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State and government in early India

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Abstract

In the Early Vedic period (c. 1500-700 B.C.) that of the *Rg-Veda Samhitā*, the Vedic Aryans, then in occupation of the north-eastern fringe of the Iranian plateau and the land of the five rivers immediately to its east, were divided into a number of tribes (*Janas*). The kings were called after their tribes as in the formula of the priests' announcement of the royal sacrificer to the assembled multitude at the ceremony of royal consecration. Afterwards in the period of the *Yajus Samhitās* and the Brāhmanas there emerged, at least among the more advanced peoples, a new type of polity, based on the territorial state. In two *Yajur Veda* texts the king is stated to be the ruler of the *vis*. (people) as well as of the *rāṣṭra* (kingdom or royal sway).

Keywords: Tribes, vedic, king, royal

Introduction

The three technical terms applied to the king's authority were *rājya* (kingdom or ruling power), *rastra* and above all, *kṣatra* (temporal power) as opposed to *brahma* (spiritual power). Other texts prescribe the performance of sacrifices whose aim was the submission of the people (*vis*.) to their ruler, while forbidding ceremonies that could have the contrary result. Reference is made in a few *Atharva Veda* texts to the king's quasi-divinity. But no claim is made for his divine descent, much less for his divinity. On the contrary, the king's descent from Manu (father of the human race according to Vedic cosmogonic ideas) is pointedly mentioned in a prayer on his behalf. The development of the conception of the king's divinity may be traced in the *Yajur Samhitās* and the Brāhmanas, especially in connection with their description of the three great ceremonies of royal and imperial consecration, the *Asvamedha*, the *Vajapeya* and the *Rajasūya*. According to these texts, the king not only shares the world of the gods but also enjoys fellowship or sonship or even identity with Prajapati, the highest deity of the later Vedic pantheon. This conception, nevertheless, was subject to three important limitations. First, the ruler's affinity with the gods is, according to the views of the authors, a personal distinction acquired by him through his performance of sacrifices. Secondly, the human descent of the king is clearly mentioned in the formula of the king's proclamation to the multitude at the *Rajasūya*. Thirdly the doctrine of sacrifice in the *Yajus Samhitās* and the Brāhmanas meant that it was a way of entering into the godhead and even of controlling the gods. The gods themselves it was held, owed their position to the omnipotent sacrificer. From this it followed that the king's divinity, such as it was, was not peculiar to himself but was shared by him with others equally entitled to the performance of the great sacrifices. A unique text of the *Satapatha Brahmana*, however, explains the riddle of "one ruling the many" by the argument that he, the Rajanya, is most manifestly of Prajapati'. Here the king's authority is evidently based upon his divinity without reference to the sacrifice.

The most remarkable feature of the early Vedic polity was the institution of popular assemblies, of which two, namely, the *Sabha* and the *Samiti* deserve special mention. Amid the obscurity of the texts and their inconclusive interpretations by scholars, we may draw the following general conclusions about the constitution and functions of these bodies: the *Samiti* was the Vedic tribal or folk assembly *par excellence*, which at least occasionally exercised the right of electing the king, while the *Sabha* was, from the outset, a more limited body with judicial functions. Both the *Samiti* and the *Sabha* enjoyed the right of debate-a privilege perhaps unknown to the popular assemblies of other ancient peoples. In the later Vedic period, the *Samiti* disappeared as a popular assembly while the *Sabha* became a narrow body corresponding to the king's privy council and court.

The view that the Vedic kingship was a constitutional monarchy or a public trust, is not warranted by facts. The Vedic king's authority, however, was subject to some important limitations.

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The old Vedic concept of an omnipotent divine law (*vrata* or *dhaman*) and custom (*dharma* or *dharman*) must have operated as a moral though not as a constitutional, check on the king's authority. Moreover, the princes and nobles and the officials called *Sutas* and *Gramanis* who are styled king-makers in two *satapatha Brahmana* texts, together with the popular assemblies must have collectively exercised a large, although undefined measure of influence over the king's administration. As regards the influence of the Brāhmanas, it is true that a fundamental principle of the Vedic polity is the separation of the temporal power (*ksatra*) from the spiritual power (*brahma*). Nevertheless it is probably correct to state that while the Vedic relationship of *brahma* to *ksatra* anticipated by many centuries the relation between the Church and the State in Europe, the Brahmanical order lacking the strength of organization of the Roman Catholic Church and also its will to power, failed to establish what its counterpart did at some time or other i.e., an effective control over the temporal power. In the office of the *Purohita* or the king's domestic chaplain, the Brāhmanas would seem to have found a pillar of their strength, for he was regarded from the first as the necessary adjunct of the king, and in fact was regarded as the protector of the realm'. From some later Vedic texts, however, we learn that the *Purohita* could be in danger of losing his position owing to the tyranny or caprice of his patron. We may reasonably infer that such influence as was exercised by the *Purohita* over the king depended more upon his personality than upon the established law and usage.

Pre-Mauryan and Mauryan Periods (c. 700-185 B.C.)

At the time of the rise of Buddhism a chain of such states extended over the Indo-Gangā plain and the Malwa tableland. These states, which had a more or less fixed territory and capital, were commemorated in some earlier Buddhist and Jaina canonical texts in a conventional list of sixteen great political organizations (*mahajanapadas*). The states were of two principal types—monarchical and republican. Shortly after the rise of Buddhism, the chief monarchies conquered the smaller kingdoms and republics, and were eventually themselves absorbed in the empire of the *nandas*, the predecessors of the Imperial Mauryas.

The pre-Mauryan period marked the first great epoch of organized state administration in Indian history. We may trace this advance in the branches of political, economic and military organization of the state. It will suffice to describe very briefly the first of these branches. One important aspect of state policy was the promotion of public security and welfare. According to the Dharma Sūtras and the *Arthashastra*, it is the duty of the king to ensure the security and welfare of the subjects. To begin with, he is charged with the distinctive duty (*dharma*) of protecting all creatures. Not only does the state law contain clauses for the security of the person and property of the subjects, but the king is also made personally responsible for the restoration of the stolen property or its value to the owner. In the Dharma Sūtras the king is the guardian of minors, infants and persons unfit to transact legal business, as well as the custodian of lost and ownerless property. As regards the policy of public welfare the king in the Dharma Sūtras is required to provide food, shelter and clothing for the needy, especially at his guest-house at the capital.

Kautilya lays down a comprehensive programme of state relief against providential calamities which are classified

under eight heads, namely, fire, flood, disease and famine, as well as pests like rats, ferocious animals and snakes and even the visitations of demons. A strikingly original feature of the state administration in Kautilya's work is its policy of promotion of public health. This involves a ban on unwholesome food and drink and a strict control over physicians in the interest of patients as well as state provision for medical treatment of the afflicted people at the outbreak of diseases and epidemics. Another notable characteristic of administration is illustrated by the measures for protecting the public against the dishonest dealings of artisans and traders. In the Dharma Sūtras not only are certain class of persons, including the poor and the infirm, exempted from taxation, but some select categories are also entitled to state relief.

The above evidence is partly corroborated and partly negated by the stories in the Jatakas, which give us a truer picture of contemporary life. We have stories of kings who sought in accordance with the ideas and superstitions of the time to relieve their subjects from the calamities of drought and famine. We are also told how good kings used to construct alms-houses (*danasalas*, literally 'halls of charity') at their capitals for the benefit of the public. A few stories tell us how kings strove to promote the welfare of their subjects on canonical lines. On the other hand there are a large number of stories indicating the insecurity of life and property of the subjects under the rule of capricious and tyrannical kings.

An important branch of state administration noticed for the first time in this period relates to the security and progress of the state. In the first place, Kautilya mentions measures for securing the king's personal safety, particularly, against the danger of disaffection of princes, for launching mass propaganda through the agency of spies in order to guard against the enemy's intrigues and to seduce the enemy's subjects and for suppressing the enemies of the state. Secondly, he describes measures for planned colonization of waste lands; for acquiring control over military and political groups called *sanghas*; and those for attainment of the fundamental objective of progress (*vrddhi*) in the branch of inter-state relations.

The most dominant aspect of society and state in the Dharma Sūtras is the organization of both on the orthodox Brahmanical pattern. In these works, the Brāhmanas are given a number of immunities and privileges including exemption from corporal punishment and immunity from taxation, while the *sūdras* are subjected to grievous disabilities. The impact of the Brahmanical pattern state, as it may be called is strongly felt in Kautilya's account of state administration. A strong reaction against the Brahmanical social pattern is noticeable in the texts of the early Jaina and Buddhist literature. But we have only passing and scattered references to the influences of this reaction in the branches of law and polity.

We now turn to the second type of polity marking the epoch of the rise of Buddhism. In the records of these and later times titles *sangha* and *gana* are often applied in a general sense to republican constitutions. In reality, these terms constitute a genus including the species of religious, economic, military and political units. We can distinguish two periods of the rise and fall of republics in the history of the pre-Mauryan age. Sometime before the rise of Jainism and Buddhism a number of republics, of which the Licchavis and the Mallas were the most important, came

into prominence along the middle and upper basin of the Ganga. But in a short time they were absorbed in the larger kingdoms like Magadha and Kosala. Further the land of the five rivers was split up after the decline of the Achaemenid power in that area into a number of republics and monarchies, which flourished till they were conquered by Alexander of Macedon. As regards the republics of the first period, we may conclude from a careful study of the relevant texts of the early Buddhist literature that they were ruled by clans of the Ksatriya caste who formed an aristocracy of birth. Their constitution consisted of a sovereign popular assembly and an elected chief (*Senāpati*) or group of chiefs (*Pramokkhas* or *Mukhyas*). From the evidence of the most authentic Buddhist canonical texts, the Sākyas of Kapilavastu appear to have possessed a hereditary ruler and an assembly of the ruling Ksatriya caste. This was evidently a mixed constitution of monarchical and aristocratic elements.

In the period immediately preceding the rise of the Mauryas, we can trace two parallel movements in the political history of India: In the Gangā basin and the Malwa tableland the large states were absorbed into the dominion of the Nandas, which paved the way for the imperial dominion of the Mauryas. On the other hand, the Indus valley, which fell for a time under the yoke of the Achaemenids of Irān, was split up into a number of independent states, monarchical as well as republican. These flourished till they were overthrown by Alexander.

Our knowledge of the states and governments of the Indus valley on the eve of Alexander's invasion is derived from the first-hand observations of the officers (called Companions) of the great conqueror, which have been preserved in the works of later classical writers. The monarchies were of two types, the normal type ruled by a king, and the unusual type (represented by the solitary example of Patalene in the Sindhu delta) which was ruled by two hereditary kings of different houses holding supreme command in war and a council of elders possessing supreme power. The republics were also of two types, the common type of aristocracies and democracies (peculiar to the Abastinoi). The constitution of the republics comprised a sovereign assembly which had the right of making war and peace and negotiating with foreign powers, a supreme magistrate and probably also a council of advisers or elders. To judge from the testimony even of the hostile Greeks, some of the Indus valley states achieved a high degree of equity and justice in their administration. Such were the kingdoms of the Sophytes in the Salt Range of the Punjab and of the Mousikanos in the lower Indus valley. These states seem likewise to have under taken new experiments in the branch of general administration. In the kingdom of the Sophytes and the republic of the Abastinoi (Ambasthas) the Government controlled the upbringing of children so as to weed out the weak and the infirm. A unique feature of the kingdom of the Mousikanos was the absence of slaves.

The liberation of the Indus valley from the Macedonian yoke by Candragupta Maurya, and the completion of political unity of the country under his successors, led to the creation of the first all India empire with frontiers reaching out almost to its natural boundaries in the east and south and extending beyond the north-west. By the time of Asoka the empire was divided into four provinces with headquarters at Taksasilā, Ujjayini, Tosali and Suvarnagiri in North-western, Western, Eastern and Southern India respectively.

The home province was under the direct administration of the emperor. The Mauryas attempted to integrate the regions and peoples of their far-flung empire by such measures the creation of a highly centralized administration under the rule of the emperor and his officials, the appointment of Mauryan princes as viceroys at the head of the provincial administration, the creation of a kind of Koine (lingua franca), the so-called 'Monumental Prākrt' as the official language of their empire, as well as the adoption of Brāhmi as its official script for the most part, and finally the wise policy of granting autonomy to many dependent peoples. The Mauryas continued the old policy of promotion of public safety and welfare. From the Girnār rock inscription of Rudradāman, the Saka ruler of Western India in the 2nd century A.D., we learn that a big irrigation lake was constructed in that remote region of the Mauryan empires by the provincial governor under Candragupta Maurya and that it was repaired by the local authority in the reign of Asoka. The welfare measures of Asoka after his conversion to Buddhism mark an epoch not only in the history of ancient India, but also of ancient world. These comprised, first, planting of trees along the roads, digging of wells, and making arrangements for the treatment of men and beasts—this is the earliest reference to state hospitals; secondly, inculcation of virtuous living among the people in accordance with the emperor's Law of Piety; thirdly, similar inculcation of a kind of religious syncretism based on appreciation of the common ethical values of all popular faiths of the time; and fourthly, the protection of animal life. Great care was taken for the maintenance of routes and communications. The rural officials (*Agronomoi*) of Candragupta Maurya's administration were required, according to Megasthenes, to mark the roads by pillars at regular distances of 10 *stadia*. A 'royal road' connected Puṣkalāvatī beyond the Sindhu river with Pātaliputra, the imperial capital. It would thus seem that the Indians under Mauryan rule ranked among the great road building nations of the world.

Pre-Gupta and Gupta Periods (c. 185 B.C.-A.D. 700)

The break up of the Mauryan empire was followed by the rise of regional powers, *viz.*, the Sungas in the Gangā basin, the Sātavāhanas in Western India, and for a time, the Cetas of the eastern seaboard. To this period we may assign the beginning of the institution of powerful feudatories which was destined to assume dangerous proportions from the late Gupta period onwards. The Sunga feudatories occupied a position little short of independence, since they struck coins in their own names and sometimes assumed even royal titles. The great feudatories of the Sātavāhanas ruled as kings over large territories, while others were known by the distinctive titles of *Mahārathis* and *Mahābhajas*. The pre-Gupta age was likewise a period of barbarian invasions and settlements. During this period, many foreign dynasties—Greek, Saka, and Parthian—ruled over the Indus Valley; a branch of the Sakas ruled Western India, and the Great Kusanas founded an empire in Northern and Western India. These rulers introduced new and administrative titles and principles of state administration after foreign models. What distinguished the Saka rulers of Western India from other foreign dynasties of this period was the completeness with which they identified themselves with their Indian subjects. They substituted the indigenous Brāhmi for the foreign Kharosthi in their coin-legends and adopted a largely

Sanskritized Prakṛt in place of the old undiluted Prakṛt for their official records. Usavadāta, son-in-law of Nahapāna (the greatest ruler of the first satrapy), distributed his charities impartially among the Brāhmana laity and the Buddhist monks, thus assuming the role of the Indian princely patron of learning and piety at its best. Rudradāman, the greatest ruler of the second satrapy, chose to be remembered in his famous Girnār inscription as a model king after Indian standards.

The Guptas founded the first great indigenous empire after the period of barbarian invasions and settlements in Northern and Western India following the collapse of the Imperial Mauryas. They not only reunited the most fertile and prosperous regions under a single rule, but also completed their emancipation from foreign yoke. According to the contemporary Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Fa-hien, the people in the Gupta dominions enjoyed the blessings of peace and prosperity. Fa-hien begins his account of the 'Middle Kingdom' (Chinese designation of Madhyadeśa comprising the area of the Gupta empire) with the observation that capital punishment was unknown and crimes were punished with fines. He also notes that the revenues of the Gupta empire were mainly derived from the king's share of the agricultural produce. The result of this beneficent administration of the Guptas was evident in the condition of the people. Speaking of the people of the 'Middle Kingdom', Fa-hien states that they were 'numerous and happy'. The Guptas also patronized learning by the construction of more buildings (with endowments for their maintenance) at the great Buddhist monastic university of Nālanda, while their care for public works was shown by their restoration of the famous artificial lake at Girnār during the reign of Skandagupta. In short, the administration in ancient India was at its best under the Guptas.

The downfall of the Gupta empire was partly due to the invasions of the barbarian Hūnas under Toramāna and his son and successor Mihirakula, and partly, to the assertion of independence by its vassal chiefs. The ascendancy of the feudatories in the of ancient Indian states dates from the later Gupta period. In contrast to the feudal system of medieval Europe, however king was not regarded as the sole owner of the soil and the practice of sub-infeudation did not assume great proportions.

The period of decline and fall of the Gupta empires was marked by the rise of new powers in Northern India, such as the Hūna Toramāna and his son and successor Mihirakula, Yasodharman of Mālava, Isānavarman of the Maukhari dynasty of the modern Uttar Pradesh and Saśānka of Bengal. But none of them succeeded in building up a lasting empire. In the first half of the 7th century, king Harsavardhana (c.A.D. 606-47) of the house of Thāneśvar and Kannauj emerged as the most powerful ruler in Northern India. The contemporary Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Hiuen Tsang gives high praise to Harsa for his love of justice, his unremitting industry in the discharge of his duties, and his piety and popularity. The king, we are told, undertook incessant tours for the inspection of his dominion, built rest-houses for travellers, and erected *stūpas* and monasteries throughout his kingdom. He distributed all his accumulated treasures among his subjects at the great quinquennial assemblies at Prayāga. We also owe to this illustrious pilgrim a general account of the system of Indian administration at the time of his visit (A.D. 629-45). The ruling class of Ksatriyas, we read, was guided by the

standards of benevolence and mercy, taxation was light, forced labour was used sparingly, and families were not required to be registered. On the other hand, the penal law was marked by a certain degree of harshness in strong contrast to exceptional mildness under the Imperial Guptas.

Post-Gupta Period (c. A.D. 700-1200)

In the interval between the death of Harsa and the Muslim conquest, the stage of North Indian history was dominated by a few ruling houses—the Imperial Pratihāras of Kannauj and their successors the Gāhadavālas of Kannauj, the Kalacuris of Cedi, the Candellas of Jejakabhukti, the Paramāras of Malava, the Caulukyās of Gujarat and the Cahamanas of Sakambhari and Ajmer. To them we owe the institution of the clan-monarchies which afterwards became the distinctive feature of the polity of the states of Rājputānā. In this type of polity, the king reserved for himself the central part of his kingdom and distributed the rest among other clan-chiefs. In other respects the Rājput dynasties followed the Gupta pattern of Government. The rulers assumed the usual imperial titles to which a number of other titles—*Asvapati*, *Gajapati*, *Narapati* and *Rājatrayādhipati* (lord of horses, elephants, men and three grades of kings) —were added by the Kalacuris and the Gāhadavālas. The dominions directly administered by the ruler were split into provinces and their subdivisions; these were administered by appropriate state officers. The villages were administered by traditional headmen. The efficiency of the administration of the Pratihāras is proved by the testimony of an Arab writer, who states that no part of India was more safe from robbers than the Pratihāra dominion. The downfall of the Rājput dynasties was brought about chiefly by the devastating invasions of Sultan Mahmūd of Ghaznī in the first quarter of the 11th century and those of Shihābu'd-dīn Muhammad Ghuri and his able lieutenant Qutbu'd-dīn Aibak in the last decade of the 12th and the early years of the 13th centuries. These invasions led to the establishment of the first Muslim empire of Northern India under the Turkish Sultāns of Delhi.

In Eastern India the leading powers of this period were the dynasties of the Pālas and their successors, the Senas. The Pala dynasty had a unique beginning as its founder was chosen by the leading people for the purpose of ending anarchy. This attempt was barren of constitutional results, probably because of the absence of a permanent and regularly constituted council of ministers or similar bodies at the time. In fact, the Pāla administration followed the current pattern of personal rule by a monarch supported by a bureaucracy. A great blow was struck at the power of the Palas by the successful rising of the Kaivarta chief Divya in North Bengal against the oppressive ruler Mahīpāla I. The final downfall of the dynasty was due to the rise of powerful feudatory families headed by the Senas. The Senas belonged to a family of Brahmanas who had adopted the occupations of Ksatriyas; they came from the region of Karnataka in the South. The Sena capital in West Bengal (Nadia) was captured and territory in North Bengal was occupied by Muhammad Bakhtyar, an able adventurer in the service of Aibak.

In the Deccan the leading powers of the post-Gupta period were the Rastrakutas of Manyakheta and their successors the Calukyās of Kalyana. Able and ambitious rulers of these dynasties, like Indra III of the former and Vikramaditya VI of the latter, took a leading part in the struggle for

ascendancy among the powers of North and South India. Yet the great feudatories of these dynasties enjoyed a position of semi-independence. They waged war on behalf of the paramount power, assigned taxes and alienated lands on their own authority. The feudatories had often sub-feudatories holding seigniories (*manneyas*) under them, these last being sometimes in possession of the same family for several generations. The feudatories and even the holders of *manneyas* had sufficient authority to assign lands freely. The bilingual inscriptions of these dynasties in Sanskrit and Kannada testify to their attempt to recognize Kannada as official language while maintaining the age-old position of Sanskrit as the common language of sacred and secular literature throughout India.

During the post-Gupta period the paramount position in South India was held by the Pandyas and the Colas. The strength of their political and military organization is proved by the extensive conquests of their greatest rulers like Rajaraja I and his famous son Rajendra I. They made themselves masters not only of the whole of South India and the territories immediately to its north along the eastern and western seaboards but also of the Sailendra empires comprising the Malaya Peninsula and Sumatra. The Pandyas and the Colas issued bilingual inscriptions in Sanskrit and Tamil on a wider scale than the contemporary Deccan powers. Thus they sought to reconcile the claims of the regional language with those of the common literary language of the country.

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