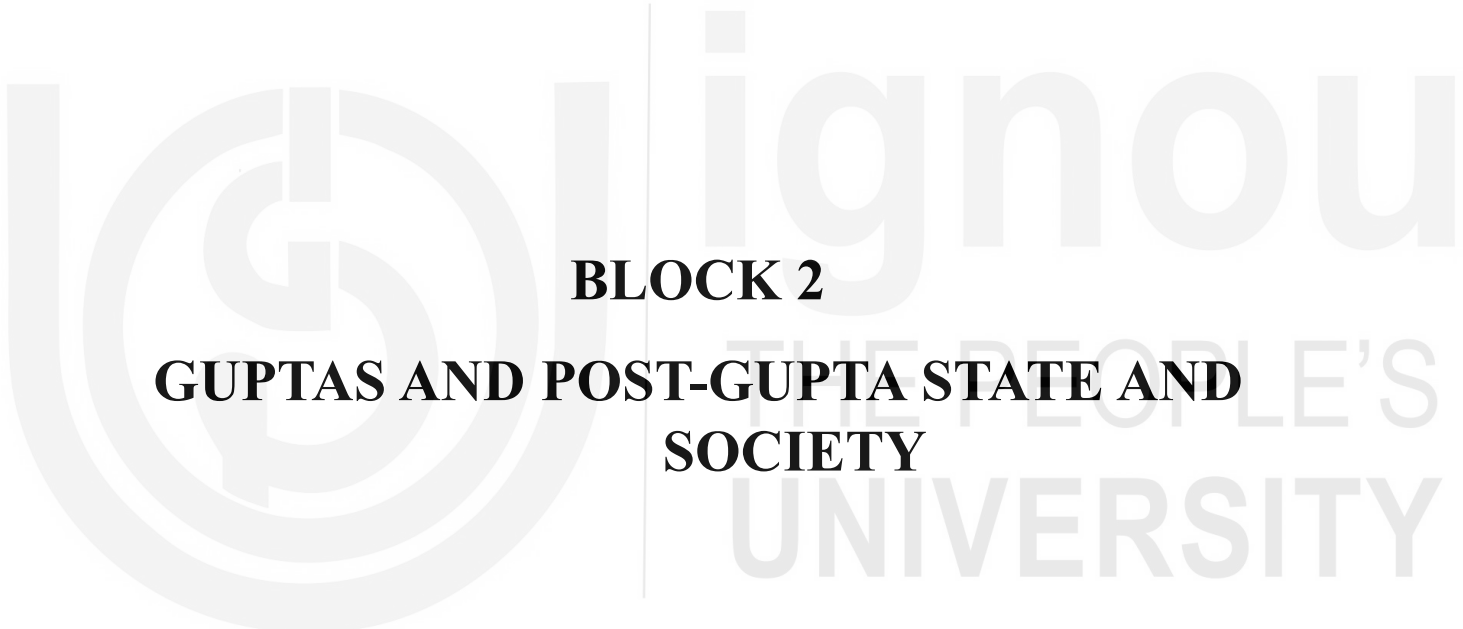


The background of the page features a large, light gray watermark of the IGNOU logo and name. The logo is a stylized 'U' with a 'G' inside a circle, and the text 'ignou' is written in a lowercase, sans-serif font. Below it, 'THE PEOPLE'S UNIVERSITY' is written in a smaller, uppercase, sans-serif font.

BLOCK 2

GUPTAS AND POST-GUPTA STATE AND SOCIETY



UNIT 6 THE RISE OF GUPTAS: ECONOMY, SOCIETY AND POLITY*

Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Antecedents
- 6.3 Political History of the Guptas
- 6.4 Administration
- 6.5 Army
- 6.6 Economy
- 6.7 Society
- 6.8 Culture under the Guptas
- 6.9 Decline of the Guptas
- 6.10 Summary
- 6.11 Key Words
- 6.12 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 6.13 Suggested Readings

6.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will learn about,

- political conditions in India at the beginning of the fourth century CE;
- expansion and consolidation of the Gupta empire;
- order of succession of the Gupta rulers and their military exploits;
- administration, economy, society and culture under the Guptas; and
- the decline of the Guptas.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, you will become familiar with the political history of the Gupta period. Compared to the pre-Mauryan and Mauryan periods, the number of ruling families had increased considerably in the post-Mauryan period. This means that (i) more and more areas were experiencing the emergence of local states; these states which may have been small were represented by local ruling families, (ii) when large state structures arose these small local states either lost their separate existence or they continued as subordinates within larger areas. One such large state structure which began to emerge from the beginning of the fourth century CE was that of the Guptas.

In this Unit, we will look at the political, social and economic aspects of the Gupta period. We will focus on changes which were taking place in this period and which greatly changed the character of post-Gupta polity and society.

* Dr. Vinayak, IP College for Women, University of Delhi, Delhi.

6.2 ANTECEDENTS

In the beginning of the fourth century CE, no large state structure existed in India. However, there were minor powers and new families of rulers who were emerging. It was in this context that the Guptas began to emerge on the political scene. They were a family of uncertain origins. Let us look at the powers which were ruling in different parts of the country before the Guptas appeared on the scene.

Before the middle of the third century CE, the power of the Kushanas was considerably reduced by the Sassanians of Iran. They subordinated the Kushanas and the Sassanians' rule extended to Sindh and other areas. However numismatic evidence indicates that several branches of Kushanas continued to rule in Afghanistan, Kashmir, western Panjab and it is possible that some of them were contemporaries of early Guptas. Several republican states such as Madakas (ruling in Punjab; who have been mentioned in connection with the exploits of Samudragupta), Yaudheyas (present-day Haryana), and Malavas (Rajasthan) and many others which find mention in the Gupta records were ruling over small principalities. Several branches of Nagas who were powerful in Mathura figure also in the context of north India as rulers who were defeated by the Guptas.

The Kshatrapas were ruling in western India till they were defeated by the Gupta ruler Chandragupta II towards the close of the fourth century CE. In ancient Vidarbha, a powerful family known as Vakatakas had emerged by the middle of the third century CE. Matrimonial alliances between the Vakatakas and Guptas brought them into close contact with each other.

After the decline of the Satavahanas in Deccan, new royal families emerged in different parts of the Deccan. In coastal Andhra, the Ikshvakus, the Salankayanas and others made their presence felt. Kadambas emerged powerful in Karnataka. The Pallavas in Tamilnadu ruled as a formidable power from the middle of the third century CE till the 9th century CE.

The above discussion does not exhaust the list of powers that were emerging in different parts of India. What are described are the most notable ones. It must however be acknowledged that in many areas like Bengal, Odisha, forest regions of Madhya Pradesh and elsewhere kingdoms were emerging for the first time. This new trend was very significant for the later course of political history.

6.3 POLITICAL HISTORY OF THE GUPTAS

Very little is known about the early Gupta rulers. Whatever we know about them generally comes from the records of later imperial rulers. As a result, there has always been speculation among historians about the ancestry and family of early Guptas. Some of the historians try to trace back their ancestry to any person appearing in the historical records with the name ending with 'gupta', such as Sivagupta who appeared in a Satavahana inscription.

The original core of the Gupta territory lay in eastern UP. This can be surmised from the fact that Samudragupta's Allahabad (now Prayagraj) pillar inscription comes from this region. Besides the coin hoards of the Guptas have been found from this region. Lastly, the *Puranas* describe the early Gupta territories in this region.

It is possible that in the closing decades of the 3rd century CE, the Guptas were subordinates of a branch of later Kushanas ruling in north-west India. However inscriptional and archaeological data suggests that they became independent in the second decade of the fourth century CE.

Inscriptions tell us that Chandragupta was preceded by Srigupta and Ghatotkacha before being mentioned as the first independent king with the title *maharajadhiraja*. He started an Era in 319-20 CE known as *Gupta Samvat*. This is also confirmed from the account of Al-Biruni, who had visited India in the first part of 11th century CE. Historical records do not give us a clear picture about the territories under his control. Though a passage of *Vishnu Purana* gives us some details about the territories ruled by him. According to this passage the territories of Prayagraj (present-day Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh), Saket (around present day Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh) and Magadha were under the control of Chandragupta I. But the authenticity of this passage is still not established, thus it is not sure whether these areas were actually controlled by Chandragupta I. The Chandragupta-Kumaradevi (king-queen type) type gold coins of Chandragupta I inform us about the matrimonial alliance between the Gupta king Chandragupta I and Lichchhavis princess Kumaradevi. These coins have Chandragupta and his queen Kumaradevi engraved on the obverse and a seated goddess on the reverse with the legend *Lichchhavayah* (i.e. the Lichchhavis). The Lichchhavis were ruling in the region of Vaishali (Muzaffarpur in north Bihar) since the 6th century BCE. This alliance not only enlarged his kingdom but also legitimized his rule. The fragmentary information received about the territorial expansion and marriage alliance with Lichchhavis indicate that Chandragupta I might have come to have firm control over the middle Ganga valley, in areas both to the north and south of the river.

Samudragupta (335-75 CE)

During Chandragupta I's successor, Samudragupta's reign, the kingdom grew into an empire. The most important source which gives us information about his accession and conquests is Prayagraj *Prashasti* (till now known as the Allahabad *Prashasti*). It was composed by his court poet Harishena who composed 33 lines which were engraved on a pillar. It is a possibility that there may have been a war of succession to the throne before Samudragupta became the king. This is largely due to the discovery of coins bearing the name of Kacha. These coins in many respects are similar to Samudragupta's coins. Many interpretations have been given about these coins. Some historians considered Kacha as the elder brother of Samudragupta, who might have been killed in the war of succession. Other scholars maintain that these were the coins which were issued by Samudragupta in the memory of his brother Kacha. The third interpretation suggests that Kacha was the initial name of Samudragupta and latter name was acquired by him after the conquest of the South. Except these coins not much is known about Kacha from other sources; this name does not even appear in official Gupta inscriptions. Prayagraj *Prashasti* depicts Samudragupta as an extraordinary person and an ideal king.

Samudragupta adopted an aggressive policy of conquests. Regarding his campaigns in Aryavarta, some scholars believe that he carried his conquests of Aryavarta at one time only. However, some other historians believe that there

were two campaigns in Aryavarta. This is so because the *Prashasti* first mentions the subjugation of three Aryavarta kings, being followed by his southern campaigns, and then again mentions the defeat of nine Aryavarta kings. The kings of Aryavarta that were defeated by him were Achyuta (ruling over Ahichchatra), Nagasena (ruling over Gwalior region) and Kota-Kulaja (the ruler of the Kota family in east Punjab and Delhi). By defeating them Samudragupta established firm control over the Ganga valley and some adjacent regions.

Regarding his campaigns in south India, twelve rulers were defeated by him which included:

- 1) Mahendra of Kosala (Raipur, Durg, Sambalpur and Bilaspur districts)
- 2) Vyaghraraja of Mahakantara (Jeypore, forest region of Odisha)
- 3) Mantaraja of Kaurata (Sonpur area in Madhya Pradesh or Plain country to the north-east of Mahendra hill)
- 4) Mahendragiri of Pishtapura (Pithasuram, East Godavari district)
- 5) Svamidatta of Kottura (Ganjam district)
- 6) Damana of Erandapalla (Chicacole or West Godavari district)
- 7) Vishnugopa of Kanchi (Chingelput district)
- 8) Nilaraja of Avamukta (Godavari valley)
- 9) Hasti-varman of Vengi (Cellor in the Krishna-Godavari delta)
- 10) Ugresena of Palakka (Nellore district)
- 11) Kubera of Devarastra (Yellamanchiti in Visakhapatnam district)
- 12) Dhananjaya of Kushthalpura (in North Arcot district in Tamilnadu)

Regarding the kings of south India or *Dakshinapatha*, Samudragupta first captured them (*grahana*) and then released them (*moksha*). However, he followed a completely different policy with regard to the kings of *Aryavarta*. He subjugated them and annexed their territories. The north Indian kings defeated by Samudragupta were: Rudradwa, Matila, Nagadatta, Chandravarman, Ganapati-naga. Nagasena, Archyuta, Nandi, Balavarman, and others. The *Prashasti* further states that Samudragupta reduced the states in the forest regions to servitude. The frontier kings defeated by him included: Samatata (in southeast Bengal), Kamarupa (Assam), Nepala (Nepal) and others; republican states of the Malavas, Yaudheyas, Madrakas, Abhiras etc. All these rulers paid rich tributes to him and accepted his suzerainty. The foreign rulers of north-western India like the later Kushanas and the Saka chief and residents of different island countries including Sinhala or Sri Lanka not only surrendered to him but also offered their daughters in marriage.

At the end of his reign, most parts of north India were directly under the control of Samudragupta, except Kashmir, western Punjab, Rajasthan, Sindh and Gujarat. He also directly controlled the highland of central India to the east of Jabalpur, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and the area on eastern coast at least up to Chingleput.



Allahabad Prashasti of Samudragupta. Source: *Inscription of the Early Gupta Kings and Their Successors*, 1888. Text: John Fleet, CIE (1847-1917). Image: Thomas A. Rust, circa 1870. Wikimedia Commons.

Chandragupta II (375-414 CE)

Under Chandragupta II, the son and successor of Samudragupta, the growth and spread of Gupta power reached its peak. Coins, inscriptions and some literary sources give information about Chandragupta II's reign. The Gupta inscriptions mention Chandragupta II as the successor of Samudragupta. However, a 7th century dramatist Vishakhadatta in his drama *Devichandraguptam* mentions that Chandragupta II killed his elder brother, Ramagupta. This was so because Ramagupta was facing defeat at the hands of the Sakas and in order to save the kingdom, Ramagupta had agreed to surrender his wife to the Saka king. Chandragupta opposed this and went to the Saka camp in the guise of queen Dhruvadevi I, the wife of Ramagupta. He was successful against the Saka king. However, in the ensuing hostility between Chandragupta II and his brother Ramagupta, he killed the latter and married his widow Dhruvadevi. Certain other texts like the *Harshcharita* and *Kavyamimansa* also refer to this episode. Thus, Chandragupta II came to the throne to re-establish the supremacy of Guptas. He established matrimonial relations with the Nagas by marrying princess Kuberhaga whose daughter Prabhavati was later married to Rudrasena II of the Vakataka family. He established matrimonial alliance with Kadambas of Karnataka as well. He defeated the Saka Kshatrapa king Rudrasimha-III and brought an end to their rule in western India. As a result, the regions of Gujarat, Kathiawad and western Malwa were added to the Gupta Empire. Mehrauli Iron Pillar Inscription is

identified by many scholars with Chandragupta-II. According to this inscription Chandra crossed the Sindhu region of seven rivers and defeated Valhikas (Balkh in Afghanistan). This inscription also mentions about his victory over enemies from Vanga (Bengal).

On the basis of these evidences it can be suggested that Chandragupta II was able to extend the frontiers of Gupta Empire in western, north-western and eastern India. Chandragupta II ruled till 415-16 CE.

Kumaragupta I (414-54)

At the time of the death of Chandragupta II, the Gupta empire extended from the greater part of north India to the Kathiawad peninsula. As a result, there was no one who could challenge their power. Hence, the reign of Kumaragupta I, son and successor of Chandragupta II, was marked by only a few military campaigns. From his inscriptions it seems that he certainly retained firm control over the core area of the empire. His reign was also known for political consolidation and prosperity. However, at the end of his reign, the Gupta empire faced Huna invasion in north-west region which was checked by his son Skandagupta.

Skandagupta (454-467)

Skandagupta is generally considered the last important ruler of Gupta Empire, who ruled over a vast territory. From the beginning of his reign he started facing various troubles in his realm. The Bhitari inscription informs us that at the very beginning of his reign Pushyamitras posed trouble. Though he was successful in averting the onslaught of Hunas, these campaigns cost the kingdom dearly. Scholars maintain that his gold coins were not only limited but also had less gold in them as compared with the earlier rulers. He was the last Gupta ruler to mint silver coins in western India.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Fill in the blanks:
 - a) At the beginning of the 4th century CE there were (many/no) small kingdoms in North India.
 - b) Chandragupta-I had a matrimonial alliance with (Sakas/Lichchhavis).
 - c) The *Prayaga-prashasti* refers to the victories of (Pravarasena/Samudragupta).
- 2) Discuss the efforts made by Samudragupta for the expansion of Gupta empire.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 3) List five minor powers in north India at the beginning of 4th century CE.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

6.4 ADMINISTRATION

Guptas as a political power ruled in north India for about two and half century and out of this period they functioned as an empire for almost 150 years. The Gupta power at its peak extended from Kathiawar peninsula in Gujarat in the west to Bengal in the east and from north-west India in the north to Madhya Pradesh in south. This however does not mean that the entire area was directly ruled by the central authority; there were areas like Bengal, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh which the Guptas administered through officials appointed by them; even in far-flung Saurashtra in Gujarat, governors were appointed by the Gupta rulers like Skandagupta. Elsewhere in the Malwa region, the Guptas maintained their suzerainty through political and matrimonial alliances with various autonomous powers.

In administration the Guptas borrowed various features from their predecessors such as Mauryas, Kushanas and Satavahanas. King was the central figure of the administrative system and it was reflected by the titles held by them, such as *maharajadhiraja*, *parama-bhattaraka*, *parameshvara*, *samarat* and *dharmamaharaja*. They were considered divine rulers on earth. The duties of the king were the following:

- 1) Despite the supreme power vested in him, he was expected to follow a righteous path.
- 2) He was supposed to decide the policy of the state during war and peace.
- 3) He should always protect his countrymen from any invasion.
- 4) He led the army in case of war.
- 5) He should support the brahmanas, *Sramanas* and others who needed his protection.
- 6) He was supposed to venerate the learned and religious people and give them every possible help.
- 7) As the Supreme judge he was to look after the administration of justice according to religious precepts and customs.
- 8) He appointed his central and provincial ministers.
- 9) As a reigning king he appointed the successor to the throne.

The king was thus the focus of administration. He was assisted by princes, ministers and advisors. The princes also held positions like viceroys of provinces. The king used to issue written instructions to officials on all important matters. In some cases, the office of the functionaries became hereditary. Inscriptions suggest that Gupta administration was more decentralised as compared to that of

the Mauryas. The Gupta administration made some efforts at restructuring the agrarian economy. This is indicated by land grants where the donees were expected to augment agricultural potential of the region. It was in this way that cultivation of fertile, irrigated lands was improved, and settlement of wasteland was encouraged. The initial land grants were not in the centre but the areas beyond. Thus, this initiative brought peripheral regions into the larger agrarian economy.

The high-ranking officers included the *Mahadandanayaka* (Chief Justice) who assisted the king in the matters of justice. In the provinces this work was entrusted to the *Uparikas* and in the districts to the *vishayapatis*. In the villages the headman and the village elders used to decide upon petty cases. The other high officials included the *Mahapratihara* (chief of the palace guards), *Pratihara* (regulated ceremonies and granted necessary permits for admission to the royal presence), *Dutakas* (implemented gifts when gifts of land were made to the brahmanas and others). There existed an espionage system as well.

For facilitating the efficient functioning of administration, the kingdom was generally divided into a number of regions or provinces, headed by governors appointed by the king. These provinces were known as the *deshas*, *rashtras* or *bhuktis*. Some of the provinces mentioned in Gupta inscriptions are *Tirabhukti* (corresponded to north Bihar), *Nagarabhukti*, *Magadhabhukti* and *Pundravardhanabhukti* (corresponded to north Bengal). The *bhuktis* were governed by *Uparikas* directly appointed by the king. The territorial units under the provinces (*bhukti/desha*) were known as *vishaya* (governed by *vishayapati* or in some cases by *Ayuktaka*). He was appointed by provincial governor. The inscriptions from Bengal indicate that the *vishayapati* associated himself with *Nagarsresthi* (head of city merchants), *Sarthavaha* (caravan leader), *Prathamakulika* (head of the artisan community) and *Prathamakayastha* (head of the kayastha community). Apart from these *Pustapalas* were officials who managed and kept records.

The administrative units below the district were referred differently in different regions, such as — *vithi*, *ashtakuladhikarana*, *bhumi*, *pathaka* and *petha*. It seems that these units were placed above several villages and were administrated by different officials such as *ayuktakas* and *vithi-mahattaras*. The lowest unit of administration was known as the *grama* which was headed by a *gramika* or *gramadhyaksha*. It is not very clear whether these officials were appointed by higher authorities or selected with the permission of villagers.

6.5 ARMY

Without any doubt, the army functioned as one of the important elements of the state during this period. Normally divided in various divisions (chariots, infantry, cavalry and elephants), it was headed by different chiefs and commanders. Though in some contemporary texts (such as *Kamandakiya Nitisara*) the chariot division was generally considered an integral part of the army, but, by this time their use in warfare had become rare. It is not very clear whether the officer named *dandanayaka* functioned as a military commander or a judicial officer. Officers named *asvapati* and *pilupati* respectively commanded the cavalry and elephant divisions. The *senapati*, mainly synonymous with the military commander, quite frequently functioned as local administrator. Engaging in constant war might have created some new designations such as *sandhivigrahika* (officer-in-charge

of war and peace). *Chata-bhata* were known as the regular and irregular troops and most probably performed the task of local police.

One individual could hold multiple offices; for example the posts of *kumaramatyā*, *sandhivigrahika* and *mahadandanayaka* were held by Harishena, the court poet of Samudragupta. The army was paid in cash and its needs were well looked after by an officer-in-charge of stores called *Ranabhandagarika*. This officer also looked after the supply of weapons such as battle-axes, bows and arrows, spear pikes, swords, lances, javelins et.

6.6 ECONOMY

Though agriculture was the mainstay of economy, there were other occupations as well such as commerce and production of crafts. Different social groups were engaged in these occupations. It is important to realise that certain changes had started taking place in the pattern of economic production and consequently in relations between different social groups. We will be discussing these changes below.

The revenue generated from agriculture was the main source of income for state. For collecting this revenue, a large section of officials was appointed. Contemporary sources (such as *Amarakosha*) give information about the diverse type of crops produced in this period such as paddy, cotton, oil-seeds, indigo, mustard seeds etc. The people of this period had good knowledge of agriculture and they were aware about the different types of soils. In this regard *Amarakosha* give us information about twelve types of soils — *urvara* (fertile), *ushara* (dry), *maru* (desiccated), *aprahata* (untilled), *sadbala* (grassy land), *pankila* (covered with mud), *jalaprayamanupam* (land located near a source of water), *kachcha* (marshy), *sarkara*, *sarkati*, *nadimatrika* (well-watered by rivers) and *devematrika* (area well fed by rain). The cultivated land was called as *kshetra* and uncultivated land was called by various names such as *khila* or *aprahata*.

Land grants not merely give us information about different types of lands given to different donees but also provide information about land measurement. The Gupta land grant records from Bengal inform us about a unit known as *vapa* which was used for measuring land in the region (*adhavapa*, *dronvapa*, *kulyavapa*). It is derived from root *vap* (to sow). The exact size of this unit is not clearly mentioned. Some grants mention a rod (*nala*), that might have been used for linear measurement. Though evidence indicates that there was diversity in land measurement, occasionally at some places we also find some standardization. In addition to type and systems of land measurement, the land records from Bengal also provide information about the price of plots. The price of agriculture and non-agriculture plots varied according to the quality of soil, fertility, location, region and so on.

Irrigation was considered important. Locally managed irrigation devices like the *ghati-yantra* also called the *araghatta* were in vogue. Different irrigation practices existed in the Gupta kingdom. Mention may be made of *Sudarshana* reservoir (*tadaga*) in Saurashtra in Gujarat. Originally built in the Mauryan period, this reservoir was thoroughly repaired when it was extensively damaged in the time of Mahakshatrpa Rudradaman (middle of the second century CE). It was again damaged in the time of Skandagupta; Purnadatta, his newly appointed governor of Saurashtra and his son, Chakrapalita, undertook the repair of the reservoir at

this time. Copper plates of this period clearly mention tanks and ponds (*tadaga* and *pushkarini*), marshy areas and ditches (*jola*, *hajjika* and *khata*) and embankments along rivers (*ali*, *brihadali*) as mediums of irrigation. State was not wholly responsible for providing irrigation facilities. Much of agriculture was also rain dependent.

Certain changes can be witnessed in the agrarian society at this time. The land system was becoming more complex. Grants of land were being made to religious and ritual specialists or to officers. In those cases when the land granted to brahmanas was a wet land or forest, the donees took on the role of a pioneer in introducing agriculture. The brahmanas became proficient in supervising agrarian activities, helped by manuals on agriculture, such as *Krishiparashara*, which may be dated to this or the subsequent period. The textual records of earlier period (like *Arthashastra*) talk only about tax-paying cultivators (*karada*) and the ruler, but the textual records of Gupta period talk about three tiers, *mahipati* (the king), *svami* (landowner) and *karshaka* (cultivator) which indicates that landed intermediaries were starting to emerge in this period. By the end of Gupta period donees were not only gifted with rights over land but also with some important administrative and judicial rights. Not only the practice of gifting land was becoming common but also remuneration was received in the form of land by officials of different categories. Thus, instances of a class of people who owned land but did not cultivate it increased. People who had superior rights over land increased. Brahmanas by virtue of being the highest varna and as part of the majority of landed beneficiaries, became powerful. The other village landholders who also occupied an important place in rural society were the *Gramikas*, *Kutumbins* and *Mahattaras*.

Conversely the position of cultivators declined. Ordinary cultivators known by the names of *Krishibala*, *Krashaka* now came to acquire low economic and social status. Slaves worked on the fields of their masters. Even domestic female slaves were cruelly exploited as indicated by a text like *Kamasutra*. Inequalities in society increased and thus burden on the actual tillers of the soil increased. The number of taxes imposed by the state on the producers also went up in this period. Further, the practice of *vishti* or unpaid labour made the position of ordinary cultivators miserable.

Craft production covered a very wide range of items. There were items of ordinary domestic use such as earthen pots, items of furniture, baskets, metal tools for domestic use. Luxury items included jewellery made of gold and silver, precious stones, objects made of ivory, fine silks and cotton cloth. Contemporary sources refer to potters (*kumbhakara*), carpenters (*sutradhara* or *vardhaki*), textile dyers (*chimpaka*), ivory-makers, distiller (*kallara*), brick manufactures (*ishtakapalli*), salt-makers (*lavanatailika*) and oil millers etc. These sources also inform us about the different categories of craftsmen. For example, different varieties of silk cloth, called *kshauma* and *pattavastra* are mentioned in the texts of this period. The craftsmen were generally organized into various guild-like professional groups (*sreni* or *nigamas*). These guilds played a crucial role in craftsmen's life. Texts like *Amarkosha* and *Brihat Samhita* refer to different categories of craftsmen. Sites like Taxila, Ahichchhatra, Mathura, Rajghat, Kaushambi and Pataliputra in the Ganges valley have yielded many craft products like earthen wares, terracotta, beads made from different stones, objects of glass, metal items etc. However, the analysis of archaeological remains from various sites of this period indicates a declining trend in craft production.

The items produced through crafts as well as raw material required for their production was not easily available everywhere. They were made available through trade. The term used for commercial transactions was known as *kraya-vikraya*. For smooth function of this transaction various types of coins were issued by different rulers. In ancient India, the Guptas were known for issuing the largest number of gold coins, which were called *dinaras* in their inscriptions. However, in gold content the Gupta coins are not as pure as the Kushana ones and most probably not used by ordinary peoples in their daily transactions. Daily transaction mostly was done in copper coins or other modes of currency. But in contrast to those of the Kushanas, the Gupta copper coins are very few. Thus, it seems that commercial activities in this period were not as flourishing as they were in Kushana period. Moreover, in comparison to the earlier period, decline was noticed in long-distance trade in this period. This happened because around 550 CE people of the eastern Roman (Byzantine) empire gained knowledge of growing silk from the Chinese. This adversely affected India's position as India had played an important role in the earlier Silk trade. The archaeological remains of the urban centres of this period also point towards decline.

6.7 SOCIETY

The position of brahmanas in the social order was already high before the Gupta period. They came to be related to the royal power. The royal patronage and land grants by individuals and institutions to brahmanas made them even more powerful. Not only individual brahmanas but also a group of brahmanas were encouraged through land grants to settle on virgin lands. Thus, the number of brahmana settlements which were called *agraharas* or *brahmadeyas* increased. The kings patronised the brahmanas irrespective of the former's religious affiliation. This was one of the main reasons for the economic prosperity and prestige of the brahmanas.

The idea of the *varna* divided social order became the norm. Though the *varna* system was the ideal social order there were many whose *varna* identity could not be determined. Thus, the law books or *Dharmashastras* tried to determine the status of various *jatis* or castes in society by giving fictitious explanations about their origins. They suggested that various *jatis* or groups had originated through *varnasamkara* or inter marriages between the various *varnas*.

The castes proliferated into numerous sub-castes or *jatis*. Many foreigners had been assimilated into Indian society, and each group of foreigners was given a semi-kshatriya status (*vratyakshatriyas*) because they could not be considered to be of pure kshatriya origin. Due to the absorption of various tribal groups into the Brahmanical society and due to the expansion of agriculture into forest territories, fictitious titles were thought of for tribal groups. Various other groups like the untouchables or *antyajas* were considered impure. Similarly, *chandalas*, *chamakaras* and similar groups were considered as outcastes. Fa-hsien informs us that the *chandalas* lived outside the village and dealt in meat and flesh. Thus, such groups continued to be miserable in the Gupta period. The position of shudras, however, improved slightly during this period. They were now permitted to listen to recitations of the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Puranas* but not the *Veda*, which was still considered sacred.

The position of women of higher *varna* was low. The woman in a family was expected to function as an ideal wife and mother. In texts, women were even considered to be of the same category as the shudras.

6.8 CULTURE UNDER THE GUPTAS¹

The Gupta period has often been referred to as the “Golden Age” due to its cultural heritage. This applies to great accomplishments in the field of art and architecture, language and literature. The Gupta age, thus, stands out as a significant and noteworthy departure from previous historical periods, particularly in the cultural history of India due to impressive standards achieved by artistic and literary expressions of this time.

It has been rightly commented that the Gupta art represents ancient Indian art at its best. From the vantage point of architecture, the Gupta period reflects creative enthusiasm and deep sense and awareness of beauty. These are evident in the *Dashavatara* temple at Deogarh in Jhansi district (UP), Bhitargaon temple near Kanpur (UP), Vishnu temple at Tigawa (Jabalpur district, MP), Shiva temple at Bhumara (Satna district, MP), Parvati temple at Nachna-Kuthara (Panna district, MP) etc. Some of them are adorned with beautiful sculptural panels. The Gupta temple-building activity represents evolution from the earlier tradition of rock-cut shrines which now reached a whole new level. However, the high and elaborately carved *sikharas* (towers) on top of the temples were yet to register their appearance. Therefore, Gupta period marks the formative phase of temple construction in India, but it was a significant phase that continued to influence temple-building activity right up to the medieval period.

What we now refer to as “Classical Sanskrit” developed during the Guptas. Sanskrit was widely patronized by Gupta rulers, making it the official language of their court. All their inscriptions are written in Sanskrit. Ignored earlier under the influence of Buddhist and Jaina traditions that encouraged vernacular dialects like Pali, Prakrit and Ardhamagadhi, Sanskrit saw its revival under the Guptas. It became a widespread language in entire north India during the Gupta period. Even Buddhist scholars, particularly those of *Mahayana* Buddhism, began composing their scriptures in Sanskrit. Great poets, dramatists, grammarians and playwrights of Sanskrit are known from this period.

The epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* are believed to have been compiled and given their final form around 4th-5th century CE. The great Sanskrit writer-poet Kalidasa — one of the *Navaratnas* (nine gems) of the court of Gupta king Chandragupta Vikramaditya — wrote dramas like *Abhijnana-Shakuntalam*, *Malavikagnimitram*, *Vikramorvasiyam* and poetic works such as *Raghuvamsham*, *Kumarasambhavam* and *Meghadutam* which show the excellent literary standards achieved during the Gupta period. Besides these, Varahamihira wrote *Brihat Samhita* that deals with scientific subjects like astronomy and botany. Aryabhatta wrote *Aryabhattachiyam*: a famous work on geometry, algebra, arithmetic and trigonometry. The notable creations on medicine include *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita*. An all-round progress in literature was manifest during this time.

¹ This section on Culture has been written by Dr Abhishek Anand

- 1) Which of the following statements are right (✓) or wrong (×)?
 - a) The king no more remained a central figure under the Guptas. ()
 - b) The king was to lead the army in case of war. ()
 - c) *Mahadandanayaka* was the minister of revenues. ()
 - d) One-sixth of the produce was claimed as royal revenue. ()
 - e) The highest unit of administration was the village. ()
- 2) Write about the society and culture under the Guptas.

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 3) Write about the duties of the Gupta king.

.....

.....

.....

.....

6.9 DECLINE OF THE GUPTAS

After Skandgupta's reign the Gupta power weakened. Soon many subordinate rulers became independent. The later Gupta kings ruled between 475-530 CE. They ruled over small territories and functioned as petty rulers. The Gupta rule finally came to end by the middle of the sixth century CE. There were various reasons why the Gupta power weakened towards the end.

1) Huna Invasions

The successors of Chandragupta II had to face the Huna onslaught. Hunas were from Central Asia. They were a branch of the White Huns, the Hephthalites from Central Asia, known in the Indian sources as the Hunas. Before attacking the north-western Indian frontier, they had occupied Bactria and were threatening to cross the Hindu Kush mountains. Initially the Gupta rulers were successful in fighting them back. However, the successors of Kumaragupta could not defend their kingdom. Each wave of Huna invasions made the Gupta rule weaker. A major blow came at the end of the fifth century when the Hunas successfully broke through northern India. The first Huna king in India was Toramana who claimed conquest over northern India as far as Eran in central India. Thus, the Huna attacks caused a major blow to Gupta authority particularly in northern and western regions of the empire.

2) Administrative Weaknesses

Skandagupta was facing domestic problems also. This involved court rivalries and the breaking away of the feudatories whose political integration into the metropolitan area of the Gupta state was tenuous. This was because the Guptas had always adopted the policy in the conquered areas to restore the authority of local chiefs or kings once they had accepted Gupta suzerainty. In fact, no efforts were made to impose a strict and effective control over these regions. Hence, it was natural that whenever there was a crisis of succession or a weak monarchy within the Gupta empire these local chiefs would re-establish their independent authority. This created a problem for almost every Gupta king who had to reinforce his authority. The Guptas lost western India as after the reign of Skandagupta, in CE 467, hardly any Gupta coin or inscription has been found in western Malwa and Saurashtra. This must have deprived the Guptas of the rich revenues from trade and commerce and crippled them economically. Secondly, the constant military campaigns were a strain on the state treasury. Towards the end of the 5th century CE and beginning of 6th century CE, taking advantage of the weak Gupta emperors, many regional powers reasserted their authority, and in due course declared their independence.

Besides these, there were many other reasons which contributed to the decline of the Guptas. For example, it has been argued that the Guptas issued land-grants to brahmana donees and in this process surrendered the revenue and administrative rights in favour of the donees. This practice was bound to reduce revenues. The migration of a guild of silk weavers from Gujarat to Malwa in 473 CE and their adoption of non-productive professions show that there was no great demand for the cloth produced by them (Sharma, 2005). The advantages from Gujarat trade gradually disappeared. Further, it is believed that the *samanta* system in which the *samantas* (minor rulers), who ruled as subordinates to the central authority, started to consolidate itself in the Gupta period. This is also believed to be the reason why Gupta administrative structure became so loose. There is diversity of opinion as to how the system originated and regarding the details of the system, but the presence of many *Samantas* within the empire does show that they wielded power almost independently of the Gupta authority.

Towards the end of their rule, the Gupta kings made desperate attempts to maintain their gold currency by reducing the content of pure gold in it, but this was not very helpful. Although the Guptas continued to rule till the sixth century, their imperial power had vanished a century earlier.

6.10 SUMMARY

In the beginning of the fourth century CE, north India was divided into many small kingdoms and chieftaincies. It was in this political scenario that the Guptas rose as a powerful family of rulers. Successful military campaigns, robust administration, sound economic and social footing made them one of the strongest in north India. However, from the later part of the Gupta period and in the post-Gupta period certain changes began to accelerate which transformed the economic and social set up. This is clearly seen from the practice of land grants which became very common in the post-Gupta period. The position of outcastes and slaves became very miserable though some improvement in the position of the

shudras could be seen. Craft activity delined though great achievements in the realm of art and architecture could be seen.

6.11 KEY WORDS

Aryavarta: Literally meaning “abode of the Aryans”, it is the region where the Vedic Aryans settled after their migration into the Indian subcontinent. It covers parts of north-western and northern India.

Chandala: One of the lowest rungs of the *Varna* order of ancient times. They were regarded as untouchables and supposedly engaged in disposal of corpses.

Dakshinapatha: Ancient south region of the Indian subcontinent below *Uttarapatha*. It also connotes the great route linking Magadha and Pratishthana (present-day Paithan in Maharashtra) in ancient times.

Charmakaras: Those involved in tanning leather.

Prashasti: Panegyric/Eulogy.

Puranas: Encyclopaedic Hindu texts on a variety of topics.

Sramanas: Literally meaning “one who toils, labours or exerts himself”, it refers to the ascetics; those in pursuit of spiritual liberation.

Terracotta: The Italian word meaning “baked earth”. It is a type of ceramic pottery made by baking terracotta clay. It was also widely used in ancient times to make sculptures.

6.12 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) (a) many (b) Lichchhavis (c) Samudragupta
- 2) Write your answer by reading Section 6.3, under the heading ‘Samudragupta’
- 3) Yaudheyas, Malavas, Nagas, Madras, Later Kushanas. See Section 6.2

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) (a) × (b) √ (c) × (d) √ (e) ×
- 2) See Section 6.7 and 6.8
- 3) See Section 6.4

6.13 SUGGESTED READINGS

Gupta, P.L. *The Imperial Guptas*. Varanasi.

Thapar, Romila (1983). *A History of India*. Penguin.

Thapar, Romila (2002). *The Penguin History of Early India. From the Origins to AD 1300*. Penguin Books

Sharma, R.S. (2005). *India's Ancient Past*. Oxford University Press.

UNIT 7 POST-GUPTA KINGDOMS IN NORTH INDIA*

Structure

- 7.0 Objectives
- 7.1 Introduction
- 7.2 The Regional Powers
 - 7.2.1 The Maitrakas of Valabhi
 - 7.2.2 The Maukharis of Kanauj
 - 7.2.3 Harshavardhana and his Reign
 - 7.2.4 The Later Guptas of Magadha
 - 7.2.5 Yasodharman of Kanauj
 - 7.2.6 Kashmir
- 7.3 Nature of the Post-Gupta Period
- 7.4 Summary
- 7.5 Key Words
- 7.6 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 7.7 Suggested Readings

7.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to learn about:

- the political developments and disintegration in the Post-Gupta period;
- emergence of various political powers;
- growth of the power of Maitrakas of Valabhi, Maukharis of Kanauj, Harshavardhana, Later Guptas of Magadha, Yasodharman of Kanauj and Kashmir; and
- nature of society and economy of the period.

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In the post Gupta period, a number of new political powers emerged in different parts of north India. Until the rise of Harsha in the early seventh century four kingdoms effectively held power in northern India: the Guptas of Magadha; the Maukharis of Kanauj; the Pushyabhutis of Thanesar; and the Maitrakas of Valabhi. This may give the impression that political authority was very fragmented, and this was the result of the weakening of central authority. But when you look at it from a different angle you will realize that formation of new political powers was a continuous process in early Indian history. These powers, representing different dynasties, established their kingdoms and were often at war with each other. This Unit attempts to give a brief history of these kingdoms.

* Dr. Oly Roy, Assistant Professor, Amity University, Noida.

7.2 THE REGIONAL POWERS

The prominent principalities which arose in the post-Gupta period were the Maitrakas, Kalachuris, Gurjaras, Maukharis, and Later Guptas; and the kingdoms of Nepal, Bengal, Assam, and Odisha. Outside the Gupta empire, the kingdoms of Kashmir and Thaneswar and southern Kalinga were prominent. It was not until the beginning of the seventh century C.E. that the ruler of Thaneswar succeeded in establishing a powerful empire in northern India, though for a short period.

Let us discuss these powers briefly.

7.2.1 The Maitrakas of Valabhi

Of all the states that grew out of debris of the Gupta Empire, the kingdom of Valabhi is considered to be one of the 'most durable'. They were one of the subordinates of the Guptas. The earliest land-grant of the family was the one issued by Maharaja Dronasimha in 502 CE. The extent of the kingdom of Valabhi is uncertain. As all the royal grants were issued from Valabhi, it can be assumed that Valabhi was their capital. A large number of records of this family have come to light, however they are of little historical merit. Therefore not much is known about the Maitrakas.

A record of sixteen grants by Dhruvasena exists, but it does not mention a single event of historical importance. Maharaja Dharapatta, his younger son, succeeded him. He was succeeded by his son, Guhasena. Around 556 CE or 559 CE i.e., during the time of Guhasena, Maitrakas were ruling as an independent power. Hiuen Tsang refers to a particular ruler called Shiladitya. It can be assumed from various references that he held an extensive kingdom. Hiuen Tsang pays tribute to him. He is said to be a "monarch of great administrative ability and of rare kindness and compassion." He built a Buddhist temple which is considered to be "extremely artistic in structure and ornament," and held every year a "great religious assembly" to which Buddhists were summoned from all corners.

7.2.2 The Maukharis of Kanauj

The Maukharis held the region of western Ganges plains around Kanauj. Originally, they were tributary rulers who established an independent kingdom, changing their title from *maharaja* to *maharaja-adhiraja*, thus imitating the earlier Guptas. Maukhari is the name of a very ancient family or clan and we find references to them in Patanjali's work and in other early documents. They gained political ascendancy towards the end of 5th century CE as Harsha inscription of 554 CE mentions the rise of Yajnavarman from Gaya during this period. The Maukharis after becoming powerful claimed to have descended from Asvapati, referred to in the *Mahabharata* as king of Madras in central Punjab. Certain archaeological sources indicate that the Maukharis were widely spread over northern India from a very early period. In the sixth century CE a Maukhari family ruled in the neighbourhood of Gaya. Three kings of this family are known from inscriptions found in the Barabar and Nagarjuna Hills in Gaya District. They are Yajna-varman, his son Sardula-varman and the latter's son Ananta-varman who were all feudatories of the Guptas. This is indicated by their title 'samanta' which they held. The Maukhari rulers used several titles which are

found in various seals and inscriptions which provide us with some information on their genealogy. The Asirgarh Copper seal gives the names of the following rulers:

- 1) *Maharaja* Hari-varman – Jayasvamini
- 2) *Maharaja* Aditya-varman – Harshagupta
- 3) *Maharaja* Isvara-varman – Upagupta
- 4) *Maharajadhiraja* Isana-varman – Lakshmivati
- 5) *Maharajadhiraja* Sarva-varman – Indrabhattarika
- 6) *Maharajadhiraja* Avanti-varman

The modern province of U.P was the seat of their power. It also included portions of Magadha. The theory that the Maukhari dominion extended up to Sutej in the west is based on insufficient evidence. Kanauj seems to have been the capital of Maukhari kingdom at least during the reign of Avantivarman and his son. The distinction between the titles given to the first three kings and the others indicates that the reign of Isana-varman marked the beginning of the rise of the family to power and prestige.

The Maukharis ruled as feudatory chiefs in south Bihar and U.P., since the time of Budha-gupta. The disintegration of the Guptas in the early sixth century CE gave them an opportunity to establish their independence. Isanavarman claims to have defeated the Andhras, Gulikas and the Gaudas which indicate extensive military campaigns and great power. He was the first in his family to assume the imperial title of *Maharajadhiraja* and to issue coins.

The Later Guptas, who came into prominence about the same time, challenged the power of Maukharis. It was an elongated war between the two. The Maukhari king Isanavarman was defeated by Kumaragupta and probably also by Damodaragupta. Sarvavarman, the second son of Isanavarman, is said to have defeated Damodaragupta of the Later Gupta dynasty. Very less is known about the Maukharis after Isana-varman. Banabhatta in *Harshacharita* has remarked that the Maukharis stood at the head of all royal houses, and Avantivarman was the pride of that race. This implies that the Maukharis enjoyed sovereignty till the beginning of the seventh century CE.

Isanavarman, his son Sarvavarman and Avantivarman (Sarvavarman's son) were powerful kings and ruled over considerable territory. The chronology of the rulers of Maukharis is constructed on very limited sources and the following chronology can be accepted:

- 1) Isana-varman — c. CE 550-576
- 2) Sarva-varman — c. CE 576-580
- 3) Avanti-varman — c. CE 580-600

There is uncertainty regarding the successor of Avantivarman. Dated coins of Isanavarman, Sarvavarman and Avantivarman have come to light but the readings have been unclear. The last Maukhari king was Grahavarman who was married to Rajyasri, the daughter of Prabhakaravardhana of Thanesar and sister of the famous ruler Harshavardhana. The Malava king Devagupta attacked Kanauj and killed Grahavarman bringing the Maukhari kingdom to an end.

7.2.3 Harshavardhana and his Reign

The Pushyabhutis ruled in Thanesar, north of Delhi. The Pushyabhuti family became influential on the accession of Prabhakaravardhana. From Banabhatta's *Harshacharita*, we learn that Prabhakaravardhana was also known as Pratapasila and that he had another son named Krishna and a daughter named Rajyasri. Harshavardhana was the most powerful ruler of this dynasty. His rule and his times will be dealt with in some detail in Unit 8.

7.2.4 The Later Guptas of Magadha

From around the middle of sixth century CE till about 675 CE the kings who ruled Magadha were known as Magadha Guptas or Later Guptas. The Later Guptas of Magadha were not part of the main Gupta dynasty, but were a minor line having the same name. The Later Guptas were also feudatories of the Imperial Guptas like the Maukharis. An inscription found at Apsad, near Gaya gives the following genealogy of the kings of this dynasty:

- 1) Krishnagupta
- 2) Harshagupta
- 3) Jivitagupta
- 4) Kumaragupta
- 5) Damodaragupta
- 6) Mahasenagupta
- 7) Madhavagupta
- 8) Adityasena

Apsad inscription describes the military achievements of the first three kings. It is not clear whether these rulers carried out such campaigns independently or as feudatories. Harshagupta had to fight the Hunas; his son Jivagupta fought against the Lichchhavis of Nepal and Gaudas of Bengal. Jivagupta's successor king Kumaragupta defeated Maukhari king Isanavarman. The next king Damodargupta, son of Kumaragupta, was defeated and killed by Maukhari king Sarvavarman and lost a portion of Magadha. For some time the successors of Damodargupta retreated to Malwa because of the Maukharis but they again established their supremacy in Magadha. The most powerful ruler was Adityasena, who ruled in Magadha in 672 CE, a date which seems to occur in one of his inscriptions. This sovereignty is further supported by the fact that Adityasena assumed the title of *Maharajadhiraja*. His empire included Magadha, Anga and Bengal. It is just possible that his kingdom included a portion of eastern Uttar Pradesh. He was a *Parama-Bhagvata* and got a temple of Vishnu constructed. An inscription which was engraved in a temple at Deoghar refers to his conquest of the Chola country and also performance of several sacrifices, including three *Asvamedhas*. But this record alone cannot establish the fact that Adityasena carried out victorious campaigns against the Cholas. Names of three successors of Adityasena – Devagupta, Vishnu-gupta and Jivita-gupta have come down to us. All continued with the imperial title.

Vishnugupta ruled for at least 17 years. Jivita-gupta probably extended his authority to some territory on the banks of Gomati which once formed part of the

Maukhari kingdom. No successor of Jivita-gupta is known, and the end of the Later Guptas is ambiguous. When Yasovarman of Kanauj went for his campaign in the east in the second quarter of the eighth century CE, he found one king in possession of Gauda and Magadha. It has been suggested that this ruler who was defeated at the hands of Yasovarman described in the poem *Gaudavaho* (killing of the king of Gauda), is none other than Jivitagupta. The power of the Later Guptas came to an end in or shortly before the second quarter of the eighth century CE when the last ruler Jivitagupta was defeated either by a king of Gauda or king Yasovarman of Kanauj.

7.2.5 Yasodharman of Kanauj

During the reign of Kumaragupta I, his feudatory Bandhuvvarman ruled over Mandasor as it was a major centre of western Malwa. He belonged to the Aulikara family which perhaps ruled there up to the beginning of the sixth century CE. Two stone pillar inscriptions from Mandasor in Madhya Pradesh, one of which is dated in 532 CE refer to a powerful king Yasodharman. His early history is unknown. One of his court-poets, Vakpati, wrote a poetical work in Prakrit which narrated his victorious campaign. His work forms the chief source of our knowledge of his life and reign. The narration of Vakpati seems to be an exaggeration when he says that Yasodharman conquered all the regions in south and north. But there is evidence that corroborate his conquest in the east. An inscription found at Nalanda indicates that his authority extended over Magadha. It also implies that Yasodharman carried out his campaign as far as Bengal and defeated the ruler of Gauda.

Though his campaigns in the south seem to be doubtful but there are references that might form the basis of it. The inscriptions of the Chalukya king Vijayaditya, great-grandson of the famous Pulakesin II refer to a fight with a king who is not named but is described as the Lord of the North, or whole of *Uttarapatha* (*sakalottarapatha-natha*). The battle most probably took place towards the close of 695 CE. The Chalukya king defeated the enemy and is said to have obtained from him 'the symbols of the rivers Ganga and Yamuna', the *Palidhvaja* banner and other emblems of imperial power. The reference to Ganga and the Yamuna shows that the battle probably took place in the Ganga-Yamuna *doab*. On the basis of such information it can be assumed that the ruler referred to here as Lord of the *Uttarapatha* is Yasodharman. At the same time the victory of the Chalukyan king mentioned in Chalukya inscriptions should not be taken as a wholly true fact. Many sources are available which lead to the conclusion that in the northern campaign Vijayaditya, the Chalukya crown-prince, was taken captive by the enemy. Yasodharman is generally identified with Yi-sha-fu-mo, king of Central India, who sent his minister, the Buddhist monk Pu-ta-sin (Buddhasena), to the court of China in 731 CE. Lalitaditya, the king of Kashmir, sent an embassy to China in 736 CE, and probably referred to Yasodharman as an ally. It might be assumed that both the kings asked for Chinese help and support against the Arabs and Tibetans who were paving their way to India. If this theory is considered then one can assume that he tried to extend his power to the west.

Yasodharman was victorious against the Arabs of Sindh. Yasodharman along with Lalitaditya fought successfully against foreign powers. But soon their alliance broke. *Rajatarangini* narrates the struggle between Yasodharman and Lalitaditya. From the narration mentioned in *Rajatarangini*, it seems that

Yasodharman was defeated at the hands of Lalitaditya. Yasodharman also lost his kingdoms to him. But it is not clear whether he was slain or not. The date of Yasodharman is unclear; his reign may be placed between CE 700 and 740.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) List the minor powers and the regions they ruled in north India in the sixth century CE.
- 2) Which of the following statements are right (✓) or wrong (x):
 - a) The Maitrakas of Valabhi were one of the subordinates of the Guptas. ()
 - b) The Maukhari king Isanavarman was defeated by Budha-gupta. ()
 - c) An inscription found at Aphas, near Gaya gives the genealogy of the kings of the dynasty of the Later Guptas of Magadha. ()
 - d) Lalitaditya ascended the throne in about CE 752. ()

7.2.6 Kashmir

To the east of Sindhu, Kashmir was the first important state. Kashmir has its history written from the earliest times in a text called *Rajatarangini*. *Rajatarangini* was written by Kalhana in the twelfth century CE. The chronology mentioned by Kalhana indicates that nearly the whole of the Gupta age is covered by the reign of a single king of the Gonanda dynasty who is said to have ruled for 300 years. This seems to be a fallacy. The next two reigns of two brothers covering a period of 80 years is also doubtful. The subsequent period is comparatively reliable. The new dynasty which Kalhana mentions is the Karkota or Naga dynasty, founded by Durlabhavardhana. He married the daughter of the last king of the Gonanda dynasty named Baladitya. As Baladitya had no son Durlabhavardhana succeeded to the throne (CE 627).

Huien Tsang, the Chinese pilgrim gives a very long account of Kashmir. He visited Kashmir during the reign of Durlabhavardhana. Five other states – Takshasila (Rawalpindi district), Simhapura (Salt Range region), Urasa (Hazara or Abbottabad district), Pan-nu-tso (Punch), and Rajapura (Rajaori) were under Kashmir. Thus Durlabhavardhana ruled over not only Kashmir proper, but also a part of western and north-western Punjab as well. He was succeeded by his son, Durlabhaka. Durlabhavardhana and Durlabhaka reigned for 36 and 50 years respectively. Durlabhaka was succeeded by his eldest son Chandrapida. During his period Arab were encroaching upon the frontiers of Kashmir. In 713 CE he sent an envoy to the Chinese emperor asking for aid against the Arabs. Though he did not receive any support from the Chinese, he was able to protect his kingdom from the Arabs. As mentioned by Kalhana, King Chandrapida was known for his piety and justice. Kalhana mentions that when the king proposed to build a temple, a tanner refused to give up his hut which was situated on the site. When the matter was reported to the king, he considered his own officers to be at fault and not the tanner. His reign is said to have been a period of humane activities. After his death, his younger brother succeeded the throne. But his ruling years are said to be full of ‘cruel’ and ‘bloody’ deeds. He was followed by his younger brother Lalitaditya Muktapida, the ‘greatest’ king of the dynasty.

Lalitaditya ascended the throne about CE 724. He mainly concentrated on expeditions during his reign. He entered into alliance with Yasodharman and

defeated the Tibetans. Lalitaditya was also successful against the mountain tribes on the north and north-western frontier of his kingdom, such as the Dards, Kambojas and Turks. The most powerful expedition was against Yasodharman as already mentioned. It made him the master of Kanauj. After defeating Yasodharman, he proceeded towards the eastern ocean and reached Kalinga. The king of Gauda probably acknowledged his suzerainty without a fight. After reaching the bank of Kaveri he even conquered some of the islands. In the west he overran the seven Konkans and advanced as far as Dvaraka (in the western extreme of Kathiawar Peninsula). He also conquered Avanti and many other states till he reached the hilly regions and the northwest. Here he conquered the Kambojas, Tukharas (Turks), Bhauttas (Tibetans), Daradas and also a king called Mammuni. It might be a probable fact that Mammuni, whom he is said to have defeated thrice, refers to an Arab ruler. His conquests made the kingdom of Kashmir one of the greatest empire after the Gupta Empire in northern India. Kashmirians chose to call him the 'universal monarch'. He adorned his kingdom with beautiful towns, and decorating the towns with fine buildings, monasteries, temples and images of gods. Kalhana's account implies that he was a celebrated ruler. But at the same time Kalhana also mentions two accounts that reflect his dark side. Once when he was drunk he ordered the town of Pravarapura to be burnt down. Afterwards while he was sober, he repented it, and was glad to find that the ministers had disobeyed his orders.

The second incident is gruesome. He summoned the king of Bengal (Gauda) to Kashmir and promised him safe-conduct and made the image of Vishnu Panhasakesava as the surety for his promise. But he got the same king assassinated. It is difficult to find any motive behind this. A few devoted followers of the murdered king undertook the long journey from Bengal to Kashmir, and endowed the temple of the god who had been made the surety. The priests closed the gates, but they were forced open. The Bengali heroes reached the statue of Vishnu Ramasvamin mistaking it for that of Panhasakesava. They broke it into pieces. They were all mercilessly cut to pieces by the Kashmir soldiers who had just arrived from the capital. Kalhana recognizes the men from Bengal who came all the way for revenge and their act of courage, love and determination for their king. Kalhana says,

"What of the long journey which had to be accomplished and what of the devotion for the dead temple of Ramasvamin is seen empty, whereas the world is filled with the fame of the Gauda heroes."

Lalitaditya died around CE 760. His successors were weak and were unable to maintain the prestige and honour of the family. The dynasty, however, continued to rule over Kashmir till about the middle of the ninth century CE.

7.3 NATURE OF THE POST-GUPTA PERIOD

The political powers which emerged in different regions of India in the post-Gupta period, were more stable than the large state structure of Harsha. They had their bases in the regions in which they emerged and in many cases they marked the beginning of the political identity of a region or a sub-region. From the perspective of colonial historiography this period was considered as a Dark Age in comparison with the 'Golden Age' of the Gupta period as this period was characterized by 'small', 'unimportant' kingdoms and 'political confusion' largely

because there were no large states. But as the study of regional history gained importance it was discovered that changes during this period were important. The focus shifted from the Ganges plain to other parts of the subcontinent.

Impressive amount of work has been done on the period which historians call as the early medieval period. This was the period of great regional kings and the rise of regions. The constant wars between polities and the rise and fall of dynasties point to the process of local state formation and the spread of state societies across regions. Thus it was not a period of political fragmentation which the decline of the Guptas led to; it was a continuous structural evolution within regional polities. In this process chieftaincies changed to early kingdoms, to regional kingdoms. A new balance of regional powers can be seen developing in this period. Scholars have characterized this period as feudal, while some regard it as dynamic and generative. The feudalism school regards the evidence of royal land grants to brahmanas and officers as crucial. This created holdings of land and villages where the recipients had the right to collect revenue but were not required to pay tax. The landed intermediaries had immediate authority over the peasant. There was decline of urban life and trans-regional trade. As there was paucity of coins, officials had to be paid through revenue from land instead of by cash. The number of feudatories increased with the increase in grant of lands.

Other scholars like Romila Thapar and B.D. Chattopadhyaya understand this period differently. Romila Thapar explains it as a process where “Pre-state polities were transformed into states, and the creating of a centre of power involved the colonization of an area by settling subordinate branch lineages of the main dynasty in new areas.” This is seen as the spread of monarchy into pre-state societies and the workings of an ‘integrative polity’.

Brahmanism during this period was asserting itself. The granting of land to brahmanas, which increased in the post-Gupta period, emphasized the pre-eminence of the brahmana in society.

Distinctions between courtly high culture and popular culture became more sharply defined. Elements of popular culture spoke other languages, their customs and rituals were different. Sanskrit and elite courtly culture cemented its relationship even more strongly.

Politically monarchy triumphed over the *gana sanghas* and the forest clans. Earlier kings of non-kshatriya origin were not concerned with acquiring the kshatriya status but from the post-Gupta period this became common to monarchy. In the making of a kshatriya the role of the brahmana was crucial. It was the brahmana which legitimized the king’s right to rule even if the king had low origins. The brahmanas for their efforts were granted with grants of land. New settlements were to become the nuclei of support for the king.

Due to the practice of landgrants, new, wealthy and powerful landholding groups, either as owners or enjoyers of soil began to emerge as intermediaries between the ruler and the actual tiller of the soil. The emergence of landed intermediaries is considered as a typical symbol of Indian feudal economy.

The feudatories had to accept the suzerainty of the ruler who granted the land. He had to give his daughter’s hand in marriage if the king asked for it. He had to mention the king in his charters and inscriptions. His presence in the court on

certain occasions was mandatory. Sometimes when the feudatory was powerful enough he could grant lands without taking permission of his suzerain. This was called sub-infeudation leading to the formation of hierarchy in the power structure.

Many historians rather than calling it a feudal society preferred to call it an integrative polity. “It is argued that the formation of states in the post-Gupta period was in itself a different process from the earlier one and therefore created a different kind of economy and society.” The changes can be noticed in the following manner:

- 1) Territories emerged under new names and ruling lineages were associated with territorial names rather than only with clan names;
- 2) As more areas were brought under cultivation, settled societies which were stratified by caste came into close contact with forest societies. Gradually diverse groups were brought into a definite system. Religious institutions received grants and sacred centres played multiple roles. Local cults were incorporated into the existing ‘Hindu’ sects. Temples acted as significant political and religious institutions.
- 3) Links were established between the emerging kingdoms and the chiefdoms;
- 4) Monarchy was established in what had been pre-state societies;
- 5) Network of trade increased, thus there was increase in commercial taxes.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Comment on the nature of the political structure during the post-Gupta period. Write in 10 lines.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) Discuss the history the Gupta and the post-Gupta period of Kashmir as written by Kalhana.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

7.4 SUMMARY

In the post-Gupta period many kingdoms came into existence. These kingdoms were small and not as large as the Gupta kingdom. Some of the powerful kings like Harsha managed to bring almost the whole of northern India under their control, but their kingdoms were short-lived. Though this period is marked by the emergence of a large number of regional polities, this period saw the beginnings of stable state structures. The case of Kashmir has been mentioned in this Unit, where for the first time the functioning of a local state system came into existence. Elsewhere too, many regional polities came to dominate the political scene. Thus, the decline of the Gupta power and the collapse of Harsha's empire did not mean the beginning of political anarchy. After the end of these empires, the regional powers consolidated themselves and played important roles in the history of subsequent periods.

7.5 KEY WORDS

Maharaja-adhiraja: is a Sanskrit title implying paramount sovereignty

Samanta: the term 'samanta' originally meant 'neighbour' and referred to the independent ruler of an adjacent territory. But by the end of Gupta rule and by sixth century a new meaning of the term was adopted. 'Samanta' implied a subjected but reinstated tributary prince of a realm. The rise of the 'samantas' was a distinctive feature of the growth of medieval realms.

Feudatories: a person under the protection of a feudal lord to whom he has vowed homage.

7.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) See Section 7.2 and its sub-sections.
- 2) a) $\sqrt{\quad}$ b) $\times$ c) $\sqrt{\quad}$ d) $\times$

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) See Section 7.3
- 2) See Section 7.2.6

7.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Chattopadhyaya, B.D. (1998). *The Making of Early Medieval India*. Oxford University Press.

Fox, R.G. (Ed.) (1977). *Realm and Region in Traditional India*. Duke University: Programme in Comparative Studies on Southern Asia.

Gopal, L. (1989). *The Economic Life of Northern India*. Delhi: Motilal Banarasi Dass Publishers Pvt. Ltd.

Kulke, H. (1998). *The State in India (1000-1700)*. Oxford University Press.

Puri, B.N. (1986). *The History of the Gurjara Pratiharas*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd.

Raychaudhuri, H.C. (1973). *Dynastic History of Northern India*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publisher Pvt. Ltd.

Sharma, R.S. (2003). *Early Medieval Indian Society: A Study in Feudalisation*. Kolkata: Orient Longman Pvt. Ltd.

Sharma, R.S. (2009). *Indian Feudalism*. New Delhi: Macmillan Publishers India Ltd.

Sharma, R.S. (2016). *Social Changes in Early Medieval India*. New Delhi: PPH.



ignou
THE PEOPLE'S
UNIVERSITY

UNIT 8 HARSHA AND THE RISE OF KANNAUJ*

Structure

- 8.0 Objectives
- 8.1 Introduction
- 8.2 The Changing Political Scenario in North India
 - 8.2.1 Kanauj as the New Political Centre
 - 8.2.2 Decline of Pataliputra
- 8.3 The Pushyabhutis
- 8.4 The Political Activities of Harsha
 - 8.4.1 Sources
 - 8.4.2 Political Activities of Harsha: An Overview
 - 8.4.3 The Extent of Harsha's Kingdom
 - 8.4.4 Huien Tsang's Account
 - 8.4.5 The Harsha Era
 - 8.4.6 Administration
 - 8.4.7 End of Harsha's Reign
- 8.5 Political Structure in the Early Medieval Period
- 8.6 Aftermath: The Tripartite Struggle for Kanauj
- 8.7 Summary
- 8.8 Key Words
- 8.9 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 8.10 Suggested Readings

8.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to learn:

- how the political scenario of north India changed in the 5th-6th century CE;
- the emergence of new types of political centres – the *Jayaskandhavaras*;
- why Kanauj became the new political centre of north India;
- Harsha's political activities; and
- impact of the rise of Kanauj: the Tripartite struggle.

8.1 INTRODUCTION

The political scenario in post-Gupta north India was characterized by the emergence of numerous ruling families like the Maukharis of Kanyakubja, Later Guptas of Magadha, Gaudas of West Bengal (Murshidabad Dist.), Maitrakas of Valabhi (Saurashtra peninsula), Pushyabhutis of Thaneswar, etc. Many of them were originally subordinates of the Guptas. But, with the decline of the political authority of the Guptas, they assumed independence. North India in the 6th century was, thus, an arena where multiple ruling powers, all rooted in their respective

* Dr. Sayantani Pal, Associate Professor, Department of Ancient Indian History and Culture, University of Calcutta, Kolkata.

regional contexts, were constantly fighting with each other. In such a political scenario, the *samantas* (subordinates) emerged powerful. They kept control over outlying areas or fought battles in areas far away from the political centres of their overlords. The rise of local and regional powers has been regarded as the hallmark of this period. In this Unit, we are introducing you to a brief history of the Pushyabhutis and how Harsha became the most important ruler and succeeded in establishing an empire.

8.2 THE CHANGING POLITICAL SCENARIO IN NORTH INDIA

In this period, we see that some regions became more powerful than others. For example, the places located in strategically sound areas, like those situated on elevated regions or those surrounded by hills or rivers; regions which were well connected by land and water routes for facilitating the movement of army or the easy transportation of supplies and provisions for the army, assumed more importance than the older *rajadhanis* (capitals). These new centres were called *Jayaskandhavaras* (literally meaning ‘camp of victory’) in epigraphs. It was from these *Jayaskandhavaras* that the ruling dynasties issued land-grants to religious recipients like the brahmanas or the monasteries and temples. Inscriptions of the early medieval polities are replete with references to various *Jayaskandhavaras* under different kings. From such references, the political conquests and the extent of the territories of the rulers may be inferred. As for instance, the Banskhera and the Madhuban copper plates of Harsha were issued from the *Jayaskandhavaras* of Vardhamanakoti and Kapitthika respectively. Both were probably located somewhere in Uttar Pradesh.

8.2.1 Kanauj as the New Political Centre

Kanauj, earlier known as Kanyakubja or Mahodaya, situated in the Kannauj district of present Uttar Pradesh assumed a lot of significance in the politics of early medieval north India. Located in the fertile plains of the Ganga-Yamuna *doab*, Kanauj stood on an elevated area that could be easily fortified. Thus, even though it was situated in plains, due to its favourable location, it could be easily fortified and was secure. Besides, Kanauj was rooted in a large agrarian expanse in the western Ganges plains. Land-grants could be made in plenty from this area. Naturally, the area attracted many brahmanas who settled here and for subsequent centuries the brahmanas of Kanauj came to be widely esteemed in the royal courts throughout the country. Kanauj was also well-connected by routes going towards east into the Ganges plains as well as with those going to south. Due to all these factors, it rose to power and became an important nodal point in north. With this development we see a shift of focus from Pataliputra in south Bihar to Kanauj. The latter also came to constitute a central theme in the politics of post-Gupta north India.

As a political centre Kanyakubja first appears in *Harshacharita* as a seat of power of the Maukharis under Grahavarman who was married to the Pushyabhuti princess Rajyasri, the sister of Harshavardhana. When Harshvardhana became king, he chose this city as his seat of power instead of Thaneswar in Haryana, which was the capital of his predecessors. This choice of capital might have been due to the threatening activities of the Hunas who were making inroads into India from the north-west since the reign of Skandagupta in the middle of

the 5th century CE. Since Thaneshwar was closer to the north-west, Harshavardhana must have felt more secure at Kanyakubja as it was more centrally located to the east.

8.2.2 Decline of Pataliputra

Historians like R. S. Sharma are of the opinion that Pataliputra in the post-Gupta period was on decline due to decay of trade and commerce. This was part of the process of feudalisation of the state polity and economy. Tolls used to be collected from traders coming to this city from other places. Since trade declined, money in the form of coins had become scarce. Thus, officers, soldiers and other royal servants had to be given their salaries through the assignment of land. Therefore, in the post-Gupta times the cities lost their importance and the *Skandhavaras* acquired prominence. Thus, R.S. Sharma has remarked that Pataliputra largely represents the pre-feudal order whereas the emergence of Kanyakubja under Harsha typifies the advent of the feudal age in north India. However, this view has its critics. A study of the economy of the various regions and localities does not point to an overall decline of trade, urban centres, and money economy in the period immediately following the Guptas. It was not a pan-Indian phenomenon. Rather, in some areas like south-eastern Bengal, western India etc. trade flourished, and there is an abundance of gold and pure silver coins. Besides, inter and intra-regional trade used to be carried on a large scale.

Kanyakubja became powerful after Harsha chose it as his capital and Banabhatta, his court poet, glorified it in his *Harshacharita*. This, on the other hand, contributed to the theory of “Tripartite Struggle” by the historians like H. C. Raychaudhuri and others. They believed that it was a struggle among three dynasties: the Gurjara-Pratiharas of western India, the Palas of Bengal and Bihar and the Rashtrakutas of Deccan. The aim was to capture Kanyakubja which became the royal capital since it was chosen by Harshavardhana.

8.3 THE PUSHYABHUTIS¹

A variety of sources inform us about the rise of the family of Pushyabhutis which first ruled from Thaneshwar in Haryana and later from Kannauj in Uttar Pradesh. These sources include the *Harshacharita*, accounts of Hiuen-tsang and some inscriptions and coins. Banabhatta informs us that the founder king of this dynasty at Thaneshwar was Pushyabhuti and that the family was known as Pushyabhuti *vamsha*. However, the inscriptions of Harsha make no reference to him. The Banskhara and Madhuvan plates and royal seals mention five earlier rulers among whom the first three are given the title of *Maharaja*. This may indicate that they were not sovereign monarchs. The fourth king Prabhakarvardhana has been described as a *Maharajadhiraja* which makes us infer that he was an independent monarch and had established matrimonial relations with the Maukharis by marrying his daughter Rajyasri with Grahavarman.

Thaneshwar, during this time (about 604 CE) was threatened by the Hunas from the western side. Banabhatta has described Prabhakarvardhana as “a lion to the Huna Deer”. According to him an army under Rajyavardhana was sent to defeat the Hunas but due to the sudden illness of his father he had to come back. With Prabhakarvardhana’s death the family had to face troubled times for a while.

¹This section on Pushyabhutis has been borrowed from EHI-02, Block-8, Unit-34.

The Malava king killed Grahavarman and took Rajyasri prisoner. It appears that the Malava and the Gauda kings entered into alliance and even Thaneshwar was threatened. Rajyavardhana defeated the Malavas but was killed through treachery by Sasanka, the Gauda king. Now it was Harsha's responsibility to seek revenge and in due course he was able to establish a strong empire.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Read the following statements and mark right (✓) or wrong (x).
 - i) Thaneshwar was the kingdom of the Maukharis.
 - ii) Kanyakubja was located in the Ganga-Yamuna *doab*.
 - iii) As the political centre of north India Kanauj replaced Ujjayini.
 - iv) Tripartite struggle was fought between two powers.
- 2) Why did *Jayaskandhavaras* become important in the post-sixth century CE polity of north India?

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 3) Write five sentences on the reasons for the decline of Pataliputra.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 4) Write in 100 words about the Pushyabhutis.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

8.4 THE POLITICAL ACTIVITIES OF HARSHA

The Pushyabhutis ruled from Thaneshwar in Haryana and later from Kanauj in Uttar Pradesh. Let us have a look at the sources which give information about Harsha's reign and his career.

8.4.1 Sources

Epigraphs, mostly in the form of eulogies and copper plate charters of the dynasties of this period make exaggerated claims of political conquests and other kingly qualities. Such *prashastis*, however, present a stereotypical account of the political conquests of the king. They claim that the king was a universal emperor (*chakravartin/sarvabhauma* king) who had conquered all quarters and, thus, accomplished *digvijaya*. The reference to political centres, the areas of land-grants recorded in the inscriptions as well as the find spots of the records may hint at the extent of territory under a dynasty. Apart from this, the *charitakavyas* (biographical poems) composed by the court poets for their patron kings emerged as a new source of historical information in this period. In such poems the patron king of the court poet is the hero and he passes through many vicissitudes and challenges which he finally overcomes. The earliest model of this kind is found in *Harshacharita* (The Life of Harsha). It was the first formal *charitakavya*. In this *kavya*, the poet Banabhatta relates the account of Harshavardhana's rise to power. We are told that when the Pushyabhuti king Prabhakaravardhana was ruling, the formidable Hunas had attacked the north-western frontier of the kingdom. Both of the princes Rajyavardhana and Harshavardhana went to resist them. In the meantime, Prabhakaravardhana fell ill and died. The situation worsened when the Maukhari king Grahavarman of Kanyakubja, their brother-in-law and the husband of their sister Rajyasri, was killed by enemies. These were Sasanka of Gauda and Devagupta of Malava. Rajyavardhana went to fight the enemy and died at the enemy camp. Later, Harshavardhana rescued his sister and since the Maukharis had no successor, the throne of Kanyakubja was offered to him by the ministers of the Maukharis. He accepted it and, thus, he became the joint ruler of the Pushyabhuti and Maukhari kingdoms. He made Kanyakubja his capital. Thus, ends the poem. It may be noted that the aim of the poet was to tell the tale of Harsha's ascendancy to throne. By portraying him as an upright and just person, by underlining the mutual love that both the brothers shared, Bana justifies Harsha for having succeeded to the throne even though, by doing this, he superseded his elder brother.

In the subsequent period, rulers like Ramapala of Bengal and Bihar, Vikramaditya VI of the Western Chalukya dynasty, Kumarapala of the Chaulukya dynasty of Gujarat appear as the central characters of the *charitakavyas* like *Ramacharita*, *Vikramankadevacharita* and *Kumarapalacharita* respectively. This indicates how *Harshacharita* had set up an example and initiated a genre of literature that became widespread and was followed by rulers of different regions who wished to appear as heroes of poems.

Other source for the period concerned comes from the well-known account of the Chinese traveller Huiyen Tsang who travelled in India from 629-645 CE and spent much time at the court of Harsha.

Interpretation of Sources

Harsha was a patron of both Banabhatta and Huiyen Tsang. Their accounts project Harsha as the master of the whole of north India. By taking such accounts at face value, earlier historians projected Harsha as the last great 'Hindu' empire-builder of post-Gupta period. Again, such views were strengthened by the epithet of *sakalottarapathesvara* ("the war-like lord of all the regions of the north") attributed to Harsha by the successors of his arch rival Chalukya king

Pulakesin II. Thus, in the scheme of periodization of Indian history, historians used to mark the end of an era with the death of Harsha in 647 CE, verily the end of the “Hindu” period. Thus, Vincent Smith, one of the earliest authors of a comprehensive volume of Indian history (*Early History of India*), talks of the ‘medieval Hindu kingdoms from the death of Harsha’ in which the Rajputs come to the forefront. The major criteria of this change was the break-up of a large empire as they believed that Harsha was the last emperor of pre-medieval period who had authority over vast portions of north India similar to that of the Mauryas or the Guptas. The beginning of the medieval period, despite the presence of the Rajputs, was perceived as largely a Muslim era.

8.4.2 Political Activities of Harsha: An Overview

Harsha ascended the throne in 606 CE. He belonged to the Pushyabhuti dynasty based around Sthanvisvara (modern Thanesar in the Ambala district of Punjab). The claims of conquests made in the records of Harsha can be judged from the inscriptions of his contemporary kings like Sasanka, the king of Gauda (Murshidabad district of West Bengal) or Chalukya Pulakesin II. Both were his rivals. We shall discuss the political activities of Harsha in the following manner.

Early career

Prabhakaravardhana was Harsha’s father and the fourth king in line. His two sons were Rajyavardhana and Harshavardhana. His daughter Rajyasri was married to Grahavarman, the king of Maukhari dynasty of Kanyakubja. It was an important marriage alliance which influenced the power balance in the 7th century north India. Gauda, the archrival of the Maukharis (earlier the Maukhari king Isanavarman claimed to have defeated the Gaudas) had formed an alliance with Devagupta of Malava.

Eastern campaign

The Gauda king Sasanka and the Malava king Devagupta had created trouble by killing Grahavarman: the Maukhari king and the brother-in-law of Harsha. They captured Kanyakubja. Rajyavardhana, Harsha’s elder brother died in the enemy camp. After rescuing his sister and Grahavarman’s widowed queen Rajyasri, Harsha was offered the throne by the ministers of the Maukharis since they had no successor. Harsha now occupied the throne of Kanyakubja and, thus, began to rule over both the territories of the Pushyabhutis and the Maukharis. He now took a vow to take revenge on Sasanka and invaded those kingdoms in the east which had refused allegiance to him. However, neither Banabhatta nor Huien Tsang give any information regarding the actual conflict between Sasanka and Harsha. Besides, Huien Tsang mentions that some years before 637-638 CE, Sasanka had cut down the Bodhi tree at Gaya. It was a sacred symbol of the Buddhists and Sasanka could not have performed such an act unless he was in occupation of Gaya region. He also indicated that Harsha conquered Odra and Kongada (north, eastern and southern Odisha) by 643 CE. Thus, it appears that Harsha could not achieve any success in eastern India before the death of Sasanka in c. 637 CE.

Western India

The kingdom of Valabhi in Saurashtra was being ruled by the Maitrakas who were the vassals of the Guptas. The relationship between Harsha and the Maitraka

dynasty is a little complicated. In the inscription of the Gurjara kings of Broach (Nausari grant of Jayabhata II, 726 CE) they claimed to have protected the Valabhi ruler who was overpowered by Harsha. Originally the Latas (southern Gujarat), Malavas and the Gurjaras occupied a strategic position in between the kingdoms of Harsha and that of Chalukya Pulakesin II situated to the north and south of the Narmada respectively. Thus, both Harsha and Pulakesin would attempt to bring three of them under control. Pulakesin II claims these three rulers as his vassals in his Aihole inscription. However, when Harsha occupied the Valabhi kingdom, peace must have been settled due to a matrimonial alliance between the two. Thus, Dhruvasena II Baladitya of the Maitraka dynasty married the daughter of Harsha and became his ally. This alliance, thus, weaned away Dhruvasena II from Pulakesin's influence. This might have been the reason for the celebrated conflict between Harsha and Pulakesin II.

Conflict with Pulakesin II

The kingdoms of Harsha and Pulakesin II touched on the border of the river Narmada. In his Aihole inscription Pulakesin says that Harsha's joy (*harsha*) melted away through fear when his elephants fell in battle. From the account of Huien Tsang it appears that Harsha took the initiative but could not achieve any success against Pulakesin. Regarding the claim made by the successors of Pulakesin that he acquired the title of *Parameshvara* by defeating *sakalottarapathesvara* (Harsha), R. C. Majumdar suggests that the result of the battle was magnified in favour of Pulakesin by his successors. This is a fine example of the poet's intention to speak highly of the rivals in royal *prashastis* in order to glorify the achievements of their patrons.

8.4.3 The Extent of Harsha's Kingdom

Harsha appears to have been in occupation of parts of present UP, south Bihar and Odisha. He inherited Thanesar, parts of eastern Punjab and eastern Rajasthan. Besides Bhaskaravarman, the ruler of Kamarupa was his subordinate ally and Harsha also exercised influence on the kings of Jalandhar and perhaps Kashmir. In the south Narmada was the boundary beyond which Pulakesin II was ruling.

The extent of Harsha's empire was, thus, not as large as earlier historians had thought. So, there is no reason to project him as "the last great Hindu emperor" or to view his reign as marking the end of the ancient and the beginning of the medieval era. In fact, contemporary historians question the view that any event like the death of a king marks the end on an era. The transition of one era into another should be based on historical processes which had a much greater impact on all aspects of society.

8.4.4 Huien Tsang's Account

Huien Tsang, the Chinese pilgrim travelled in India from 629 to 645 CE. He speaks about the prosperity of Kannauj under Harsha. He says that the king travelled frequently throughout his kingdom to understand the condition of his subjects. He presents Harsha as a follower of *Mahayana* Buddhism and he has given a grand description of the Buddhist assembly at Kanyakubja during his reign. He also says that Harsha used to pay salary to his ministers and officials by land grants. However, the actual evidence of such secular grants has not come down to us. He also mentions that this patronage to the *Mahayanas* by Harsha was

resented by the *Hinayanas* and the brahmanas. Harsha almost exhausted the royal treasury by making lavish gifts to the Buddhists. How far this account is true is difficult to ascertain. But it definitely brings out the religious tension among different sects in this period who fought among themselves to secure royal patronage.

On the other hand, Huien Tsang himself says that at the Prayaga Assembly Harsha worshipped the Buddha, Shiva and the Sun and distributed charity to the followers of all faiths. Besides, the Banskhera and Madhuban copper plates of Harsha record his grant of land to *Rigvedin* and *Samavedin* brahmanas. Inscriptions also suggest that the early Pusyabhuti kings worshipped Surya while Rajyavardhana was a devotee of the Buddha. Harsha has been represented as a devotee of Shiva in these inscriptions. Moreover, among the three plays attributed to Harsha - namely, *Priyadarshika*, *Ratnavali* and *Nagananda* – the first two begin with an invocation to Brahmanical gods. This data might indicate that the Chinese pilgrim was actually biased in favour of Buddhism and wanted to present Harsha as its great patron.

8.4.5 The Harsha Era

Alberuni who came to India in the 11th century records that the Harsha Era was in use in Mathura and Kanauj. This Era commenced from 606 CE: the date of Harsha's ascendancy to throne. The Banskhera, Madhuban and the newly discovered Kurukshetra Varanasi copper plates of Harsha as well as the Shahpur image inscription of Adityasena are probably dated in this Era. Previously, the Guptas who ruled a large part of north India had also introduced the Gupta Era. This indicates that the rulers wished to commemorate themselves to posterity by initiating an Era in their name.

8.4.6 Administration

Very little data is available regarding the administration in Harsha's reign. Unfortunately, the two main authorities – Bana and Huien Tsang – do not tell us much about Harsha's administration. The inscriptions of Harsha and Pulakesin II and his successors and other contemporary kings do give us some details of administration. The king was the supreme head of government. He appointed the ministers and important officers of the state. He led the armies in battle. He ruled according to the ideals laid down in the *Dharmashastras*. The king was assisted in his administration by a council of ministers. In his council were included feudatories, *samantas*, princes and high officials. There was special staff of officers to manage the royal palace. There were departmental heads that were directly under the control of king. In Harsha's time civil and military departments were not clearly separate. As a result, some of the top civil officers functioned in the capacity of military officers also. The provincial and district administration did not differ much from that of the Guptas. This is evident from the names of the administrative divisions and those of the officers mentioned in the inscriptions of Damodarapura of Kumaragupta I, Faridpur inscriptions of Dharmaditya and Samachardeva and seals of Basadha are also found in the inscriptions of Harsha and in the descriptions of Bana.

The various official designations seem to have continued from the days of the Guptas. Huien Tsang says that taxes were not heavy, and the king took one-sixth

of the farmer's produce as his grain share. According to him there was no regular corvée but then he goes on to say that it was moderate and that the taxes were light. Devahuti feels that he is probably referring to labour in lieu of taxes. Harsha was a strong ruler and inspired confidence and loyalty in his ministers. Huien Tsang mentions that he was an industrious king. His day was divided into three periods out of which one was devoted to the affairs of the kingdom and two to religious affairs. While the affairs of the state may imply more secular aspects of administration, religious affairs may point to opening of hospitals for the needy; provision of free rest houses on highways; distribution of charity; arrangement of philosophical debates; planting of fruit bearing or shady trees; establishment of educational establishments etc. He also kept in close touch with the common man through tours of inspection in which he travelled incognito. He was familiar with his extensive empire and that added to his proficiency as an administrator. For example, he knew the local geography and the temperament of the people belonging to varied terrains and that helped him in choosing the right governors. Harsha was in the habit of convening personal audiences with his tributary leaders and this ensured seamless administration. In 643 CE there were about 20 such tributary leaders. Harsha was on friendly terms with neighbouring countries who he asked to extend facilities of travel and residence to Huien Tsang. He also had diplomatic contacts with the Chinese emperor.

The highest title in Harsha's reign was *parambhattarakamaharajadhiraja*, "the noblest supreme king of kings". The use of such high-sounding titles became a norm from the Guptas onwards. As soon as the kings became universal conquerors and achieved foremost position among the rivals, such titles became common. Regarding the claim made by the successors of Pulakesin II that Pulakesin acquired the title of *Paramesvara* by defeating *sakalottarapathesvara* (Harsha), R.C. Majumdar suggests that the result of the battle was magnified in favour of Pulakesin by his successors. This is a fine example of the poet's intention to speak highly of the rivals in royal *prashastis* in order to glorify the achievements of their patrons.

The lesser kings were known as *rajas* or *maharajas*. They were independent in their territories but owed allegiance to the sovereign.

8.4.7 End of Harsha's Reign

From the Chinese sources we learn that the T'ang emperor Tai Tsung sent an embassy to the court of Harsha in 643 and again in 647 CE. On the last occasion they found Harsha was no longer alive and his throne had been usurped by someone. With the help of forces from Nepal and Assam the usurper was defeated and taken as a prisoner to China. This event shows the growing interest of the Chinese in the politics of north India.

8.5 THE POLITICAL STRUCTURE IN THE EARLY MEDIEVAL PERIOD

The above discussion on the political activities of a famous king like Harshavardhana brings out difficulty in forming an idea about the innumerable early medieval kingdoms and the extent of their respective areas on the basis of available sources. The contours of their kingdoms were rather fluid. Matrimonial alliances as well as conflicts were common among the lineages. B. D.

Chattopadhyaya has shown that in early medieval India lineage ties were central to political formations and there was actually no dichotomy between lineage and states.

The *prashastis* (eulogies) of this period are indicative of a hierarchical political structure. Inscriptions of the subordinate kings refer to their overlord. The phrase commonly used in this connection is *tatpadanudhyata* literally meaning “meditating at his feet”. This phrase is also used by kings in connection to their fathers. However, when used by a subordinate in connection to his overlord, it meant ‘favoured by his feet’, thereby claiming a sort of closer association with him than others.

It is also an issue of how far the term ‘feudatory’ or ‘vassal’ is applicable to subordinate rulers who were obliged to offer allegiance or military service? There used to be no contract between the overlord and subordinates as was the case in western European feudalism. The actual evidence of the ruler granting land to his feudatory (secular or non-religious land grants) are very few. Therefore, the increase in the number of land grants from the 6th century could not have been a contributing factor to the emergence of ‘feudal polity’.

8.6 AFTERMATH: THE TRIPARTITE STRUGGLE FOR KANAUJ

Harsha is credited to have established Kanyakubja as the symbol of royal power in north India. In the subsequent period we see repeated attempts by rulers to position themselves as kings of Kanyakubja. In the early 8th century Yasovarman, the hero of a Prakrit poem *Gaudavaho* posed himself as the ruler of Kanyakubja. The title of the poem *Gaudavaho* (in Sanskrit *Gaudavadha* means the defeat and death of the king of Gauda) suggests rivalry between Gauda and Kanyakubja. According to D. C. Sircar, it began as early as the reign of the Maukharis, when in his Haraha inscription, dated 554 CE, Ishanavarman claimed to have defeated the Gaudas. This legacy of the rivalry between these two powers continued with Harsha representing Kanauj and Sasanka representing Gauda and ultimately ended up with the conflict between the Palas of Bengal and Bihar (represented as Gaudesvara in the north Indian sources) and the Gurjara-Pratiharas of Kanauj.

Even in the *Rajatarangini* Kalhana claims that Yasovarman was defeated by Lalitaditya Muktapida of the Karkota dynasty of Kashmir. The veracity of the varied claims of majestic conquests put forward by the respective court poets can never be ascertained. However, such representations of heroes of poems posing themselves as conquerors of Kanauj nevertheless indicates the growing importance of Kanyakubja in the political scenario of 6th-8th/9th century north India.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) What are the characteristics of a *charitakavya*?

.....

.....

.....

.....

2) Write five sentences on the conflict between Harsha and Pulakesin II.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

3) Read the following statements and mark right (✓) or wrong (x).

- i) Huien Tsang travelled in India from 629-645 CE.
- ii) Harsha was a Buddhist according to his inscriptions.
- iii) Harsha Era commenced from 606 CE.
- iv) *Sakalottarapathanatha* was a title given to Harsha by his own family.

8.7 SUMMARY

The rise of Harsha amply reflects the rise to importance of the Ganga-Yamuna *doab*. No doubt that it obtained much fame in the influential accounts of Banabhatta and Huien Tsang. The epithet *sakalottarapathanatha* applied to him by his rivals — the Chalukyas of Deccan – further emphasized its significance. The above discussion, however, would indicate how this claim is grossly exaggerated.

Even, putting aside such claims the emergence of Kannauj in the post-Gupta polity cannot be denied. Kannauj commanded an impressive agrarian hinterland which was important in the growth of a town. This also reflects the changing political economy in which exploitation of agrarian resources became essential for the innumerable local, supra-local and regional dynasties that were to dominate the north Indian political arena for subsequent years to come.

8.8 KEY WORDS

Jayaskandhavara: literally “Camp of victory”, it implies a temporary camp situated at a strategic location.

Tripartite struggle: the struggle among three powers, namely the Palas of Bihar and Bengal, the Gurjara-Pratihars of western India and the Rashtrakutas of Deccan for capturing Kanyakubja in the 8th-9th century CE.

CharitaKavya: biographical poem.

Sakalottarapathesvara: the war-like lord of all the regions of the north, signifying the sovereign ruler of *Uttarapatha* (north India).

Samantachakra: circle of feudatories.

Tatpadanudhyata/padanudhyata: literally meaning “meditating at his feet”, it is often used to refer to the son and successor of the king or the favourite *samanta* (subordinate).

8.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) i) ×, ii) √, iii) ×, iv) ×
- 2) Your answer should explain the meaning of the word *Jayaskandhavara*, its difference from the *rajdhani*s (capitals). You must highlight the changing economic scenario in which religious land-grants became important and also the strategic location and connectivity of the *Jayaskandhavaras*. See Sub-section 8.2
- 3) See the explanation given by R.S. Sharma regarding post-Gupta economy and state. The decline of Pataliputra, should, however, not to be seen as a general phenomenon of the decline of urban centres in the 6th century. See Sub-section 8.2.2
- 4) See Section 8.3

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Your answer should begin with the meaning of the term *Charitakavya*. You need to explain when and why did this particular genre of literature originate and assume importance. See Sub-section 8.4.1
- 2) Your answer should begin with the identities of these two rulers. You need to explain the factors leading to their conflict regarding the common boundaries of their kingdoms, control over the powers occupying strategic locations like the Latas, Malavas and Gurjaras. See Section 8.4.2
- 3) i) √ ii) × iii) √ iv) ×

8.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

Chakravarti, Ranabir (2010). *Exploring Early India up to c. A.D. 1300*. Delhi: Macmillan Publishers India Ltd.

Cowell, E. B. and Thomas, F. W. (trans.) (1993). *The Harsha-Charita of Bana*. Delhi: MotilalBanarssidas.

Devahuti, D. (1999). *Harsha: A Political Study*. Oxford University Press.

Sharma, R.S. (2005). *India's Ancient Past*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Singh, Upinder (2009). *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India from the Stone Age to the 12th Century*. Delhi: Pearson Longman.

UNIT 9 KINGDOMS IN THE DECCAN AND SOUTH*

Structure

- 9.0 Objectives
- 9.1 Introduction
- 9.2 Political Situation in Deccan till Mid-Sixth Century CE
 - 9.2.1 Vidarbha (Maharashtra)
 - 9.2.2 Karnataka
 - 9.2.3 Eastern Deccan
 - 9.2.4 South Karnataka
- 9.3 Political Situation in South India
- 9.4 The Rise of the Chalukyas, Pallavas and the Pandyas
 - 9.4.1 The Chalukyas
 - 9.4.2 The Pallavas
 - 9.4.3 The Pandyas
 - 9.4.4 Other Powers
- 9.5 Conflicts Between Different Powers
 - 9.5.1 The Role of Minor Kings
 - 9.5.2 Other Dimensions of Political Conflicts
 - 9.5.3 Relations with other Countries
 - 9.5.4 Kerala
- 9.6 Political Organization
 - 9.6.1 The King and the Higher Stratum of Administration
 - 9.6.2 Administrative Units
 - 9.6.3 Local Associations
- 9.7 Relations between Different Categories of Rulers
- 9.8 Summary
- 9.9 Key Words
- 9.10 Answers to Self-Check Exercises
- 9.11 Suggested Readings

9.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to learn about:

- the kingdoms that arose in Deccan and south India with special reference to the Chalukyas of Badami and Pallavas of Kanchi;
- the relations between these kingdoms;
- the role of geography in understanding the political history of our period; and
- how people were governed in these kingdoms.

¹ This Unit has been adopted from EHI-02, Block-8.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

People often speak of India south of the Vindhyas as south India or Deccan. This division has been made for a long time, indeed as early as ancient India when the area south of the Vindhyas was called *Dakshinapatha* (Southern Territory). *Dakhina* became Dakkan of medieval times, from which, in turn, the term Deccan is derived. But historians and geographers have found it more useful to distinguish the Deccan proper from the rest of south India. The Deccan consists of Maharashtra and northern Karnataka, and as far as the double deltas of Godavari and Krishna. Following this usage, we shall speak of Deccan and south India as two regions south of the Vindhyas while the term 'southern India' will stand for both the regions and as distinct from 'northern India'. You will appreciate the value of these distinctions more and more as you go deeper into the study of history and society of this area.

You have already read about the political developments which took place in Deccan and south India in Mauryan and post-Mauryan period. You have noticed that while the Deccan was included in the Mauryan empire, the major chiefdoms of south India i.e. those of the Cholas, Pandyas, Cheras and Satiyaputras were friendly neighbours of the Mauryas. In the post-Mauryan period, initially minor chiefs assuming the title of *raja* (king) appeared in Deccan and the Deccan was politically integrated by Satavahanas who called themselves "Lords of the Deccan". In the south too, the chiefdoms were going through important changes resulting in the emergence of state systems in the subsequent period. In this Unit, you shall be reading about the political situation which developed in Deccan from the post-Satavahana period (beginning of the 3rd century CE to the 8th century CE).

9.2 POLITICAL SITUATION IN DECCAN TILL MID-SIXTH CENTURY CE

After the decline of Satavahanas the political control of Deccan under one dynasty came to an end. Several kingdoms arose in different regions as successors of the Satavahanas. In northern Maharashtra we see the Abhiras, who for a time served as army commanders in the Saka kingdoms, founding a kingdom in mid-3rd century CE. The founder of this line was one Isvarasena who began an Era in 248-49 CE. This Era became very important later and came to be known as Kalachuri-Chedi Era.

9.2.1 Vidarbha (Maharashtra)

The Maharashtra plateau soon came to be dominated by the Vakatakas. They began as minor kings from the last quarter of the 3rd century CE, but rapidly gained power and extended their sway over most of Maharashtra and adjoining parts of Madhya Pradesh. There were two lines of Vakataka kings ruling in different areas. The main line ruled from eastern Maharashtra (the Vidarbha region), while a collateral branch called the Basin branch of Vakatakas ruled in southern Maharashtra. The most famous Vakataka king was Pravarasena-I of the main line, who alone had the title of *Samrat* among the Vakatakas. He performed several Vedic sacrifices and issued many land-grants to brahmanas. The Vakatakas seem to have been a peace-loving people overall and had formed matrimonial

and diplomatic ties with their powerful neighbours such as the Guptas in north, the Vishnukundins in eastern Deccan and the Kadambas in south. But the break-up and weakening of the kingdom could not be prevented as the Kalachuris and Kadambas carved out their territories at its cost in the first half of the 6th century CE. By the mid-6th century they were supplanted by the Chalukyas of Badami as the major power in Deccan.

9.2.2 Karnataka

In the coastal strip of northern Karnataka (North Kanara) and adjoining areas a small kingdom was carved out by the Chutus. They ruled till about the mid-4th century CE when they were supplanted by Kadambas. This kingdom was founded by the famous Mayurasarman who was an expert in guerrilla warfare and compelled the Pallavas of Kanchi to recognize his sovereignty. He, then, performed horse sacrifices (*ashvamedha*) and became Mayuravarman from Mayurasarman, that is, a kshatriya from a brahmana (Varman was a typical kshatriya surname while Sarman was a brahmana surname). Early in its history there was a division of Kadamba kingdom into two parts between the two lines of the family, with Vijayanti (Banavasi) and Palasika (Halsi) as capitals. The two lines were never at peace with each other, and both were threatened by their more powerful neighbours – the Pallavas, the Western Gangas, and, above all, the Chalukyas of Badami. The Chalukyas gradually entered into their territory and by about 575 CE completely vanquished them.

9.2.3 Eastern Deccan

Politically, the most disturbed region in the post-Satavahana Deccan was the fertile Krishna-Godavari delta (Andhra delta) in the east. Here, the Satavahanas were succeeded by the Ikshvakus who were in control of this region from 225 CE. There was a break in their rule by the coming of Abhiras from the west, but it was a brief interregnum and the Ikshvakus came back and ruled for the next 50 years or so. Then, the area was apparently split up into several principalities. From copper-plate inscriptions we come to know of the kings of Brihatphalayana *gotra* followed by those of Salankayana *gotra*, while the Allahabad Pillar Inscription (*Prayagraj-prashasti*) which praises Samudragupta, informs us about half a dozen kingdoms in this area about 350 CE. These included kingdoms of Vengi and Kurala, with capitals at Pishtapura and Avamukta of Devarashtra, and so on.

Political stability returned to the Andhra delta from the mid-5th century with the coming of the Vishnukundins. They had good relations with the Vakatakas, but had prolonged, continued conflicts with the Western Gangas of south Karnataka. Madhavarman-I (440-60 CE), the founder of the line who performed many horse sacrifices, and Madhavavarman-II (556-616 CE) are among the famous rulers of the line. The Vishnukundins ruled till about the first quarter of the 7th century CE when the Chalukyas came in.

9.2.4 South Karnataka

In south Karnataka there arose a dynasty at the beginning of the 5th century CE. The kings of this dynasty were called Gangas or Western Gangas to distinguish them from the Eastern Ganges of Odisha. The Western Gangas ruled over south Karnataka for the next 600 years. Because of such a long association the area

came to be called Gangavadi. Gangavadi is an isolated territory surrounded by mountains and is relatively less prosperous agriculturally. Both these factors allowed the Gangas to rule without much interference from outsiders for such a long time. They were, however, very advantageously situated from a military point of view. They were to play a very important role in mutual conflicts between the Pallavas and the Chalukyas of Badami, mostly as subordinate allies of the latter, as well as in the conflict between Pallavas and Pandyas. They did not generally have cordial relations with the Pallavas who were well placed to harass them from their lofty mountain fortress of Nandidrug.

9.3 POLITICAL SITUATION IN SOUTH INDIA

The *Sangam* period in Tamilnadu and Kerala drew to a close about the end of the 3rd century CE. The history of this area from the 4th to the mid-6th century CE is very obscure. The early history of Pallavas belongs to this period. We have their copper-plate charters that were issued from Kanchi. Pallava rule was traditionally associated with the Kanchi region (Palar river valley) or Tondaimandalam (*Tondai* is Tamil for Pallava). But it seems that during this period the Kanchi region was not under their effective control as they had been pushed north by mountainous tribes called Kalabhras.

In fact, from the end of the *Sangam* period to the mid-6th century CE Tamilnadu and Kerala were dominated by the Kalabhras. We do not know much about them, but it has been inferred from the scanty evidence that they were against Brahmanical institutions and favourably disposed towards Buddhism and Jainism, that they put an end to the rule of the Cheras, Cholas and Pandyas of the *Sangam* age, and that they were non-agricultural hill tribes who caused great havoc among settled agricultural population. The Kalabhra threat seems to have extended to the borders of Chalukyas kingdom which emerged in north Karnataka, for they too claim to have defeated them. This period is known as the 'Kalabhra Interregnum'.

9.4 THE RISE OF THE CHALUKYAS, PALLAVAS AND THE PANDYAS

From the mid-6th century CE the political scene in Deccan and south India was dominated by the activities of three powers: the Chalukyas of Badami, the Pallavas of Kanchi, and the Pandyas of Madurai.

9.4.1 The Chalukyas

The Chalukyas became the sovereign power with Pulakesin-I. He laid the foundations of his kingdom by making the hill near Badami in Bijapur district of Karnataka into a strong fortress in 543-44 CE and performed a horse sacrifice. His successors overthrew the Kadambas and annexed their kingdom gradually, and subjugated the Mauryas of Konkan (the coastal strip of Maharashtra). With the expeditions of Pulakesin-II the Chalukyas became the paramount power in Deccan as the Western Gangas and Alupas in the south and the Latas, Malavas and Gurjaras in the north offered their submission to him. The army of Pulakesin-II checked the forces of Harshavardhana on the banks of the Narmada.

Pulakesin-II also defeated the Vishnukundins of Andhra delta. But he was not satisfied demanding just offers of submission as the Krishna-Godavari delta with

almost one million acres of rich arable land was too valuable a possession. So about 621 CE he sent his younger brother Vishnuvardhana to consolidate the conquest and take over the area. In 631 CE Vishnuvardhana was allowed to form his own kingdom. Thus, began the line of the Chalukyas of Vengi or Eastern Chalukyas who remained in control of the area for more than 500 years.

9.4.2 The Pallavas

The rise of Pallavas began with Simhavishnu about the middle of the 6th century CE. He put an end to the Kalabhra Interregnum in Tondaimandalam (Kanchi region) and extended his kingdom southward up to the Kaveri delta. He was succeeded by Mahendravarman-I who annexed territories in the north up to river Krishna. The Pallava kings also secured submission from the neighbouring chieftains and kings, and thus reached the zone of influence of the Chalukyas of Badami, and of the Pandyas. Even the Pandyas had to accept their overlordship briefly. Thus, by the middle of the 7th century CE, the Pallavas had set up a powerful regional kingdom in south India. Their power began to weaken from the mid-8th century when the Chalukyas were being replaced by the Rashtrakutas in Deccan. By the early 10th century CE, the Pallava rule came to an end when Aparajata was defeated by Aditya Chola-I.

9.4.3 The Pandyas

The Pandyas came to light with king Kadungon towards the close of the 6th century CE when he suppressed the Kalabhras. The Pandyas ruled in the southernmost districts of Tamilnadu, with the Vaigai river basin as the heartland of the kingdom. They constantly tried to extend their sway over the Kaveri delta in north and Chera country (Kerala) in south-west.

9.4.4 Other Powers

The Gangas continued to rule in Gangavadi in south Karnataka. Besides, there were several other small kingdoms and chieftaincies in Deccan and south India at this time, such as the Nolambas, the Banas, the Silaharas, etc. Unlike northern India there are no continuous stretches of river valleys and plains here. The major river valleys such as the Raichur Doab (between the Tungabhadra and Krishna), the Krishna-Godavari delta, the lower Kaveri valley and the Vaigai valley are separated from each other by rugged mountainous territories. Moreover, there were vast expanses of forests that divided cultivated zones. All this encouraged political fragmentation and allowed small political units to survive in isolated pockets of habitation. The above-mentioned important river valleys could and did support greater kingdoms such as the Chalukyas of Badami (Raichur *Doab*), the Pallavas (Palar river valley), and so on. But it was a difficult task for any one of the regional kingdoms to extend its sway over the rest, much more difficult than in the case of northern India. This comes out very clearly in the following account of mutual conflicts of the Chalukyas, Pallavas and the Pandyas.

9.5 CONFLICTS BETWEEN DIFFERENT POWERS

The political history of this period is marked by frequent wars between the Chalukyas of Badami and Pallavas, and between Pandyas and the Pallavas. Hostilities began with the raid of Chalukya's Pulakesin-II who defeated

Mahendravarman and occupied the northern part of Pallava kingdom. In another campaign he vanquished the Banas (the 'feudatories' of the Pallavas in Rayalseema) and once again threatened Kanchi. But he was badly defeated in several battles by Narasimhavarman-I who had succeeded Mahendravarman.

Narasimhavarman then attacked the Chalukyas, captured Badami and probably killed Pulakesin-II. The situation was saved by the latter's son Vikramaditya-I. He drove out the Pallavas, formed an alliance with the Pandyas, and repeatedly raided Pallava territory. The reign of one of his successors, Vikramaditya-II, is especially marked in this connection, for he is said to have overrun and looted Kanchi three times.

Without going into the details of particular wars and battles, we may note that the Pallavas had to engage in battles with the Pandyas too. It is remarkable that in these conflicts it was always the Pallavas who were the target of attack. This was not just because they were situated between the Chalukyas and the Pandyas, but mainly because they were the most prosperous of all. It is significant that it was always the Chalukyas who attacked the Pallavas and that the Pallavas concerned themselves mainly with driving them back into their territory. The only exception was the raid of Narasimhavarman-I into Chalukyan kingdom and his occupation of its capital. But this was a retaliatory move and was made only once in the entire history of the conflict. Another time, Pallava Paramesvaravarman-I launched an expedition into the Chalukyan kingdom as a diversionary move. Paramesvaravarman wanted to get rid of the Chalukyan forces occupying his kingdom by diverting their attention.

The same is true of the Pandyas who fought repeatedly with the Pallavas for the control of the Kaveri delta. The *Sangam* literature as well as the account of Huien-Tsang suggests that the Vaigai river valley – the core of Pandyan kingdom – was relatively poor agriculturally. The Pandyas must have realised that if they wanted to be rich and powerful, they would have to control the rich Kaveri delta. They seemed to have fought the Pallavas with this purpose in mind, and by the early 9th century CE they eventually came to control this area.

9.5.1 The Role of Minor Kings

The lesser kings and chieftains took part in the conflict of regional kingdoms as subordinate allies of one or the other of these powers. Pulakesin-II had to subdue the Banas – allies of the Pallavas – before attacking Narasimhavarman-I. Similarly, Pallava general Udayachandra engaged in battles with Sabara king Udayana and Nishada chieftain Prithvivvyaghra who probably sided with the Chalukyas. These subordinate allies shared not only in the plunder but could add new areas to their realm as well.

When we look at the smaller principalities individually, we do not find them worthy of attention. That is because each small kingdom by itself was insignificant, a non-entity. But taken together, they, no doubt, represent a political force to reckon with in the affairs of the Deccan and south India. Equally striking is the inability of any king from the 4th to the 9th century CE to establish his hold over the Deccan and south India. For these six centuries political disunity was the norm despite the energetic efforts and ambitions of a number of kings. As already noted, the broken geography of southern India had a role to play here in political disunity as well as in the importance of lesser kings and chieftains.

9.5.2 Other Dimensions of Political Conflicts

An important off-shoot of the Pallava-Chalukya conflict was the emergence of the kingdom of Chalukyas of Lata or south Gujarat. As a result of Narasimhavarman's occupation of Badami and the death of Pulakesin-II there was terrible confusion and political disorder in the Chalukyan kingdom. In the task of restoring unity to it, suppressing the hostile forces, and of driving out the Chalukyas, Vikramaditya-I had been greatly helped by his younger brother Jayasimhavarman. In return, Vikramaditya rewarded his brother by giving away south Gujarat to him.

9.5.3 Relations with other Countries

A noteworthy feature of south Indian politics at this time was an active interest in the political affairs of Sri Lanka. In the battles with the Chalukyas we hear that Narasimhavarman-I had a Lankan prince Maravarma on his side. Maravarma had been driven into exile and had sought refuge at the Pallavan court. After his return from Badami Narasimhavarman helped Maravarma to gain the throne at Anuradhapura by sending two naval expeditions. Later, when he had again been dispossessed of his kingdom it was to the Pallava king that Maravarma looked for help. The Pandyans, too, showed keen interest in Sri Lanka, the wealth of which lured them into launching predatory raids into this area.

The Pallavas seem to have taken interest in and somehow influenced the politics of Southeast Asia. It is possible that Nandivarman-II Pallavamalla came from Southeast Asia to succeed to the Pallava throne in mid-8th century. We also hear of the powerful fleet of Nandivarman-III and a Tamil record in Thailand mentioning a Vishnu temple and a tank. A more direct interference in South Asia, however, came only with the Cholas who put an end to Pallava dominance in south India.

9.5.4 Kerala

Kerala seems to have continued under the rule of the Perumals in this period, although the details of the political history of the period are lacking. A famous ruler in this line was Cheraman Perumal (late 8th/early 9th century CE). He seems to have pursued his religion and religious policy in some extraordinary manner, so that the Jains, Christians, Shaivites and Muslims not just praise him as a patron, but actually claimed him as a practitioner of their own religion. The prosperity of Malabar constantly attracted invaders from outside. Not only the Pandyas claimed to have vanquished Kerala; the same claim was also made by Narasimhavarman, a number of Chalukyan kings and later, by the Rashtrakutas.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) Which of the following statements are right (✓) or wrong (x).
 - a) The political control of the Deccan continued to remain under one dynasty after the decline of the Satavahanas. ()
 - b) The Vakatakas seem to have been a peace-loving people. ()
 - c) Tamilnadu and Kerala were dominated by Kalabhras after the decline of *Sangam* period. ()

- d) In the conflicts in south India the Pallavas were the target of attack. ()
- e) The prosperity of Malabar did not attract invaders. ()
- 2) What do you know about the Chalukyas, Pallavas and Pandyas?
-
-
-
-
-
- 3) Discuss the nature of conflicts amongst the powers of south India. What role did the minor kings play in it?
-
-
-
-
-

9.6 POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

Let us briefly discuss the political organization of these kingdoms.

9.6.1 The King and the Higher Stratum of Administration

We shall now proceed to discuss the patterns of administration that prevailed in these kingdoms. In theory the king was the source of all authority. He assumed high sounding titles such as *maharaja*, *bhattaraka*, *dharmamaharajadhiraja*, etc. In the beginning, kingship was governed by the Vedic ideal. We find kings proclaiming in their inscriptions that they performed horse sacrifices (*ashvamedha*) and other Vedic sacrifices such as *vajapeya*, *rajasuya*, etc. During this period these sacrifices did not have the social significance they had in the Later Vedic period. But they had a special political meaning as they served to underline the independence of a particular king and justified his right to rule. Thus, Pulakesin-I – the founder of the Chalukya kingdom – performed a horse sacrifice to mark the beginning of his dynastic rule. The same was done by many other kings. Gradually, however, as the religious milieu changed, the ideal of kingship changed too and the practice of performing royal Vedic sacrifices fell into disuse.

The king was helped by his ministers at the court. Members of the royal family including the crown prince (*yuvaraja*) took an important part in running the government at higher levels. Then, there were a number of officials of various ranks who discharged various administrative duties in the name of the King. An important part of their job was to collect taxes. There was a principal tax on land amounting to one-sixth or more of the produce, in addition to several miscellaneous taxes such as those on weavers, draught cattle, marriage parties

and so on. Besides collecting taxes, the state officials maintained law and order and adjudicated cases of crime and civil disputes that came before them.

9.6.2 Administrative Units

The kingdom was divided into a hierarchy of administrative units. In Deccan these units were called *vishaya*, *ahara*, *rashtra*, etc. From the 8th century CE there developed a trend in Deccan of dividing kingdoms into a hierarchy of the multiples of 10 villages. Less often, a district consisted of 12 villages. In the Pallava kingdom the *nadu* emerged as the main, lasting unit of administration.

The kings of this period realised the importance of agriculture, the revenue from which was the main basis of their wealth and strength. It is significant that *nadu* – the basic political unit in Pallava (and later in Chola) times – also meant arable land in contrast to *Kadu* which meant non-cultivable waste land. Therefore, the state made all attempts to encourage the extension of agriculture. King Mayurasarman of Kadamba dynasty is said to have brought vast tracts of virgin land to the plough by inviting brahmanas from afar. For probably the same purpose a Pallava King gave away a thousand ploughs. Moreover, as agriculture depended a great deal on irrigation in south India, the Pallavas took great interest in the provision and maintenance of canals, tanks, lakes and large wells.

9.6.3 Local Associations

A characteristic feature of south Indian polity, especially Pallava, was the importance of local corporate units in most important aspects of the lives of people. There were innumerable local groups and associations based on caste, craft, profession or religious persuasion. Thus, there were associations of handicraftsmen like the weavers, oil pressers etc.; of merchants like the *Nanadesis*, the *Manigramam* and the *Five Hundred of Ayyavole* (Ayyavole is the Tamil name of Aihole); of students; of ascetics; of temple priests, etc. In addition, there were three important territorial assemblies:

- *Ur*,
- *Sabha*, and
- *Nagaram*.

Ur was a non-brahmanical village assembly. *Sabha* was a village assembly consisting only of brahmanas, and *nagaram* was an assembly where mercantile interests predominated (*nagaram* had some agricultural interests too). The members of an assembly used to meet annually while the day-to-day tasks were looked after by a smaller executive body. Each group functioned autonomously in accordance with its own constitution based on custom and usage and took care of the problems of its members at the local level. In matters affecting people of more than one assembly or association, decision was taken by mutual deliberation.

Local administration through corporate units greatly lightened the burden of the government. It not only gave a chance to people to air their grievances and problems, but also fixed responsibility on the people themselves for redressing the grievances and solving problems. This strengthened the basis of state by minimizing opposition to it as the people could not hold the government responsible for these matters.

That is why we do not find Pallava kings trying to encroach upon the functioning of local autonomous corporate groups. But they did seek to strengthen their own base by bringing in brahmanas and creating privileged brahmana settlements by making land-grants to brahmanas, either directly (called *brahmadeya*) or in the name of a temple (called *devadana*). These brahmana settlements were created all over the core areas of the Pallava kingdom. The “core areas” were the most prosperous areas based on irrigated rice cultivation, on the prosperity of which the strength of the Pallavas depended. As we have seen, the village assembly of brahmanas was called *sabha* or *mahasabha*. During the late Pallava period the *sabha* developed the system of governance through committees. This is known as the committee or *variya*m system. It became a hallmark of self-government in the brahmana settlements in south India. The *sabha* managed several tasks mostly through these committees – maintenance of tanks and roads, management of charitable donations and of temple affairs, and regulation of irrigation rights.

In Deccan, the role of local associations and assemblies was less conspicuous. In place of corporate institutions, it was the local notables called *mahajanas* who took part in local administration in villages and towns in Chalukyan times. In villages the *mahajanas* had a leader called *gavunda* (headman). These notables did not enjoy the same kind of autonomy as was the case with south Indian assemblies but were closely supervised by state officials.

Brahmana settlements, however, were to be found all over Deccan as well as in south India. We do not know precisely how the brahmanas in Deccan managed their collective affairs. But since they were all a creation of kings and chiefs they must have looked after the interests of the government in the locality.

9.7 RELATIONS BETWEEN DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF RULERS

The relation between big kings and their lesser allies is a matter of controversy. Broadly, there are two views about the relations between powerful kings, and minor kings and chieftains. First, it is said that smaller kings and chieftains regarded a big king, especially the Pallavas, as their overlord on religious grounds. The Pallava kings used to participate in elaborate religious ceremonies which gave them a high ritual status. It was this high ritual status that was respected by lesser kings and chiefs. This theory is not supported by historical evidence. It cannot explain how these minor kings could shift their respect from the Pallavas to Chalukyas, or why they should stop respecting any high ritual status king in volatile political situations and declare their independence, or why they should again be made to respect the ritual status by force.

The alternative view regards these smaller kings and chieftains as the ‘feudatories’ of major powers. But ‘feudatory’ is a technical term which stands for a special kind of relationship that existed in medieval Western Europe. We are not sure whether the same relation was there between the Pallavas or Chalukyas and lesser kings and chiefs. That is why, we have preferred a neutral term “subordinate ally” to describe the relation of minor political powers with the major ones.

- 1) Discuss the role of local associations in administration.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

- 2) Highlight the relations between different categories of rulers.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

9.8 SUMMARY

In this Unit, you have learnt about the political situation in Deccan and south India upto the mid-6th century CE. After this period, we find that the Chalukyas, Pallavas and Pandyas were the major political powers in the region. There were certain minor powers also, but their role was not very significant. The major powers were constantly at conflict with each other and the minor powers did side with one or other major power during these conflicts.

As far as the political organization is concerned, the king remained the central figure of administration and was helped by other officials. A significant feature was the role of local associations in the day-to-day administrative work.

9.9 KEY WORDS

Ashvamedha: horse sacrifice.

Brahmadeya: land-grant to brahmanas.

Devadana: land-grant to temple.

Nagaram: assembly where mercantile interests predominated.

Sabha: a village assembly which consisted of only brahmanas.

Ur: non-Brahmanical village assembly.

Yuvraja: crown prince.

9.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) a) $\times$ b) $\checkmark$ c) $\checkmark$ d) $\checkmark$ e) $\times$
- 2) Base your answer on Section 9.4.
- 3) Base your answer on Section 9.5 and its Sub-sections.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) Base your answer on Sub-section 9.6.3.
- 2) Base your answer on Section 9.7.

9.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

Gupta, P.L. *Imperial Guptas*. Varanasi.

Nilakantha Sastry, K.A. (1974). *A History of South India*. New Delhi: Oxford.

Thapar, Romila (1983). *History of India*. Volume I. Pelican.