

UNIT 38 STRUCTURE OF POLITY

Structure

- 38.0 Objectives
 - 38.1 Introduction
 - 38.2 The King
 - 38.3 Bureaucracy
 - 38.4 The Army
 - 38.5 Administrative Divisions
 - 38.6 The Samanta
 - 38.7 Taxation
 - 38.8 Judicial System
 - 38.9 Let Us Sum Up
 - 38.10 Key Words
 - 38.11 Answers To Check Your Progress Exercises
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38.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you will be able to know about:

- the nature of the polity or political organization during the period 300 A.D. to 700 A.D.,
 - the differences between the Mauryan polity and the polity during this period, and
 - the reasons why the political organization of this period is described as feudal in nature by many historians.
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38.1 INTRODUCTION

The period under study was dominated by the reigns of the Guptas and Pushyabhutis in the north, of the Vakatakas, Kadambas and Chalukyas of Badami in the Deccan and of the Pallavas in southern Andhra and Tamil Nadu. There were of course a number of small kingdoms and chieftaincies in many parts of the country. The major sources for the study of the polity of this period are inscriptions, **dharmasastra** literature, **Harshacharita** of Bana and the accounts of Chinese travellers like Fa-Hien, Hiuen Tsang, etc. Broadly speaking the polity of this period was marked by hereditary monarchies ruling over small territories with one or two of them assuming wider sovereign status now and then. For example, the Guptas (from 300 A.D. to 500 A.D.) and Harsha (in the first half of the 7th century A.D.) had fairly wide areas under their control. Their political history has already been discussed in Block 8. In this Unit we shall discuss the main features of the political organization in the period between 300 A.D. and 700 A.D. We shall also try to show how these features mark a change from the political organization of the earlier periods and thus indicate that important changes were taking place also in the political organization of the country during this period.

38.2 THE KING

Most of the country was ruled by kings. Only in a few fringe areas there lingered on the **gana** (tribal republic) form of government. After the military expeditions of Samudragupta in north India early in the fourth century A.D. most of these tribal republics almost disappeared from the political scene. Thus the Madra and Yaudheya in the Panjab, the Abhira in central India, etc. are not heard of again. Some of the tribal chieftaincies also slowly became monarchies. The King took pompous titles like **paramamahesvara**, **rajadhiraja**, **paramabhattaraka**, etc. which indicate their superiority over many other smaller rulers. During this period the divine right theory also came into vogue. The King in keeping with this theory held such titles as **prithviallabha** i.e. 'the beloved of the Earth goddess'. He is called the fifth **lokapala** as the other existing four **lokapalas** or guardians of the four cardinal directions were namely Kubera, Varuna, Indra and Yama. Though the

concept of the divinity of the King became dominant, it was combined with the notion of the King as guardian and protector.

Kingship was hereditary. Though succession to the throne was generally decided by law of primogeniture, that is, the eldest son succeeding his father, there were many exceptions to this rule. Sometimes kings were even elected by nobles and councillors. As head of the government, the King was overseer of all administrative activities of his realm. He was the supreme judge, and he usually led his army to the battlefields.

There are occasional references to queens acting as rulers, as in the cases of Prabhavati, the Vakataka queen who came from the ruling family of the Guptas, and of Didda, the queen, of a later period, of Kashmir. Generally however the queens remained in the background.

38.3 BUREAUCRACY

As compared to the Mauryan period, there is no clear evidence for the existence of a central **mantriparishad** or council of ministers to advise the King. There were, however, many high officials who were at times called **mantrin**. The other designations for higher officials were **sandhivigarhika**, who was minister for foreign affairs, war and peace; **mahabaladhikrita** and **mahadandanayaka**, both of which denoted superior posts in the army. Sometimes the same person was holding more than one such post; for example, Harishena who composed the famous Allahabad Pillar Inscription of Samudragupta is said to have been a **sandhivigrahika** as well as a **mahadandanayaka**.

Besides these, there was in the Gupta government a class of officials known as **kumaramatyas**. It seems that most of the high officials were selected from this class or cadre and so the **kumaramatyas** are mentioned in various capacities like **sandhivigrahika**, **mahabaladhikrita**, etc. Some of them were under the direct control of the King where as some seem to have served the princes and provincial governors. The officer called **Uparika** was in charge of a **bhukti**, an administrative division. **Ayuktaka** was a member of the bureaucracy who, like **Vishayapati**, functioned at a level higher than villages, and he was an important intermediate administrative link between the **bhukti** and the village.

The officials seem to have been paid in cash in the beginning of our period and later they were just assigned revenues of some designated territories and they were therefore called **bhogika** or **bhogapati**. This is known from **Harshacharita** which refers to the complaints made to Harsha by villagers against such officials. The posts also became hereditary, thereby weakening the King's authority in course of time.

38.4 THE ARMY

Both for maintaining internal peace and for defending against external aggression a standing army became a regular feature during this period. It was noted above that there were a number of high military officials and they were obviously in charge of this army. Cavalry was an important element of this army. Some maritime states like the Pallavas in the south also had navy. Chariots do not figure prominently during this time. The royal army was supplemented by the militia of feudatory chiefs (**samanta**).

38.5 ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISIONS

The country was organised into many divisions for administrative purposes. The highest unit among these territorial divisions was called **bhukti** which was under the charge of a high official called **uparika**. Sometimes princes were also in charge of some **bhukti**. **Vishaya** was the next administrative division below which was the lowest unit, i.e., the village. In certain areas **vishaya** was also known as **rashtra**. In eastern India the **vishayas** were also divided into **vithis** over and above the village. At the level of **vishaya** the officials (or locally powerful people) called **Vishayapatis** played a leading role in the administration. In each village a headman and the village elders managed the local affairs. In urban settlements or towns there were a number of craft and merchant guilds to look after their administration.

38.6 THE SAMANTA

Semi-independent local chiefs called **samanta** were an important feature of the polity of this time. We have already read that Samudragupta conquered and subjugated a number of territories. Some of the rulers of these territories which were on the fringes of the Gupta empire were made subordinate allies of the King. They became feudatories, so to say, of the Gupta King paying periodical tribute to the latter. Some of them also presented him their daughters in marriage. They were obliged to pay homage to the King by personally attending his court. The King in turn recognised their right to continue to rule over their own territories and for this he also gave them charters. These subordinate rulers were also obliged to send their men to fight in the King's army during times of war. Subject to the above obligations the feudatories or **samantas** were left to look after the administration of their territories, which was actually done by King's officials in the central parts of the Gupta empire.

Another factor which really introduced features of a decentralized polity was the granting of land to priests and officials for their maintenance. Generally the King not only gave the land but also parted with some of his administrative rights like taxing the people, punishing the criminals, etc. The granted territories were also given immunity from the entry of the King's army. Naturally the grantees of such lands became almost independent of the King and became **samantas** themselves. Consequent to this, in the 7th century A.D. and after we find officials giving themselves pompous titles like **mahasamanta** and 'one who obtained the privilege of five great sounds (**panchamahasabda**)'. Through the use of these titles, the **samantas** and **mahasamantas** proclaimed their autonomy. The presence of all these features in polity has led historians to suggest that from the Gupta period onward the political organization which developed in India represented a feudal-type of political organization.

38.7 TAXATION

The government got most of its revenue through taxation. Land taxes called **baga**, **bhoga**, etc. were the main items and the land taxes actually increased through the centuries. As trade and commerce seem to have declined during this period commercial taxes are not found prominently. The local people were also obliged to provide for the stay and food of villages. It may be noted here that as far as the lands granted to officials and priests are concerned, the government lost much of its revenue from those lands.

38.8 JUDICIAL SYSTEM

Judicial system was more developed now compared to earlier times. Many law codes and treatises were compiled during this period and the **dharmasastras** elaborately dealt with legal matters.

There were different courts like **Karana**, **adhikarana**, **dharmasana**, etc. Criminal and civil cases were clearly differentiated from each other. Laws regarding property and inheritance were elaborate. Of course justice was based on the **varna** classification in society. For the same kind of crime, culprits belonging to a higher **varna** or caste got less punishment than those belonging to a lower **varna**. **Dharmasastras** also insisted that local usages and practices of different guilds and castes should be given due weight while dispensing justice.

Check Your Progress

- 1) Discuss the main differences between the Mauryan polity and the polity during 300 A.D. - 700 A.D.

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- 2) Mark which of the following statements are right (✓) or wrong (×).
- a) The Samantas maintained their own armies.
 - b) **Bhukti** was the lowest administrative division.
 - c) The King adopted pompous titles during this period.
 - d) Pallavas did not have a naval force.
 - e) Justice was based on **Varna** divisions.
- 3) Write in about five lines the role of **samantas** in the polity.
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38.9 LET US SUM UP

From the above sections a fair idea may be obtained regarding the polity of the period from 300 A.D. to 700 A.D. However, in India during this period a uniform pattern may not be found in all the kingdoms. But there were a number of common features in all of them. Monarchy had become a regular feature throughout the length and breadth of the subcontinent. A regular division of each state's territory for administrative purpose, a hierarchy of officials forming the bureaucracy, a standing army and a sort of revenue or taxation system may be found in all the kingdoms, particularly in central parts of each sovereign state. But when compared to the Mauryan polity the King's government during this period did not possess effective powers and control throughout its territory.

In the outlying areas the feudatory chiefs or **samantas** had their administrative jurisdiction and their recognition of the King's authority was only nominal. The Mauryan government had a large number of higher officials to control each and every social and economic activity in the major part of the empire. This was not so in the case of the Gupta empire or other contemporary polities, where many things were outside the state control. For example, while craft and merchant guilds were kept under strict government vigilance in the Mauryan state, they were more or less autonomous in the Gupta age. Even the laws pertaining to each guild were given due recognition in the latter case. Such fragmentation of Kingly powers during this period is to be attributed to certain major changes emerging in the socio-economic organization. These changes became prominent by the 7th century A.D. and after giving birth to what is described as 'Indian Feudalism' by Prof. R.S. Sharma. As far as the period under study is concerned the new elements were just emerging and they took more definite shape in later centuries.

38.10 KEY WORDS

Adhikarana	: A court of justice.
Bhaga	: Land tax
Bhukti	: Highest administrative division
Divine right theory	: The theory that the right (of kingship) was obtained from the god.
Feudalism	: A Socio-economic and political system where relationship between a superior (lord) and his subordinate (vassal) is based on landgrant or assignment (fief) and where the lord is obliged

to protect his vassal and the vassal is obliged to render military service to his lord in times of need.

- Gana** : a tribal republic which is governed by chiefs, a chief of ruling clans and not by a king.
- Kumaramatyā** : A general cadre of higher officials.
- Mantri** : Minister
- Samanta** : A feudatory chief
- Sandhivigrahika** : Minister for foreign affairs, peace and war.

38.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

- 1) Read Secs. 38.2 and 38.9 and base your answer on them.
- 2) a) ✓ b) × c) ✓ d) × e) ✓
- 3) See Sec. 38.6