

Brahmanization, Rural Expansion, and Peasant Protest in the Peninsula

The New Phase

The period *c.* AD 300–750 marks the second historical phase in the regions south of the Vindhya. It continued some of the processes that had begun in the first historical phase (*c.* 200 BC–AD 300) of the peninsula. It however shows some new features that were not regarded as significant in earlier times. The first phase shows the ascendancy of the Satavahanas over the Deccan, and that of the Tamil kingdoms over the southern districts of Tamil Nadu. In that period, northern Tamil Nadu, southern Karnataka, a part of southern Maharashtra, and the land between the Godavari and the Mahanadi broadly owed allegiance to the seats of political authority established outside their areas. They themselves did not have their own states. Now in these areas and also in Vidarbha, between AD 300 and 600 there arose about two dozen states which are known to us from their land charters. Eventually, by the beginning of the seventh century, the Pallavas of Kanchi, the Chalukyas of Badami, and the Pandyas of Madurai emerged as the rulers of the three major states. The first historical phase is marked by numerous crafts, internal and external trade, widespread use of coins, and a large number of towns. Trade, towns, and coinage seem to have been in a state of decline in the second phase, but in that phase numerous land grants free of taxes were made to the temples and brahmanas. The grants suggest that many new areas were brought under cultivation and settlement. This period therefore saw a far greater expansion of agrarian economy.

We also notice the march of triumphant Brahmanism. In the first phase we encounter extensive Buddhist monuments in both Andhra and Maharashtra.

Cave inscriptions probably indicate the influence of Jainism and also of Buddhism in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu. Now however Jainism was confined to Karnataka, and the peninsula as a whole shows numerous instances of the performance of Vedic sacrifices by the kings. This phase also marked the beginning of the construction of stone temples for Shiva and Vishnu in Tamil Nadu under the Pallavas, and in Karnataka under the Chalukyas of Badami. By the beginning of the second phase, south India had ceased to be the land of megaliths, and towards its end began the process that made it a land of temples.

Culturally, the Dravidian element seems to have dominated the scene in the first phase, but during the second phase Aryanization and brahmanization came to the fore. This happened because of land grants made by the rulers who were either brahmanas or firm supporters of them. As managers of temple lands, the brahmanas guided cultural and religious activities. They spread Sanskrit, which became the official language. The Ashokan inscriptions found in Andhra and Karnataka show that the people knew Prakrit in the third century BC. Also, epigraphs between the second century BC and the third century AD were largely written in Prakrit. The Brahmi inscriptions that have been found in Tamil Nadu also contain Prakrit words, but from about AD 400 onwards Sanskrit became the official language in the peninsula and most charters were composed in it.

States of the Deccan and South India

In northern Maharashtra and Vidarbha (Berar), the Satavahanas were succeeded by the Vakatakas, a local power. The Vakatakas, who were brahmanas themselves, are known from a large number of copperplate land grants issued by them. They were great champions of the brahmanical religion and performed numerous Vedic sacrifices. Their political history is more linked to north India than to south India. We may recall how Chandragupta II married his daughter Prabhavati Gupta into the Vakataka royal family and with its support conquered Malwa and Gujarat from the Shaka Kshatrapas in the last quarter of the fourth century AD. Culturally however the Vakataka kingdom served as a channel for the transmission of brahmanical ideas and social institutions to the south.

The Vakataka power was followed by that of the Chalukyas of Badami who played an important role in the history of the Deccan and south India for about two centuries until AD 757, when they were overthrown by their feudatories, the Rashtrakutas. The Chalukyas claimed their descent from Brahma or Manu or the Moon. They boasted that their ancestors ruled at Ayodhya, but all this was done

to acquire legitimacy and respectability. In actuality they seem to have been a local Kanarese people who were accommodated in the ruling varna with brahmanical blessings.

The Chalukyas set up their kingdom towards the beginning of the sixth century in the western Deccan. They established their capital at Vatapi, modern Badami, in the district of Bijapur, which forms a part of Karnataka. They later branched off into several independent ruling houses, but the main branch continued to rule at Vatapi for two centuries. During this period, no other power in the Deccan was as important as the Chalukyas of Badami until we come to Vijayanagar in later medieval times.

On the ruins of the Satavahana power in the eastern part of the peninsula, there arose the Ikshvakus in the Krishna–Guntur region. They seem to have been a local tribe who adopted the exalted name of the Ikshvakus in order to demonstrate the antiquity of their lineage, and also claimed to be brahmanas. They have left behind many monuments at Nagarjunakonda and Dharanikota. They began the practise of land grants in the Krishna–Guntur region, where several of their copperplate inscriptions have been discovered.

The Ikshvakus were supplanted by the Pallavas. The term *pallava* means creeper, and is a Sanskrit version of the Tamil word *tondai*, which also carries the same meaning. The Pallavas were possibly a local tribe who established their authority in the Tondainadu or the land of creepers. It however took them some time to become completely civilized and acceptable because in Tamil, the word *pallava* is also a synonym of robber. The authority of the Pallavas extended over both southern Andhra and northern Tamil Nadu. They set up their capital at Kanchi, identical with modern Kanchipuram, which under them became a town of temples and Vedic learning.

The early Pallavas came into conflict with the Kadambas, who had established their control over northern Karnataka and Konkan in the fourth century. They claimed to be brahmanas, and generously rewarded their fellow caste men.

The Kadamba kingdom was founded by Mayurasharman. It is said that he came to receive education at Kanchi but was unceremoniously driven out. Smarting under this insult, the Kadamba chief set up his camp in a forest, and defeated the Pallavas, possibly with the help of the forest tribes. Eventually, the Pallavas avenged the defeat but recognized the Kadamba authority by formally investing Mayurasharman with the royal insignia. Mayurasharman is said to have performed eighteen *ashvamedhas* or horse sacrifices and granted numerous villages to brahmanas. The Kadambas established their capital at Vijayanti or

Banavasi in north Kanara district of Karnataka.

The Gangas were another important contemporary dynasty of the Pallavas. They established their kingdom in southern Karnataka around the fourth century. The kingdom was situated between that of the Pallavas in the east and of the Kadambas in the west. They are called the Western Gangas or Gangas of Mysore in order to differentiate them from the Eastern Gangas who ruled in Kalinga from the fifth century onwards. For most of their reign, the Western Gangas were feudatories of the Pallavas. Their earliest capital was located at Kolar which, given its gold mines, may have helped the rise of this dynasty.

The Western Gangas made land grants mostly to the Jainas; the Kadambas also made grants to the Jainas, though they favoured the brahmanas more. The Pallavas for their part granted numerous villages free of taxes largely to the brahmanas. We have as many as sixteen land charters of the early Pallavas. A few, which seem to be earlier, are written on stone in Prakrit, but most of them were recorded on copperplates in Sanskrit. The villages granted to the brahmanas were exempted from payment of all taxes and forced labour to the state. This implied that these were collected from the cultivators by the brahmanas for their personal use and profit. As many as eighteen types of immunities were granted to the brahmanas in a Pallava grant of the fourth century. They were empowered to enjoy the fruits of the land so granted and exempted from payment of land tax, from supply of forced labour, from supply of provisions to royal officers living in the town, and free from the interference of royal agents and constabulary.

The Pallavas, the Kadambas, the Chalukyas of Badami, and their other contemporaries were great champions of Vedic sacrifices. They performed *ashvamedha* and *vajapeya* sacrifices, which legitimized their position, enhanced their prestige, and enormously increased the income of the priestly class. The brahmanas therefore emerged as an important class at the expense of the peasantry, from whom they collected their dues directly. They also received as gifts a substantial proportion of the taxes collected by the king from his subjects.

The Kalabhra Revolt

Although the period between AD 300 and 750 was extremely important for state formation and agrarian expansion in the peninsula, very little is known about what happened at the tip of the peninsula after the eclipse of the Cholas, the

Cheras, and the Pandyas. The only important event is a revolt led by the Kalabhras in the sixth century. The Kalabhras seem to have been a tribal people who captured power, particularly at the cost of the Cholas, and ruled for seventy-five years. Their rule also affected the Pallavas as well as their neighbouring contemporaries. The Kalabhras are called evil rulers, who overthrew innumerable kings and established their hold on the Tamil land. The Kalabhra revolt was a powerful peasant protest directed against the landed brahmanas. The repeated teaching that those who attack land grants are condemned to hell for sixty thousand years failed to change their minds. They put an end to the *brahmadeya* rights granted to the brahmanas in numerous villages. It appears that the Kalabhras were of Buddhist persuasion as they patronized Buddhist monasteries. The Kalabhras' revolt was so widespread that it could be quelled only through the joint efforts of the Pandyas, the Pallavas, and the Chalukyas of Badami. By the last quarter of the sixth century, according to a tradition, the Kalabhras had imprisoned the Chola, the Pandya, and the Chera kings, which underlines how formidable their revolt was. The confederacy of the kings formed against the Kalabhras, who had revoked the land grants made to the brahmanas, shows that the revolt was directed against the existing social and political order in south India.

It, therefore, appears that some land grants had been made between AD 300 and 500 to the brahmanas by the kings of the deep south. The Sangam texts tell us that villages were granted to the warriors by the chief for their acts of bravery. Land grants seem to have stimulated agrarian expansion under the Pallavas in south Andhra and north Tamil Nadu from the end of the third century onwards, but they seem to have adversely affected the peasants.

Conflict between the Pallavas and the Chalukyas

The principal interest in the political history of peninsular India from the sixth to the eighth century centres around the long struggle for supremacy between the Pallavas of Kanchi and the Chalukyas of Badami. The Pandyas, who were in control of Madurai and Tirunelveli districts of Tamil Nadu, joined this conflict as a poor third. Although both the Pallavas and the Chalukyas championed Brahmanism, performed Vedic sacrifices, and made grants to the brahmanas, the two quarrelled with each other over plunder, prestige, and territorial resources. Both tried to establish supremacy over the land lying between the Krishna and the Tungabhadra. This doab was again the bone of contention in late medieval times between the Vijayanagar and the Bahmani kingdoms. Time and again, the

Pallava princes tried to cross the Tungabhadra, which formed the natural historic boundary between many a kingdom of the Deccan and the deep south. The struggle continued over a long period with varying fortunes.

The first important event in this long conflict took place during the reign of Pulakeshin II (AD 609–42), the most famous Chalukya king. He is known to us from the eulogy written on him by the court poet Ravikirti in the Aihole inscription. This inscription is an example of the poetic excellence achieved in Sanskrit, and despite its exaggeration is a valuable source for the life of Pulakeshin. He subjugated the Kadamba capital at Banavasi and compelled the Gangas of Mysore to acknowledge his suzerainty. He also defeated Harsha's army on the Narmada and checked his advance towards the Deccan. In his conflict with the Pallavas, he almost reached the Pallava capital, but the Pallavas purchased peace by ceding their northern provinces to Pulakeshin II. Around AD 610 Pulakeshin II also conquered the entire area between the Krishna and the Godavari, which came to be known as the province of Vengi. Here, a branch of the main dynasty was set up and is known as the eastern Chalukyas of Vengi. However, Pulakeshin's second invasion of Pallava territory ended in failure. The Pallava king Narasimhavarman (AD 630–68) occupied the Chalukya capital at Vatapi in about AD 642, when Pulakeshin II was probably killed in a battle against the Pallavas. Narasimhavarman assumed the title of Vatapikonda or the conqueror of Vatapi. He is also said to have defeated the Cholas, the Cheras, the Pandyas, and the Kalabhras.

Towards the end of the seventh century, there was a lull in this conflict, which was again resumed in the first half of the eighth century. The Chalukya king Vikramaditya II (AD 733–45) is said to have overrun Kanchi three times. In AD 740 he completely routed the Pallavas. His victory ended the Pallava supremacy in the far south although the ruling house continued for over a century thereafter. However, the Chalukyas were unable for long to enjoy the fruits of their victory over the Pallavas because their own hegemony was brought to an end in AD 757 by the Rashtrakutas.

Temples

Besides the performance of Vedic sacrifices, the worship of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, especially of the last two, was becoming popular. From the seventh century onwards, the Alvar saints, who were great devotees of Vishnu, popularized the worship of this god. The Nayanars rendered a similar service to

the cult of Shiva. From the seventh century onwards, the cult of bhakti began to dominate the religious life of south Indians, and the Alvars and Nayanars played a great part in propagating it.

The Pallava kings constructed a number of stone temples in the seventh and eighth centuries for housing these gods. The most famous of them are the seven *ratha* temples at Mahabalipuram, at a distance of 65 km from Chennai. These were built in the seventh century by Narasimhavarman, who founded the port city of Mahabalipuram or Mamallapuram. This city is also famous for the Shore Temple, which was a structural construction erected independently and not hewn out of rock. In addition, the Pallavas constructed several such structural temples at their capital Kanchi. A very good example was the Kailashanath temple built in the eighth century. The Chalukyas of Badami erected numerous temples at Aihole, which has as many as seventy, from about AD 610. The work was continued in the adjacent towns of Badami and Pattadakal. Pattadakal has ten temples built in the seventh and eighth centuries, the most celebrated of which are the Papanatha temple (c. AD 680) and the Virupaksha temple (c. AD 740). The first of these, although 30 m long, has a low and stunted tower in the northern style; the second was constructed in purely southern style. The latter is about 40 m in length and has a very high square and storeyed tower (*shikhara*). The temple walls are adorned with beautiful pieces of sculpture, representing scenes from the *Ramayana*.

We have no clear idea of how these early temples were maintained. After the eighth century, land grants to temples became a common practice in south India, and usually they were recorded on the walls of the temples. Most temples were managed by the brahmanas. By early medieval times, such temples came to own three-fifths of the arable land, and became centres of religious rituals and caste-based ideology in south India. However, the earlier temples seem to have been constructed and maintained out of the taxes directly collected by the king from the common people. Some temples in Karnataka under the Chalukyas were erected by Jaina traders. The common people worshipped their village gods by offering them paddy and toddy, but those who could afford it might have made rich offerings to acquire status and satisfy their religious cravings.

Demands on the Peasantry

To conduct wars, to cultivate art and literature, to promote religion, and to maintain the administrative staff, enormous resources were needed. These were

apparently provided by the peasantry. The nature of burdens imposed on the agrarian communities was more or less the same in the Vakataka and the Pallava kingdoms although the former was in Vidarbha and Maharashtra, and the latter in southern Andhra and northern Tamil Nadu. In addition to land tax, which was a part of the produce, the king could demand donations of cereals and gold, and could bore certain trees such as the palmyra to obtain salt and substances derived from plants such as sugar and liquor. Of course, all the natural resources beneath the earth in the villages belonged to him. In addition, he demanded flowers and milk, wood and grass, and could compel the villagers to carry loads free of charge. The king was also entitled to forced labour or *vishti*.

When royal officials visited the villages either to collect taxes or to punish criminals, and also when the army was on the march, the rural communities had to fulfil several obligations. They had to supply bullocks for carts and provide beds, charcoal, ovens, cooking pots, and attendants.

This whole list of imposts indicates that the state made heavy demands on the labour and produce of the peasantry. Most of these are covered by the eighteen types of immunities granted to the brahmanas from the fourth century AD onwards. Later, more and more demands were made on the peasantry.

Land Grants and Rural Expansion

These numerous demands made by the king on the agrarian population presuppose a capacity to pay on the part of the peasantry. Collection could not have been possible without an increase in agricultural production. In this period we witness the formation of new states in the trans-Vindhyan regions. Each state had a number of feudatory chiefdoms, which were small states within a large state. Each of them, large or small, paramount or feudatory, needed its own administrative machinery, and a substantial number of priestly and other functionaries. Every state, therefore, required resources that could be obtained from its rural base. Therefore, the states could not multiply without the proliferation of rural communities or an increase in the agricultural production of the existing villages. It seems that in tribal areas, the brahmanas were granted land, and the tribal peasantry learnt the value of preserving cattle and better methods of cultivation from them. The peasants also learnt from the brahmanas the new calendar that helped agriculture. Certain areas suffered from a dearth of labour power. In order to sustain the economy of such areas, it was also found necessary to make over some sharecroppers and weavers to the brahmanas, as is

known from an early Pallava grant. Therefore, the large number of grants made to the brahmanas played an important role in spreading new methods of cultivation and increasing the size of the rural communities.

This period saw three types of villages in south India: *ur*, *sabha*, and *nagaram*. The *ur* was the usual type of village inhabited by peasant castes, who perhaps held their land in common; it was the responsibility of the village headman to collect and pay taxes on their behalf. These villages were mainly found in southern Tamil Nadu. The *sabha* type of village consisted of *brahmadeya* villages or those granted to the brahmanas, and of *agrahara* villages. The brahmana owners enjoyed individual rights in the land but carried on their activities collectively. The *nagaram* type of village consisted of a village settled and dominated by combinations of traders and merchants. This possibly happened because trade declined and merchants moved to villages. In the Chalukya areas, rural affairs were managed by village elders called *mahajana*. On the whole, the period c. AD 300–750 provides good evidence of agricultural expansion, rural organization, and more productive use of land.

Social Structure and Brahmanization

We can present a rough outline of the social structure that developed in this period. Society was dominated by princes and priests. The princes claimed the status of brahmanas or kshatriyas, though many of them were local clan chiefs promoted to the second varna through benefactions made to the priests. The priests invented respectable family trees for these chiefs and traced their descent from age-old solar and lunar dynasties. This process enabled the new rulers to acquire acceptability in the eyes of the people. The priests were mainly brahmanas, though the Jaina and Buddhist monks may also be placed in this category. In this phase, priests through land grants gained in influence and authority. Many south Indian rulers claimed to be brahmanas, which shows that the kshatriyas were not as important in the south as in the north. The same seems to have been the case with the vaishyas. Though the varna system was introduced in south India, in practice its operation was different from that in Aryavarta or the main part of north India.

However, like the north, below the princes and priests came the peasantry, which was divided into numerous peasant castes. Possibly most of them were called shudras in the brahmanical system. If the peasant and artisan castes failed to produce and render services and payments, it was considered a departure from

the established dharma or norm. Such a situation was described as the age of Kali. It was the duty of the king to put an end to such a state of affairs and restore peace and order which worked in favour of chiefs and priests. The title *dharma-maharaja* was, therefore, adopted by the Vakataka, Pallava, Kadamba, and Western Ganga kings. The real founder of the Pallava power, Simhavarman, is credited with coming to the rescue of dharma when it was beset with the evils typical of the Kaliyuga. This apparently refers to his suppression of the Kalabhra, peasants who upset the existing social order.

Chronology

200 BC–AD 300	The ascendancy of the Satavahanas over the Deccan and that of the Tamil kingdoms over southern Tamil Nadu. Non-Ashokan epigraphs in Andhra and Karnataka in Prakrit.
(AD)	
300–500	Land grants to the brahmanas by the kings of the deep south.
300–600	About two dozen states in the peninsula, including Vidarbha.
300–750	Rural expansion and better use of land south of the Vindhyas. More state formation in the peninsula.
4 C	Eighteen types of immunities for the brahmanas in peninsular India. The rise of Western Ganga rule in southern Karnataka. Chandragupta II captured Malwa and Gujarat from the Shaka Kshatrapas. The Kadamba controlled northern Karnataka and Konkan. From now Sanskrit became the official language in the peninsula.
5 C	The Eastern Gangas ruled Kalinga from this century onwards.
6 C	The Kalabhra revolt. The Chalukyas set up their kingdom in the western Deccan.
6–8 C	Struggle between the Pallavas of Kanchi and the Chalukyas of Badami.
7 C	Emergence of the Pallavas of Kanchi, the Chalukyas of Badami, and the Pandyas of Madurai as major states. The reign of the Chalukya king Pulakeshin II according

	to the Aihole inscription.
610	Erection of temples.
630–68	The reign of the Pallava king Narasimhavarman.
680	The Papanatha temple of Pattadakal.
733–45	The reign of the Chalukya king Vikramaditya II.
740	The Virupaksha temple of Pattadakal.
757	Pallava hegemony brought to an end.
775	The end of the role of the Chalukyas of Badami in the Deccan.