

Land, Labour, and Loyalty: A Comparative Study of the Meitei Lallup and Tai Sakdina Systems within the Framework of Asian Feudalism

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ABSTRACT

Feudalism has long been a subject of comparative historical inquiry, with scholars debating its applicability beyond Europe. This study examines two distinct Asian models the Meitei Lallup system of Manipur and the Tai Sakdina system of Thailand to explore how feudal institutions evolved as adaptive responses to agrarian economies, military needs, and political centralisation. Drawing on chronicles, legal codes, and secondary scholarship, the research employs a historical-comparative framework informed by the theoretical perspectives of Bloch, Duby, Sharma, and Kosambi. The findings reveal that while both systems shared core features of feudalism surplus extraction, hereditary privileges, service obligations, and the integration of religion into governance they differed in their structural emphasis. The Tai Sakdina system was bureaucratically rigid, with graded land allotments tied to rice-field units that determined social rank and corvée duties, reinforcing elite dominance. In contrast, the Meitei Lallup system was more service-oriented, relying on rotational labour contributions alongside taxation, creating a relatively flexible model of authority. Both systems centralised power by binding society into reciprocal networks of duty, yet each reflected unique cultural and political contexts. The study concludes that Asian feudal formations paralleled European models in function but not in form, demonstrating the need for region-specific analyses. By situating the Meitei and Tai systems within global debates, this research underscores the versatility of feudalism as a conceptual framework while highlighting its adaptive transformations in early Asian polities.

Keywords: Feudalism, Sakdina, Lallup, Manipur, Tai states

Introduction

Feudalism emerged as a distinctive socio-economic and political order across various regions of the world, shaped by local historical and cultural conditions. Fundamentally, it functioned as a system of land tenure rooted in reciprocal obligations, where the granting of land was intrinsically tied to services, most commonly of military or administrative nature. This arrangement created intricate networks of personal loyalty and duty, linking lords and vassals, and extending hierarchically from kings to commoners. By depending on land-based relationships rather than monetary transactions, feudal systems effectively sustained governance, ensured agricultural productivity, and maintained military readiness. In the Asian context, feudal frameworks adapted uniquely to diverse political and cultural landscapes, resulting in region-specific institutions that shared common features of obligation, loyalty, and hierarchical authority. Notably, the Meitei kingdom of Manipur institutionalised the Lallup system, a rotational labour service where every able-bodied male contributed to civil and military tasks. This system allowed the state to mobilise manpower for public works, agricultural cultivation, and military campaigns without incurring direct financial costs. Conversely, the Tai states implemented the Sakdina system, which formalised social hierarchy through land allotments that defined status, responsibilities, and privileges. While both systems relied on reciprocal service, the Meitei model was primarily service-oriented and flexible, whereas the Tai system emphasised rigid rank-based land allocation.

A comparative examination of these feudal structures underscores how early Asian polities negotiated the demands of governance, economic management, and military organisation through non-monetary mechanisms. Both the Lallup and Sakdina systems illustrate the central role of obligations in consolidating political authority: rulers bound multiple layers of society into networks of duty, ensuring loyalty and efficient resource mobilisation. In Manipur, labour service constituted the administrative and military backbone, facilitating the functioning of the state with minimal monetary expenditure. In contrast, the Tai system relied on codified hierarchies, linking landholding to social rank and formalising authority over nobles, commoners, and slaves alike. These systems demonstrate the adaptability of feudal principles outside Europe, revealing how pre-modern Asian states leveraged land, labour, and loyalty as foundational instruments of governance. Together, they provide valuable insights into the diverse manifestations of feudalism, highlighting both shared structural characteristics and region-specific adaptations, thereby expanding the understanding of non-European feudal forms in comparative historical studies.

Review of Literatures

The study of feudalism has generated extensive debate among historians, with scholars attempting to define its scope and manifestations across different regions. In the European tradition, Bloch (1961) characterised feudalism as a nexus of landholding, rights, and duties governed by personal loyalty and hereditary privileges, forming the basis of medieval governance. This perspective was expanded by Duby (1974), who highlighted the economic underpinnings of the system, stressing the role of agrarian surplus in sustaining political authority. In the Indian context, R.S. Sharma (1980) broadened the interpretation by identifying feudalism as a mechanism of surplus extraction from peasants through land rights, forced labour, and superior ownership claims. Kosambi (1965) earlier emphasised the socio-economic implications of land control, arguing that feudal relations in India were distinct from Europe but equally central to state formation. Together, these works established the conceptual ground for examining non-European feudal formations such as those of the Meitei and Tai societies. The Thai Sakdina system has been a focal point for Southeast Asian historians. Rabibhadana (1969) examined its institutional character, showing how graded land allotments formalised civil and military hierarchies under King Borommatrailoknat in the fifteenth century. Wyatt (1984) contextualised Sakdina within the political centralisation of the early Thai states, arguing that the system linked social status to rice-field units, thereby sustaining both agrarian production and military organisation. Ishii (1975) analysed the hierarchical classification of nobles (Khunung), commoners (Phrai), and slaves (That), stressing its rigid social stratification. Later, Terwiel (1983) reinforced this view by noting how corvée obligations under Sakdina entrenched state power over commoners. These perspectives highlight how the Tai polity institutionalised obligations and privileges in a codified structure, demonstrating a variant of feudalism that blended hierarchy, land, and service.

For Manipur, scholars have drawn attention to the distinct form of feudalisation manifested in the Lallup system. Parratt (1980) described its origins under King Nongda Lairen Pakhangba and its formalisation under King Loiyumba, whereby able-bodied men between the ages of 16 and 60 were obliged to perform rotational labour for the state. Iboongohal (1987) detailed how lands were distributed to nobles, Brahmins, temples, and soldiers, reinforcing hierarchies through revenue-free grants. Hodson (1908) earlier recognised the role of clan chiefs and nobles as intermediaries who facilitated surplus extraction from peasants, while Singh (1992) emphasised the integration of religion into the feudal structure through temple lands. Devi (2003) further examined how the Lallup system extended to both civil and military duties, underscoring its role in consolidating political authority without direct monetary expenditure. Unlike the rigidly graded Sakdina system, Meitei feudalism relied heavily on service obligations rather than structured land allotments, making it distinctive within the Asian context.

Comparative scholarship has sought to situate both the Tai and Meitei systems within the broader framework of Asian feudalism. Sharma (2001) argued that common features such as corvée labour, surplus extraction, and king-centred authority reveal structural parallels across the region. Lieberman (2003) noted that while hierarchical classification was central to Tai feudalism, Manipur's system was relatively fluid, anchored more in service than in rigid land-based ranking. Singh (2015) highlighted differences in taxation, with Tai nobles exempted from revenue obligations while Meitei nobles remained partially accountable. Roy (2010) suggested that both systems reveal adaptive strategies of governance in agrarian polities, reflecting how rulers consolidated power through social stratification and reciprocal obligations. Collectively, these studies illustrate that while the feudal models of the Meitei and Tai societies shared certain features with the European archetype, they also evolved unique mechanisms suited to their cultural and political landscapes.

Objectives

The present study seeks to critically explore the evolution and structural features of the feudal systems that developed in the Meitei kingdom of Manipur and the Tai states, with particular attention to their mechanisms of governance and resource mobilisation. It aims to analyse both the similarities and differences in landholding patterns, modes of labour mobilisation, and systems of social stratification that characterised these societies. By examining how these arrangements sustained political authority, facilitated economic

production, and organised military power, the study interprets the broader significance of feudal institutions in shaping early Asian polities. At the same time, it positions these regional models within the wider scholarly debate on the applicability and adaptability of the concept of feudalism beyond its European origins, thereby contributing to a comparative understanding of how land, labour, and hierarchy functioned as foundations of governance in diverse cultural contexts.

Materials and Methods

This study adopts a historical-comparative methodology grounded in the analysis of secondary sources such as chronicles, legal codes, and scholarly interpretations. Primary focus is given to historical records including the Sakdina laws of Thailand and the Cheitharol Kumbaba, the royal chronicle of Manipur, which provide insights into the organisation of land, labour, and authority. The comparative framework is informed by theoretical definitions of feudalism articulated by European scholars like Marc Bloch and Indian historians such as R.S. Sharma, allowing for cross-cultural evaluation. Evidence is thematically categorised under four dimensions: land tenure, labour obligations, social stratification, and state authority, enabling a systematic assessment of structural features. Through this comparative lens, the study identifies both points of convergence and divergence between the Tai and Meitei systems, ultimately situating them within the wider global discourse on feudalism and its applicability in non-European historical contexts.

Analysis and Results

The analysis of the Tai Sakdina system and the Meitei Lallup system demonstrates that both societies relied heavily on labour mobilisation and reciprocal obligations rather than monetary taxation to sustain political and economic authority. In the Tai system, the Sakdina rank served as the principal marker of social identity, determining land allotments, duties, and privileges. Nobles occupied the upper echelons of the hierarchy, enjoying extensive rights and exemptions, while commoners (phrai) and slaves (that) shouldered *corvée* labour, levies, and military service. The king, positioned as the ultimate owner of land, exercised monopolistic authority over both political and economic spheres, thereby ensuring centralisation of power. By contrast, the Meitei system operated primarily through the rotational Lallup service, where able-bodied men contributed labour for ten out of every forty days. Though land grants were distributed to nobles, Brahmins, temples, and soldiers to reinforce hierarchy, taxation persisted, distinguishing the Meitei model from the Tai system. Social divisions existed between nobles, commoners, and slaves, but the Meitei structure was less rigidly classified than the Sakdina hierarchy, with clan chiefs maintaining dual allegiance to both the king and their local lineages.

A closer comparison highlights both the convergences and divergences of these systems. Both models exhibited core features of feudalism, including surplus extraction, hereditary privileges, military service obligations, and the integration of religion into governance. Yet, their operational mechanisms diverged significantly. The Tai Sakdina system was more rigid and bureaucratically institutionalised, with each individual's rank measured in rice-field units that directly correlated with their duties and status. In contrast, the Meitei Lallup framework was more service-oriented, with flexibility in obligations and less formalised stratification. Religion played a pivotal role in reinforcing authority in both societies: Buddhist monasteries in the Tai states legitimised royal power, while Brahmin priests and temple land grants in Manipur reinforced social and political hierarchies. The differing treatment of nobility also reveals important nuances. Tai nobles largely enjoyed exemptions from taxation, whereas Meitei nobles were not fully exempt, underscoring variations in elite privileges within Asian feudal structures.

The results of this comparative study confirm that both the Tai and Meitei systems can be meaningfully situated within the broader conceptual framework of feudalism, albeit with distinct regional adaptations. The findings show that both models enabled the centralisation of power, with the king monopolising land, labour, and military resources without reliance on monetary taxation. Labour mobilisation was crucial in both contexts: *corvée* service by the phrai in the Tai states and rotational Lallup obligations in Manipur formed the backbone of public works and military organisation. Social stratification was evident in both systems, though more rigidly formalised under the Sakdina hierarchy. Nobility and religious institutions functioned as stabilising pillars of authority, providing legitimacy while benefiting from privileges. However, divergences such as the greater flexibility of the Meitei system, the persistence of taxation, and the less burdensome nature of Lallup compared to the longer *corvée* obligations of the Tai phrai reveal region-specific adaptations. Ultimately, these findings underscore that Asian polities developed indigenous modes of governance that paralleled but did not replicate European feudalism, instead evolving as adaptive responses to local military, agricultural, and administrative needs through networks of obligation and reciprocal service.

Discussion

The comparative study of the Tai Sakdina and Meitei Lallup systems contributes to the wider debate on feudalism by demonstrating how the concept, though rooted in European historiography, can be meaningfully applied to non-European contexts with appropriate qualifications. Building on Bloch's (1961) characterisation of feudalism as a nexus of landholding, loyalty, and hereditary privilege, and Duby's (1974) emphasis on agrarian surplus, the findings suggest that similar structural mechanisms operated in Asia. In the Indian tradition, R.S. Sharma (1980) and Kosambi (1965) broadened the definition by underlining surplus extraction and socio-economic hierarchies, perspectives that resonate with the features of both the Sakdina and Lallup systems. The evidence confirms that these systems institutionalised surplus mobilisation, stratification, and political centralisation, even though they did not replicate the precise European model. Instead, they illustrate how localised conditions agrarian economies, military needs, and religious institutions shaped parallel forms of feudal organisation. Within Southeast Asia, the Sakdina system has drawn scholarly attention for its institutional rigidity. Rabibhadana (1969) and Wyatt (1984) showed that Sakdina codified hierarchies through land allotments measured in rice-field units, linking status directly to agrarian productivity and military service. Ishii (1975) and Terwiel (1983) reinforced this interpretation by emphasising the entrenchment of obligations and the king's monopoly over authority, which allowed the Thai polity to integrate nobles, commoners, and slaves into a tightly graded hierarchy. The current study supports these conclusions, showing that Sakdina's rigid classification and exemption of nobles from taxation reinforced elite dominance while binding commoners through *corvée* labour. This highlights a uniquely Southeast Asian manifestation of feudalism where bureaucratised ranking merged with agrarian obligations to sustain state power.

In contrast, the Meitei Lallup system illustrates a more flexible model of feudal organisation. Parratt (1980) and Iboongohal (1987) documented its origins and expansion under successive rulers, noting how rotational labour service formed the backbone of administration and military mobilisation. Hodson (1908) and Singh (1992) drew attention to the dual role of nobles and clan chiefs as both local leaders and agents of the king, while Devi (2003) highlighted the integration of religious authority through land grants to temples and Brahmins. Unlike Sakdina, the Meitei system did not codify ranks in land units but relied on service obligations, making it less rigid yet equally effective in consolidating power. The persistence of taxation alongside labour service, as noted by Singh (2015), further distinguished it from the Thai model, suggesting a hybrid system where *corvée* and revenue complemented each other. Thus, the Lallup system reflects a distinctive adaptation of feudal principles within the socio-political landscape of Manipur. Comparative scholarship underscores both the shared and divergent elements of these systems. Sharma (2001) and Roy (2010) pointed to common features such as surplus extraction, *corvée* labour, and king-centred authority, while Lieberman (2003) stressed the relative fluidity of the Meitei structure compared to the rigid stratification of Sakdina. Singh's (2015) observation about taxation further demonstrates that Asian feudal models were not homogenous but adapted to local contexts. The findings of this study reinforce these perspectives, showing that while both systems mirrored core elements of European feudalism, they evolved in response to regional demands for military manpower, agricultural productivity, and central authority. Ultimately, the discussion highlights that the Meitei and Tai systems exemplify indigenous pathways of feudal development in Asia, offering valuable insights into the global applicability of feudalism as a historical category while affirming the need to account for cultural specificity and local adaptation.

Summary and Conclusion

The present study provides a comparative examination of the feudal systems of the Meitei kingdom of Manipur and the Tai states, highlighting both shared structures and region-specific adaptations. Analysis reveals that both systems relied fundamentally on labour mobilisation, hierarchical obligations, and land-based authority rather than direct monetary taxation, enabling rulers to consolidate political power, maintain military readiness, and sustain agrarian productivity. In the Tai Sakdina system, rigidly codified land allotments determined social status, duties, and privileges, embedding a formal hierarchy that stratified nobles, commoners, and slaves, with the king exercising ultimate ownership and authority. Conversely, the Meitei Lallup system operated through rotational labour obligations, combining civil and military duties, with land grants supporting nobles, Brahmins, and temples. Unlike Sakdina, the Meitei model remained relatively flexible, relying on service obligations rather than strictly graded land allotments, while retaining elements of taxation, which introduced a hybrid form of resource mobilisation. In both societies, religious institutions reinforced state authority, legitimised elite privileges, and integrated spiritual sanction into governance, highlighting the intersection of socio-political and cultural dimensions within Asian feudal frameworks.

The comparative findings indicate that, while the Tai and Meitei systems shared core feudal characteristics such as surplus extraction, hereditary privileges, and king-centred authority they evolved distinct operational mechanisms in response to local economic, military, and cultural conditions. Tai feudalism emphasised codification, rigidity, and exemption of nobles from taxation, whereas Meitei feudalism prioritised flexibility, service obligations, and complementary revenue extraction. Together, these systems demonstrate the adaptive nature of feudal organisation beyond Europe, reflecting indigenous strategies for balancing

authority, resource mobilisation, and social hierarchy. The study underscores that Asian feudal models cannot be understood as mere replicas of European paradigms but as locally tailored institutions that integrated land, labour, loyalty, and religion to sustain governance. Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader historiographical debate by illustrating how pre-modern Asian polities developed distinctive pathways of feudalism, offering valuable insights into the comparative study of social, economic, and political organisation in historical contexts.

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