Towards the Early Medieval (I): Changes in Polity and Economy With Special Reference to the Pallavas, Chalukyas, and Vardhanas

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History, as you know, is as much a story of continuity as of change. Taking a long-term view of the past and with the wisdom of hindsight, historians discover certain broad continuities for a long stretch of time that distinguish it from the preceding and succeeding stretches when there is a break in these continuities, i.e. when change occurs. These continuities become the characteristic feature of the particular stretch that is then called a period of history. In Indian history, three such major periods are known as ancient, medieval, and modern periods. The transition from the ancient to the medieval period in Indian history, the first subdivision of which is called 'early medieval', was a long-drawn-out affair. This transition encompassed a series of significant changes over a wide spectrum of human activity and thought. In this lesson we shall study the political and economic developments that mark this transition, with special reference to the Pallavas, Chalukyas, and Vardhanas. The next lesson will focus on the changes in society and culture that accompanied and were not infrequently related in various ways to the political and economic developments.

The Pallavas were a dynasty of South India. They ruled for a very long time, for as many as six centuries from third century AD onwards. Initially they were a small power in what is now northern Tamil Nadu, with their capital at Kanchipuram. From the sixth century they figure as a major regional power, dominating a large territory that included the domains of several small rulers, and defending it in an almost continuous series of wars against the Pandyas of Madurai (southern Tamil Nadu) and the Chalukyas. Their power began to wane from about mid-eighth century.

The Chalukyas emerge as rulers of northern Karnataka and adjoining areas of Maharashtra in the western Deccan in the beginning of the sixth century AD. They rapidly made themselves overlords of an extensive empire, ruling from their capital

Vatapi (modern Badami). The Chalukyas of Badami were dislodged about mid-eighth century by the Rashtrakutas, their erstwhile subordinates. A junior branch of theirs, called Eastern Chalukyas, ruled in the Andhra delta region from AD 631 for about five centuries. There were other branches of the Chalukyas also in Indian history, but we shall here not be concerned with the Chalukya dynasties that ruled after the mid-eighth century.

In North India as the Gupta rule began to decline from the turn of the sixth century – to disappear eventually by the middle of it – a number of small kingdoms arose. Two of these were ruled by the Maukharis of Kanauj and the Pushyabhutis of Sthanvishvara (modern Thanesar in Haryana) respectively. The Pushyabhuti kings had the suffix *vardhana* at the end of their name, such as Prabhakaravardhana, Rajyavardhana, Harshavardhana. That is why they are also known as Vardhanas. Princess Rajyashri from the Vardhana family was married to the Maukhari king. When he died, her brother, King Harshavardhana of Thanesar (Harsha in short), became the effective ruler of both the kingdoms, probably by virtue of her widow sister's claim to the throne; she, according to the Chinese sources, 'regularly took a seat of honour beside her brother Harsha, and shared in state deliberations'. Through a number of wars lasting over a number of years, Harsha formed a very large, but extremely short-lived, empire in North India; it fell to pieces immediately after his death in AD 647.

You will see that while the three empires well represent the three major divisions of India – North India (Vardhanas), the Deccan (Chalukyas), and South India (Pallavas)– they do not span the same range of time in Indian history. The Vardhanas ruled for the shortest period, the Chalukyas ruled both before and after them, and the chronologies of both formed a subset of the Pallava period, which was the longest of all. Since our chief interest lies in the changes that historians have identified in the transition to the early medieval period in Indian history, we shall focus on the two centuries from c. AD 550 to c. AD 750. The transitional aspects of the periods outside this time-bracket are usually discussed in the chapters on the preceding and succeeding periods of early Indian history, with special reference to the Guptas and the Palas-Pratiharas-Rashtrakutas-Cholas respectively. The focus on the transition also requires that we take into proper account other realms than those of the Vardhanas, Chalukyas and Pallavas.

Historians realised very early that the medieval period in Indian history began well before the Muslim rulers of the Delhi Sultanate. The great scholar Vincent Smith dated the beginning of this medieval period from the death of Harshavardhana, and termed its first phase as ‘early medieval India’; this nomenclature was widely accepted and was sometimes called ‘medieval Hindu India’ or ‘Rajput period’.

Over the last fifty years or so, the issue of the transition from ancient to early medieval period has been paid greater attention by historians, who now generally date it from the beginning of the Gupta period. However, they do not always agree with each other and have debated a number of issues. These may be called the debates over Indian feudalism, as they invariably began with questioning the view that the transition to the early medieval marked a transition to feudalism in Indian history. The controversies continue, but they have clarified a number of points (while obfuscating others), and it is clear that it is agreement over several basic facts of the transition that makes possible debate over the rest. In this Unit, we shall not go into these disputes, which deserve to be studied separately, except when a reference to them becomes unavoidable.

Polity

The distinctiveness of the early medieval polities of our period, in opposition to that of the early historical ones, has been noted in several respects. In these discussions of the transition from the ancient to the early medieval, Mauryan state and administration provide a point of comparison of the ancient Indian states with the early medieval ones, beginning with the Gupta Empire. Unlike the ancient Indian polities as exemplified by the Mauryan state, the early medieval ones were decentralised structures. The contrast has recently been modified somewhat, but it remains nonetheless. In earlier discussions, it used to be viewed in terms of a highly centralised Mauryan state versus the decentralised, ‘feudal’ set-up of the early medieval polities. Now that the terms of discussion are the degree of decentralisation rather than of centralisation, with a revised judgment of the overall character of the Mauryan state (which is now seen as far less centralised than earlier), the distinctive character of the early medieval states is now expressed differently. They are stated to have been ‘more decentralised’ than the Mauryan state.

A major indicator of the early medieval political transformation is seen in the nature of royal titles. In contrast with the practice in ancient India, when kings (including the mighty Mauryan monarchs) usually made do with the simple title of *raja* or 'the king', there was a tendency for the royal titles to become increasingly more magnificent and high-sounding in early medieval times, when even petty rulers were known as *maharaja*, 'the great king', and *maharajadhiraja*, 'the supreme king of great kings'. The trend began early with the Gupta emperors. Although they were usually called *maharajadhiraja* in most of the inscriptions**,** from the time of Chandragupta II some of them were sometimes also called *paramabhattaraka maharajadhiraja*, 'the most excellent great lord, the supreme king of great kings', and *bhaṭṭāraka mahārāja rājādhirāja*, 'the great lord, the great king, the supreme king of kings'.

In continuation of this practice, Harshavardhana, along with his father and grandfather assumed the title of *paramabhattaraka maharajadhiraja*. About the same time, the Maitraka ruler Dharasena IV (AD 641-650), a powerful regional king of Saurashtra though a lesser potentate than Harsha, added two more, and equally pompous, titles – *parameshvara*, 'the supreme lord', and *chakravatin*, 'the universal emperor' – to these two. The Chalukyas of Badami called themselves variously *maharaja*, *parameshvara*, *rajadhiraja parameshvara*, or, most elaborately, *maharajadhiraja parameshvara paramabhattaraka*. Apart from these titles that are indicative of political status, these kings often had those of other types as well, more often indicating their religious affiliations (e.g. *paramamaheshvara* and *paramabhagavata*) but also referring to their other qualities. The seventh-century Pallava ruler Narasiṃhavarman II is known to have assumed more than two hundred fifty titles! Among other things he was called *rajasimha* ('lion among kings'), *sankarabhakta* ('devotee of Shiva'), and *agamapriya* ('lover of Shaivite scriptures called *agama*'). Both the high political status and religious commitment of the Pallava rulers was captured by their title *dharmamaharaja* or *dharmamaharajadhiraja*; the prefix *dharma* seems to be emblematic of their known proclivity for Brahmanism and hostility to the non-Brahmanical religions.

These high-sounding political titles are interpreted as reflecting a qualitative shift in the nature of political organisation, apart of course from the growing ornateness of Sanskrit

language. Unlike the ancient kings of India, the paramount, imperial sovereigns of our period like the Chalukyas and the Vardhanas did not directly administer their entire dominions with the help of officials, but only the central part of it. For the rest they ruled through their overlordship over a host of lesser kings. There was, in other words, a hierarchy of kings in a large political formation, and this hierarchy corresponded to a hierarchy of titles. There were many types of these subordinate kings, from big kings of large areas to petty chieftains, including tribal leaders. This structure did not prevail only in the biggest states of the times, namely those of the Vardhanas, Chalukyas or Pallavas, but could exist in smaller states as well. The regional kingdom of Kashmir in the seventh century, for instance, had a number of dependent states, including the kingdoms of Taxila, the Salt Range, and the lower hills.

These subordinate kings of the paramount sovereign, the *parambhattaraka maharajadhiraja*, were often known collectively by the term *samanta*.

Samanta was an old word, but earlier it meant a neighbour, including a neighbouring king. Now it acquired a new meaning of 'subordinate king'. In the Madhuban Copperplate Inscription of Harsha, for instance, it is in this sense that a person named Ishvaragupta is called a *samanta maharaja*. In contemporary literature also we get numerous references to the political importance of these *samantas*. Samantas, it needs to be underlined, were no simple political allies of the paramount sovereign and thus outsiders, but were important functionaries *within* his realm. They rendered valuable military service to him and were considered integral parts of his defence system. They accompanied their overlords in their expeditions, shared with them in the glories and spoils of victory, and paid for their defeats. Thus the Chalukya king Pulakeshin II , in his campaigns against the Pallavas, had first to overcome the opposition of the Banas, who were the subordinates of the Pallavas. On being defeated, the Banas seem to have transferred their loyalty to the Chalukyas as their principality, which figures as an administrative unit (*Banaraja-vishaya,* 'the *vishaya* of the Bana king') in a Chalukya record. The *samantas* attended the overlord's court regularly, and even performed valuable administrative duties directly under him. Ishvaragupta, for instance, was a keeper of records of Harsha.

Samantas have been identified as a major source of the political instability and turbulence that mark the early medieval period. Always a potential source of trouble, they were the first to take advantage of the problems and weakness of the centre and declare themselves independent and, if possible, even seize power from their overlords. Thus the Chalukyas were overthrown by the Rashtrakutas, who had been their subordinates, and the empire of Harshavardhana did not outlast him, and was followed by a long period marked by a multiplicity of independent small kingdoms.

How did the paramount sovereign and his subordinate rulers govern the areas under their direct control? In this respect also a number of differences with the earlier systems of administration have been pointed out. In general, royal control of affairs slackened. The early medieval kings, as typified by the Guptas, are supposed to have taken a less active part in government than the ancient rulers, as typified by the Mauryas: 'Whereas Ashoka insisted that he be kept informed of what was happening, the Guptas seemed satisfied with leaving it to the *kumaramatyas* and the *ayuktakas* [their officials].'

A number of official designations are seen for the first time in early medieval records. Some of these, such as *sandhivigrahika* and *dandanayaka,* appear early and soon became very important offices in most polities all over India. There was also a strong tendency to elevating these offices by adding the prefix *mahat* to them and making them *mahasandhivigrahika*, *mahadandanayaka*, and so forth. In a great majority of cases our records do not provide the details of these numerous designations, so that their exact nature is often no more than a matter of reasoned guesswork. However, the plethora of these new names indicates a certain reorganization of the administration, some of which was clearly necessitated by the growing importance of the new concerns of the state. For instance, the practice of creating *agraharas* through land grants called into existence the office of *agraharika*; in early medieval Assam the task seems to have been divided between two officers, the *lekhayitri*, who was in charge of getting the grants recorded, and *shasayitri*, whose duty was to get them executed.

However, it is not easy to say if the large numbers of designations that are seen in the early medieval records represent an increase in the total number of state functionaries. For one, these designations pertain to the records of different kingdoms so that not all of

the known functionaries worked as part of the same state apparatus. For another, in a number of cases we see the same person holding a number of high offices.
In fact, on two sets of grounds it is thought that there was a shrinkage of officialdom during the early medieval period as the state began to withdraw from a large number of activities. One is the practice of land grants, the other being local autonomy in administration.

By the time of Xuan Zang, officials had begun to be paid commonly through grants of land (or a share in local taxes) instead of salaries. This saved the government the heavy duty of organizing the collection of resources for conversion in cash for the disbursement of salaries. During this time, the state also began to grant in perpetuity fiscal, juridical and administrative rights on a considerable scale to religious functionaries and institutions. The fiscal, juridical, and administrative administration of the villages over which such authority was granted consequently no longer remained the headache of the government. In a further contrast with the Mauryan state, in early medieval polities the government now stopped taking an active role in the development of agrarian economy, and instead began granting land to 'individuals, who were expected to act as a catalyst in rural areas'.

The grantees became an additional source of the decentralisation of the polity. In fact, they are supposed to have added to the ranks of the *samantas*. Examples such as of *samanta maharaja* Ishvaragupta, who was a keeper of seals in the court of Harsha can be, and have in fact been, interpreted in a different way than we have done above: it was not necessarily a case of a *samanta maharaja* who served as a keeper of seals, but could as well have been one of a keeper of the seals who had risen to the rank of *samanta* by means of land grant. Such has been some historians' belief in the *samanta*-making power of land grants that whenever they see a brahmin king in early medieval India they conclude they must have been descendants of some donee brahmin, that his ancestors must have been given the first access to political power by means of land grants

A further curtailment of state activities resulted from local autonomy in administration, both at village and town levels. This has been identified as a major development in early medieval India, although it did not develop in the same way everywhere. In ancient India the committees or persons supervising local government were appointed by the state, as in the Mauryan set-up; later local representatives came to be entrusted with these tasks. Where the villagers were allowed to manage their own affairs, as in the Shangam period, they did so only in a limited and ad hoc sort of way; it is only in later times that a developed and well-organized system of local autonomous bodies, entrusted with a large number of tasks, emerged gradually.

In the deep south, local assemblies and/or councils must have in existence during the post-Shangam period, but their activities in the Tamil country remain obscure to us for a long time. However, from the late eighth and early ninth centuries when inscriptions begin to refer to three types of them – *ur* (non-brahmin assembly), *sabha* (assembly of brahmins), and *nagaram* (generally mercantile corporation) – they already appear with all or most of their known features. It follows that, if their growth was not sudden but gradual (as was probably the case), it must have occurred during our period.

As to the rest of India, a fourth century record from Andhra Pradesh refers to village officials, and village headmen such as *gramabhojakas* and *gramakutas* figure in a number of records, but in general local notables seem to have played an important role in rural administration on a regular basis, in conjunction with the state functionaries. At the time of issuing a charter in an area, it was usual for the king to inform these notables of it and their consent was deemed important for carrying out land transactions. In the western Deccan they were known as *gamundas* and *mahajanas*; elsewhere *mahattara* was the most common term for them during our period.

A typical feature of political life at the level of locality was the grant of varying degrees of autonomy to urban corporate groups by the king. This is seen for the first time in our period in a number of charters over a wide area from modern Gujarat to Maharashtra and Karnataka, from the end of the sixth till the first quarter of the 8th century.

Not everything was transformed, however, and we must be careful, when tracing the transition from the ancient to early medieval times, to note that administration continued

to bear many similarities to earlier practices. Like Ashoka, Harsha is said to have built rest houses for travellers in his kingdom. Just as Ashoka undertook a regular tour of his realm, and Manu prescribed such tours of inspection as an important part of the king's duty, the early medieval kings, Harshavardhana for instance, are often seen be moving about in their domains. As Xuan Zang says of Harsha: 'The king made visits of inspection throughout his dominions, not residing long at any place, but having temporary buildings erected for his residence at each place of sojourn; but he did not go abroad during the three months of rain-season retreat.' However, historians who do not remember, or accept as valid, this parallel with the earlier times, interpret this evidence very differently. They think that if the king had to do all this himself, he was behaving more like a 'royal inspector' than a king and he was not having a proper administrative machinery: 'Harsha relied more on personal supervision than on the assistance of an organized bureaucracy for the efficient rule of his vast empire.' In a contradictory move, when the king's officials are seen to be doing the state's work, historians –sometimes the *same* historian – reproach the Gupta kings for leaving it to them rather than doing it themselves!

It should also be clear from the examples already referred to that things did not change in the same way everywhere. In fact, from royal titles to local administration, regional variations in the polities could be very marked. For instance, a general feature of early medieval kingdoms was the king's right to choose his successor and appoint him as heir apparent (*yuvaraja* or *yuvamaharaja*); the importance of these heirs apparent, however, seems to have varied significantly from one polity to another. Further, the line of royal succession was through males generally, but in the Kara kingdom of Orissa women rulers were quite as normal (and not something exceptional). And while a number of designations for the state functionaries, such as *mahadandanayaka* and *senapati* were common everywhere, a greater number of them (at any rate in configuration) were specific to different regions. For instance, a revenue official called *dhruva* is not found outside Saurashtra, and *lekhayitri* and *shasayitri* were peculiar to the Assam region.

Economy

The economic aspects of the transition have been reconstructed mainly on the basis of the evidence of land-grant inscriptions, coins, and settlement archaeology, with some help from literary sources such as the account of the Chinese traveller Xuan Zang. These may be studied under the following themes: continuous and unprecedented agrarian expansion; growth of a new class of landlords in the countryside along with corresponding changes in the status of peasantry; and decline in craft production, trade, and urbanisation. It is absolutely impossible to describe some of these changes without discussing the controversies they involve, although we need not go here, as elsewhere in this lesson, into whether these changes entitle us to speak of a feudal or some other type of formation in early medieval India.

Agrarian regions had emerged all over the subcontinent by the first half of the seventh century AD at the time of Xuan Zang's visit. However, the economies of not all areas were equally or uniformly developed. People who practised pastoralism 'exclusively', for instance, inhabited a long stretch along the lower Indus. Many other regions remained heavily forested, and in yet other areas, there had been a setback to past prosperity and land was lying desolate. These details, together with many others from other sources, show that there remained considerable potential for further agricultural development.

It is commonly argued that a major, probably the most important, way in which the early medieval states sought to tap this potential was by granting land to brahmins and temples. The increasing number of land grants in early medieval times are taken as spearheading the process of agrarian expansion. However, a recent reappraisal of the evidence cautions against this as a facile generalisation, and takes the position that only a handful of the grants were really about agrarian expansion, most being grants of revenue of already settled areas, that typically a land grant was the end product rather than a starting point of agrarian expansion. However, growing numbers of peasants continued to bring more and more land under the plough, and they got all possible encouragement from the state; for

instance, in eighth century King Lalitaditya distributed water wheels for facilitating cultivation in Kashmir.

Extension of agriculture was a widespread phenomenon by all accounts, making possible the rise of kingdoms in new areas and integration of new communities during and after our period. The details for all areas for all periods are not equally available, but research has been adding to our knowledge. For instance, we are exceptionally well informed about the construction and upkeep of irrigation system in the Pallava kingdom. The Pallavas have long been reputed for building a number of tanks around Kanchipuram in the Palar valley through such a shrewd, close observation of the terrain as draws the admiration of the experts even today. The evidence for irrigation in southern Tamil Nadu in the Pandya kingdom – small epigraphs on granite sluices – remained neglected for some time. Their investigation has revealed several impressive irrigation projects that were successfully completed in the Pandya kingdom during the seventh-eighth centuries.

A major new feature of the agrarian economy was the creation of a class of landlords by means of land grants to religious men and institutions. The first instances of these grants date back to the early medieval period, but they are few, and it is only from the Gupta period that they began to be issued on a steadily larger scale. The grantees were given away for all time the revenues of a village (sometimes a part of it, sometimes more than one village), the people of which were asked to be obedient to them and regularly pay them their dues. They were also authorised to collect judicial fines from them for many types of crimes (*aparadha*). In other words, the grantees came to represent the state in the granted area, and state officials were normally prevented from interfering with their authority.

There is a controversy over the implications of these grants for the peasantry. According to one view, by subjecting them to the authority of these landlords, the land grants led to an all-round depression of the status of peasants, who suffered from several constraints and were reduced to a state of servility. In the other opinion, this is exaggeration as the peasants now simply began to pay the grantees just what they had been paying so far to the state officials, and so they remained as ‘free’ as ever.

Paradoxically, this progress of the rural economy was not matched, according to some historians, by a similar progress of the non-rural one, i.e. of non-rural craft production

and of trade and urbanisation. Villages came to be ‘closed’ or ‘self-sufficient’ economies, meeting most of their needs through mutual, non-market agreements on exchanges in kind; e.g. the potter would provide pots to peasants in return of which he would be given a piece of land and/or a share in their harvest. As villages multiplied, this kind of arrangement led to a progressive reduction of trade and commerce, and with it to the decline of urban economy. It thus strengthened a trend that began with the decline of India’s external trade, which was occasioned by the downfall of the western Roman empire and came to a near halt by the close of the sixth century when people in the eastern Roman empire stopped importing silk from China through Indian traders. The trade with China and Southeast Asia was clearly inadequate to check this economic regression, as seen in the urban and currency scenario in early medieval India till about the end of the tenth century AD. Trade is reduced to a minimum, a much lesser number of coins is seen in circulation, prosperous cities of yore continue to decline with some being eventually deserted as urban professionals including priests and craftspersons move out in the countryside in search of livelihood.

The criticisms of this picture of urban decline have been numerous and varied. One is the outright rejection of the decline thesis in toto; according to these critics foreign trade during the Gupta and the post-Gupta periods was in fact ‘in an exceptionally flourishing state’. In another line of critique, a phase of urban and currency decline in general is conceded, but it is argued (by implication) that the decline occurred for a more limited period and on a lesser scale, and that it could not have been due to the decline of long-distance trade; no attempt is however made to explain what else was or could have been responsible for the decline. The third viewpoint seeks to delimit further both the spatial and the temporal extent of the decline of urbanism; it is believed, wrongly, that the case for urban decline has been made only for the Ganges valley (in fact, there is a book that argues in detail for urban decay for the whole of the subcontinent). Further, some scholars point out the problems with the concept of closed or self-sufficient economy, and while some others do not think there was a reduction in the number of coins in circulation in early medieval India, there are yet others who concede the paucity of coins but do not think that this necessarily amounts to a shrinkage of trade.

To top it all, inner contradictions in the decline theses have also been brought out. We need only to add to it the variations and contradictions in the critics' standpoints (not to mention the responses to them by the protagonists of the decline thesis) to see how bad the overall situation is for arriving at a general, controversy-free understanding of the non-agrarian history of the period. Yet it seems safe enough to conclude from all this – although it is not much of a conclusion – that the transition to the early medieval period in the non-agrarian sector was anything but static, and that the confusing mass of evidence underlines a dynamism the precise nature of which awaits further research with far more rigour (and regard for each other's work) than is seen at the moment.