

---

## UNIT 5 EARLY MEDIEVAL POLITIES IN NORTH INDIA, 7<sup>TH</sup> TO 12<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES A.D.

---

Early Medieval Polities in  
Peninsular India 8<sup>th</sup> to  
12<sup>th</sup> Centuries A.D.

### Structure

- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Transition to Early Medieval India: Various Perspectives
- 5.3 Major Political Powers: Palas, Pratiharas and Rashtrakutas
- 5.4 Approaches to the Study of Early Medieval Polity
- 5.5 State Formation under the Rajputs
- 5.6 Nature of Polity under the Palas
- 5.7 Summary
- 5.8 Exercises

---

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

---

The land grants bestowed upon the Buddhist monks by the Satvahana rulers in the second century A.D. referred to transfer of administrative right to the donees. This was a novel feature which characterises the post Mauryan polity. An important feature of the Gupta polity was that the position of the officers of the districts had become hereditary. From the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. onwards the land grants became numerous. The feudatories of the Guptas in Central India issued grants to *Brahmins* which carried with them administrative rights (control over revenue and law and order maintenance). These grants were generally held in perpetuity. These measures later led to the emergence of *Brahmin* feudatories who held administrative rights independent of the royal authority. Land grants made by the Gupta rulers did not entitle the grantee the right of sub-assignment. However, the earliest example of sub-infeudation can be traced to an inscription from Indore in Central India which refers to the approval given by a feudatory of the Guptas regarding a grant made by a merchant. Towards the close of the Gupta period grants were issued by the feudatories without seeking the approval of the royal authority in the core of the empire. In the periphery this practice is dated much earlier. In the Gupta period there is evidence of land grants bestowed upon officers for religious purpose. The officials were generally assigned revenues as payment for services. There is no specific and clear instance of land grants made to administrative and military personnel. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (Gupta period) the term *Samant* was generally used in the context of subjugated chiefs who became feudatories (tributaries). The Barabar hill cave inscription of Maukhari chief Anantvarman (who was a feudatory of the Guptas) refers to him as '*Samanta Cudamanih*' (the best among feudatories). Soon it came to be applied to royal officials (in the period of Kalachuri-Chedis [who ruled in Maharashtra and Gujarat] and Harshavardhan). In Harsha's period it appears that not only the vanquished chiefs but officials were also bestowed with the titles such as samanta-maharaja and mahasamanta. In times of war the samantas were obliged to render military aid to the suzerain. The *Harshcharit* of Banabhatt elaborately discusses the role of the *Samantas*. It seems that tributary relationship was the keynote of the *Samant* (feudatory) system.

From the above account it is clear that land grants made by the kings were initially for religious purpose and the emergence of feudatories within the state system in the

Gupta period created a hierarchical structure based on suzerain/subordinate relationship. In the post-Gupta period there was proliferation of ruling lineages which, in the process of aspiring for political power, at times collaborated to form a supra-local authority at the regional level. In this context the Kshatriyaisation process and the *Samant* system characterised by land grants to secular personnel was the basis of state formation.

---

## 5.2 TRANSITION TO EARLY MEDIEVAL INDIA: VARIOUS PERSPECTIVES

---

An important problem which confronts historians is characterisation of historical phases into periods such as ancient, medieval, modern etc. These periods had earlier been correlated with Hindu, Muslim and British periods respectively. N.R. Ray laid stress on associating chronology with the special features or aspects of historical change. The term 'early medieval' suggests the evolution from the early historical period to medieval period and brings out the characteristics of continuity and change in the broad historical context. This viewpoint, demolishes the ideas of orientalism which emphasised 'timelessness' and 'changelessness' of Indian polity, society and economy.

We have to analyse the historiography for understanding the periodisation of Indian History into ancient, medieval and modern. According to the conventional interpretation ancient period began with the Aryan invasion and the medieval period with the Muslim invasion. Recently historians are using the term 'early historical' rather than ancient for the period starting from the middle of first millennium B.C. For defining the 'early historical' phase the following features have been outlined by historians like R.S. Sharma:

- Territorial states headed by *Rajanyas* or *Kshatriyas* developed into an extremely centralised officialdom where the authority did not emanate from landholding since the officials were remunerated in cash. The economy was marked by the development of cash nexus, urbanisation, overseas trade, urban crafts etc. In the villages communal landholdings were prevalent among the village communities which constituted the core of social and economic activities of the village.
- Consolidation of the *Varna* system in which the *Kshatriyas* and the *Brahmanas* had control over the produce and *Vaishyas* paid the taxes since they were the traders and the peasants engaged in trading and agriculture and the *Shudras* rendered slave labour. Slavery was prevalent but it was not similar to serfdom. The multiplicity of castes did not exist. These features are found in their mature form in the 3<sup>rd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D.

The transformation from 'early historical' to medieval is explained in the context of Indian feudalism by the most acceptable school of ancient Indian historiography represented by D.D. Kosambi., R.S. Sharma and B.N.S. Yadava. The basic premise of the feudal polity is:

- i) The disintegration of the unitary administrative system of the Mauryan state based on money or cash economy led to the creation of various loci of authority.
- ii) The religious and secular land grants of the period also embodied the administrative rights, which led to fragmentation of authority and sovereignty.

In most of the conventional writings on early medieval political system the states are considered as monarchies with the kings wielding power and authority through the officialdom but the feudal attributes lead to fragmentation and decentralisation of authority and weakening of the central control within the Hindu political system. A. S. Altekar's views reflect the prevalent notion of early medieval India among the historians, " (the) ideal of federal-feudal empire with full liberty to each constituent state to strive for imperial status but without permission to forge a unitary empire after the conquest, thus produced a state of continuous instability in ancient India". This transformation was regarded as a crisis since the centralised state was replaced by fragmented polity.

The other generalisations regarding the polity of pre-modern India relate to the presuppositions such as traditional polity and oriental despotism. The basic proposition of scholars subscribing to this viewpoint is the changeless nature of the polity, economy and society.

N. R. Ray divides the medieval period into 3 phases:

7<sup>th</sup> century –12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

12<sup>th</sup> century – 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

16<sup>th</sup> century – 18<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

He gives the following characteristics of medievalism:

- i) The kingdoms become regional and they are regarded as analogous to nation states of Europe.
- ii) The nature of economy gets transformed from one based on monetary transactions to predominantly agrarian.
- iii) In the sphere of the development of language, literature, script etc. the regional features get consolidated.
- iv) The distinctive feature of religion in this period was the mushrooming of a number of sects and sub-sects.
- v) Art was categorised into specific regional schools such as Eastern, Orissan, Central Indian, West Indian and Central Deccanese.

Ray's postulate is also based on the feudal theory or assumption (conjecture).

The early period of medievalism according to the established historiography is located in the pre-Sultanate phase and it has to be analysed in the context of Indian feudalism. The important features of this postulate are given hereunder:

- i) Fragmentation of polity: This process was antithetical to the centralised polity of the Mauryan period. It got consolidated in the post-Gupta period. The essential characteristics of the state were vertical gradation, division of sovereignty, emergence of a category of semi-independent rulers viz. *Samantas*, *Mahasamantas* etc.
- ii) The rise of landed groups: This is attributed to the prevalence of land grants bestowed mainly upon *Brahmanas* or religious institutions in the initial period (starting from the early centuries of Christian era and later). In the post-Gupta phase land grants were made to individuals and for other secular purposes. There is reference to fief holding *Samantas* in this period.
- iii) An important constituent of this model was the decay of market economy, trade and urbanism. Services were paid through land assignments. With the growth

of agrarian economy social relations in the rural areas underwent transformation due to the movement of groups into rural areas and the consolidation of the *Jajmani* (patron-client) system.

- iv) Exploitation of the peasants: They were subjected to high taxation, compulsory labour and were deprived of the right of freedom to move from one place to another.
- v) The multiplicity of castes: A unique characteristic of the post-Gupta period was the stratification within society. This was brought about due to the prevalence of the concept of *Varnasankara* (intermixture of castes which originated in the pre-Gupta period) but the process of emergence of castes got strengthened in the post-Gupta period. Due to this phenomenon many new categories came into existence such as *Kayasthas* and untouchables.
- vi) The basis of the ideology and culture of this period was *Bhakti* which was analogous to the feudal construct since both relied upon attributes like fealty and faithfulness. The deterioration in the sphere of religious practices (development of Tantricism etc.) and court culture and the emergence of the category of landed intermediaries led to the crystallisation of feudal ideology or precepts.

Thus the feudal proposition of scholars in explaining early medieval polity is in contrast to the attributes which shaped the 'early historical' period.

'Early Medieval' as a category in the historical time span can be explained by juxtaposing it with the 'Early India'. The historians have tried to define the features of 'Early India' and contrast it with 'Early Medieval'. This exercise has enabled the historians to demolish the myth of the changelessness of Indian polity, economy and society.

The early medieval period has generally been perceived as marked by decentralisation of polity. This view is deduced from the belief that the disintegration of Mauryan empire led to the fragmentation of polity. Historians relying on an important literary source i.e. the Arthashastra, have analysed the Mauryan empire as a 'centralised bureaucratic state'. However, this approach is being reviewed and Mauryan empire is regarded not as a monolithic entity but a variegated structure comprising of different cultural strands within its large spatial and political dimensions. It consisted of the core located in the Madhyadesa and the local peripheral cultural areas. Thus the political formation even in the Mauryan times was not homogenous.

Recently historians have tried to analyse state formation from a perspective which is at variance with the feudal and decentralisation model. According to this view the following factors contributed to state formation in the early medieval period:

- i) The development of state society (represented by ruling lineage formation) resulted in state formation at the regional and local level (nuclear and peripheral regions).
- ii) Transformation of tribes into peasants. Historians suggest that in the early medieval period with diminishing trade and commerce the *Vaishyas* (engaged in commerce, agriculture, pastoralism) suffered a setback. *Shudras* had served as slave labourers in the early historical period but in the early medieval period, aboriginal tribes and foreign ethnic identities permeated the *Shudra Varna*. The cultivating categories were now the tribes who got metamorphosed into *Shudra* peasants who paid revenue.



- iii) On the ideological plane the consolidation of regional cults by the amalgamation of varied doctrines, rituals and customs (brahmanical, tribal etc.). The rise of *Bhakti* and regional cults was thus an important feature of the ideology of this period viz. the Jagannath cult in Orissa was a mechanism to legitimize the king's power.

Scholars feel that historical changes should be studied against the backdrop of regions and localities. Local state formation brought about the convergence of local and regional customs, traditions etc. into the existing patterns of monarchy, *Dharmshastric* social and *Puranic* Hindu religious traditions. These features did not exist in isolation. They were interrelated and contributed to the emergence of regional patterns in polity and culture. Thus recently historians have tried to analyse early medieval not as a period of crisis but a phase when historical changes led to the emergence of regions embodying distinctive political, social, economic and cultural attributes.

The emergence of Rajput lineages such as Guhilas, Chalukyas and Hunas (foreign and native) was a unique feature of early medieval polity. These lineages were spread over Gujarat, Rajasthan, Central India and Uttar Pradesh. In the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century the medieval state of Mewar became prominent under the Guhila clan belonging to the Nagda-Ahar branch. The expansion of agrarian economy (development of irrigation techniques, etc.) and land grants indicate the proliferation of agricultural settlements. Gurjaras are referred to as agriculturists in the inscriptions. Many ruling families in Western India were offshoots of the Gurjaras.

In Orissa in the period between 4<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. state formation was characterised by the proliferation of lineages. The most important among these were the Coda-Gangas who emerged powerful in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. The emergence of the ruling families took place in the regions which provided the scope for resource mobilisation as is evident from the land grants of the period.

The viewpoint that disintegration of a centralised state structure led to a crisis or the emergence of feudal polity has been contradicted by some scholars who feel that early medieval period was characterised by the establishment of local and regional states which arose due to the proliferation of local ruling clans and their transformation into local state and regional structures.

The period from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. especially the period after the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. witnessed the emergence of regional and local states. This phenomenon was the characteristic trait of early medieval India. An underlying feature of local state formation was the rise of ruling lineages in different regions. However, the political system was monarchical. Thus, *Brahmanical* ethos validated the monarchical system as essential for maintenance of political order and it also regarded *Varna* system indispensable for preservation of socio-political order. The *Varnasamkara* concept accentuated the process of stratification (vertical and horizontal) and social mobility also took place through dissent or fissioning off within groups and communities etc. The ascription of *Kshatriya* status by social categories was a means to get sanction for political authority.

The three important attributes of state formation in this period were:

- 1) Ideology for endorsement of monarchy
- 2) Appropriation of agricultural surplus
- 3) The emergence of a hierarchical system based on hegemony and subjugation.

The rise of state system had several implications for the localities and social groups. It brought about the disintegration of the social system comprising of non-stratified communities and created distinctive category of ruling groups. Thus the formation of state in a regional and social context was made possible due to the divisions within social groups and regions and the development of a system marked by hierarchical relations based on the elements of authority and subjection.

---

### 5.3 MAJOR POLITICAL POWERS : PALAS, PRATI HARAS AND RASHTRAKUTAS

---

The decline of the Gupta empire in the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. was followed by the rise of a number of ruling houses such as Maukhris of Kanauj and Pushpbhutis of Thanesar. Harshavardhana who belonged to the family of Pushpbhutis of Thanesar became the ruler of Kanauj, filling the vacuum after the death of his brother-in-law, the Maukhri ruler of Kanauj. Ever since Harshavardhana made Kanauj the capital of his empire, it remained the imperial centre of North Indian polities for several centuries, even though its political fortunes changed frequently. This implied a shift in political power from the east to the west. Pataliputra, which was an important centre during the reigns of both the Mauryas and Guptas, was now replaced by Kanauj as the centre of North Indian political dominance.

In this Unit we shall mainly strive to understand the political history of the major regional powers of North India. Later we will discuss the complex processes of formation of polity which have been understood in different ways by different historians. Before engaging with those, it is necessary to have an overview of the succession of ruling dynasties that ruled in these regions during the early medieval period as also the sequence of important battles won and lost by these dynasties. To start with, let us look at Bengal.

Bengal had been part of the Maurya and Gupta empires. For long stretches of its early history Bengal is not known to have played an important role in the political history of India even after the decline of the Guptas. The first significant ruler of Bengal was Sasanka who ruled roughly between 606-637 A.D. Sasanka is considered the first historically known ruler of the area that constituted Bengal. He was also the first in this region to have extended his political sovereignty over areas that lay far beyond the geographical boundary of Bengal. Sasanka had become the master of the whole of Bengal with his capital at Karnasuvarna (near Murshidabad), and had perhaps extended his rule as far as Orissa. He even advanced against Kanauj which was occupied by the rulers of the Maukhari dynasty at that time. Sasanka's military adventures proved successful and this ultimately led to the growth of hostilities between him and the rulers of Thanesar. Harshavardhana, who eventually became king of Thanesar, set out to defeat Sasanka but was unsuccessful. Ultimately, Harsha succeeded in his conquest of Sasanka's empire only after the latter's death.

The death of Sasanka was followed by a period of political decline in the fortunes of Bengal. It was attacked by Yasovarman of Kanauj and Laitaditya of Kashmir and later on perhaps by the king of Kamrupa. It resulted in the weakening of central authority and the rise of independent chiefs. It seems that the prevailing anarchy led the chiefs to elect someone called Gopala as the ruler of the whole kingdom. Gopala, who went on to become the founder of the Pala dynasty in Bengal, consolidated his rule over Bengal and brought the much needed stability and prosperity

to the region. The date of his accession is not known in definite terms but is generally believed to be in the second half of the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. He died in about 780 A.D. and was succeeded by his son Dharmapala.

R.C. Majumdar describes Dharmapala as one of the greatest kings that ever ruled in Bengal and one who raised the glory of the kingdom to great heights. It may be mentioned that in the famous tripartite struggle between the Palas, Pratiharas and Rashtrakutas, to establish control over Northern India, Dharmapala played a very crucial role. In fact for a while he managed to attain a supreme position in North India. According to R.C. Majumdar, Dharmapala spent his whole life in military campaigns. After having suffered defeat at the hands of Pratiharas and Rashtrakutas, he went on to establish an empire that embraced a considerable part of Northern India. Details about his reign are known mostly from copper plate inscriptions found at a place called Khalimpur. Apart from his military campaigns, Dharmapala is also known for his patronage of Buddhism. He founded many Buddhist monasteries but, it was the famous Vikramshila University founded by him, that earned him a lot of fame.

Dharmapala was succeeded by his son Devapala who ruled for about 40 years. According to R.C. Majumdar his fame had reached as far as the distant isles of the Indian Archipelago. Devapala also emerged as a powerful king. Devapala was the last among the line of powerful kings of the Pala dynasty. He was succeeded by Vignahapala, who ruled for a short period. It is said that Vignahapala preferred an ascetic life to an aggressive military career. He was followed in succession by Narayanapala, whose reign saw the decline of the glorious rule established by the Palas.

Of the Pala kings, both Dharmapala and Devapala, won fame and glory through their victories in the famous Tripartite struggle. This was a struggle amongst the Pratiharas, Palas and Rashtrakutas for gaining victory over the imperial capital of Kanauj and for establishing control over Northern India.

About the same time that the Palas had established a strong monarchy in Bengal, the Pratiharas under their king, Vatsaraja, seemed to have ruled over large parts of Rajputana and Central India. While the Palas were expanding in a westward direction. The Pratiharas were expanding their kingdom towards the East. Conflict between the two powers was thus inevitable. By the time the first encounter between the two took place, the Palas seemed to have extended their kingdom at least as far as Allahabad. It is not clear who the Pala king was at that time. It may have been either Gopala or Dharmapala.

In the meantime, rulers of the Rashtrakuta dynasty, who had already established their supremacy in the Deccan were trying to extend their dominance over North India. The Rashtrakuta king Dhruva having crossed the Vindhyas, first defeated the Pratihara king Vatsaraja and then advanced upon Dharmapala and defeated him. With this encounter which took place somewhere in the Ganga Yamuna doab, began the Tripartite struggle for supremacy between the Palas, Pratiharas and Rashtrakutas.

Though the Rashtrakutas achieved complete triumph in the beginning, the death of Dhruva was followed by chaos in the Rashtrakuta kingdom. Dhruva's son Govinda III was engaged in a struggle against an alliance of twelve kings of South India. The Palas and Pratiharas made use of the respite that this development gave them. Of the two, Dharmapala was quick to recover. He took advantage of this and made his

suzerainty to be acknowledged by almost all important states of North India. He managed to capture Kanauj and place his own nominee on the throne. He held a great imperial assembly in the presence of a large number of vassal kings at Kanauj. In this assembly he consecrated himself as the overlord of the whole of Northern India. At this time Dharmapala's suzerainty was accepted in areas covering Central Punjab, and probably extended upto the Sindhu, Kangra valley, East Punjab, Jaipur, Malwa and probably also Berar. This is inferred from the list of vassal chiefs who attended his imperial assembly. With this event, Bengal emerged from oblivion and rose to the position of a supreme power in North India. The king of Bengal became the supreme head of an empire that stretched from the Western part of North India to the East up to Central India.

However, this situation did not last for long, given the ever-changing nature of political control during this period. The Pratiharas managed to recover under the leadership of Nagabhatta, the son and successor of Vatsaraja. Nagabhatta attacked and defeated the nominee whom Dharmapala had placed on the throne of Kanauj, which resulted in a conflict with Dharmapala himself. In a battle fought against Dharmapala, Nagabhatta emerged victorious. After this success, Nagabhatta conquered several territories, including a large portion of the territories under the control of Dharmapala.

In this situation, Dharmapala probably sought the aid of Govinda III, the Rashtrakuta king, to check the advances of Nagabhatta. Govinda III, either in response to this or on his own initiative, undertook a military expedition to North India. Nagabhatta who was unable to resist such an onslaught was forced to flee. His territory was overrun by the Rashtrakutas who then proceeded northwards. However, even after establishing an empire that stretched from South to North Govinda III was unable to sustain his conquests, due to internal dissensions within the empire. In this scenario, Dharmapala managed to gain the upper hand. He seems to have recovered his empire to a large extent. At the time of his death around 815 A.D., his son Devapala became the undisputed ruler of a large part of North India. He is said to have defeated the Dravidas, Gurjaras and Hunas and conquered Utkala and Kamarupa. The court poet described his empire as extending from the Himalayas in the North to the Vindhya in the South and from the Bay of Bengal in the East to the Arabian sea in the West.

We have already discussed how the power of the Palas gradually declined after the reign of Devapala. The Palas henceforth ruled as a local power in Eastern India. They continually faced invasions and occasional raids by the Kalachuris, Chandellas and Rashtrakutas who sometimes conquered portions of their territory. North and West Bengal were occupied by the Kambojas in the later half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Taking advantage of this the Kalachuris advanced against the Palas as far as Mithila. Around the same time, the Chola king Rajendra Chola and a Chalukya king also invaded the Pala territories. It goes to the credit of Mahipala I, the reigning Pala king of the time, to have defended his kingdom successfully against the Kalachuris, Cholas and Chalukyas and also to have recovered territories from the Kambojas. But South and West Bengal were ruled by several independent chiefs and was not under the control of the Palas.

However, Mahipala's successor, Nayapala and his successor Vgrahapala III continued to be engaged in a constant struggle against the Kalachuris of Tripuri. Vgrahapala III was succeeded by his son Mahipala II whose reign witnessed a lot of upheavals. Some of the vassal chiefs rose against him. Mahipala II tried to resist these vassals,



but was defeated and killed. Divya, an official who belonged to the Kaivarta caste established control over North Bengal. Mahipala II's brothers Surapala II and Ramapala took shelter in Magadha. Surapala II died soon after and Ramapala took over, but by this time practically the whole of Bengal had passed out of Pala control. A dynasty of kings with names ending in Varman, ruled over East Bengal, while Divya the rebel Kaivarta chief ruled over North Bengal. The remaining territories of Bengal were under the control of different independent chiefs who perhaps still nominally acknowledged the overlordship of the Palas.

Ramapala was able to mobilise the support of a large number of chiefs who helped him to defeat and kill the son of Divya and wrest back North Bengal. Ramapala also forced the Varman ruler of East Bengal to submit to his authority. He also conquered Kamarupa and sent an expedition against the Gahadavalas. He also interfered in the politics of Orissa. In short, Ramapala was successful in restoring the strength and prestige of the Pala kingdom to a large extent. However, the Pala kingdom disintegrated during the reign of his two sons Kumarapala and Madanapala.

Even while Madanapala was busy defending his kingdom from invasions, a new dynasty called the Senas rose in West Bengal. The first significant ruler of this dynasty was Vijayasena, who defeated Madanapala and conquered Bengal. He advanced as far as Assam and Mithila and also conquered a part of Magadha, although the Pala king still ruled over a portion of Magadha. Vijayasena was succeeded by his son Ballalasena. Ballalasena who was a powerful king as well as a learned scholar, was succeeded by his son Lakshmanasena. Lakshmanasena whose reign began in 1178 A.D., had an illustrious military career. He achieved some success in Orissa, fought against the Gahadavalas and was able to advance successfully as far as Banaras and Allahabad and was also in possession of a large part of Bihar. Lakshmanasena was also a learned scholar and a patron of poets. With him ended the reign of the Sena dynasty and Bengal passed into the hands of the Turkish rulers of Delhi.

Let us now examine the political developments in the region of Orissa which also emerged as an important regional kingdom with its distinctive regional tradition. We have already learnt about Sasanka's conquest of Orissa. After the death of Sasanka, Orissa, as we already know was overrun by Harsha. Around the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Sainyabhit Madhavavarman, the ruler of the Sailodbhava dynasty declared independence. The Sailodbhavas were a dynasty that ruled over Kongoda, a region extending from Chilka lake to Mahendragiri mountain in the Ganjam district. After Sasanka conquered Orissa, this dynasty continued as his feudatory.

After going through this brief sketch of political events of the early medieval period in North India you may be wondering how to make sense of all these details of dynastic accounts, battles, victories and defeats. After all, the study of history goes far beyond mere listing of political events, and deal mainly with the analysis of political processes and social and economic formations. Of what use, then are these sketches of dynastic histories of the different regions, to a modern day historian. Well, as B.D. Chattopadhyay points out, "Even the seemingly bewildering variety of details of the political history of early medieval India – the absurdly long genealogies, the inflated records of achievements of microscopic kingdoms, the rapidity of the rise and fall of centres of power – are ultimately manifestations of the way in which the polity evolved in the period and hence is worthy, not so much of cataloguing, but of serious analysis."

---

## 5.4 APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF EARLY MEDIEVAL POLITY

---

Early medieval India has been described by historians, largely as a dark phase of Indian history characterised only by political fragmentation and cultural decline. Such a characterisation being assigned to it, this period remained by and large a neglected one in terms of historical research. We owe it completely to new researches in the recent decades to have brought to light the many important and interesting aspects of this period. Fresh studies have contributed to the removal of the notion of 'dark age' attached to this period by offering fresh perspectives. Indeed the very absence of political unity that was considered a negative attribute by earlier scholars is now seen as the factor that had made possible the emergence of rich regional cultures of the medieval period. The existing historiography on the early medieval period has been classified into hypotheses based on broadly two sets of propositions. One of these assumptions is that traditional polity is essentially changeless. Historians relying on this hypothesis have described polity in early medieval India as "traditional" or "Oriental despotic" (originally derived from Marx) Hermann Kulke points out that Marx's model of oriental despotism was an "outcome of occidental prejudice against an alleged oriental despotism".

The other assumption underlying most of the recent works on this period is one that envisages possibilities of change as opposed to the previous approach of changelessness of Indian polity. The first kind of model with the assumption of change is perhaps the "imperial model" or centralised state model. Change according to the historians subscribing to the imperial model, was thus conceived in terms of dynastic change as well as change in size of territory of the empire. It was seen as deviation from the norm set by "imperial rulers down to the time of Harsha who endeavoured to stem the tide of disintegration and fragmentation" (B.D. Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India*). The early medieval period was therefore understood, within this model as a negative change from the ideal imperial system. In other words, change is seen here as a negative change towards a state of instability as opposed to the norm of a centralised unitary state. This approach is also, therefore not very helpful in gaining insights into the processes involved in state formation during the period under study. This is because, it does not go much beyond a description of military conquests and dynastic history into more crucial structural issues. This approach, which was mainly adopted by nationalist Indian historians is also fraught with dangers of communal interpretations of Indian history since it assumes as its ideal or normative, the "Hindu political order".

Yet another model which is based upon the assumption of dynamism or change is the "Indian Feudalism" model. This model needs to be understood seriously as it represents a turning point in the historiography of the period. This is because change during the early medieval period was explained in this model as representing a transformation of the socio-economic system and the interrelatedness between social and political formation. The emergence of a hierarchical structure during this period, as exemplified in the *Samanta* system, is used by historians following the feudalism approach to explain the hegemony and dominance of the early medieval state through suppression and exploitation.

D. D. Kosambi was the first to provide a conceptual definition of Indian feudalism. In subsequent years the most important contribution towards the understanding of this period through the feudalism approach was in the writings of R. S. Sharma. The

basis of Sharma's arguments was evidence that revealed an ever-increasing number of land grants made to *Brahmins* and religious institutions since the early centuries of Christian era and also to government officials later on. Sharma pointed to the fact that grantees were being endowed with more and more immunities and they increasingly encroached on communal village land which led to the exploitation of the peasantry.

This situation according to him was further aggravated by the decline of urbanism and trade, particularly foreign trade. Another factor was the paucity of coins. Thus economically, this period was characterised by him as one of decay and decline. He described the period, in political terms, as one which saw a continuous process of fragmentation and decentralisation, caused by the widespread practice of granting big and small territories to feudatories and officials who established their control over territories and emerged as independent potentates. The crux of this argument, therefore is that feudal polity emerged from the gradual breakdown of a centralised bureaucratic state system, represented by the Mauryan state. The system of assignment of land, gradually became widespread in the early medieval period and was tied up with the transfer of the rights of administration of the centralized state as well as its rights over sources of revenue. This process gradually led to the corroding of the authority of the state and resulted in the erosion of sovereignty.

This construct drew criticism from scholars like D. C. Sircar who pointed to the scarce amount of evidence for land grants of a secular type with service tenures, as compared to the evidence of a large number of grants made to *Brahmins* and religious institutions. Another proponent of the 'feudal polity' model, B. N. S. Yadava endeavoured to provide new evidence of an increasing practice of land-grants to military officers, during the post-Gupta period and for restrictions on the mobility of peasants. Yadava, influenced by the writings of Marc Bloch and Max Weber, shifted emphasis towards the political aspects of feudalism. For him the most important feature of Indian feudalism was the '*Samanta*' or the independent neighbouring chief, who rose to prominence since 600 A.D., at the royal courts from a vanquished status to a position of reinstated feudatories and court dignitaries. In the new conception of empire, the territorial aspect or control was no longer important. In its place, the extension of the tributary system became important. According to Yadava, such empires were at best tributary superstructures and therefore lacked solidarity, stability and political unity.

The feudalism model outlined above has met with a lot of criticism over the years. B. D. Chattopadhyay has questioned the theory of urban decay and decline of trade in the post-Gupta period, a very essential premise of the feudalism argument. The sharpest criticism has come from Harbans Mukhia who questioned the very existence of Indian feudalism. He pointed out that in the European context, feudalism emerged due to changes in the society, whereas in India, the establishment of feudalism has been attributed to state actions especially land grants. He raised doubts whether such complex socio-political structures as feudalism can be established through administrative and legal procedures. Mukhia also raised questions about several other essentials in the concept of Indian feudalism, such as serfdom. He argued that Indian peasantry has been characterised predominantly as free. Like Mukhia, B. D. Chattopadhyay also raises doubts whether administrative measures can bring in changes in socio-political formations. He says that if land assignments made by the state weaken the power of the state (because the state surrenders its administrative and revenue rights), then it means that feudal polity emerged because "pre-feudal polity decides to preside over the liquidation of its own power" (B.D. Chattopadhyay,

*The Making of Early Medieval India*). In this sense the situations in early medieval times could be explained as a form of crisis in the pre-feudal system. This leads to the question i.e., was the pre-feudal polity absolutely centralised?

While critiquing the model of feudal polity Chattopadhyay agrees that the existence of landgrants cannot be denied, nor can the presence of the contractual element in these landgrants be negated completely. He also accepts that the system of assignments, wherever it existed, did bring in important changes in agrarian relations. However, he points out that all this does not help to explain the origin of feudal polity. Instead, he considers land grants (secular) as one and not the sole criteria for understanding the structure of polity. While questioning the single line argument for the formation of polity, based on the evidence of landgrants, Chattopadhyay also says that no system can be totally centralised, indicating thereby that the problem should be addressed from another stand point. This leads us to studies, which have analysed the complex interrelationship between socio-economic and political aspects that have shaped the formation of the early medieval polities.

In recent years, new historical works on the formation of polity in early medieval India have taken our understanding of the problem from a macro to a micro-level. The common issue in most of these studies is a focus on structural developments and changes within a micro-level state system. These studies constitute a departure from the existing historiography because unlike the nationalist historians' model and the feudalism model, which have viewed political change largely in terms of fragmentation or the breakdown of political authority, the new group of historians have perceived political changes through integration and interrelationship between socio-economic and political processes.

The process of change, according to these historians, has been a result of the emergence and gradual development of "state society" (formation of ruling lineages). This involved a metamorphosis of 'pre-state polities' into state polities and thus the assimilation of local polities into larger state structures.

B.D. Chattopadhyay explains that the process of establishment of large polities took place in the nuclear areas. These nuclear regions served as a strong resource generation pocket for the state structure. He further points out that large polities emerged in other areas as well as a result of military expansion. In this context he gives the example of the expansion of the Pala power which from South East Bengal penetrated into the middle and lower Ganges basin.

According to Hermann Kulke this process of the expansion of state society, through the transformation of pre-state polities into state polities, was based on and progressed along with certain other crucial phenomena. One of these was the emergence and spatial expansion of ruling lineages. This process was achieved through Kshatriyaisation or Rajputisation. Within the framework of post – Gupta polity state society which was a manifestation of formation of ruling lineages had first penetrated into nuclear regions and expanded into peripheral areas by the end of the Gupta period.

B.D. Chattopadhyay also examines the formation of ruling lineages from the perspective of the process of social mobility in early medieval India. He explains that through Kshatriyaisation, any lineage or segment of a large ethnic group could make an attempt to assume political power and establish a large state structure by an effective mobilisation of force. Ruling lineages owed their origin to the expansion of agricultural settlements (this development was accentuated by the improvement



of agricultural techniques, etc.) and conversion of tribal groups into peasants, which helped in the colonisation of new areas and the emergence of a state structure. Although this period was marked by the emergence of many ruling lineages but they did not become permanently established in a geographical region for long and got eclipsed in course of time. Several other lineages emerged (as offshoots of the same clan) as the political power in another region through expansion into other areas. Sometimes the lineage in a geographical location was replaced by another lineage with the passage of time and established a different type of political formation.

The new group of scholars, working within the framework of “integrative polities”, also linked the process of formation of state polities with economic and social processes like the extension of agrarian society through the peasantization of tribal groups. A very important constituent of this complex and multi-dimensional process of state formation studied by this group of scholars is the religious aspect i.e. the role played by religious institutions in the process of state formation. Whereas within the framework of the “feudalism” and “segmentary state” models, land grants to Brahmins and temples are attributed a “divisive” and hence negative role leading to the process of fragmentation of political authority and strengthening of the segmentary structure of state, the new approaches view this as an aspect of integration.

According to B.D. Chattopadhyaya, such assignments as *Brahmadeyas* and *Devadanas* as administrative measures helped in providing legitimacy to the temporal power in the areas occupied by them. In this respect the temporal and sacred arena were mutually interlinked. Temporal power depended upon the sanction from ‘spiritual authority’ and the latter needed the support from the temporal power for its sustenance.

During the process of spread of lineage society the several cults and practices of the lineage groups were brought into a uniform framework and the precepts of Bhakti provided the basis for this integration. The temple served as the focal point of Bhakti ideology. The religious cults and traditions which were institutionalised and integrated through the temple and the principles of Bhakti were an instrument for legitimising state power.

*Samantas* have been regarded as feudatories who brought about the decentralization of polity which came to be dominated by suzerain – subordinate relationship. However scholars like B. D. Chattopadhyay counter the decentralised polity perspective and while conceding the hierarchical (overlord/subordinate) element intrinsic to “*Samanta*”, they feel that it did not lead to centrifugal tendencies but was an instrument of integration. The expansion of ruling lineages horizontally was brought about due to many factors (expansion of agricultural settlements, transformation of tribes into peasants, etc.). This type of polity could sustain itself only through the hierarchical feudatory (*Samanta*) system in which administrative powers and resources had to be parceled out. A local and regional ruling lineage could get transformed into a supralocal power only with the aid (military etc.) of other ruling lineages and this necessitated a hierarchical system based on gradation. Thus the feudatory system was integrative in character.

---

## 5.5 STATE FORMATION UNDER THE RAJPUTS

---

The period after the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. was characterized by the growth of ruling clans especially in Rajasthan and these have been categorized as Rajput. The rise of Rajputs has so far been analysed in the context of tracing their ancestry through

a study of the genealogies found in the inscriptions and constructing a dynastic and political history. Several theories have been propounded by scholars regarding the origin of the Rajputs. Some consider them to be of foreign stock while others regard them as belonging to the *Kshatriya Varna*. Bardic traditions refer to them as having originated from agnikunda on Mt. Abu. Later heroic poems or traditions suggest that the category Rajput comprised of 36 clans which initially may have been 12 or 24. However recent writings have tried to study the history of the emergence of ruling lineages in early medieval India. Thus the focus in the study of early medieval polity has moved away from the dynastic history of 'Rajput' kingdoms to the analysis of the factors which led to the emergence of state structure comprising of local ruling clans. The formation of ruling lineages is regarded as a 'process' which emerged and was strengthened by the alleged ascription of *Kshatriya* status by these ruling clans. The claims were not merely a manifestation of their desire to trace their pedigree but they represented the means to justify their position as the ruling authority. Thus, the 'Rajput' category and the process of Rajputization through adaptation within the regional and socio-political context, gained ascendancy in early medieval times. This should be studied not in terms of dynastic and genealogical details but as a phenomenon which led to the evolution from 'tribal' to state polity in this period.

The increase in agricultural settlements with the growth of agricultural economy is borne out by the epigraphic and archaeological testimony. The inscriptional evidence from Western and Central India refers to the subjugation of Sabaras, Bhillas and Pulindas by the Rajput clans. The Rajput ruling lineages gained at the expense of the tribal groups. Various traditions mentioned either in the inscriptions or the heroic poems refer to the migration of Guhilas from Gujarat to Rajasthan and depict them as the successors of the tribal chiefdom of the Bhils. The Nadol offshoot of the Cahamana clan established itself in South-east Marwar by displacing the Medas, which has been referred to in the *PuratanaPrabandhSangraha* and Nainsi's *Khyat* (Compiled in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century). The improved agricultural techniques encouraged settlement of new territories and the gradual transformation from "tribalism" to state polity. The mythical bardic narrative contained in the *Pallival Chand* portrays the process by which the Medas and Minas were eclipsed by Rathoda Siha. An important feature of this period was the process of social mobility within *Varna* hierarchy. Medas and Hunas exemplify this process since they acquired 'Rajput' rank from a tribal position. The Pratiharas belonged to the Gurjara clan and became an important ruling power in the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. They were originally pastoralists and agriculturists. The Pratiharas as part of the tribal Gurjara clan branched off to emerge as a ruling power. The genealogies 'fabricated' for this period tried to claim high status for the ruling lineage. The Pratiharas of Mandor (837 A.D.) are said to have descended from *Kshatriya* wife of a *Brahmana* thus laying claim to *Brahma-kshatra* status. Guhilas of Mewar (10<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) are also referred to as possessing *Brahma-kshatra* status. Cahamanas of Sakambhari (1169 A.D.) are also alleged to be *Brahma-kshatra*. In the records dealing with the 'Rajput' ruling clans they are either referred to as feudatories of Pratiharas, Mauryas or autonomous. Regarding their ancestry it is traced to the mythological figures like Maharaja Karna, Lakshmana, Vedic gods like Indra, Vishnu, Solar race and Ikshvakus of Kṛta age. It seems that *Brahma-kshatra* status was a device used in the late period to further legitimise the new pure *Kshatriya* position as having been obtained from an even more pure and high status of *Brahman*. Thus the genealogies were composed in the period of transformation from subservient to sovereign power. These genealogies were exaggeration although they did contain some elements of genuinity. The Gurjaras of Gujarat were feudatories of the Valabhi

king. The early Guhilas held feudatory positions (feudatories of Mauryas and Pratiharas). The Cahahamana genealogy refers to the term *Samanta* which proves that they were feudatories of Gurjara Pratiharas and the term *naradeva* or *nrpa* (king) indicates their transformation to autonomous status. The above examples illustrate how the Rajputisation process (formation of ruling lineages, emergence of feudatories) took place within the prevailing graded state structure.

An important characteristic of Rajput polity was the distribution of land among the Rajput clans which led to the emergence of large estates. The grouping of villages into blocks comprising of six or multiples of six or eighty four villages led to the emergence of territorial and administrative units. The forts built in this period were an expression of political authority of the ruling clans and these forts drew sustenance from the contiguous landholdings and formed a part of the territorial system of Rajput polity. Marriage alliances among the various Rajput clans also had their impact in the political sphere. The inter-clan marriage networks were confined to Rajputs i.e. ruling elites. Social groups who acquired power in this period and emerged as ruling elites also legitimised their position socially and politically by entering into marriage alliances with established Rajput lineages and through kshatriyaisation.

It appears that by the 13<sup>th</sup> century the Rajputra category indicated not only the political position but it became hereditary. There was growth and expansion of Rajput clan network. The term *Rajputra* encompassed a wide category from son of a king to a small landholder. Epithets like *Rajaputra*, *Rauta*, *Ranaka* became more prevalent after 12<sup>th</sup> century than *samanta* and *mahasamanta*. The terms *Rajputra*, *Ranaka*, etc. are sometimes mentioned along with the appellations like *samanta*, *mahamandalesvara*, etc. *Rauta*, *Ranaka*, titles are also found in the inscriptions of many clans who were probably seeking a place in the socio-political structure which proves that Rajput socio-political system was an assimilative and flexible structure. With the rise of the Rajputs the traditional *Kshatriyas* were probably resorting to other professions and the ruling category was now not analogous to *Kshatriya* but to the Rajput. There are several instances of inter-clan relationship within Rajput polity viz.- In the Cahamana kingdom Guhilas existed as landholding elites. The memorial stones or relics known as govardhana dhvajas or devali refer to Pratihara, Cahamana and Guhila clans. They also mention appellations like *Mahasamanta*, *Rana*, *Rauta*, *Rajputra*. It appears that military prowess was an important factor which helped these clans in becoming ruling powers. The Rajput ruling clans got proliferated either through segmentation (an important clan got subdivided into sub-clan) or through assimilation with the local elements.

The land assignments were an important feature of the polity under the Pratiharas and their feudatories. Land was bestowed upon the *Brahmins* and temples by the Pratihara kings. These grants were virtually held in perpetuity. However these grants do not clarify the exact nature of economic and administrative privileges. These administrative measures (issuance of land grants) led to the emergence of landed intermediaries between the ruling group and the peasants. Religious endowments were commonly prevalent in the territories of feudatories of Pratiharas. The religious grantees were given the responsibility of maintaining law and order and collection of revenue. In 890 A.D. Pratihara ruler Bhoja I assigned land to a Kalachuri ruler for his meritorious military service. Pratihara kings also gave land grants to senior officials. The grant issued by the Gurjara feudatory of the Pratiharas refers to the territory under his control as *Svabhog-avapta-vamsapotakabhoga*. He was a member of ruling family and had been granted the territory by the Pratihara king but

he further sub-allotted it with administrative rights. However it seems that Pratiharas issued very few secular grants. An important feature of administrative system under Pratiharas and their feudatories was the practice of subinfeudation. The religious grantees made endowments to others by transferring portions of their assignments. Grants were also bestowed upon the *mathas* and teachers by the members of the ruling clans or other feudatories who could make sub-grants even without the approval of the overlord. There is a reference to a land grant made by a high Pratihara functionary to a temple which was recommended by a Cahamana feudatory. The charter of this grant contained the signature of the two royal officials. This shows the importance of royal sanction in the administrative system. However it seems that royal and official sanction was not always sought while making grants.

A unique feature of Pratihara administrative system was the absence of a large centralised bureaucratic machinery. The category of central officials mentioned in the grants are called *Niyuktas*. The territories held by the feudatories and *Mahasamantas* were administered by them through their sub-feudatories. It seems that the administrative rights were further parceled out among feudatories and sub-feudatories. Though the Pratiharas might have exercised control over their feudatories but it seems that the polity was dominated by *Samanta*/feudatory system. The Pratihara kings used appellations viz. *Parmeshwara*, *Mahrajadhiraja* etc. These titles point to the superiority of the king over all other chiefs and princes who had accepted his suzerainty. From the inscriptions we come to know that Madhava (in the period of the Pratihara king Mahendrapal II) who was a governor (*Tantrapal*) and chief commander (*Mahadandanayaka*) was also referred to as *Mahasamanta*. Undabhata who held the position of governor of town (*Mahapratihara*) was also called *Mahasamantadhipati* (head of feudatories). It seems that the officials were bestowed with appellations having feudal connotation. The feudatories of Pratiharas (Cahamana, Chalukyas, Guhilot and Kalachuri) provided military assistance to their suzerain. The relationship was based on the idea of loyalty and allegiance. The feudatories acknowledged their suzerain in the grants. The Pratiharas did not have several seats of power and kept their base mainly at Kannauj. They did not generally make non-religious grants. However in 1036 A.D. the last ruler of this dynasty made a non-sectarian grant to a non-*Brahmin*. Villages under the Gurjara Pratiharas were divided into groups of 12 and 84. This is mentioned in the inscription of 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. of a Chalukya feudatory of Pratiharas. It seems that later the territories were distributed among the leaders of the clans in units of 12 villages or their multiples.

The Gurjara Pratihara empire declined in the later half of the 10<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The Gahadavalas and Kalachuris controlled the territories in UP. The eastern portion of Central India was being ruled by Kalachuris of Tripuri and Chandelas of Jejakabhukti. Later the Kalachuris were divided into 3 groups:

- 1) of Tripuri
- 2) of Ratanpura
- 3) of Gorakhpur

Territories in Rajasthan, Gujarat and Malwa were placed under various Rajput ruling clans viz. Cahamanas who got partitioned into 5 groups:

- 1) Broach
- 2) Javalipura (mid 12<sup>th</sup> century)



- 3) Sakambhari
- 4) Naddula and
- 5) Ranthambhor

The important ruling clans of Cahamanas in the 12<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> century A.D. were those of Broach and Ranthambhor. The Guhilas took control of Mewar in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Tomars were in possession of Ajmer and Delhi. Paramaras held Malwa and fissioned off into various branches: Malwa, Abu, Bhinmal and Kiradu in the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. However Abu Paramaras were subjugated by Bhima Chalukya in 1062 A.D. and Paramaras continued to function as feudatories of Chalukya as in Abu. Gujarat was brought under the Chalukya rule. However in the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D., their feudatories, the Vaghelas emerged as an important ruling power.

The grants inscribed on stone or copper as well as documents like Lekhapaddhati throw light on the practice of land grants to officials and feudatories for their services. It seems that under the Cahamanas, Gahadavalas, Chandellas and Kalachuris officers and administrative functionaries were remunerated from the taxes collected from villages. Taxes were set aside as salary for the various categories of officers. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Gahadavala officials were in a position to make exactions for their personal use upon the villages. The Cahamans also exacted taxes from villages for the upkeep of military personnel called Baladhipas. In this period various administrative functionaries were remunerated through fixed levies. Officials like *Purohitas*, *Sacivas*, *Pratiharas*, *Mahamatyas* etc. were also remunerated through land grants for the specific services performed by them in the administrative system. Feudatories whether they belonged to the ruling clan or not were however entrusted with all kinds of military, judicial and executive responsibilities. Inscriptions refer to various types of feudatories: *Raja*, *Rajarajanaka*, *Ranaka*, *Rajputra*, *Thakkura*, *Samanta*, *Mahasamanta*, *Mandalikas*, etc. They were compensated for their services in the form of grants of villages.

From the inscriptions we learn that the land grants were initially given to the priests and later this practice became widespread and officials (non-priests) and feudatories were also endowed with grants: *Brahmins*, *Kayastha* and *Kshatriya*. An important feature of the Rajput polity in Rajasthan and Gujarat was that grants were generally given to the members of the ruling family. However those who were not members of ruling clan were also given grants in other areas. The feudatories were generally required to provide military assistance to the suzerain. Military personnel of the Chandellas and Gahadavalas were known as *Rautas* but were called *Rajputras* under the Cahamanas and Chalukyas (who were members of the ruling clan). The appellations *Ranaka* and *Thakura* are frequently used for feudatories in North India.

The earliest land grants were issued in favour of priests and temples. Later the secular grants were also issued on the pattern of religious grants especially to *Brahmins* who enjoyed civil and military positions. Agni Puran (10<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) deriving from *Kamandaka NitiSara* (8<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) advises the *Samantas* “to assuage public feeling to help their overlord in war, to mobilise his (the overlord’s) allies and auxiliaries and to distinguish friends from enemies. They are further asked to protect the people (*janatranam*) like a fort – a function that devolved on them from their sovereign. On the other hand the king is advised to be on his guard against the vassals, whose revolt is considered to be an external danger in contrast to the internal danger caused by the disaffection of princes, ministers and other high

functionaries” (R. S. Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*). The *Agnipurana* therefore directs the king to annihilate the rebellious feudatories.

The *Lekhapaddhati* which discusses the situation in Gujarat in the 12<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> century is a legal text which refers to the duties of the feudatories. However, the inscriptions do not clearly state the responsibilities of the feudatories. The Pattalas or charters mentioned in the *Lekhapaddhati* refer to the king and his *Mahamatyas* who are also mentioned in the 12<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> century grants of feudatories of Chalukyas who gave grants to *Ranakas* who in turn sub-allotted land to *Rajputras*. *Manasollasa* a text of 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. suggests that the king should give gifts viz. land to feudatories (*Samantamanyakas*) and the ministers viz. *Mantrins*, *Amatyas* and *Sacivas*. It suggests that the endowment should be made to servants (*Bhrtyas*) and kinsmen (*Bandhavas*). Different types of gifts are mentioned viz. villages, mines etc. The documents relating to revenue collection at village level (*grama-pattakas*) in Gujarat refer to the *Rajputras* who sub-assigned their lands to merchants for revenue appropriation (*Lekhapaddhati*).

The *Prabandhchintamani* of *Merutunga* describes the period of Paramara Bhoj and Chalukya Bhim. *Merutunga* points out, “the lord of the country gives away a village, the lord of the village a field, and the lord of the field some vegetables; every contented person gives away his property”. The grantees were given charters by the king for revenue appropriation and they became the village lords. *Manasara* (12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. text) places the king into a graded structure comprising of 9 categories: *Cakravartin*, *Maharaja* (or *Adhiraja*), *Mahendra* (*Narendra*), *Parsnika*, *Pattadhara*, *Mandalesa* etc. *Aparajitaprccha* of Bhatt Bhuvandev (12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) describes nine types of rulers: *Mahipati*, *Raja*, *Naradhiva*, *Mahamandaleswar*, *Mandalika*, *Mahasamanta*, *Samanta* etc. The grants specifically made to priests and temples are more than the specific secular grants.

---

## 5.6 NATURE OF POLITY UNDER THE PALAS

---

The Pala kings (referred to as *Parambhataraka*, *Parameshwara* and *Maharajadhiraj*) gave land grants to brahmins, priests and temples. These grants were permanent. They also bestowed land grants on Buddhist monasteries. The land grants carried with them various economic and administrative perquisites. The Pala grants are specifically related to maintenance of law and order and of administration of justice. A Pala grant (802 A.D.) mentions an official in North Bengal called *Dasagramika* who was given one kula of land as inferred from Manu. Land grants were also given to *Kaivartas* who were peasants. The pala records (land charters) refer to *rajas*, *Rajputras*, *Ranakas*, *Rajarajanakas*, *Mahasamantas*, *Mahasamantadhipatis*, etc. They were probably feudatories who were given lands in lieu of military services. There is no evidence for sub-infeudation under the Palas. Royal officials are mentioned in the inscriptions who seem to have administered the kingdom comprising of Bengal and Bihar. Some of the titles used for Pala officials are *Maha-daussadhasadhanika*, *Maha-kartakrtika*, *Mahasandhivighraha*, etc. The Palas operated from several loci of power viz. Pataliputra, Mudgagiri, etc., all located on the Ganga. The victory camps of the Palas were visited by the tributaries. Villages under the Palas were grouped into units of one and ten under the charge of *Gramapati* and *Dasagramika*. They were royal officials responsible for the administration for these units. We have very few epigraphic evidences related to service grants under the Palas.

---

## 5.7 SUMMARY

---

In this Unit we have discussed the debate relating to the transition from early historical to early medieval period. This would help you to understand the essential characteristics of the socio-political formation of the early medieval period. Tripartite struggle among the three powers – Palas, Pratiharas and Rashtrakutas- was an important political development of this period. The major theoretical models propounded by historians to explain early medieval polity have been discussed. The process of state formation under the Rajputs has been analysed. The nature of polity under the Palas and the Rajputs helps us to understand the characteristic features of the polity of this period. These included land grants issued by the state for religious and secular purpose, emergence of feudatories within the state system and the transformation of lineages into ruling groups who established supra-local state structures.

---

## 5.8 EXERCISES

---

- 1) Analyse the various approaches to the study of early medieval polity.
- 2) Discuss the process of state formation under the Rajputs.
- 3) Give a brief account of the views of scholars about feudalism in India.



---

## UNIT 6 EARLY MEDIEVAL POLITIES IN PENINSULAR INDIA 6<sup>TH</sup> TO 8<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES A.D.

---

Early Medieval Polities in  
Peninsular India 8<sup>th</sup> to  
12<sup>th</sup> Centuries A.D.

### Structure

- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 The Major Kingdoms and their Territorial Expansion
- 6.3 Monarchical Polity
- 6.4 Administrative System
- 6.5 Political Processes between the 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> Centuries A.D.
- 6.6 Summary
- 6.7 Exercises

---

### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

---

Peninsular India refers to the region south of the Vindhyas, roughly covering present Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh (the Deccan), Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Orissa, which is not included here, was also a regional polity of the post-Gupta period developing as a major political region of the peninsula. The other major polities were those of the Deccan in the Malaprabha-Krishna, Krishna-Tungbhadra and Godavari valleys, viz., the Chalukyas of Vatapi (6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D.), the Rashtrakutas of Manyakheta (8<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D.), the Chalukyas of Kalyani (10<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D.), the Hoysalas of Dvarasamudra/Halebid and Kaktiyas of Warangal (12<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D.). The major powers of Tamil Nadu were the Pallavas of Kanchipuram (Palar-Cheyyar valley) and the Pandyas of Madurai (Vaigai-Tamraparni valleys) (6<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D.) and the Cholas of Tanjavur (Kaveri valley) (9<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D.). The Cholas, the most powerful of the peninsular polities, with the Kaveri valley as the nucleus of their power, succeeded in establishing the most enduring regional state in the Tamil macro-region. The Tamil region developed its distinctive politico-cultural features under them. In other words, the Tamil regional state and regional culture evolved simultaneously. Dispersed between the larger states of the Deccan and Tamil region were several smaller lineage polities such as the Gangas, Kadambas, Banas and a host of others owing allegiance alternatively to the more powerful lineages of the Deccan plateau and the Tamil plains. Here we are concerned only with those polities which emerged during the period from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> centuries AD.

The period from the sixth to the eighth centuries marks a significant stage in peninsular India in several respects. It witnessed the emergence of several states, many of them for the first time in their respective localities. Secondly there took place an increase in the migration of *Brahman* communities from North India, thereby encouraging percolation of *Brahmanical* ideology and culture to South India as in Eastern India. Thirdly South India played a leading role in the spread of Indian culture overseas, through maritime contacts.

The sources for the history of this phase are found in the form of inscriptions on stone and copper plates written in Sanskrit and regional languages, namely Tamil, Kannada and Telugu according to the linguistic area. These indigenous sources are to some extent augmented by the accounts of the Chinese pilgrims, Fa Hsien, Hsuan Tsang and I Tsing.



---

## 6.2 THE MAJOR KINGDOMS AND THEIR TERRITORIAL EXPANSION

---

As peninsular India does not have large plains comparable to the North Indian plains, the states here could not expand very much; they were mostly confined to some core areas centred around certain rivers like the Krishna, Kaveri, etc. In more than one sense, these states paved way for the emergence of distinct regional cultures, which however were not isolated for ever.

The three important ruling lines that became visible first are the Pallavas, who ruled over parts of Andhra and Tamil Nadu, the Pandyas in the Southern part of Tamil Nadu and the Chalukyas of Badami in Northern Karnataka. The Pallavas had an earlier beginning in early 4th century in Southern Andhra, South of the Krishna river and gradually expanded Southwards up to Kanchipuram on the banks of the Palar river in North Tamil Nadu. Their history can be continuously traced from the middle of the 6th century up to the end of the ninth century. During these centuries their territory covered a wider area in the Tamil districts from the northern borders to the banks of the Kaveri river though in Andhra Pradesh it was confined to its southernmost districts only. The core territory in the northern part of Tamil Nadu was called Tondainadu.

Simhavishnu (550-80 A.D.) takes credit to this expansion, even while he was a prince, according to a copper-plate record of his father. It was almost about the same time that the Chalukyas of Badami also started ruling in North Karnataka with Badami (Bijapur District) as capital. The founder, Pulakesin I (543-66 A.D.) converted the hill near Badami into a strong fortress and launched his expansionist activities. The territory of the Kadambas of Banavasi towards the South and that of the Mauryas of Konkan on the West were soon conquered and annexed to their growing territory.

It is however in the reign of Pulakesin II (609-42 A.D.) that the Chalukya territory expanded to a large extent. The Ganga rulers of South Karnataka and the Alupas of the West coast (South Kanara District) were made their subordinates. Thus more or less the whole of Kannada speaking area was brought under one rule. In the North the army went beyond the Narmada river to Malwa and Southern Gujarat, where the Latas, Malwas and Gurjaras became submissive. Crowning all these, the Chalukyan ruler came head on against his greatest northern adversary, Harsha of Kanauj, who was planning to attack the Deccan and won a decisive victory on the banks of the Narmada.

Pulakesin II tried to control the whole of Deccan by undertaking an expedition into the Eastern Deccan and coastal Andhra comprising the deltas of Krishna and Godavari rivers. This brought him into conflict with the Pallavas who had been trying to control the delta for more than one century. Mahendravarman I (580-630 A.D.) the Pallava contemporary was also an ambitious king. In the ensuing encounters the Pallavas suffered defeat and the Chalukya army penetrated deep into the Pallava territory almost up to the capital city, Kanchipuram. Soon after this Pulakesin II put up his brother Vishnuvardhana to rule over the Andhra country and this paved the way for the new long-lasting dynasty called the Eastern Chalukyas of Vengi centred in the Godavari-Krishna delta.

The Pallava king Narasimha I (630-68 A.D.) son and successor of Mahendra I proved an equal match to the Chalukyan king and after a series of battles he took his forces into the Chalukya territory and even entered into Badami where he got inscribed on rock an inscription of victory. After this the Pallava king sent two naval expeditions to Sri Lanka to help the Sri Lankan prince Manavarma in succession struggle. The latter had taken asylum in the Pallava court.

The succeeding decades saw more hostilities between the Chalukyas and the Pallavas but with no decisive changes on either side. Then followed a lull in war activities for about three decades. At this time the Chalukya king was Vijayaditya (696-733 A.D.) and his Pallava contemporary was Rajasimha (691-729 A.D.). Several of the earliest structural temples belonging to the Dravida style were built during this time at the initiative of both the rulers in their respective territories. Rajasimha's reign is also noted for the embassies sent to China.

A few years after Rajasimha's reign, there was a crisis in the Pallava kingdom, there being no direct heir to ascend the throne. Hence, a young boy was brought from a collateral line from a far off place by the efforts of officials, chief townsmen of Kanchipuram and *Brahman* scholars and was offered the throne. On becoming king he took the title of Nandivarman II. This young king who had a long reign (731-96 A.D.) had to fight on several fronts, particularly with the Pandyas on the South. The Chalukya rule in Badami was replaced by the Rashtrakutas in about 750 A.D. The Rashtrakutas continued the expansionist policy of their predecessors by undertaking expeditions into the North beyond the Vindhya and also towards the South.

### **Territory and Society**

The foregoing account may give an impression that the polity of the early medieval centuries was characterised by warfare more than anything else. The basis of this warfare did not result always in territorial expansion for the victorious warrior king. But it would have helped in defining clearly the boundaries of the core territory of each dynasty. Outside this area, the wars were waged to subdue the contending kings and extract tribute and booty. The eulogistic preambles (*prasasti*) of the copper-plate records of this time emphasise this aspect of the warfare. An indirect result of the warfare was the spread of new culture and political ideas into the areas of tribal communities. More and more tribal communities were brought into the political influence of the expanding kingdoms and a network of overlord subordinate relationships, mostly tenuous and flexible, came to be established. In course of time some of the tribal chiefs themselves tried and succeeded in establishing small kingdoms. Another result of the constant warfare was the migration of people seeking opportunities in new areas. This would have aided in the extension of agriculture into forest lands.

From some explicit information, it may be said that during the 7th and 8th centuries A.D. several new *Brahman* settlements called *Brahmadeyas* were created by the rulers for the sake of *Brahmans*. This in one way gave a fillip to the extension of agricultural land with irrigation facilities, generally tank irrigation. Also it introduced new kinds of land relations in those special kind of villages, with *Brahman* landowners at the top and their tenant cultivators under them. Otherwise the society was not much stratified. The *Varna* ideology that had been introduced into the Deccan during the pre-Christian centuries was certainly known to the rulers and most of their copper-plate records tell that the kings were proud of upholding the *Varna* ideology. But whether the society was actually classified into four *Varnas* is doubtful.

Some of the communities that we come across in the inscriptions are found to be just professional groups, like herders, goldsmiths, merchants, etc. Some of the professions like leather-working were considered low and so those associated with such professions were consigned to the lowest level of the society. Some of them were even treated as slaves.

---

### 6.3 MONARCHICAL POLITY

---

The political organisation of the times was of a simple kind. King was the head of the state. Normally kingship was hereditary and passed on through the eldest son. But there were sometimes deviations from this norm which caused some family feuds and civil wars too. At times the Matras and Mulaprakritis played an active role in choosing a king as it happened in the case of Nandivarman II (731-96 A.D.) the Pallava king who belonged to a collateral line.

The king's image became lofty if he was a great warrior as well as an intellectual, like the Pallava king Mahendra I. Certainly this image was emphasized in the eulogy part (*prasasti*) of their charters. All the ruling families of these centuries were given a long mythical genealogy to create an image of great antiquity of the respective families and also to give them a divine origin. These details were couched in highly ornate Sanskrit poetry. That is, the *Brahman* scholars were the creators of such genealogies. Another related thing was the performance of Vedic rituals by the rulers, for which also the *Brahmans* were necessary. The performance of Vedic rituals such as *hiranyagarbha*, *agnishtoma*, *asvamedha*, etc. was an important avenue to legitimise the *Kshatriya* status claimed by the new rulers. The Pallava rulers actually claimed a *Brahma-kshatriya* status, a status of both *Brahman* and *Kshatriya*.

---

### 6.4 ADMINISTRATIVE SYSTEM

---

There are a few references to *Amatya* which is taken as minister. But scholars do not agree that there was a regular council of ministers to assist the king, in any of these early states. We come across one or two active officials, sometimes referred to as *Amatya* or *Mantri*. These are found to be a combination of military leader (*Senapati*) and civil officer (*Ajnapti* in Sanskrit or *Anatti* in Tamil). For example, in the reign of Nandivarman II Pallavamalla who had a long reign (731-96 A.D.) there were only two or three such officials who combined in themselves both military and civil duties. For example Udayachandra one of the king's few loyal officers was a big warrior too and he helped the king in several battles. These were also highly cultured people. Evidence relating to the *amatya* or *senapati* is found frequently in the eighth century records than in the earlier ones, showing the growth of the south Indian states by that time. Each of the states had some type of standing army, mostly composed of infantry and to some extent elephantry and cavalry. The Pallavas had some kind of navy also which is said to have undertaken expeditions to Sri Lanka in the seventh century. There are also some vague hints regarding conquest of some islands in the eighth century.

There is only scanty information about the administrative divisions of the times under study. There are references to *Ahara*, *vishaya*, *Rashtra*, and *Nadu*. These more or less synonymous terms denoted according to the context either the whole territory of a ruler or just the basic administrative divisions. The designation *Nadu* was

common to all South Indian languages and the other terms were of Sanskrit origin and are mentioned generally in the Sanskrit sections of the royal records. Each of these basic units included in their turn several villages within them. There were some officials in charge of these divisions, called *Vishayapati*, *Rashtrapati* or *Naduviyavan*. These officials are mentioned in the beginning of the royal charters, showing their importance. In the Pallava kingdom there was another division called *kottam* above the *Nadu/Rashtra*. Each *Kottam* therefore included some *Nadu* divisions within them.

Village was the lowest territorial unit of administration. Details regarding the village level administration are available only from the records of the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and later. *Gamunda* is found as a village officer in the Chalukya area. Generally it is a corporate body or group of chief inhabitants of a village which was more important in local administration. This group was called *Mahajana*, *Sabha* or *Ur* in different places. The accountant *Karanika* was an important village official.

All the states had some sort of revenue system. The revenue office was called *nilaikkalam* in the Pallava kingdom. Land tax was an important source of state revenue. But it seems taxes on professions were equally important. Taxes on goldsmiths, braziers, oil-mongers, weavers, cattle-keepers, and toddy-tappers are frequently mentioned in the inscriptions. There was a tax on marriages and houses. Sales tax and tolls were collected in markets and along the roads. Salt manufacture was a state prerogative and therefore the salt-makers had to pay rent for making salt to the government. The property of those who died without issue became the property of the government. There was a limited circulation of coins issued by the different kingdoms.

An important activity of the government was to provide irrigation facilities and kings took interest in reclaiming more and more land for cultivation. This information is known from the records relating to the creation of new settlements (*Brahmadeya*) for the sake of Brahman scholars. The Pallavas took pride in reclaiming forest land for settling people and one of their favourite designations was '*Kaduvetti*' in Tamil meaning 'one who cleared forests'. The building of temples and towns may have been in the personal interest of the kings, making their presence more prominent and enhancing their status among their subjects. But it gave a fillip to flowering of art and architecture and provided work to a large number of artisans. There took place mobility of artisans over large distances, for example from Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu to Badami in Northern Karnataka and vice versa. In the field of religion also, the kings had their own predispositions, sometimes there were fanatics who tried to impose their beliefs on unwilling people. Thus we hear of two kings, one a Pallava and the other a Pandya, who are said to have persecuted Jains in the seventh century A.D. But these were only aberrations. Generally kings were eclectic and patronised all religions and cults in the country. Justice was meted out both at the king's court (*Adhikaranam*) and at the local level (*Dharmasana*). According to *Mattavilasaprahasana*, a dramatic farce said to have been written by the Pallava king Mahendravarman (590-630 A.D.), justice was sometimes not impartial; rich people could influence the judges.

---

## 6.5 POLITICAL PROCESSES BETWEEN THE 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> CENTURIES A.D.

---

Different perspectives exist on the nature of these polities and the emergence of the state in peninsular India. "Traditional" historiography was empirically comprehensive,



but failed to perceive the inter-relationships between political and socio-economic processes, i.e., social formations in the emergence of a state system, and hence presented an inadequate and often incorrect perspectives on the nature of the state. Imperialist and nationalist approaches also impelled them to glorify these polities as empires with all the machinery of a well-developed modern state. Marxist historiography introduced the theory of Indian feudalism to explain a structural change in Indian economy and society based on the early medieval land grant system, representing the first attempt to relate socio-economic processes to the political processes and envisaging the emergence of “a hierarchical structure in the place of the binarily opposed entities of the state and peasantry, a structure of different tiers of intermediaries, which explains the mechanism of exploitation and coercion in the early medieval state”. However, by locating feudal polity at the crisis caused by the breakdown of a centralised bureaucratic state system (Mauryan) or political fragmentation, this view was again derived from European feudalism emerging after the breakdown of the classical regimes. A correction to this view is offered in the alternative explanation given for the diffused polities of the post-Mauryan period as the spread of state society in secondary formation of state and not as a crisis in state power or fragmentation. In the early medieval context, the complex system of land grants has been examined afresh to show how land grants both to the *Brahmanas* and officials as service or secular assignments led to the emergence of the “*Samanta* – feudatory network”. Hence, political integration or integrative polity has been posed as a counter point to the decentralised polity of the feudal model. This view emphasizes the correlation between roles and services and ranking in the *Samanta* hierarchy leading to an integrative polity by transforming the *Samanta* into a vital component of the political structure. Here ranking is seen as the basis of political organisation of both the local and supra-local structures i.e. the intermediate zone, with potential changes in the very formation of these structures, leading to a transformation or reordering of the hierarchy. As an analytical tool the “*Samanta* – feudatory network” would seem to have greater potential for understanding the nature of the Deccan and Andhra polities of the early medieval period, i.e., 6<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D., in all of which the “*Samanta*-feudatory system” is very conspicuous as a ranked hierarchy of the intermediate strata.

Monarchy as the major institution of political organisation developed in the Deccan under these dynasties, which followed the Gupta polity of northern India and that of the Gupta contemporaries in the Deccan and Andhra regions such as the Vakatakas, Kadambas, Vishnukundis and Pallavas. Monarchy, hereditary succession and the law of primogeniture were the characteristic features of all early medieval polities, but regional differences between the Deccan kingdoms and the Tamil monarchies exist, based on the nature and degree of influence that the northern Brahmanical Sastric texts and institutions had over the emerging kingdoms and the differences in the pre-existing and region specific non-Sanskritic traditions. Also significant were the geographic and topographic differences in the two major regions of peninsular India, viz., the Deccan plateau and the coastal plains (especially the Tamil plains), which led to significant variations in the resource bases of the kingdoms which emerged in these two zones. The Deccan is marked by relatively less continuous agricultural zones when compared to the large continuous plains of the Tamil region. It was also noted for its trading activities and craft organisation from the early historic times (3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD) and hilly and forested zones with several local and tribal chifships which could hardly be closely integrated into larger territorial regimes for enduring regional states to emerge. Hence the Deccan kingdoms of the Chalukyas and Rashtrakutas were polities based on the *Brahmanical*

socio-political order and institutions like the *Brahmadeya* and the temple, but remained a loosely knit *Samanta* type of feudatory states, where crisis was built into the very nature of the feudatory system, with ranking among the chiefships and an authority/power structure, in which the scale could easily be tilted by one or the other chiefship with military capability. Thus there was hardly any scope for a centralised administration to develop through there was a centralised taxation system and a hierarchically organised bureaucracy. There was no proper standing army except the royal troops at the capital and the smaller groups of fighters in the neighbouring regions held under the control of members of the royal family, some of whom were placed at strategic points in the transit zones and buffer zones held by feudatories or smaller powers owing allegiance to the main dynasty, zones leading to more powerful neighbours in the Tamil and Andhra regions.

High sounding titles were used by the rulers to express their very uncertain power, while officers with impressive designations like *Mahasandhivigrahika*, *Mahadandanayaka* and so on were appointed from among the kinsmen of the royal families and even from among the lesser chiefs and feudatories. Government at the local level can be located in regions called the *Vishaya*, *Rashtra* and *Desa*, with their respective heads called *Vishayapati*, *Desadhikari*, etc., while the *Grama* or the village was run by the mahajanans, the big men of the village controlling land, production and redistribution and also local administration. In most cases these divisions were not created by the central authority but were those spontaneously evolved regions which were recognized as such by the ruling powers, the centre of power shifting according to the change in the dynasties which acquired a hegemonic control over certain core regions and territories. Hence these polities may be best understood as loosely knit chiefships under a more powerful dynastic rule/control, with a monarchy supported by the *Brahmanical* order and institutional means. It was a scale of formations, which had the potential of tilting in favour of the mightier among the ruling powers.

The Pallavas of Kanchipuram ruled over the Northern parts of Tamil Nadu, historically known as Tondaimandalam (Palar-Cheyyar valley- Chingleput, North Arcot, South Arcot, Pondichery and parts of the Chittoor districts of Andhra Pradesh) and the Pandyas ruled over the Southern parts of Tamil Nadu (Vaigai – Tamraparni valleys – Madurai, Ramanathapuram, Tirunelveli and Kanyakumari districts). Both these kingdoms were products of the *Brahmanical* socio-political ideology in keeping with the general processes of political development in the whole of the sub-continent in the Gupta and post-Gupta periods. The early Pallavas are represented by several branches of the same lineage making land grants in the Southern parts of Andhra Pradesh, mostly from victorious military camps indicating a fluid situation, each of these branches being in search of a more permanent territorial base. A few of these charters mention Kanchipuram as the place of issue. The Pallavas may well have been pastoral chiefs in search of a territorial base, which they found ultimately in and around Kanchipuram.

The Pallavas inherited an administrative machinery with a set of functionaries of the Gupta type such as *Amatyas*, *Rashtrikas*, prevalent in the Deccan under the early *Brahmanical* ruling families of the 4<sup>th</sup> to the 6<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. The positions of the royal preceptor and mantri were held by one and the same person, usually a *Brahmana* or *Brahmasriraja*. Other functionaries included *Vayilkelppar* (one who took the king's orders), *Kosadhyaksha* or *Manikkappandaram Kappan* (head of the Kosa or Bhandara). They were ranked offices, many of which were held by smaller local chiefs chosen by the king and remunerated by grants of land for their

service or chieftains whose authority over specific regions/localities was acknowledged. The Pallava polity emerged by the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. as a system of sharing authority between the kings and chiefs in a virtual hierarchy, the king exercising a hegemonic control and the chiefs acting as his agents and functionaries. It was an expansive kingship in which the king's authority was symbolized through chiefly authority, *Brahmadeya* sabhas and temples. In other words, it was a monarchy with a hegemonic control over subordinate chiefs and institutional means like the *Brahmadeya* and the temple to integrate peasant and pastoral regions into a new socio-political order.

During their early sojourn in Andhra, the Pallavas imbibed the Northern politico-cultural norms based on the Dharma Sastras and other *Brahmanical* texts and the epics. These traditions they carried with them to Tondai Nadu, where they consolidated their power. However, the regional specificities of the Tamil society and economy led to a new synthesis of the Northern normative traditions of governance with the Southern forms of socio-political organisation which were now being integrated into a new polity. The Pallavas had to recognise the agrarian organisation of Tamilakam with local peasant regions like the *Nadus*, their entrenched peasant communities and their assemblies also called the *Nadu*, and integrate them into this new polity, in which the Sanskrit and Tamil forms resulted in a new synthesis. The new legitimating forces introduced by them were the *Brahmadeya* and the *Puranic* temple, both acting as instruments of integration of their territorial base. This was built up in two ways. One was by a subordination of the chieftaincies in this region, presumably by conquest and the other through agrarian expansion and integration with the proliferation of the *Brahmadeya*, which served the dual purpose of bringing new unsettled areas under cultivation as well as integrating pre-existing pastoral and peasant settlements into the new agrarian order. Politically they were bastions of royal power, as the *Brahmanas* in return for land grants provided ideological support to the new ruling family by creating impressive lineage connections in their genealogies and assigning divine origin to the king in their *prasastis*. The chiefly families of the region also adopted the *Brahmanical* ideology and participated as *Vijnaptis* (petitioners) and *Ajnaptis* (executors) in the land grant system, e.g., Udayachandra was a chief, who was also a military functionary under Nandivarman II and created a *Brahmadeya* with royal sanction. Traditional understanding of the Pallava polity characterised it as an empire and a centralised state, an imperialist view and inapplicable to the Pallava polity.

The political processes under the Pallavas mark the transformation of the early historical tribal polities into a more complex agrarian order with a new power structure dominated by monarchy, i.e., a restructuring of the early tribal and uneven socio-economic organisation into an agrarian system based on land grants, creating differential rights in land and a hierarchical power structure. The subsistence level settlements now became surplus oriented settlements through the *Brahmadeya* and the temple, two integrative institutions mobilising and redistributing resources. The *Puranic* ideology introduced the temple as the legitimating device and the innovative focus of all economic activities and social ranking based on the *Brahmanical* caste system.

The Pandya kingdom of the same period was similar to that of the Pallavas in all respects. The major difference lay in the fact that the Pandyas were an indigenous ruling family, one of the traditional trio of the Sangam Tamil polity, re-establishing their power in the traditional region associated with them, i.e., the Pandi Nadu. However, Northern Sanskrit- *Puranic* traditions influenced the development of

Pandya polity. Claiming descent from Siva and the Lunar lineage, the Pandyas also claimed to be performers of Vedic sacrifices, made *Mahadanas* (Great gifts), granted land to *Brahmanas* and built *Puranic* temples. They also achieved a socio-political organisation in which the *Brahmadeya* and the temple acted as integrative institutions in restructuring economy, society and polity.

### Chronological Tables

#### The Chalukyas of Badami

Pulakesin I	543-566 A.D.
Kirtivarman	566-597 A.D.
Mangalesa	597-609 A.D.
Pulakesin II	609-642 A.D.
Vikramaditya I	644-681 A.D.
Vinayaditya	681-696 A.D.
Vijayaditya	696-733 A.D.
Vikramaditya II	733-744 A.D.
Kirtivarman II	744-745 A.D.

#### The Pallavas of Kanchipuram

Simhavarman	c.550 A.D.
Simhavishnu	c.575 A.D.
Mahendra I	590-630 A.D.
Narasimha I	630-668 A.D.
Paramesvara I	669-691 A.D.
Rajasimha	691-729 A.D.
Paramesvara II	729-731 A.D.
Nandivarman II	731-796 A.D.
Dantivarman	796-846 A.D.

#### The Pandyas of Madurai

Kadungon	c.600 A.D.
Avanisulamani	c.625 A.D.
Sendan	c.650 A.D.
Arikesari	c.700 A.D.
Ranadhira	c.725 A.D.
Rajasimha I	c.750 A.D.
Parantaka Varaguna I	768-815 A.D.

## 6.6 SUMMARY

In this Unit, we have tried to focus on the nature of state formation in peninsular India between 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. In this period the states emerged in core areas centred around rivers like Kaveri, Krishna and their tributaries. The important kingdoms in this period were the Pallavas of Kanchipuram, Pandeyas of Madurai, and Chalukyas of Badami. It seems that the political history of this period was marked by warfare and territorial expansion outside the core areas. Political conflicts led to migration of people which brought about expansion of agriculture. It also resulted in the spread of new cultures, political ideas and development of regional identities in these areas. Thus the tribal chiefs of this period, were transformed into



kings and Varna ideology led to the social stratification and legitimisation of kingship. The political organisation was monarchical in nature. The bureaucratic system was not very well developed and mature which is proved by the few references to *Amatyas* or ministers. Administrative divisions existed but information about them is scanty. The local and revenue administration were important constituents of the administrative system. The state encouraged the creation of *Brahmadeya* settlements and promoted the art and architectural activities. The kings also gave patronage to religion. In this period, the early historical tribal polities, got transformed into a complex, agrarian order dominated by monarchy. The *Brahmadeya* and the temple mobilised and redistributed the resources and *Puranic* ideology provided the legitimating device.

---

## **6.7 EXERCISES**

---

- 1) Trace the rise and consolidation of early medieval polities in peninsular India between 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D.
- 2) Analyse the nature of political processes between 6<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. in peninsular India.



ignou  
THE PEOPLE'S  
UNIVERSITY

---

## **UNIT 7 Early Medieval Polities In Peninsular India 8<sup>TH</sup> TO 12<sup>TH</sup> Centuries A.D.**

---

Early Medieval Polities in  
Peninsular India 8<sup>th</sup> to  
12<sup>th</sup> Centuries A.D.

### **Structure**

- 7.1 Introduction
- 7.2 Historical Background
- 7.3 The Royal Establishment
- 7.4 Landed Magnates as State's Agents
- 7.5 Revenue
- 7.6 Military and Police
- 7.7 Locality Chiefs
- 7.8 Local Groups: The Basis of Power
- 7.9 Ideology
- 7.10 Conceptual Considerations
- 7.11 Summary
- 7.12 Exercises

---

### **7.1 INTRODUCTION**

---

The “early medieval” in Indian history is characterised, among other things, by the emergence of a number of regional kingdoms in different parts of the subcontinent. A few arose in South India as well. The historical processes and background of these South Indian kingdoms were, however, different from those of their counterparts elsewhere. Thus, the political processes and structures in these kingdoms offer an interesting case study in both conformity and contrast within a general sub continental pattern in early medieval India. In this lesson, we shall take up the situation in the Southern regions of peninsular India, namely in the kingdoms of the Pandyas of Madurai, Cheras of Mahodayapuram and Cholas of Thanjavur. It should not be assumed that these three kingdoms shared a uniform structure; indeed, there were variations despite apparent similarity.

---

### **7.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

---

The background from which these South Indian kingdoms emerged was somewhat the same. The Southern most region, where people speak Malayalam and Tamil today, constituted more or less a single socio-cultural unit known as “Tamilakam” in the early historical period (c. 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC to AD 3<sup>rd</sup> century) called, rather inappropriately, the “Sangam Age”. An economy and society of uneven development characterised the period. Social stratification had not quite reached a stage that would demand the institution of state. Polity in this period was characterised by what have been described as chiefdom-level organisations, where many chiefdoms, big and small, exercised power and authority. There was no regular exaction of surplus in any form of revenue; nor do we come across anything which would approximate to “officers” or “offices”. There is nothing that compels us to imagine the existence of an “army” of any description, references to fights and fighters notwithstanding. Notions of territory, sovereignty and state did not yet exist in that world. It was a world of heroes, heroism and heroic poetry. The oral poetry of

bards and minstrels, singing in praise of the valour and munificence of one chieftain or the other, together with the esoteric sacrifices performed by a *Brahmana* priest for the chief, provided legitimacy to the patrons.

A transformation of this society came about gradually in the period after third century A.D. There were many factors behind it. They included the expansion of plough agriculture in the river valleys, the emergence of a class of non cultivating intermediaries demanding extra-kin labour in the processes of production, the increased presence of the *Brahmana* groups with their own ideas and institutions, and a whole lot of related developments. In fact, there is a veritable “transition debate” that has grown in relation to this process. In any case, what we see when the curtain rises on the historical scene in the South by the seventh century A.D. is the existence of what could now be described as monarchical states in the Pallava (Northern Tamilnadu) and Pandya (Southern Tamilnadu) territories. Monarchical state appeared in the Kaveri valley under the Cholas and in the West Coast under the Cheras a little later. In this lesson, we shall examine the political structure in these kingdoms.

---

### 7.3 THE ROYAL ESTABLISHMENT

---

The most visible political organisation in the epigraphical records of this period is the state presided over by a hereditary monarch. In the case of the Pallavas, Pandyas and Cholas, the descent was patrilineal while there is reason to believe that it was matrilineal in the Chera kingdom. The king arrogated, or was accorded, the *Kshatriya* status or caste, with claims to belong to the *Suryavamsa* or *Chandravamsa* being put forward by the dynasts, the only exception being the Pallavas who claimed a *Brahmakshatra* status. The model of the *Chakravartin*, which was tested and found successful in the Gupta state and immediately thereafter in Northern India, was emulated in the polities in South India as well. Elaborate *prasastis* (“panegyrics”), detailing the origin, genealogy, historical antecedents and personal achievements of the ruler, were composed in his honour in all but the case of the Cheras where the nature of state was different from the rest. The literature of the period, both Tamil and Sanskrit, projects a glorious self-image of royalty and a somewhat resplendent royal court, both a means of claiming legitimacy for the ruler. In fact, new techniques of legitimation were necessary for the new political dispensations. A detailed examination of the political structure will show how it was different from the earlier periods.

Although the self-image of the king was perhaps larger than life, he had nonetheless a presence in the kingdom. Most conspicuous was the fact that the inscriptions, seen in their hundreds and thousands throughout the territory of these kingdoms, are dated in the regnal year of the kings. This was so even when the document had no claim of being a royal order or an administrative document. The royal presence was felt through the establishments of the king’s government as well, both at the capital and in the different parts of the kingdom. These establishments included the “civil” and at times “military” aspects of the administration. An illustration is available in the case of the Chola state. Historians in the past such as K. A. Nilakanta Sastri waxed eloquent about the highly bureaucratic and centralised nature of the Chola empire; those of a later generation, such as Burton Stein, rejected this romantic idea altogether. Neither position is supported by the sources.

In the case of the lesser states like those of the Pandyas and Cheras or even the Cholas in the earlier periods, the presence of this government was felt in a feeble

way. For instance, inscriptions of the Pandyas speak of their civil and military functionaries in distant Southern Travancore. The Chera king himself is stated to have presided over an apparently inconsequential meeting of a small Brahmana assembly in Valappalli far away from his capital. Functionaries of the Chola state we present somewhat authoritatively in meetings of village assemblies of distant places like Uttaramerur. All this shows that the king and his establishment were not just matters of interpretation by historians in the nationalist era.

---

## 7.4 LANDED MAGNATES AS STATE'S AGENTS

---

By the time the Chola state was established in a most concrete manner (AD tenth century), the establishment of the king's government with a large number of functionaries or agents also grew. One interesting feature is that most or all of these functionaries were identified and enlisted from among the notables in society. One major source was the class of landed magnates, who had gained in strength in the period from the tenth century and after. By the middle of the tenth century, the landed magnates emerged in the Kaveri delta and outside in a big way. They bear high-sounding titles like *Udaiyan*, *Velan*, *Araiyan*, *Muventavelan*, etc. These titles indicated primarily ownership of land and also some position in the structure of the state. These titles are more often than not prefixed by the name or title of a Chola king, e.g., *Ràjaràja-pallavaraiyan* or *Ksatriyasikhamani-muventavelan*. At least in one case, there is the clear statement that the titles were actually conferred by the state (*Pattam Kattina Peyar*).

All this shows that, when a strong section of landowners emerged following the agrarian expansion in the Kaveri delta, the state was all too ready to recognise them. What is interesting is that, these magnates, so recognised, carry out the functions of the state. Recent studies have shown that most of those who functioned as the agents, or what an earlier fashion of historiography referred to as the "officers", of the state were drawn from among this class of landed magnates. Thus, there are *Adhikàris*, *Olainayakams*, *Dandanayakams*, *Srikaryans*, and a whole lot of similar functionaries of the king's government. It is not without significance that those who performed functions of greater consequence held more impressive titles indicating greater importance in society. These functionaries are described in so many words as carrying out the king's work: as the king himself puts it, they looked after "our work" (*Nam Karumam Aràyum*). They were "our men" (*Nantamar*) for the king and "the king's men" (*Koyirramar*) for others. Among them they carried out the administration of the kingdom, both in the capital city and in places far afield. In fact, there is considerable evidence of the transfer of such agents of the state from one place to another, a clear indication of the existence of something resembling an officialdom. It is also interesting that this pattern of landed magnates being recognised and enlisted as state agents becomes popular in the period of Uttama Chola (last quarter of 10<sup>th</sup> century) onwards and gets elaborated by the time we come to regnal periods of *Ràjaràja I* (685-1014 A.D.) and *Rajendra I*. (1014-1044 A.D.). It begins to taper off by the time of *Kulottunga II* (mid 12<sup>th</sup> century AD).

---

## 7.5 REVENUE

---

The most clearly identifiable areas where the king's "administration" had scope all over the territory were those of revenue, affairs of temples and military and police. In fact, it is in revenue administration that we see the state in its fullest. We see clear



signs of extraction of surplus in the kingdoms of the Pandyas and Cheras, although the question whether what was extracted was a tax or a rent is very difficult to answer. Annual land revenue of *Attakkol* is mentioned in the inscriptions of the Cheras, which was collected from far and near and which went to the king himself. Similarly, there are many revenue terms in the Pandyan inscriptions. But, as in the case of other aspects of administration, it is in the case of the Cholas that we have the clearest information of the revenue system. This is not only because of the elaborate details available in the more numerous and detailed inscriptions of the Cholas; it is also a due to the fact that it was under the Cholas that the state in South India reached its highest level of development.

What is called a whole 'department of revenue' is seen in the *Puravubarit-tinaik-kalam*. References to this 'department' begin to occur from the reign of Uttama Chola in the second half of the tenth century. It grew into an elaborate affair with various sections each under a hierarchy of officers in the time of Ràjaràja I. Even here, the more important functionaries are the wealthier landed magnates. What begins as a relatively humble affair with a few 'officers' gets elaborated with a hierarchy of them in as many as ten rungs in the period of Ràjaràja II. However, this department becomes rather insignificant by the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D., which is exactly in the same pattern of the rise, performance and gradual disappearance of the "king's men" carrying out functions of the state. It must, however, be noted that this 'department' has no presence in the countryside, its activity being limited only to the royal establishment at the capital. It is, therefore, more appropriate to describe it as a 'revenue board' or a 'revenue secretariat' rather than a 'department of revenue'.

As in the establishment called *Pravubarit-tinaik-kalam*, so also in the realisation of revenue, we see the same pattern. This throws immense light on the nature of the polities obtaining in the kingdoms under review. In the earlier, less developed, polities of the Pandyas and Cheras, we do see different types of taxes, collected by and on behalf of the state. Most terms indicating revenue are available to us from the list of remissions and relief, given at the time of granting land and other privileges to different beneficiaries. Thus, it is argued that they indicated more a possibility than the actuality. In any case, recent studies making use of a statistical analysis of the revenue terms have brought out certain interesting details. For one thing, although there are several hundreds of terms indicating "revenue" in the inscriptions of the period, only a few had prevalence in the different parts of the territory, the others occurring only once or twice. A closer examination shows that the most important among them was land revenue, called *Katamai*, literally meaning "obligation" and standing for a rent charged on land. A close second was another kind of due called *Kutimai*, which translates as "occupancy dues". There was another, *Vetti* (from *Visti* in Sanskrit) which stood for compulsory labour services. It has been shown that the former was a "produce rent", that is, the fruits of the surplus labour of the producer while the latter was a "labour rent" extracted directly in the form of labour itself. Records show that references to *Katamai* and *Kutimai* went on increasing while those to *Vetti* went on decreasing. There were other exactions, most of which were charged on land. One also comes across taxes on professions.

As regards the administration of justice, there is less clarity. It appears that justice was meted out by community organisations. Thus, *Brahmanical* assemblies dealt with problems of justice among themselves and groups of other communities are found doing the same. We have information about the right of administering justice being given away to organisations of traders, as recorded in the Syrian Christian

Copper Plates from Kerala. Law was a matter of the standardisation of locally accepted practices, on which a stamp of recognition was put, sometimes in the form of quotations from the *Dharmasastra* texts. There are instances where new practices, which deviated from earlier ones, were recognised in this manner. Courts of law as such did not exist, local, communal organisations carrying out their function.

---

## 7.6 MILITARY AND POLICE

---

In the matter of policing functions, too, we have no detailed information; but records from Kerala show that the “Companions of Honour” of the locality chiefs did the duty of *Kàval* (“protection”). These “Companions of Honour”, known as the “Hundred Organisations” as they were always referred to in terms of certain hundreds attached to particular chiefs (for example, the Six Hundred of Venad), constituted trusted body guards of the chiefs and formed his armed force which they could use in times of need. Such a body, a thousand strong, is seen in the case of the overlord, the Chera *Perumal* at the capital and following him constantly like a shadow. What is more, it is the same body that is found fighting for the suzerain of the chief, namely the Chera and even for the Chola upon the Chera overlord’s bidding. In fact, at least in the case of Kerala, there is no evidence of a regular standing army, these “Companions of Honour” of the chiefs and the overlord constituting the “armed forces”, much in the same way as the Janissaries in the Turkish system. It is probable that such bodies had a considerable role in enforcing the coercive power of other states as well. There are soldiers called *Velaikkarakar* whom we come across in the case of the Pandyas and Cholas; and they shared all the characteristic features of such “companions”. However, there is evidence of what can be taken as military “officers” in the inscriptions of the Cholas in the *Dandanayakams* and *Senapatis*, although there is no way in which their actual function can be ascertained. In any case, the picture of a huge military establishment, with a powerful army of “numerous regiments” and an equally impressive navy of “numberless ships” is exaggerated. Similarly, to deny that there was no coercive power at all which the state enjoyed is to overlook evidence. A system with the bodyguards of the chiefs and those of the king at the capital, supplemented by mercenaries recruited *ad hoc*, and led by local landed elite with high-sounding titles and occasionally specialists in archery, horse-riding and riding elephants seems to be a more realistic picture about the military establishment of early medieval South India.

---

## 7.7 LOCALITY CHIEFS

---

Such an establishment of royal government at the centre did not wield any absolute power. There were many other nodes of power in the locality and at various levels. Perhaps second only to the king at the centre, whether Chera or Chola, were the chiefs in the localities, known to an earlier style of historiography as “feudatories”. These are not, to be sure, confused with the landed magnates who held chiefly or even feudatory titles such as *Velan*, *Araiyan*, *Muventavelan*, etc. whom we have discussed earlier. These chiefs represented a continuation from an earlier period in many cases, for we hear names such as the *Ays*, *Vels*, *Muvas*, *Adigaimans*, *Malavas*, etc. for the chiefs in what is called the “Sangam” period. There are many new names which we do not come across in the records of an earlier period. All of them, however, recognised the overlordship of the Chera, Chola or Pandya. How exactly this was achieved is not recorded in the documents; the role of a policy of aggrandizement cannot be entirely ruled out. In any case, there is clear

evidence of the acknowledgement of the suzerainty of one of the three major powers such as the Chera, Chola or Pandya. This is expressed in various ways: starting from the dating of records in their territories in the regnal years of the overlords down to the complex network of political and matrimonial alliances among them and with them and the overlords, there is considerable evidence to show this superordinate-subordinate relationship. The role they played in the polities of early South India was crucial.

There were wide variations among these chiefs in many respects. Their territories varied widely in size. While a few claimed authority over vast areas of land, others had their command over a handful of villages. Some of the chiefs flaunted the *Kshatriya* status while most others were not as ambitious. Some had elaborate establishments of 'administration', including what passed for a bureaucracy, while some others were much humbler. All had bodies of "Companions of Honour" which functioned as the military and police force in the territory. In times of necessity, such forces were either offered to, or commanded by, the overlord. Thus we see that there were the soldiers of the chief of Valluvanadu in Kerala, fighting the famous Battle of Takkolan for and on behalf of their Chera overlords, who were themselves subordinate to the Cholas in that period. We see the overlords claiming and taking a part of the revenue from the territories of the chiefs. The famous Syrian Christian Copper Plates speak of the one-tenth share of the Chera overlord. There are many instances where the proceeds are distributed in the 2:1 ratio between the overlord and the local chief, showing also the hierarchy between them. There is a rich material giving information regarding the matrimonial relations between the chiefly houses and the house of the overlord, which strengthened this kind of a relation of subordination/superordination. This relation is also seen in the fact that the chiefs were required to attend the court of the suzerain when occasions demanded. Thus we have the attestations of all the major chiefs of Kerala in the Jewish Copper Plates of the Chera king, Bhaskara Ravi Varman (AD 1000), and the presence of nearly all of them in the Chola court as mentioned in the *Kalingattup-parani*.

There is a peculiar pattern that we see about these chiefs in the case of the Chola state. They function more or less in the same way as in other situations, showing allegiance in the multiple ways mentioned above. By the time we come to the period of Rājārāja I, all these chiefs disappear mysteriously from the records as rulers of their traditional territories. They appear, instead, as functionaries of the state, along with the landed magnates who held high-sounding titles. It is significant that they are now seen in areas far away from their former home territories. They were integrated into the state system, which was made stronger by Rājārāja. In about a little more than a hundred years, the chiefs start reappearing, once again in their old role and assert themselves with a vengeance. Interestingly, this is exactly in the same pattern of the increase in the number of royal functionaries, the strengthening of the establishment of land revenue and the greater power that the military arm of the state had acquired.

---

## 7.8 LOCAL GROUPS: THE BASIS OF POWER

---

The local groups, which constituted the real basis of power in early medieval South India, played a somewhat unique role in these polities. They have been subjects of endless discussions and debates in modern historical writings, although not exactly as the foundation of power in these polities. Of these, the one body about which there is a plethora of writings is the *Sabha*, the assembly of *Brahmanas* controlling

vast extent of property in agricultural land both in their own name and the name of the temples around which they were settled. But this richness of information is only a result of the records: it is in such *Brahmanical* villages and their temples that we have the largest number of inscriptions. However, the population of the *Brahmanical* groups was comparably less than that of the rest and the landed wealth that they enjoyed, albeit out of proportion to the population. The agrarian settlements of the former, called *Brahmadeyans* in the Tamil speaking regions and *Gramams* in Kerala, were much less numerous than the non-*Brahmanical* villages, called the *Vellanvakai* (“of the *vellalas*”) in the Tamil country or simply the *urs*. It is true that the information regarding the *Ur* is much less; but that should not give the impression that they were less important. In fact, it will be a mistake not to realise that they were much more numerous and thus had greater influence on the economy, society and polity. Records of the more literate sections of society are always apt to be more numerous and elaborate, and self-assertive, than those of others.

Unfortunately, the information regarding these groups in the Pandya and Chera situations is much less than what is available about the Chola situation, obviously owing to the fact that there are more numerous records for the Chola than in the two former cases. Perhaps the non-Brahmanical section of the land-owning groups was better organised in the Chola country. In any case, their existence and vitality are not to be doubted. By the time we come to the age and region of the Cheras, we have much more copious information regarding the *Ur* settlements of these non-Brahmana groups. Of late, there have been refreshing studies of the constitution and functioning of these groups in the Chola country. Physically, they constituted habitation sites, cremation grounds, drinking water sources and irrigation channels, cultivated land, pasture land, etc. The residential areas consisted of the quarters of the landowners (*Ur-nattam* or *Ur-irukkai*), that of the artisans (*Kammanacceri*), that of the agrestic labourers (*Paraicceri*). This demonstrates the stratified nature of society and its necessary adjunct of social distancing. The *Kutis* or households constituted the basic unit; the labourers and artisans formed the primary producers in South India in this period. The landowners, called *Ulukutis*, held different superior rights over land, and members, or elders, of such *Kutis* formed the title-holding magnates or the agents of the state mentioned in an earlier section. These landowners met in their assemblies of the *Ur*, known also as *Urar* and *Urom*. These assemblies, although they did not have the kind of restrictive qualifications which characterised the *Brahmanical Sabhas*, were still exclusive groups of the elders of families possessing landed property and commanding authority in the countryside. They deliberated, and decided, on matters of property and other interests of the whole community in the village. It related itself with the state, functioning also as a channel of communication between the king’s government on the one hand and the bottom layers of the political structure on the other. However, this should not be confused with the colonial construction which gives centrality to “the village” in the political economy of pre-modern India.

In discussing the local groups in early medieval South India, the *Nadu* has a place of great importance. Till recently, historians had only recognised this as just another local group. It is only in recent years that they have taken up a systematic study of the *Nadu* as “the basic building block” of the political structure of South India under the Cholas. The expression *Nadu*, like *Ur*, denoted both the locality and the assembly of its spokesmen. The constituents of this assembly, which was also known by the terms *Nattar* or *Nattom*, were the dominant landed magnates of the locality, exactly as it was in the case of the *Ur* assembly. The *nadu*, as territory, was a grouping of the *Vellanvakai* villages, i.e., the non-*Brahmanical* agrarian



settlements. Statements in inscriptions, mentioning particular *Urs* as belonging to particular *Nadus*, help us identify the territory of the *Nadus*. They had no natural boundaries – there are even cases of *Nadus* lying on either side of the Kaveri, demonstrating the fact of these being spontaneous groupings of agrarian settlements. They were widely disparate in size, varying from a handful of square miles to a few hundreds and comprising *Urs* varying from one to forty. Even the nomenclature of *Nadus* is a strong indication of the spontaneity of their origin. The *Nadu* was named after one of the constituent *urs* mostly the first clan settlement to emerge, and that was generally a toponym. This contrasts with the artificial units called *Valanadus* which were clearly administrative divisions of an artificial nature: they had natural boundaries, they were more or less comparable in size and most of all, they were given the name of a Chola ruler or his title.

The situation in other regions conforms to this pattern. In the Pallava territory, the *Kottam* was a larger unit, within which *Nadus* emerged. It was mainly pastoral in its origin but with the increase in agricultural regions it became an agricultural-cum-pastoral region. But they had a greater pastoral content about them. Otherwise they answered to the *Nadus* in every respect. In the case of the Pandyan kingdom, too, the *Nadus* had comparable nature and functions. It was, however, different in Kerala under the Chera kingdom, where the term *Nadu* was used for the territory of the locality chiefs. Even in the case of the Cholas, the number of *Nadus* went on increasing as time progressed – a result of the expansion of the agrarian order and an endorsement of the thesis that the *Nadus* were groupings of agrarian villages.

The *Nadus* being groupings of agrarian villages and the *Nattar*, its dominant agriculturists, the prime concern of the body was agriculture itself. They took care of the management of irrigation and other arrangements related to agriculture. It was the *Nadu* that paid the tax to the king's government. Revenue items such as *Nattuppuravu*, *Nattuvvari* etc. are mentioned in the documents. There are also suggestions that the *Nadus* maintained some functionaries of its own. In any case, the role of the *Nadu*, in carrying out the royal orders regarding the delimitation of boundaries of fields, resettling land and effecting grants of land, collection and remittance of tax, managing temples and their endowments on behalf of the royal establishment, and so on, was important. It follows that the *Nadu* was thus recognised by the state as its agent in the locality, exercising power and authority for and on its behalf. The *Nadu* was an inseparable part of the state system, evolved from below but integrated organically within the larger system.

There were other groups at the local level. The best known of these were the *Brahmdeyams* or *Brahamanical* villages. Corporate bodies known as the *Sabhàs*, of which the members were Brahmanas who owned property and had sufficient knowledge of the Vedas and *Sastras*, managed the affairs of the *Brahmadeya* villages. The constitution, functioning and other details of these bodies show that they followed the prescriptions in the *Dharmasastras* to the last letter. The highly disciplined way in which these bodies conducted themselves points to the solidarity they had as groups comprising of non-cultivating intermediaries with superior rights over land placed between the cultivating peasantry and the state. This solidarity was maintained, as thousands of inscriptions recording the proceedings of such assemblies demonstrate. Celebrated records such as the Manur inscription (9<sup>th</sup> century) of Pandya Maran Cadaiyan or the two Paràntaka inscriptions from Uttaramerur (10<sup>th</sup> century) amply demonstrate this unmistakable class and caste interest of the *Brahamanical* groups. To look upon them as instances of democracy at grass-root levels is not only an anachronism created in nationalist approaches or historiography

but also opposed to facts. The idea of democracy cannot be linked to a society based on caste, and habitually conscious of the principle of hierarchy, where power and control were in the hands of those who owned property.

There were similar bodies called the *Nagarams* where traders organised themselves. The ways in which they were constituted and they functioned were similar to the corporate bodies of other groups. We have detailed information in relation to the Syrian Christian trading settlement in Kollam in Southern Kerala. There is information of a comparable nature from other parts of South India as well. Administrative, fiscal and judicial rights were given away to the trading groups in such *Nagarams*. It is interesting that, apart from the Jewish, Christian and Muslim groups of a West Asian origin, there were similar groups of local origins as well. The way in which trade and trading groups influenced statecraft in these polities was quite decisive.

---

## 7.9 IDEOLOGY

---

No discussion of polity can be complete without considering the social parameters which made it possible and the ideological props that it had. We have seen in the section on historical background that, following the opening up of river valleys and the expansion of rice culture, a stratified society had emerged and got consolidated in this part of the country. This stratification expressed itself in the institution of *Jati*, with innumerable gradations in it according to economic, social and ritual status. In fact, state in South India had developed as a consequence of the emergence of a stratified society with its multiple hierarchy getting its sanction from the principles of *Varnasramadharma*. The acceptance of the graduated hierarchy and its organising principle, which had clearly a North Indian origin, was not easy. This was achieved in a complex way. One of the most effective means was through religion and the ideology it represented. It is significant that temples had emerged as veritable landed magnates in this period and this meant that a major section of the population had come to depend on the temple as tenants, sub-tenants, servants of different descriptions and so on. This took the temple a long way, apart from being an institution catering to the 'spiritual' needs of the public. It is in this context that a major popular movement known as the "*Bhakti Movement*" acquires importance. Historians in recent years have brought out the way in which the "*Bhakti Movement*", which had been perceived at best as a religious and a literary phenomenon, reflected and legitimised the new order of things in economy, society and polity. It sanctified the ties of dependence in society; it made suffering and surrender sweet. What it really achieved was a smooth acceptance of a new form of society and polity through the ideological prop it provided. It is quite another matter that the temples, which were so popularised and strengthened in one of the most dynamic and forward-looking movements in the history of South India, became bastions of orthodoxy and centres of obscurantism in the centuries to follow. But then, that is the way of history.

---

## 7.10 CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

---

In concluding our discussion, it may be useful to look at how such a polity was conceptualised by historians from time to time. In the beginning of the twentieth century, when historians, who were heavily under the influence of the romantic tradition of Western historiography and participating vicariously in Indian National Movement, put together information regarding the Pandyan and Chola kingdoms for

the first time, they were regarded as so many “empires”. Thus the chapter headings of Nilakanta Sastri’s *Pandyan Kingdom* (1929) speak about the “first empire”, “second empire”, etc. He represented the Chola state as a highly centralised empire, presided over by a “Byzantine royalty” and comprising of a “numerous and powerful bureaucracy”, supported by a coercive power consisting of an impressive army of “numerous regiments” and an equally impressive navy of “numberless ships”, an elaborate revenue mechanism, but also with vital local bodies with considerable autonomy. What Sastri wrote became a model for other historians to follow; and historiography in South India acquired a conventional quality about it with a heavy resistance to change. The picture continued without any major alteration till the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Burton Stein exposed the contradictions in this construction, showing that a strong centre and autonomous local groups do not go together. Using the impressive findings of Y.Subbarayalu in relation to the political geography of the Chola country, Stein sought to explain evidence from medieval South India in terms of the model of “segmentary state”, which A.Southall had used to explain the situation in the East African society of the Alur. Accordingly, South India in this period was characterised by a multiplicity of centres, a political centre being identified in each of the 550 *Nadu* divisions, a dual sovereignty of the actual political and a ritual variety, specialised administrative staff in each of the centres and a pyramidal segmentation. This model is not quite acceptable for various reasons, the most important among which is that it was first constructed to explain a tribal lineage society in Africa and does not suit a highly stratified society with widespread literacy and impressive monumental architecture that is found in medieval South India.

The much-debated model of “Indian feudalism”, too, has been tried in the context of early medieval South India. M.G.S.Narayanan and Kesavan Veluthat argued that the *Bhakti* Movement in South India was actually feudal in its content. Veluthat has argued further that the entire political structure in early medieval South India had a feudal character about it. The general criticism against Indian feudalism are valid in this case also. Noboru Karashima and his associates have taken up a quantitative analysis of the information contained in the epigraphical material of early medieval South India. The results of such a systematic work replace the speculation of an earlier period, making it possible to test the different thesis with greater confidence. At the end of the day, the result of the entire enterprise is the considerable clarity that has been achieved in relation to the understanding of the polities in early medieval South India.

---

## 7.11 SUMMARY

---

In this Unit we have discussed the political structure of the South Indian Kingdoms which emerged in the early medieval period. The important kingdoms of this period were: Pandeyas of Madurai, Cheras of Mahodayapuram and Cholas of Thanjavur. The political organisation of this period was based on hereditary monarchy. The king and his establishment was an important constituent of the political formation. Under the Cholas landed magnates functioned as state agents and constituted the officialdom. The Cholas had developed an elaborate revenue machinery. The administration of justice was conducted by local communities. The military establishment comprised of bodyguards of kings and chiefs and mercenaries led by landed elite. Apart from the Chera, Chola and Pandya kings the realm was ruled by several chiefs who recognised the suzerainty of Chera, Chola and Pandyas. In

the later period, these chiefs got transformed into state functionaries like the landed magnates. They were absorbed into the state system. The political aspirations of the local groups were articulated through the assemblies; *Sabha* (assembly of *Brahmins*) and *Ur* (assembly of non-brahmans). The *Nadus* comprising of the *Urs* were the building blocks of south Indian polity in this period. The nagarams (corporate body of traders) and *Brahmadeyas* (*brahmanical* villages) and *Sabhas* were the important local bodies of this period. In South India the emergence of state is attributed to social stratification derived from the principles of *Varnashramadharam*. Religion and its ideology also helped in providing legitimacy to the state. Various perspectives related to the study of political organisation of the South Indian kingdoms help us in critically analysing the nature of polity of this period.

---

## 7.12 EXERCISES

---

- 1) Discuss the nature of political organisation at the local level between 8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries in peninsular India.
- 2) Analyse the nature of royal establishment in the political structure of peninsular India (8<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D.).



ignou  
THE PEOPLE'S  
UNIVERSITY



---

## SUGGESTED READINGS FOR THIS BLOCK

---

- Appadorai, A., *Economic Conditions of Southern India AD 1000-1500*
- Champakalakshmi, R., *Trade, Ideology and Urbanisation: South India 300BC to AD 1300*
- Hall, Kenneth, *Trade and Statecraft in the Age of the Cholas*
- Heitzman, James, *Gifts of Power*
- Karashima, Noboru, *History and Society in South India: the Cholas to Vijayanagar*
- Mahalingam, T.V., *South Indian Polity*
- Minakshi, C., *Administration and Social Life under the Pallavas*
- Narayanan, M.G.S., and Kesavan Veluthat, "The Bhakti Movement in South India", in D.N.Jha, (ed.), *The Feudal Order*
- Narayanan, M.G.S., *Perumals of Kerala*
- Nilakanta Sastri, K.A., *The Pandyan Kingdom*
- Nilakanta Sastri, K.A., *Studies in Chola History and Administration*
- Nilakanta Sastri, K.A., *The Cholas*
- Nilakanta Sastri, K.A., *A History of South India*
- Stein, Burton, "The State and Agrarian Order in Medieval South India", in Burton Stein, (ed.), *Essays on South India*
- Stein, Burton, *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India*
- Stein, Burton, *All the King's Mana*
- Subbarayalu, Y., *Political Geography of the Chola Country*
- Veluthat, Kesavan, *The Political Structure of Early Medieval South India*
- Veluthat, Kesavan, "Into the Medieval – and Out of It: Early South India in Transition" Presidential Address, Indian History Congress, 1997.
- Nilakanta Sastri, K.A., *A History of South India from Prehistoric Times to the Fall of Vijayanagar*
- Yazdani, G. (ed), *Early History of Deccan*
- Thapar, Romila, *A History of India*
- Ramesh, K. V., *Chalukyas of Vatapi*
- Mahalingam, T. V., *Kanchipuram in Early South Indian History*
- Sharma, R. S., *Indian Feudalism*
- Chattopadhyaya, B.D., *The Making of Early Medieval India*
- Kulke, H. (ed.), *The State in India*
- Kulke and Rothermund, *History of India*