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Yogesh Mani D
Ph.D., Research Scholar,
ICSSR Doctoral Fellow,
Department of History
Madras Christian College
(Autonomous), Chennai,
Tamil Nadu, India

Corresponding Author:
Yogesh Mani D
Ph.D., Research Scholar,
ICSSR Doctoral Fellow,
Department of History
Madras Christian College
(Autonomous), Chennai,
Tamil Nadu, India

Modes of power and production: A historiography of theories on pre-modern State in India

Yogesh Mani D

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Abstract
This paper examines the principal theoretical frameworks through which historians and Marxist theorists have interpreted the pre-modern state in India and the wider non-European world, such as feudalism, the Asiatic mode of production, the segmentary state, and the tributary mode of production. Moving beyond Eurocentric typologies, the study explores how each concept has been adapted or contested within Indian historiography from the nineteenth century to the present. It highlights the transition from early colonial analogies of lord and vassal to Marxist formulations emphasizing agrarian class structures, ritual sovereignty, and state-mediated extraction. Drawing on scholars such as DD Kosambi, RS Sharma, Irfan Habib, Burton Stein, TJ Byres, Samir Amin, and Murzban Jal, the paper situates India's historical experience within global debates on non-capitalist formations. The argument advanced here is that the historiography of the pre-modern Indian state reveals not a single evolutionary sequence but a plurality of overlapping modes, in which ideology, ritual, and economic relations interacted to sustain complex, regionally differentiated political orders.

Keywords: Feudalism, segmentary state, Asiatic mode of production, tributary mode of production, pre-modern state

Introduction

The question of the pre-modern state

Theories of the pre-modern state have long occupied the intersection of historical sociology, political economy, and cultural analysis. Since Marx's initial effort to uncover the "law of motion" of capitalist society, scholars have sought to understand the forms of domination and surplus extraction that preceded or diverged from capitalism. Yet the application of these categories to non-European and particularly Indian contexts has been fraught with conceptual tension. The absence of private landed property, the persistence of caste hierarchies, and the coexistence of centralized ritual kingship with local autonomy have challenged linear evolutionary models derived from European history.

Within this debate, four paradigms have proven especially influential. Feudalism provided the earliest comparative template, allowing both colonial administrators and Marxist historians to frame India's early medieval past in familiar European terms. The Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP), introduced by Marx and later reinterpreted by Indian Marxists and philosophers such as Murzban Jal, attempted to theorize a distinctive structure in which the state acted as collective landlord and ideology mediated social reproduction. The segmentary state, developed by Aidan Southall and elaborated by Burton Stein, relocated political analysis from economic coercion to ritual sovereignty, emphasizing the symbolic and performative dimensions of power. Finally, the tributary mode of production, refined by Samir Amin and TJ Byres, offered a synthesis that combined Marxist materialism with recognition of state-centred extraction in agrarian societies.

Together, these frameworks trace the historiographical evolution from structural typology to relational analysis. Rather than representing mutually exclusive systems, they reveal the layered complexity of pre-colonial India's political economy, where ideological hegemony, agrarian surplus, and localized autonomy interacted to create a mosaic of authority. This paper examines these four paradigms in sequence, focusing on their adaptation to Indian conditions, their theoretical premises, and their historiographical consequences.

Feudalism: Indian Adaptations and Global Debates

Feudalism, as a term, defies singular interpretation. Constitutional historian Helen Cam viewed it as a form of political power rooted in land ownership, while legal historians treated it as a determinant of social status through tenure [1]. Economic historians, by contrast, emphasized the control of land through rights over labor rather than property. P Struve encapsulated feudalism as a regime built upon a binding, contractual relationship between a vassal's service and a suzerain's land grant [2]. From a Marxist perspective, MN Pokrovsky described it as a self-sufficient "natural economy," in contrast with an "exchange economy," oriented toward consumption rather than accumulation [3]. Coulborn, emphasizing governance, defined feudalism as a political system where authority was exercised by individuals through personal agreements rather than by a centralized state [4].

The earliest application of "feudalism" to India came from Colonel James Tod, who, in his *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (1829-32), interpreted Rajput social relations through the European lens of lord and vassal. To Tod, Rajasthan's chiefs and retainers reflected medieval Europe's mutual bonds of protection and loyalty. This analogy influenced early colonial historiography but rested on superficial resemblance rather than structural analysis [5]. The mid-twentieth century saw Marxist historians in India redefine feudalism through socio-economic dynamics rather than fealty. Dissatisfied with Marx's notion of the Asiatic Mode of Production, which seemed to confine India to a stagnant "Oriental" stage, scholars like D. D. Kosambi and R. S. Sharma reframed feudalism as a historical process marked by the decentralization of power, agrarian expansion and class formation. Kosambi, in *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (1956), proposed a dual process of feudalization: One "from above," through state initiatives and land grants, and one "from below," through local elite consolidation [6]. Sharma expanded this framework in *Indian Feudalism* (1965), arguing that the Gupta and post-Gupta periods witnessed the emergence of a landed intermediary class that weakened royal authority [7].

Feudalism's adaptation to India, however, sparked intense debate. Harbans Mukhia, in *Was There Feudalism in Indian History?* (1981), argued that feudalism is a context-specific construct rooted in medieval Europe and that essential features, such as legally codified vassalage, clear separation of political and economic power, and rigid hierarchy, were absent in India [8]. Irfan Habib, by contrast, accepted the term with qualifications. He argued that Indian feudalism shared structural features with its European counterpart agrarian exploitation, decentralization, and the dominance of a landed nobility though embedded within a distinct ideological and social matrix [9].

Subsequent studies deepened and diversified the Marxist position. BN Yadava and DN Jha elaborated on Sharma's thesis, interpreting feudalism as a societal transformation tied to land redistribution and the ideology of the *Kaliyuga*, an age of moral and material decline symbolizing social crisis [10]. In *How Feudal Was Indian Feudalism?*, Sharma refined his argument by emphasizing feudalism's cultural and ideological dimensions. His later work, *Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalisation* (2001), introduced the notion of the "feudal mind", visible in architecture, art, and religious expressions of loyalty. This intersection of economy and culture was also explored in Jha's edited volume *The Feudal Order* (2000), where contributors linked Bhakti devotionalism to feudal ideology seeing surrender and loyalty as spiritual analogues of lord vassal relations [11]. Critics such as BD Chattopadhyaya and Ranabir Chakravarti later questioned these conclusions, noting inconsistencies between textual rhetoric and archaeological evidence, as well as the persistence of trade and urbanization [12]. Thus, Indian historiography moved from applying feudalism as a static model to debating its internal diversity, economic logic, and ideological manifestation.

The Asiatic mode of production: Ideology, caste, and reformulations

The debate over the Asiatic Mode of Production (AMP) represents one of the most profound and controversial attempts to theorize non-European social formations within the Marxist framework [13]. From its inception, the AMP has occupied an ambiguous position in Marxist thought simultaneously illuminating and problematic, historically grounded yet theoretically incomplete. Marx's concern with pre-capitalist societies stemmed from his attempt to reveal the "law of motion" of modern capitalism; however, this exploration necessitated examining the logic of earlier, non-capitalist modes. Marx's analyses spanning *The German Ideology*, *Grundrisse*, and *Capital* hinted at a form of society where communal property, centralized despotism, and the absence of private landed property created a distinct economic and ideological order [14].

The AMP debate exemplifies the challenge of categorizing pre-colonial, non-European societies in Marxist terms. While European history exhibited feudalism's transition to capitalism, Asia and Africa displayed alternative configurations of surplus extraction and power. This raised a critical question: Must all non-European societies conform to European categories, or do they require distinct analytical formulations? Marx himself, despite limited empirical knowledge of the "Oriental world", recognized this divergence [15]. His notion of the AMP was thus not a mere typology but an effort to grasp societies where village communities and the state coexisted in a self-reproducing totality, with the state acting as the collective landlord.

Though a section of Indian Marxists rejected AMP, Murzban Jal reinterprets this formation in explicitly ideological terms. In his essay "Asiatic Mode of Production, Caste and the Indian Left," Jal argues that earlier Marxists misunderstood Marx's late reflections on non-European societies by reducing the AMP to a mechanical economic stage. Drawing on Marx's *Ethnological Notebooks*, Jal posits that the AMP should be read as a theologico-political structure, in which Brahminism and caste constituted the ideological superstructure reproducing the economic base. Caste, in this framework, was not merely a social hierarchy but the structural mechanism by which surplus was extracted and justified. The Brahminical order fused religious knowledge with political authority, producing what Jal terms a "Hindu counter-revolution" a counter-movement that neutralized the egalitarian impulses of materialist traditions such as Buddhism and the Lokayatas [16].

This view enriches Byres's call for rigorous analysis of the "Articulation between forces and relations of production" in non-European societies. In India, the articulation was mediated by ideology: the caste system ensured social reproduction without class conflict by encoding inequality as divine law. The state, far from being a neutral

administrative entity, became a theological extension of Brahminical order. The AMP, therefore, was not simply an economic system; it was a spiritual-political formation where domination was sanctified and resistance depoliticized [17].

At the same time, Byres insists that identifying the dominant mode of production in a given "social formation" is essential to grasp its historical motion. In Marx's words, each society has one mode that "bathes all the other colours" and "determines their specific gravity" [18]. In the Indian context, this dominant mode was a sacralized agrarian order; a unity of village, land, and state mediated through religion. While Marx saw in this the causes of stagnation, Jal reframes it as a self-reproducing contradiction: an order that sustains itself ideologically while containing the latent potential for rational transformation. Importantly, both Byres and Jal emphasize that the AMP's significance extends beyond antiquity.

The Segmentary State: Ritual Sovereignty and Political Integration

The theory of the segmentary state emerged in mid-twentieth-century anthropology and history as a corrective to both Marxist and Weberian models of state formation. Developed initially by Aidan Southall in *Alur Society: A Study in Processes and Types of Domination* (1956), and later refined by Burton Stein in *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (1980), the model proposed that in certain pre-modern societies, especially in Africa and South Asia, political authority was neither centralized nor territorially defined. Instead, it was dispersed across multiple, overlapping segments linked by ritual, kinship, and symbolic ties rather than bureaucratic control.

The segmentary state model, first formulated by Burton Stein in his seminal work *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (1980), redefined how historians understood the nature of premodern Indian polity. Rejecting both the colonial portrayal of India as despotic and the Marxist assumption of a rigid class state, Stein proposed a vision of political order characterized by ritual sovereignty, localized autonomy, and flexible integration. The king, in this model, did not rule through coercive bureaucracy or feudal hierarchies but through ritual and symbolic authority that bound a mosaic of quasi-independent localities [19].

For Stein, the Chola state in particular represented not a centralized empire but a ritually integrated polity, whose coherence was maintained through religious legitimation rather than political control. Power radiated outward in diminishing circles from the royal centre, sustained by temple rituals, Brahmanical sanction, and redistributive institutions rather than permanent administrative machinery. Political relationships were contingent, negotiated, and often mediated by local elites, Brahmanas, and temple institutions rather than enforced by a standing army or bureaucracy. Thus, Stein's model inverted the Weberian or Marxist assumption of the state as a monopolist of violence or taxation. Instead, it functioned as a ritual system of shared sovereignty [20].

The anthropological roots of Stein's model are evident in his adaptation of Aidan Southall's concept of the "segmentary state", originally developed to describe precolonial African polities such as Bunyoro and Ankole [21]. In both cases, authority was dispersed through lineage-based hierarchies, and the ruler's power derived more from ritual centrality than administrative capacity. The polity resembled a ritual field rather than a territorial state, integrating local chieftains and communities through religious symbolism and periodic ceremonies of allegiance. Stein's comparative turn thus placed South India within a global typology of non-centralized states, challenging Eurocentric narratives of feudal or absolutist sovereignty.

However, as scholars have since emphasized, the segmentary model is not without its tensions. Scholars, such as Nicholas Dirks and C. A. Bayly, extended Stein's insight into colonial and postcolonial contexts, showing how the idioms of ritual sovereignty and hierarchical patronage persisted even under modern state forms. Dirks, in particular, argued that colonial knowledge codified and reified these precolonial practices into rigid administrative categories, transforming fluid ritual orders into static "traditions". Thus, Stein's segmentary model, when historicized, offers not a timeless schema but a dynamic tool for analyzing how political power in India has long been mediated through ritual, kinship, and ideology rather than bureaucratic rationality [22].

The continued significance of Stein's thesis lies in its comparative and theoretical elasticity. In Africa, Southeast Asia, and South India alike, segmentary formations demonstrate that the state's essence need not be coercive centralization but the ritualized management of fragmentation. Stein's insight endures not as a closed theory but as an open grammar of historical diversity, enabling scholars to think beyond European categories of sovereignty and modernity. It reaffirms that the study of premodern polities must account for both the material and metaphysical dimensions of power, the intertwining of economy, ritual, and ideology that gave such states their distinctive coherence.

Conceptual evolution of the tributary mode of production

The tributary mode of production, as a conceptual reformulation within Marxist historiography, emerged from efforts to describe pre-capitalist societies that neither fit the European feudal model nor conformed to the Asiatic mode of production (AMP). The term gained prominence through Samir Amin's attempt to reconcile Marx's incomplete reflections on non-European formations with the material evidence of agrarian societies in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. In his *Unequal Development* (1976) and related essays, Amin defined the tributary mode as one in which the direct producers retain possession of the means of production, yet the surplus is appropriated by a dominant class through political coercion mediated by the state. This mode, unlike feudalism, relies not on private property or contractual vassalage but on a centralized mechanism of taxation and tribute [23].

As TJ Byres explains, Amin's tributary schema arose partly as a response to the dissatisfaction many Marxist historians felt toward the AMP, which was often criticized for theoretical vagueness and Eurocentric presuppositions. In Byres's reconstruction of the debate, the tributary mode provided an analytical alternative capable of capturing the complex articulation of political power and surplus extraction in non-European contexts. Whereas the AMP emphasized communal property and despotic stagnation, the tributary mode highlighted the dynamic interplay of state and peasantry, the political over determination of

exploitation, and the historical variability of centralized taxation systems. For Byres, Wickham's adaptation of Amin's model to pre-colonial Asia, especially his suggestion that Asian societies displayed an *articulation* of tributary and feudal relations, marked an important shift from static typologies to relational analysis [17].

This transition from the Asiatic to the tributary conception signified a broader methodological maturation in Marxist historiography. Rather than searching for a universal sequence of modes, scholars increasingly sought to theorize heterogeneous social formations dominated by political rather than strictly economic coercion. Byres situates the tributary mode within Marx's own insistence that every society possesses a "dominant mode of production" that shapes its total social configuration. The tributary formulation thus retains Marx's dialectical framework while extending it beyond the European historical experience. In the Indian context, scholars, including Burton Stein and R. S. Sharma, also touched on tributary elements when analyzing the relationship between ritual sovereignty and revenue collection, though they retained differing frameworks; Stein's ritual polity and Sharma's feudal economy. The tributary approach allowed these differing models to be read within a broader spectrum of state-mediated agrarian exploitation.

Byres credits Amin and Wickham with giving the tributary concept theoretical precision by locating it within the Marxist notions of articulation and dominance. A social formation, in this sense, may contain multiple modes petty-commodity, feudal, or communal but one mode dominates and "bathes all the other colours" of the social totality. The tributary mode, defined by political domination and centralized extraction, represents such a dominant principle across much of pre-colonial Asia. It explains the persistence of state structures capable of large-scale mobilization and long-term agrarian stability without private landed property. Nevertheless, its critics have pointed out that even the tributary model risks over-systematization, reducing diverse historical experiences to a single structural logic. Byres himself cautioned that the category must remain open and empirical, attentive to regional diversity and the articulation of multiple modes within a single social formation.

Conclusion

The historiography of the pre-modern state in India demonstrates that no single theoretical model feudal, Asiatic, segmentary, or tributary can encompass the region's historical diversity. Yet taken together, these frameworks chart the intellectual trajectory of comparative historical analysis from the nineteenth century to the present. Early colonial and liberal narratives sought analogies with medieval Europe; Marxist historians replaced analogy with structure, grounding interpretation in relations of production and modes of surplus extraction. Later revisions, from Stein's ritual polity to Amin's tributary mode, expanded the horizon of Marxist analysis to include ideology, ritual, and the state's symbolic economy as constitutive elements of power. Across these debates, two continuities stand out. First, the recognition that economic and ideological formations are inseparable: caste, kingship, and religious legitimation were not cultural superstructures atop a neutral economy but active mechanisms of production and reproduction. Second, the insistence that non-European societies demand theoretical autonomy, that India's historical experience cannot be reduced to derivative forms of European feudalism or capitalism. The convergence of materialist and anthropological approaches has therefore produced a more plural, historically grounded understanding of the state as both economic institution and moral community. In conclusion, the evolution from feudalism to the tributary model within Indian and global historiography reflects an ongoing effort to articulate a non-Eurocentric theory of social formations. Each framework whether emphasizing class, caste, or ritual illuminates a facet of how power operated in pre-modern India. Their synthesis underscores that historical analysis must remain dialectical, attentive to both continuity and transformation, material conditions and ideological forms. The study of India's pre-modern state thus continues to offer vital insight into the multiplicity of human pathways toward political organization and economic order.

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