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Rethinking Indian Feudalism Through Assam: Historiographical Debates and Regional Divergences

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ABSTRACT

This paper revisits the longstanding historiographical debate on the applicability of the term “feudalism” to early medieval India, with a specific focus on the region of ancient Assam. Drawing on the contrasting perspectives of R. S. Sharma and Harbans Mukhia, two major figures in Indian Marxist historiography; the essay examines the theoretical, economic, and social implications of labeling Indian society as “feudal”. Sharma’s model, rooted in the Pirenne thesis, emphasizes land grants, the decline of trade, and the rise of a dependent peasantry, while Mukhia challenges the universality and analytical value of the term itself. These contrasting frameworks are tested against inscriptional and archaeological evidence from ancient Assam, including the Nidhanpur copper plates and Nagajuri-Khanikargaon Fragmentary Stone Inscription. The study argues that while certain surface features in Assam such as land grants to Brahmanas and hierarchical social organization appear to parallel broader Indian patterns, the region’s ecological; political and cultural context reveals critical divergences from the Sharma model. Ultimately, this paper suggests that feudalism, as a concept, requires contextual recalibration rather than mechanical application in regional historiography.

Keywords

Indian Feudalism, Ancient Assam, R. S. Sharma, Harbans Mukhia, Land Grants, Historiographical Debates.

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Abstract— This paper revisits the longstanding historiographical debate on the applicability of the term “feudalism” to early medieval India, with a specific focus on the region of ancient Assam. Drawing on the contrasting perspectives of R. S. Sharma and Harbans Mukhia, two major figures in Indian Marxist historiography; the essay examines the theoretical, economic, and social implications of labeling Indian society as “feudal”. Sharma’s model, rooted in the Pirenne thesis, emphasizes land grants, the decline of trade, and the rise of a dependent peasantry, while Mukhia challenges the universality and analytical value of the term itself. These contrasting frameworks are tested against inscriptional and archaeological evidence from ancient Assam, including the Nidhanpur copper plates and Nagajuri-Khanikargaon Fragmentary Stone Inscription. The study argues that while certain surface features in Assam such as land grants to Brahmanas and hierarchical social organization appear to parallel broader Indian patterns, the region’s ecological, political and cultural context reveals critical divergences from the Sharma model. Ultimately, this paper suggests that feudalism, as a concept, requires contextual recalibration rather than mechanical application in regional historiography.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The term feudalism has long been a contested category in historical scholarship, especially in the context of early medieval India. While it originated in the study of medieval Europe: describing a socio-economic structure based on landholding, vassalage and decentralized political authority; the concept has been variously applied, modified and questioned when used outside its original cultural and temporal boundaries. In Indian historiography, the debate over the existence and nature of “Indian feudalism” has taken center stage in discussions of the post-Gupta period, often framed through Marxist interpretations of agrarian structures, class relations and state formation. At the heart of this debate stand two influential scholars: R. S. Sharma and Harbans Mukhia.

R. S. Sharma, drawing inspiration from Henri Pirenne’s thesis on European feudalism, propounded a distinctly Indian version of feudalism marked by the decline of long-distance trade, the proliferation of land grants, the emergence of a dependent peasantry and the rise of a landed intermediary

class (Sharma, 1990, 1984). In contrast, Harbans Mukhia challenged both the theoretical consistency and empirical accuracy of the feudalism model in India. He criticised the broad and inconsistent application of the term across contexts, claiming that Indian agrarian and social formations did not reflect the essential characteristics of European feudalism, particularly in terms of labour organization, status of peasants and technological limitations (Mukhia, 1999).

While this debate has significantly shaped the understanding of early Indian socio-economic history, it has often been framed through the lens of North Indian heartlands. This paper seeks to examine the relevance and limitations of this debate by applying it to the case of ancient Assam: a region with distinct political, ecological and cultural features. Using epigraphic sources such as Nidhanpur Copper Plate inscriptions and Nagajuri Khanikargaon Fragmentary Stone Inscription, this study assesses whether Sharma-Mukhia framework can adequately account for the regional dynamics of Assam during the early medieval period. It argues that although certain features in Assam such as land grants to Brahmanas and the rise of elite control, superficially resemble those described in the Indian feudalism thesis, a deeper analysis reveals significant divergences. These include the absence of serf like dependency, continuous trade and urban activity and a different pattern of political centralization.

In doing so, the paper contributes to a more subtle understanding of Indian feudalism by highlighting the need for region specific analysis. It also enhances the importance of critically reassessing imported theoretical models in light of local evidence and historical peculiarities.

II. DISCUSSION

A. R. S. Sharma and the Indian Feudalism Thesis

R. S. Sharma was one of the earliest and most influential historians to argue that early medieval India underwent a process of feudalization similar in structural terms to that of medieval Europe. Building on the Pirenne thesis, which emphasized the decline of Mediterranean trade and the ruralization of the European economy following Arab invasions; Sharma traced the parallel trajectory in India following the Gupta period (Sharma, 1990). He argued that the decline in long distance trade, the de-urbanisation of the economy, and the increasing use of land grants as compensation for administrative and religious services marked the emergence of an agrarian order dominated by landed intermediaries (Sharma, 1984).

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For Sharma, these land grants were not merely symbolic; they transferred fiscal and administrative rights to Brahmans and officials, creating a class that extracted surplus from the peasantry through coercive and non-market mechanisms. The peasantry, in his view, became increasingly dependent, restricted in mobility, subject to forced labour (*vishti*) and gradually tied to the land. Sharma viewed the relationship as analogous to European serfdom, though without identical institutional arrangements.

Sharma's thesis further emphasized the ideological functions in legitimizing this order. He pointed to the increasing importance of dharma, caste hierarchies, and the sanctity of land grants in puranic and inscriptional texts. Temples became centers of both spiritual and material authority, receiving substantial land grants and playing a direct role in economic management; a phenomenon Sharma described as "temple feudalism" (Sharma, 1987).

B. Harbans Mukhia and the Critique of the Feudalism Model

In contrast, Harbans Mukhia offered a powerful criticism of the Indian feudalism thesis, both on theoretical and empirical grounds. In his 1979 presidential address to the Indian history congress, titled "Was There Feudalism in Indian History?", Mukhia Challenged the applicability of feudalism as a universal model (Mukhia, 1999). He pointed out that while European feudalism was built around specific ecological, technological and economic conditions, the Indian situation displayed crucial divergences that rendered the comparison analytically weak.

Mukhia emphasized that the Indian agrarian economy was far more productive than its European counterpart. With longer growing seasons, fertile soil and efficient animal labour, Indian peasants could cultivate multiple crops per year. He argued that tied labour, central to European serfdom, was not a feature of Indian agriculture. Instead, forced labour (*beggar*) was used mainly for non-agricultural purposes such as construction or provisioning landlords. The Indian peasants, according to Mukhia, was not a serf but retained control over his labour and land, with obligations primarily related to taxation rather than direct labour services.

Mukhia also criticized the historiographical tendency to stretch the definition of feudalism to include all agrarian societies prior to capitalism. He pointed out that such excessive usage weakened the term's meaning and hid regional specificities. Instead, he promoted the use for more precise, context-sensitive categories that would better reflect India's socio-economic realities (Mukhia, 1999).

C. Applying The Debate to Ancient Assam

The debate between Sharma and Mukhia becomes particularly relevant when applied to ancient Assam, a region whose history diverges significantly from the north Indian

heartlands. Epigraphic sources such as the Nidhanpur Copper Plate inscription issued by King Bhaskarvarman provide evidence of land grants to Brahmanas that parallel those discussed by Sharma (Sarma, 2021). These grants, described as tax exempt and alienated from state revenue (*bhumichhidra*), superficially align with the model of Indian feudalism. The Brahmanas receiving these grants appear to have exercised authority over land and people, functioning similarly to Samanta's or feudal lords.

Yet the Assamese context also reveals key departures from Sharma's model. While land grants were issued, there is little evidence that Brahmanas or temple institutions developed into hereditary landed elites with exercised power over peasants. Inscriptions rarely suggest the existence of serfdom or forced agricultural labour. Labour obligations in Assam, when mentioned, were often service based and rotational rather than hereditary or coercive.

Moreover, unlike Sharma's focus on de-urbanization, archaeological and textual evidence point to continued or even growing urban activity in ancient Assam. Sites such as Pragjyotishpura, Haruppesvara and Durjayanagar (Boruah, 2024) functioned as political, religious and economic centers, with evidence of artisanal and trade activity along riverine routes such as the Brahmaputra (Lahiri, 1990). This urban continuity challenges the idea of a feudal stagnation and highlights instead to a hybrid model combining agrarian expansion with active regional trade.

Another important consideration is the role of kingship. Sharma links feudalism with political decentralization and the fragmentation of state authority. In Assam, however, kingship remained ideologically strong and politically centralized, as reflected in inscriptions that portray the monarch as a divine or semi-divine figure. While local chiefs and regional elites existed, they generally acknowledged the authority of the king and did not exhibit the political autonomy typical of Sharma's Samanta system (Barpujari, 2022).

D. Assam Urbanisation and the Question of Decline

While much of the historiographical debate on Indian feudalism centers on its emergence and characteristics, the question of its decline remains relatively unexplored; particularly in the regional contexts. In R. S. Sharma's (1990) framework, the early medieval period (circa 647-1200 CE) was marked by economic stagnation, de-urbanization, and the erosion of long-distance trade. These processes, he argued, reinforced the dominance of a land-based economy controlled by a hierarchy of landlords and intermediaries, with temples acting as centers of religious and economic authority (Sharma, 1984). Sharma saw the urban revival beginning only after the eleventh century, when renewed trade and political consolidation set the stage for the decline of feudal structures.

Nevertheless, this narrative has been increasingly questioned by scholars such as B. D. Chattopadhyaya (1994), who proposed the concept of “Third Urbanization”. In contrary to Sharma’s emphasis on decay, Chattopadhyaya pointed to the emergence of new urban centers during the early medieval period, particularly temple towns in South India, which combined ritual authority with economic activity. These towns were not mere residues of past cities but dynamic sites of commerce, artisanal production and state – society interaction. This interpretation shifts the focus from decline to transformation; suggesting that urbanization evolved alongside agrarian expansion rather than disappearing under feudal constraints.

Applying this alternative framework to ancient Assam further complicates Sharma’s feudalism thesis. Archaeological and inscriptional evidence indicates to persistent or emerging urban centers in Brahmaputra valley and beyond. Sites such as Pragytishpura, Kamarupanagar, Durjayanagar, Karnasuvarna, Hamsakonci and Hattapesvara not only served as political capitals but also functioned as cultural and economic junctions, connecting trade routes that extend into present day Bengal, North Bengal and parts of Southeast Asia (Lahiri, 1990; Barpujari, 2022). These settlements undermine the idea that ancient Assam experienced a feudal “dark age” marked by the collapse of urban life.

The inscriptional corpus from Assam also reflects a relatively centralized vision of kingship, where rulers played an active role in land administration, military organization and temple patronage. The Nidhanpur Copper Plate Grant of Bhaskarvarman, for example, demonstrates the king’s capacity to issue, reaffirm and reallocate land to Brahmanas, reinforcing royal control over resource distribution rather than signaling decentralization (Sarma, 2021). Even when land was granted, the ideological language of the grants; invoking cosmic justice, religious virtue and state responsibility suggests a framework in which the monarch remained at the center of political and moral order.

From a socio – economic perspective, the absence of widespread serfdom, inherited bondage or peasant revolts in the Assamese scenario further challenges the applicability of a classic feudal model. Peasants in Assam may have faced taxation and service obligations, but available evidence does not point to systematic subjugation. The organization of labour appears to have been flexible, often based on rotational service systems and not embedded in permanent dependency (Lahiri, 1990; Dutta, 2021). Additionally, the presence of diverse occupational groups: Kayasthas, Halovas, Ganakas, Jalovas within grant inscriptions implies a social complexity that extends beyond a rigid landlord – peasant binary.

The urban question also intersects with the decline or transformation of feudal aspects. Similar to Europe, where the growth of towns in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries provided alternatives to agrarian reliance, the emergence of temple towns, market centers and trade hubs in early Assam might have aided to a diminishing hierarchical authority. While this process was not identical to the European path, it raises the possibility that Assam’s early medieval polity underwent a unique evolution, marked not by feudal collapse but by gradual transformation of authority and production.

In this light, Sharma’s thesis appears only partially applicable to ancient Assam. The regional specificity of Assam, in its ecology, political centralization, caste structure and urban forms; resists mechanical incorporation into an all – India model of feudalism. Mukhia’s critique gains strength here: instead of imposing a single framework, historians must attend to regional variations and adopt context sensitive tools for understanding social change (Mukhia, 1999).

III. CONCLUSION

The debate over the presence and nature of feudalism in Indian history remains to be one of the most intellectually significant and ideologically charged subjects in South Asian historiography. The differing viewpoints of R. S. Sharma and Harbans Mukhia are indicative of underlying tensions between structuralism, Marxist readings and more contextually aware, empirically grounded criticisms. Sharma’s model, built upon the European feudal structure and influenced by the Pirenne thesis, highlights land grants, political decentralization and the emergence of a dependent peasantry as makers of Indian feudalism. Conversely Mukhia criticizes the universal applicability of the term, advocating for a more nuanced analysis rooted in regional specifics and socio-economic differences.

When applied to the case of ancient Assam, this historiographical framework begins to unravel. While certain surface features of Sharma’s these such as land grants to Brahmanas and hierarchical social structures; do appear in epigraphic records, the overall trajectory of Assam’s early medieval society differs in critical ways. The evidence points to continued urban development, limited instances of labour bondage and a relatively centralized model of kingship. Moreover, the ecological and technological conditions in Assam allowed for productive agriculture without necessitating serfdom or tied labour.

These findings support Mukhia’s broader argument: that feudalism, as a conceptual category, should be used cautiously and with full awareness to regional variation. The Assamese case illustrates the limits of applying a pan Indian feudal model and emphasizes the need for a more diverse and comparative historiography. In place of fixed models, future research should focus on inscriptional analysis, archaeological

data and the local socio-political context to reconstruct historical metamorphosis more accurately. Ultimately, reconsidering Indian feudalism through the lens of Assam not only sophisticates our understanding of the region's past but also challenges the theoretical hypotheses that continue to mold Indian historiography.

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