the state, where political authority is dispersed among different levels and centers. While the center retains the highest concentration of power, the periphery operates with relative independence within their respective spheres of influence. Stein's concept of the segmentary state provides a nuanced perspective on the formation of governance. It recognizes that political control within a society can evolve and manifest differently in different regions. Instead of viewing governance as a strictly centralized and uniform system, Stein's concept acknowledges the gradual transition from practical political control at the center to more symbolic and decentralized authority at the periphery.

This alternative perspective challenges the traditional understanding of a unitary state, where power is concentrated solely in the central authority. It highlights the complex dynamics of power distribution and the diverse political structures that can exist within historical societies. By exploring the segmentary state, scholars are encouraged to delve deeper into the intricacies of governance formation. They can analyze how political control shifts and adapts as one moves away from the center of power. This approach opens up avenues for investigating the influence of local contexts, regional dynamics, and the role of various centers of authority.

Stein's concept prompts a reevaluation of traditional assumptions and encourages a more comprehensive examination of historical societies. It broadens our understanding of governance by recognizing the multifaceted nature of power and the diverse forms it can take in different regions and contexts. This perspective invites scholars to explore the complexities of political systems and to consider the impact of decentralization and symbolic authority on historical societies¹². The segments in the outlying territories of the segmentary states often have uncertain or ambiguous allegiances, which adds to the political instability of these states. As we move farther away from the center of power, the likelihood increases that a subordinate authority may shift its allegiance from one power pyramid to another.

In the segmentary state framework, power is dispersed among different levels and centers, creating a decentralized political structure. However, this decentralization also means that the loyalty and allegiance of the segments in the periphery may be less steadfast compared to those closer to the center of power. The segments located in the outlying territories are more susceptible to external influences and the allure of alternative power centers. Their distance from the central authority can make them more vulnerable to the enticements or coercion of other rulers or factions. Consequently, their allegiance may shift as they seek to navigate the complex web of regional politics and power dynamics. This fluidity in allegiance poses challenges to the stability and cohesion of the segmentary states. It creates a sense of political precariousness, as the loyalty of the peripheral segments can be subject to change based on shifting circumstances or opportunistic calculations.

Understanding the dynamics of allegiance within the segmentary state framework highlights the complexity of governance in these societies. It underscores the need for constant negotiation and maintenance of relationships between different centers of power. The political landscape of the segmentary state is characterized by a delicate

balance of alliances and rivalries, influenced by factors such as geographical distance, external pressures, and local aspirations.¹³ Stein elucidates two more factors that are critical to comprehending his idea of the segmentary state in South Indian historical context: Pyramidal organisation may be seen throughout the segmentary state as a whole, whether in the units or the segments.

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Stein's perspective challenges the conventional interpretation of inscriptions in the segmentary state, particularly in the context of the Chola empire. While traditional views emphasize these inscriptions as evidence of the central dynasty's political control, Stein highlights their role in establishing and reinforcing ritual sovereignty. According to Stein, these inscriptions served a broader purpose of disseminating the symbolic authority of the great kingship throughout the realm. Rather than being solely indicative of direct political control, they were part of a larger framework of ritual practices and standardized messages. Stein's approach brings attention to the significance of ritual sovereignty within the segmentary state. It underscores the importance of symbolic power and its dissemination as a means of maintaining authority and legitimacy.

By focusing on the role of ritual practices and standardized messages, Stein offers a deeper understanding of the governance of the Chola empire and the dynamics of power distribution within the segmentary state. This perspective encourages scholars to explore the complex interplay between political control, ritual practices, and

symbolic authority. It highlights the multifaceted nature of power within the segmentary state and provides valuable insights into the broader socio-political dynamics of ancient societies.¹⁴ In this way, ritual sovereignty served as the guiding ideological principle that 'converted a conglomeration of local political systems into a segmentary state' and 'made these units into parts of a whole'¹⁵.

Stein's view provides a significant benefit, particularly with respect to the significant topic of land donations to Brahmins and religious organisations and their role within the setting of the Indian states. This is an essential question. According to what has been shown above, he considers them to be an integral component of the 'ritual sovereignty' of the segmentary state, and in his research on the Cholas, he writes that 'we can no longer interpret such grants as indicating an alienation of resources of the Chola central government'¹⁶.

In an earlier paper by G.W. Spencer titled 'Religious Networks and King's Influence in Eleventh Century South India,' it was noted that the establishment and financial support of the new temple in Tanjore by Rajaraja I was a strategic move by an ambitious ruler to solidify his tenuous power. This observation aligns with Stein's theory and adds further support to his concept of the segmentary state. Stein's theory, which delves into the structure of the Chola empire, introduces the concept of 'ritual sovereignty' as a significant factor. This notion is evident in the example of the Chola empire. The empire consisted of powerful and indigenous local segments known as Nadus, which were based on ethnic and lineage affiliations and had a documented history spanning a thousand years. Stein's proposal of the segmentary state as an explanation is intriguing and appears more compelling than alternative theories put forth thus far.

However, before fully accepting the segmentary state as an established theory, it is crucial to address some concerns. One major consideration is Stein's understanding of Hinduism, which plays a pivotal role in his concept of 'ritual sovereignty.' He raises questions regarding the existence of a strong and relevant moral order for each caste within Hinduism. Stein argues that Hinduism, as part of the monarchical framework, also contributed to significant instability. The power to legitimize political authority rested with local Brahmins who had no higher authorities. Additionally, Hinduism exhibited a notable division between the higher castes (Brahmin and non-Brahmin) involved in Vedic sect activities and the majority of Hindus who followed localized, non-Vedic, folk religious practices¹⁷. This divide between the higher and lower castes is an aspect often overlooked by historians, but it holds significant importance in understanding Hinduism and its moral influence.

The absence of a continuous moral order in Hinduism is closely intertwined with the concept of ritual exclusiveness. Stein highlights this argument not only to refute the applicability of feudalism in Indian history, as feudalism relied on a binding moral order as the foundation of vassalage, but also to shed light on his concept of the segmentary state and the significance of ritual sovereignty. Hinduism draws from both the broader all-Indian Sanskrit legacy and numerous local or regional traditions, forming the foundation and strength of the religion¹⁸. However, recent research, such as the study of the Jagannatha religion and the regional tradition of Orissa,

demonstrates that these two aspects are not strictly dichotomous entities. They interact and influence each other, blurring the boundaries between the grand Indian tradition and the localized traditions.

Understanding this interplay between the broader and local traditions is crucial for comprehending Stein's concept of the segmentary state and the role of ritual sovereignty within it. The segmentary state framework acknowledges the coexistence and interaction of various power centers and cultural traditions, highlighting their intricate relationship in shaping governance and social dynamics¹⁹. By recognizing the complex dynamics of Hinduism, where a continuous moral order is not always present and ritual exclusiveness plays a role, Stein deepens our understanding of the segmentary state. It underscores the multifaceted nature of religious and cultural practices within a broader political context, emphasizing the need to consider the interplay between grand traditions and localized customs.

The study of Hinduism and its relationship to the segmentary state offers insights into the diverse forms of authority, governance, and religious practices that existed in ancient Indian societies. It challenges simplistic categorizations and encourages a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of religious and political dynamics within the segmentary state framework.²⁰

The regional traditions were crucial in the development of a new feeling of regional allegiance, which was established on the basis of regional cults, regional languages and literature, caste and lineage ties, and other factors. It would seem that this regional allegiance, which served as a precursor to contemporary regionalism, gradually formed the new intellectual foundation upon which the regional kingdoms were established²¹. Instead of deriving their legitimacy from Vedic Brahmins who had settled in close proximity to the capitals, the rajas of the great regional empires extended their royal patronage more and more to the enlargement and embellishment of already existing tirthas²², many of which were associated with indigenous pre-Brahmanic cults.

Kulke's Integrated Processual Model

Hermann Kulke, a well-known Indian historian, made substantial contributions to the area with his integrated processual paradigm. Kulke's method sought to comprehend the evolution of Indian history by evaluating the interactions of numerous processes across time, such as political, economic, social, and cultural elements. His model provides a comprehensive framework for analysing historical transitions as well as the growth of institutions and structures.

Kulke's focus on regional variances and the need to understand local dynamics is one of his most important contributions. He saw that, rather than presuming a unified historical narrative, India's wide geographical breadth and various socio-cultural environments required an awareness of regional specificities. Kulke's method allowed

for a more contextualised view of historical changes, recognising the many trajectories and complexity within India's various regions.

Kulke's integrated processual paradigm provides a new viewpoint on feudalism in Indian history. He maintained that feudalism should not be seen as a static and unchanging reality but rather as a dynamic process that changed across time and geography. Kulke emphasised the need to study the historical processes that led to the creation and evolution of feudal ties throughout India.

Furthermore, Kulke emphasised the interdependence of economic, social, and political aspects in creating feudalism's dynamics. He saw that feudal ties were impacted by larger economic networks and trading systems rather than just land ownership and agricultural output. Kulke developed a more thorough understanding of feudalism and its intricacies within the Indian setting by exploring the interaction of economic considerations, social hierarchies, and governmental institutions.

The connection between feudalism and other power systems in mediaeval Indian society was further underlined by Kulke's integrated processual model. He contended that feudalism did not exist in isolation but rather intertwined with other forms of authority such as regional governments, caste-based hierarchies, and religious organisations. This method allows for a comprehensive examination of the sociopolitical environment, recognising the multifaceted character of power relations in mediaeval India.

Several significant aspects and arguments were engaged in Hermann Kulke's defence of his integrated processual paradigm in Indian history. These elements and arguments underline his approach's relevance and strengths:

Kulke emphasised the need to recognise regional diversity in Indian history. He stated that due to India's wide geographic extent and various cultural backdrops, a localised approach rather than a one-size-fits-all story was required. Kulke attempted to create a more nuanced perspective on historical trends by recognising regional differences.

Kulke stressed on the role of historical processes in forming Indian history. He emphasised the dynamic character of historical development rather than relying simply on static institutions. Kulke's method attempted to investigate the processes that lead to the construction, change, and disintegration of institutions, power structures, and social interactions across time.

Interdisciplinary Approach: Kulke argued for an interdisciplinary approach to researching Indian history. He felt that a thorough knowledge of historical occurrences required the integration of several disciplines, including political science, sociology, anthropology, and economics. This multidisciplinary approach enabled a more comprehensive examination of the complicated interaction of many elements and forces.

Factor Interconnectedness: Kulke maintained that economic, social, political, and cultural elements were interrelated and impacted one another. He emphasised the need to study these aspects in tandem in order to have a whole picture of historical events. Kulke attempted to present a more complete interpretation of Indian history by taking into account the interaction of diverse factors.

Interaction with Power Structures: Kulke emphasised the need to know how various power structures interacted with one another. He understood that feudalism, for example, did not exist in isolation but was intertwined with other forms of authority like regional governments, caste systems, and religious organisations. Kulke's method aimed to acquire a better understanding of the socio-political environment by analysing the intricacies and interdependencies between various power systems.

Kulke made substantial contributions to Indian history via his integrated processual model by questioning conventional narratives and presenting a more nuanced view of historical processes. His attention to regional variances, analysis of diverse causes, and investigation of the relationships between various power systems have substantially enhanced our knowledge of feudalism and the larger socio-political backdrop of mediaeval India.

Kulke's work continues to impact and inspire Indian history researchers. His integrated processual model offers a useful framework for analysing historical transitions and a foundation for future study and inquiry into the complexity of Indian society and its historical evolution. His defence of his integrated processual model emphasised the importance of regional variances, historical processes, multidisciplinary viewpoints, factor interconnectivity, and power structure interaction. These important elements and arguments served as the cornerstone for his methodology, allowing for a more nuanced and thorough knowledge of Indian history.

Conclusion

These concerns highlight the need for further examination and discussion before fully embracing Stein's segmentary state theory as an all-encompassing explanation. Exploring the complexities of Hinduism and its societal impact, particularly the division between castes, is crucial for a comprehensive understanding of the concept of ritual sovereignty and its implications within the segmentary state framework. The paper has examined the contributions of renowned historians R.S. Sharma, Burton Stein, and Hermann Kulke while delving into the complex feudalism issue in mediaeval Indian history. These researchers have improved our knowledge of the socio-political intricacies that are prominent in this age by bringing different viewpoints and theoretical frameworks to bear, illuminating the dynamics of power, governance, and social structures.

The writings of R.S. Sharma have been crucial in shedding light on the feudalistic features of mediaeval Indian society. His focus on the caste-based connections and the decentralised agricultural organisation has made it possible to better comprehend how feudal lords exploited the people. Our understanding of the feudal dynamics in India has improved as a result of Sharma's detailed examination of landholding elites and their political and

economic control over areas. The conventional view of feudalism in the Indian setting has been questioned by Burton Stein's contributions. Stein has questioned the viability of the European feudal system and suggested substitute ideas such as the "segmentary state" and "stateless societies." These ideas have been crucial for understanding the complex political system that existed in mediaeval India, emphasising the decentralised and dispersed character of power structures.

The intricate workings of feudalism in mediaeval India have largely been understood thanks to Hermann Kulke's integrated processual paradigm. Kulke's comprehensive approach, which looks at the historical processes that gave rise to and changed feudal ties, has given researchers a deeper understanding of how economic, social, and political elements interact. His focus on regional differences and how feudalism interacted with other power systems has helped us better understand the varied socio-political environment of mediaeval India. This research paper has emphasised areas of convergence and difference among these famous academics by critically analysing the arguments put forth by Sharma, Stein, and Kulke. Even though they used different techniques, their combined study has improved our knowledge of feudalism in mediaeval India. Our understanding of the intricate power dynamics, social structures, and historical processes that produced feudalistic relationships within the Indian setting has been strengthened.

The contributions made by R.S. Sharma, Burton Stein, and Hermann Kulke and their academic contributions have shed light on the complex sociopolitical environment of the time, laying the groundwork for further investigation and developing a more nuanced understanding of feudalism in the Indian setting. Our grasp of the complexity and variants of feudalism in the Indian setting has been strengthened by their wide-ranging viewpoints and theoretical frameworks, which have also given us invaluable insights into the sociopolitical institutions of mediaeval India.

¹ R.S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism* : c. 300-1200, op. cit. p. 159.

² D.C. Sircar, *Land System and Feudalism In Ancient India*, University of Calcutta, 1966, pp. 57-62. It was reviewed again by R.S. Sharma in his review article "Indian Feudalism Retouched", op. cit.

³ The article was republished as "Indian Landlordism and European Feudalism", in: D.C. Sircar, *Studies in the Political and Administrative Systems in Ancient and Medieval India*, Delhi, 1944, pp. 13-32.

⁴ D.C. Sircar, *Studies in the Political and Administrative Systems in Ancient and Medieval India*, Delhi, 1944, 56.

⁵ D.N. Jha, "Early Indian Feudalism: A Historiographical Critique", Presidential Address, Section Ancient India, 10.

⁶ Harbans Mukhia, "Was there Feudalism in Indian History", Presidential Address, Section Medieval India, Indian History Congress XL Session, Dec. 1979

⁷ B. Stein. "State and the Agrarian Order in Medieval South India: A Historiographical Critique", in *Essays on South India*, B. Stein ed., New Delhi, 1976, pp. 64-91 (86).

⁸ B. Stein. "State and the Agrarian Order in Medieval South India: A Historiographical Critique", in *Essays on South India*, B. Stein ed., New Delhi, 1976, pp. 64-91 (86).

⁹ B. Stein, "Integration of the Agrarian System of South India", in *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History*, R.E. Frykenberg ed., Madison, 1969, pp. 175- 216 (185).

¹⁰ B. Stein, "The Segmentary State in South Indian History", in *Realm and Region in Traditional India*, R.G. Fox. (ed.) New Delhi, 1977, pp. 3~51.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 49

¹² Ibid., p. 10.

¹³ Ibid., p. 16.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁵ Ibid., p 16

¹⁶ J.D.M. Derret, "Rajadharma", in J.Asian Studies. XXXV, 1976, pp. 597-609.

¹⁷ Ghoshal, U. N. (1923). Hindu Revenue System (Calcutta, 1929). *fn*, 2(259), 231.

¹⁸ Ghoshal, U. N. (1923). Hindu Revenue System (Calcutta, 1929). *fn*, 2(259), 236.

¹⁹ A.B. Pandey, Early Medieval India (Allahabad : Central Book Depot, 1974 reprint) 225-3 1.

²⁰ A . Eschmann, H. Kulke, G. C. Tripathi (eds.), Tira C11/tof J11gannatlr and the Regional Traditon of Orissa, New Delhi, 1978.

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