

Political History of Early Medieval India

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Abstract: This article attempts to analyze how the political history of the Indian state by the understanding of various processes of state formation in early medieval India. To further inform our perception, I will discuss the nuances of regional socio-political changes and establish them in the bigger context of their trans-regional settings. This research will comprehend the various issues that led to a non-linear wave in the polity of ancient India.

“History is the long struggle of man, by exercise of his reason, to understand his environment and to act upon it. But the modern period has broadened the struggle in a revolutionary way. Man now seeks to understand, and act on, not only his environment, but himself; and this has added, so to speak, a new dimension to reason and a new dimension to history.” — Edward Hallett Carr¹

The proliferation of the state from 200 BCE to 600 AD was rather a complicated process unlike the generalization made in recent decades of the Dark Age versus prosperity. During the 1970s, some disquiet was observed with the historiography of Ancient India. It was realized that economic developments could be influenced by factors other than economic. Interpretations based solely on scientific and economic factors had to accommodate other causes like – social stratification, culture, public sphere, and the distribution and monopolization of resources were observed as important as their production and availability. B. P. Sahu argues that *“This perspective of early India is just not about the political; it derives from, informs as well as encompasses the social, economic, and cultural domains too.”*²

A shift can be in perspectives on early India can be seen in the writings of Romila Thapar, B.D. Chattopadhyaya, and, Hermann Kulke. Their research has immensely focused on political processes and traces the structure of polities across historical and cultural regions, and is divided in time. While Thapar pays attention to the early historical phase, Chattopadhyaya establishes himself through his writings on the early medieval centuries, and Kulke focused on the early medieval and medieval times. Despite their wide-ranging interests, it is fascinating to observe

¹ Carr. E. H. (1961) What is History?

² Sahu (2012) Recent Perspectives of the State and Debates in Early Indian History



that their in-depth studies of the state have to provide and inspires an interconnected alternative vision of early Indian history.³ According to B. D. Chattopadhyaya, the so-called instability leading to a dark age was nothing but a shift from the norm towards a centralized state. Hence, it wasn't a dark age but rather a phase of the proliferation of the state.⁴

The role of feudalism was immense given the feudal polity led to political fragmentation causing a dismemberment of the centralized state. The disappearance of the metropolitan Mauryan State did not create a political or economic crisis either in areas where state polity had been in existence before or in areas of pre-state polity incorporated within the Mauryan Empire. The local areas of the pre-state societies were forming new kingdoms – this had nothing to do with the decentralization of already existing empires like Mauryans.

The territorial spread of the state-society required cutting through the tangle of disparate dharmas through the territorial spread of the Brahmanas and the institutions representing uniform norms by their physical presence, their style of functioning, and their control over what could be projected as 'transcendental' norm.

The process of legitimization cannot be viewed simply in terms of a newly emerged polity seeking validation through a possible relation with respectable Kshatriya ancestry or by undermining its local roots; the unvarying justification of temporal authority of ideological apparatuses through which temporal power was reaching out to its temporal domain.⁵

From the perspective of interdependence between temporal power and sacred authority, it becomes understandable that assignments such as brahmadayas and devadamas were not an administrative but a socio-religious necessity for the temporal and the sacred order - gathered a pattern of dominance on the areas of the preserve, it would not be compatible with the argument to generalize either that temporal power, in early medieval India was a tool in the hands of the Brahmanas and the temple administrators, or that of massive support to the representatives of the sacred domain meant a packaging of temporal power, an assumption within which Chattopadhyaya pre-supposes that temporal power sprung from a single source.⁶

The territorial composition of the Mauryan Empire during Ashoka's period can be characterized as a combination of quite a few nooks such as Pataliputra, Ujjayini, Takshila, and other forested areas, which were home to the atavikas. In such flexible situations – this territorial composition

³ Thapar, (1999, 2002) ; Chattopadhyaya, (1985) ; Kulke, (1982).

⁴ Chattopadhyaya, 'Political Processes and the Structure of the State in Early Medieval India'

⁵ Chattopadhyaya, B. D. (1985). Political Processes and Structure of Polity in Early Medieval India: Problems of Perspective.

⁶ Ibid.



remained static throughout the Mauryan Empire cannot be assumed as static or for that matter stable.⁷

The political process in the making of the state has been in terms of parallels with contemporary social, economic, and religious processes by Chattopadhyaya. The emergence of the genealogy has been taken as a shift from 'yajna to vamsa', indicating a change like a kingship, but in the totality of its geographical distribution, genealogical evidence has a more significant implication indicating proliferation of the actual ruling lineages defining the domain of political power.⁸

B. D. Chattopadhyaya further argues that the use of the term, 'State Formation', primary, secondary, tertiary would be highly inappropriate and would obscure the distinction with areas that were indeed experiencing a passage from pre-state to state-society on a significant scale.

The challenging distribution of patterns of ruling lineages does not necessarily correspond to the static territorial limits. Therefore, he calls for a study of polity to analyze the formation of lineages and to trace the pattern of the network they represent, territorially and inter-lineage groupings, at different levels of the hierarchy of the political power.

While Chattopadhyaya discusses the need for a reconstruction into the study of these dynasties, we also have to understand through the limited information provided about the smaller kingdoms who in past was seen as a fragmentation of the Mauryan Empire after their decline but was rather non-linear and overlapping.

According to Upinder Singh, the political makeup of this period was elaborate and planned with the officials connected specifically with the royal establishment included the mahapratihara and the khadyatapakita. The upper most ranks of the administrative structure consisted of the amatyas, ayuktakas, and sachivas, who were in charge of various departments. There was also system of espionage which included spies known as dutakas.⁹

Singh further points the mention of the adhikarana of the vinayashitisthapaka of Tirabhukti in the Vaishali seal. The term vinayashitisthapaka has been translated as 'one who maintains moral and social discipline', but the actual role of this officer is unclear.¹⁰ The Vakataka inscriptions offer relatively less information in regards to their administrative structure. The Vakataka empire was cut up into provinces called rashtras or rajyas. The Pakkana rashtra is mentioned in the Belora plates, the Bhojakata rashtra in the Chammaka plates, the Varuchha rajya in the Pandhurna plates, and the Arammi rajya in the Dudia and Padhurna plates. These rajyas were administered

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Singh, U. (2008) A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century

¹⁰ Ibid



by authorities known as rajyadhikritas and these provinces were further subdivided into vishayas, which were then separated into aharas and bhogas or bhuktis. The Vakataka Grants mentions an officer, who allotted and supervised assistant officers known as kulaputras. The kulaputras were to maintain law and order. The chhatras and bhatas, has been understood regular soldier and mercenaries who acted as the coercive arm of the state. They patrolled about the countryside, collected taxes due to the state, and may have also been responsible for maintaining peace in the provinces. The rajuka, has been known as an officer who was related with revenue assessment. He was mentioned in the Indore plates of Pravarasena II as the writer of the land grant charter. The senapati and dandanayaka were military officers.¹¹

Inscriptions commissioned during the reign of King Pravarasena II mentions different people as senapati. Singh explains that this either indicates a change in the tenancy of the post or perhaps several individuals had this designation at the same time. An inscription outside Cave sixteen at Ajanta reports the gifting of that cave to a Buddhist sangha by Varahadeva, a minister of the Vatsagulma branch of the Vakatakas. The first twenty verses notes us the genealogy of the then reigning king Harishena. The inscription then further describes Varahadeva and his father Hastibhoja who served as a minister under Harishena and his father Devasena respectively.

The conventional understanding of the Gupta period underwent a radical revision in the 1960s and 1970s. This was seen as an attempt to correct some of the biases inbuilt in the nationalist historiography of India. It can also be understood as an ingredient of a bigger historiographical transition from the domain of Marxist historians - a shift away from dynastic narratives towards the study of political and socio-economic structures.¹² Even before that, Marxist scholars such as B. N. Datta and D. D. Kosambi had written extensively about a feudal stage in Indian history. The idea was inspired by R. S. Sharma who argued that the main features of feudalism existed in the Gupta period and were intensified in subsequent centuries.¹³

Sharma further implied that the political core of feudalism lay at the administrative structure of kingdoms, whose administration was fueled through the existence of serfdom. Peasants were compelled to the lands which were owned by the so-called middle man, whom they remunerated in kind and labor. Sharma explains that the economy was fundamentally self-sufficient, and goods were produced mainly for local use and not for the market. Some features of this system were - royal grants of land; the transfer of fiscal and judicial rights to the recipients; the grant of rights over peasants, artisans, and merchants; an increased incidence of obligatory labor; a decline in trade and coinage; payment of officials through land revenue assignments. From this

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *ibid*

¹³ Sharma. R. S. (1965) *Indian Feudalism: C. 300-1200*



perspective, 300 CE onwards were marked by political fragmentation and a collapse of the urban economy. Despite critiques of the feudalism hypothesis, for many years it remained the dominant perspective on the period c. 300–1200 CE.¹⁴

This was then, counter argued by B. D. Chattopadhyaya and Hermann Kulke in the 1970s and 1980s. They proposed a different historical archetype of the period by pointing that it wasn't facing a political breakdown but rather the early medieval period has been marked by the beginning of a rigorous process of state formation at the regional and sub-regional levels. Land grants were one of several strategies adopted by rulers to display their power and played an integrative role in the politics and societies of the time.¹⁵

The political history of the Guptas has been reconstructed with the help of existing inscriptions and coins with no precise details about their emergence or social background. Some historians' claim that they were Vaishyas is solely based on texts such as the Manu Smriti and Vishnu Purana. Meanwhile, some scholars have also considered the possibility of the Guptas being Kshatriyas. This according to Singh was largely based on the fact that they had matrimonial alliances with the Lichchavis and Nagas, and on the evidence of Prabhavati Gupta's marriage into the Brahmana Vakataka dynasty was possibly have been within the Dharmashastra norms.¹⁶

However, their relation with the Vakatakas and the possibility that a princess of the Brahmana Kadamba family might have married a Gupta king has been used to argue that the Guptas were Brahmanas. Furthermore, the inscriptions of Prabhavati Gupta note that the princess belonging to the Dharana gotra. The Vakatakas are known to have belonged to the Vishnuvridha gotra, hence Dharani was assumed to be the gotra of the Guptas.¹⁷ S. R. Goyal argues it was a clear hint that the Guptas were Brahmanas. He further explains that their genealogical accounts make mention of Maharaja Gupta and Maharaja Ghatotkacha as the first two rulers of their lineage. It is not apparent whether they were independent rulers or ruling under someone else's suzerainty.¹⁸

Political events in India became tedious in the post Mauryan period. It saw the participation of several kings, eras, and people. While the people of the peninsula and south India were trying to create new polities and experiencing the reach of maritime trade, northern India was caught up in the turmoil taking place in central Asia. The Mauryas sought the full potential for trading and political expansion and didn't limit themselves to just the subcontinent but rather went into areas

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Chattopadhyaya, B.D. (1997) 'Political Processes and structure of Polity in Early India', in Herman Kulke ed. *The State In India 1000-1700*, Delhi, Oxford University Press

¹⁶ Singh, U. (2008) *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Goyal, S. R. (2005) *The Imperial Guptas: a Multidisciplinary Political Study*



beyond and towards the west. This need to extend themselves towards new ventures was also recognized by the later states.¹⁹

The Allahabad prashasti refer to Samudragupta having captured and then released several southern kings. These included Mahendra of Kosala, Vyaghraraja of Mahakantara, Mantaraja of Kairala or Kaurala, Mahendra of Pishtapura, Svamidatta of Kottura on the hill, Damana of Erandapalla, Vishnugopa of Kanchi, Nilaraja of Avamukta, Hastivarman of Vengi, Ugrasena of Palakka, Kubera of Devarashtra, Dhananjaya of Kusthalapura, and all the other kings of Dakshinapatha. Kosala corresponds to the modern Raipur, Bilaspur, and Sambalpur areas of eastern Madhya Pradesh and western Orissa. The forested kingdom of Mahakantara may have been located in the Vindhyas, the Kosala area, central India, or Orissa. Kairala would correspond to the Kerala region, but if the correct reading is Kaurala, this may have been located on the eastern coast of Andhra Pradesh. Kottura may be Kothoor, near Mahendragiri in Ganjam district of Orissa. Pishtapura is identified with modern Pithapuram in Godavari district, Andhra Pradesh. Erandapalla was located in Ganjam district of Orissa or Vishakhapatnam district of Andhra Pradesh. Vishnugopa was a Pallava king of Kanchi, ruling the area of the Chingleput district. Hastivarman was a king of the Shalankayana dynasty of Vengi, located between the Krishna and Godavari rivers in Andhra. Devarashtra is identified with the Yellamanchili region of Vishakhapatnam district. Kusthalapura may correspond to Kuttalur in the North Arcot district of Tamil Nadu, but this is far from certain. Line 23 of the inscription refers to some rulers rendering all kinds of service to Samudragupta, seeking the use of the Gupta garuda seal and entering into matrimonial alliances with the Guptas of their own accord. These included rulers with the epithets Daivaputra, Shahi, and Shahanushahi, probably representing the last vestiges of Kushana rule. The Shakas and Murundas are also mentioned in this context. There is further mention of the people of Simhala, i.e., Sri Lanka, and all the other island dwellers.²⁰

King Meghavarna of Sri Lanka sent ambassadors with gifts to Samudragupta, to seek his permission to build a monastery along with a rest house for Sri Lankan pilgrims at Bodh Gaya. Once the permission was granted, the monastery built. This incident was recorded by the famous 7th century traveler Xuanzang in a Chinese Manuscript. By the end of Samudragupta's reign, his empire had integrated almost all of northern India, except Kashmir, western Punjab, Rajasthan, Sindh, and Gujarat. From the highlands of central India to the east of Jabalpur, Chhattisgarh, Orissa, and the area on the eastern coast at least up to Chingleput. This inner core of directly annexed territories was bordered by a large number of lesser states. Beyond it, towards northwest, laid the provinces of the Shakas and Kushanas, who has been claimed to have ruled under his suzerainty. Towards the south was, the seat of the Kings of Dakshinapatha, but who

¹⁹ Singh, U. (2008) A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century

²⁰ Singh, U. (2008) A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century



faced neither annexation nor were they reduced to feudatory status. The Guptas did not form a pan-India empire within their undeviating control, but rather through their successful military campaigns; they formed a network of political relationships of dominance and subordination that extended over a large part of the subcontinent.²¹

Samudragupta has been described as a restless conqueror, who was both competent and compassionate ruler and extremely concerned about the wellbeing of his subjects. Apart from this he has been also depicted as a kaviraja, whose verses were so poetic that it could put bards to shame. His coins have illustrations with him in diverse poses which hints at his prowess and martial skills. In his standard coins, which were the more frequently used, he holds a long staff in his left hand and offers oblations into a fire altar with his right; the garuda standard appears to the left. Another coin shows the king and his queen standing face to face but historians are unable to confirm whether it was attributed Chandragupta I or Samudragupta. One of Samudragupta's coin types depicts him playing the vina on a couch. In a special mint depicts the 'ashvamedha' which demonstrates a sacrificial horse standing before a decorated yupa.²²

The concurrent emergence of local states and the occurrence of land grants across historical regions make a compelling case of a possible interrelationship.²³ A closer look at the larger implications of the land grants explains economic fealty.²⁴ Chattopadhyaya asserts that even though land grants undermined the political and economic foundations of the state, somehow dynasty after dynasty, in region after region, in post-Gupta India engaged in the act of land donations. The story gets a little more complex as one examines the object and quantity of the donations. This political history includes conflict and war as well as political and matrimonial alliances. Numerous strategies seemed to have emerged from different parts of the subcontinent and then assimilated into multiple hierarchies of power consisting of dominant and subordinate rulers.²⁵

The use of archaeological data in the construction of early India, including political processes and the structure of polity, has gained momentum in the last three decades. Narratives of the origin of the state in north India in the mid-first millennium BCE have made effective use of archaeological material to explain the processes of change and variation in time and space.²⁶

Notwithstanding the acknowledgment of the transformative potentials of iron technology, the iron-productivity-surplus-urbanization and state thesis formulated in course of the 1950s and

²¹ Ibid.

²² Singh, U. (2008) *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*

²³ Chattopadhyaya. (1995) 'State and Economy in North India'.

²⁴ Sharma. R. S. (1965) *Indian Feudalism: C. 300-1200*

²⁵ Chattopadhyaya. (1995) 'State and Economy in North India'.

²⁶ Thapar. (1999) *From Lineage to State*



1960s has come in for serious criticism on several counts, such as the size and quality of the available iron agricultural tools recovered from several sites in the sixth–fifth centuries layers, the nature of change in Indian society, technological determinism and the stereotyped straight line argument. It has been said that the argument oversimplifies agricultural operations and attributes undue precedence to iron irrespective of the varying land types and ecological zones in the country.²⁷

Besides, it has been recognized that the state emerges out of and introduces changes in varied spheres. The recent understanding of the Mauryan Empire besides a reevaluation of the literary and epigraphic sources is considerably based on the pattern of the spread of material prosperity in India during the time of the Mauryas. Continued use of archaeological evidence is visible in studies related to secondary state formation or transition to the early historical society in post-Maurya peninsular India and beyond, and they have produced significant results.²⁸ Cities were centers of convergence, spatially and socially, and of economic interest to the state. Political authority is either dominant or marginal in textual discussions of cities in early India, but they are never indifferent to it.²⁹

The impact of the studies on the state is obvious from the fact that concepts, such as lineage, chiefdom, state formation, the structure of legitimation, typology of states, parcellation of sovereignty or shared sovereignty, popular consent, and surplus, among others, are a part of the vocabulary of good Under Graduate and Graduate students among the better universities. These concepts generally used to explain pre-state and state societies are tied to issues of social differentiation and social mobility.³⁰

The study of the state includes ideas and debates in light of their social and economic history, as well as across other theories across social science disciplines. Thapar while writing on Kosambi touched on the question of the gains we have made in course of the debate on early medieval India in the recent decades. The debate made a shift from arguing on the terms laid down by the proponents of Indian feudalism around 1980, towards a ground of discussion and several new ideas differently nuanced like the segmentary state, ritual sovereignty, agrarian nuclear areas or segments/localities, the movement from processes to structure rather than the other way round, state cults and the integrative model of state formation came into play. The focus on region-centered analyses of state formation gave rise to understanding the complex ways in which regional trajectories and traditions were constituted, which in turn spurred the construction of identities and some rethinking about determining the thought of India.

²⁷ Sahu (2012) Recent Perspectives of the State and Debates in Early Indian History

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.



Sahu makes note of a wide consensus that this idea did not exist since ancient times but rather it was historically constituted. From this he derives two interrelated engaging ideas – “The first is that there was change all through but change through continuities. Second, as against the clichéd unity in diversity phrase which assumes a prior notion of unity into which diversities were accommodated, it emerges that the said unity was forged through a continuous process of networks of connections, mediated by the spread and adoption of ‘imitable models’; from Buddhism to Brahmanical ideology with all their accompaniments.”³¹

The Segmentary State model or the notion of ritual sovereignty cannot resolve the problem of the political basis of integration since a rigid use of ‘the segmentary state’ concept relegates the different foci of power to the periphery and does not see them as components of the state structure. The political history of early medieval India is vivid and vital, and it is necessary to view it not in the isolated forms of polity, economy, religion, or society but rather their influence on each other to comprehend the politics of ancient India.

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³¹ Sahu (2012) Recent Perspectives of the State and Debates in Early Indian History



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