Two

Northern India: Age of the Three Empires (*800–1000*)

After the decline of Harsha's empire in the seventh century, a number of large states arose in north India, the Deccan and south India. Unlike the Gupta and Harsha's empire in north India, none of the other kingdoms in north India were able to bring the entire Ganga valley under its control. The Ganga valley with its population and other resources was the basis on which the Gupta rulers and Harsha had been able to extend their control over Gujarat which, with its rich sea ports and manufacturers, was important for overseas trade. Malwa and Rajasthan were the essential links between the Ganga valley and Gujarat. This defined the geographical limits of an empire in north India. In south India, the Cholas were able to bring the Krishna, Godavari and the Kaveri deltas under their control. This was the basis of their supremacy in south India.

Large states arose in north India and the Deccan between AD 750 and 1000. These were the Pala empire, which dominated eastern India till the middle of the ninth century; the Pratihara empire, which dominated western India and the upper Gangetic valley till the middle of the tenth century, and the Rashtrakuta empire, which dominated the Deccan and also controlled territories in north and south India at various times. Each of these empires, although they fought among themselves, provided stable conditions of life over large areas, extended agriculture, built ponds and canals, and gave patronage to arts and letters, including temples. Of the three, the Rashtrakuta empire lasted the longest. It was not only the most powerful empire of the time, but also acted as a bridge between north and south India in economic as well as in cultural matters.

The Struggle for Domination in North India: The Palas

The period following the death of Harsha was a period of political confusion. For some time, Lalitaditya, the ruler of Kashmir brought the Punjab under his control and even controlled Kanauj which, since the days of Harsha, was considered the symbol of the sovereignty of north India—a position which Delhi was to acquire later. Control of Kanauj also implied control of the upper Gangetic valley and its rich resources in trade and agriculture. Lalitaditya even invaded Bengal or Gaud, and killed its reigning king. But his power waned with the rise of the Palas and the Gurjara-Pratiharas.

The Palas and the Pratiharas clashed with each other for the control of the area extending from Banaras to south Bihar which again had rich resources and well developed imperial traditions. The Pratiharas also clashed with the Rashtrakutas of the Deccan.

The Pala empire was founded by Gopala, probably in AD 750 when he was elected king by the notable men of the area to end the anarchy prevailing there. Gopala was not born in a high, much less a royal family, his father probably being a soldier. He unified Bengal under his control, and even brought Magadha (Bihar) under his control. Gopala was succeeded in AD 770 by his son, Dharamapala, who ruled till AD 810. His reign was marked by a tripartite struggle between the Palas, the Pratiharas and the Rashtrakutas for the control of Kanauj and north India. The Pratihara ruler advanced upon Gaud (Bengal), but before a decision could be taken, the Pratihara ruler was defeated by the Rashtrakuta ruler, Dhruva, and was forced to seek refuge in the deserts of Rajasthan. Dhruva then returned to the Deccan. This left the field free for Dharmapala who occupied Kanauj and held a grand darbar which was attended by vassal rulers from Punjab, eastern Rajasthan, etc. We are told that the rule of Dharmapala extended upto the furthest limit of India in the northwest and, perhaps, included Malwa and Berar. Apparently, this implied that the rulers of these areas accepted the suzerainty of Dharmapala.

The triumphal career of Dharmapala may be placed between AD 790 and 800. Dharmapala could not, however, consolidate his power in north India. The Pratihara power revived under Nagabhatta II. Dharmapala fell back, but was defeated near Mongyr. Bihar and modern east Uttar Pradesh remained a bone of contention between

the Palas and the Pratiharas. However, Bihar, in addition to Bengal, remained under the control of the Palas for most of the time.

Failure in the north compelled the Pala rulers to turn their energies in other directions. Devapala, the son of Dharmapala, who succeeded to the throne in AD 810 and ruled for 40 years, extended his control over Pragjyotishpur (Assam) and parts of Orissa. Probably a part of modern Nepal was also brought under Pala suzerainty.

Thus, for about a hundred years, from the middle of the eighth to the middle of the ninth century, the Pala rulers dominated eastern India. For some time, their control extended upto Varanasi. Their power is attested to by an Arab merchant, Sulaiman, who visited India in the middle of the ninth century, and wrote an account of it. He calls the Pala Kingdom Ruhma, (or Dharma, short for Dharmapala), and says that the Pala ruler was at war with his neighbours, the Pratiharas and the Rashtrakutas, but his troops were more numerous that his adversaries. He tells us that it was customary for the Pala king to be accompanied by a force of 50,000 elephants, and that 10,000–15,000 men in his army were employed 'in fulling and washing clothes'. Even if these figures may be exaggerated, we can assume that the Palas had a large military force at their disposal. But we do not know whether they had a large standing army, or whether their forces consisted largely of feudal levies. Information about the Palas is also provided to us by Tibetan chronicles, although these were written in the seventeenth century. According to these, the Pala rulers were great patrons of Buddhist learning and religion. The Nalanda university which had been famous all over the eastern world was revived by Dharmapala, and 200 villages were set apart for meeting its expenses. He also founded the Vikramaśila university which became second only to Nalanda in fame. It was located on the top of a hill, on the banks of the Ganga in Magadha, amidst pleasant surroundings. The Palas built many *viharas* in which a large number of Buddhist monks lived.

The Pala rulers also had close cultural relations with Tibet. The noted Buddhist scholars, Santarakshita and Dipankara (called Atisa), were invited to Tibet, and they introduced a new form of Buddhism there. As a result, many Tibetan Buddhists flocked to the universities of Nalanda and Vikramsila for study. Although the Palas were

supporters of Buddhism, they also extended their patronage to Saivism and Vaishnavism. They gave grants to large numbers of brahmans from north India who flocked to Bengal. Their settlements helped in the extension of cultivation in the area, and the transformation of many pastoralists and food-gatherers to settle down to cultivation. The growing prosperity of Bengal helped in extending trade and cultural contacts with countries of Southeast Asia—Burma, Malaya, Java, Sumatra, etc.

The trade with Southeast Asia was very profitable and added greatly to the prosperity of the Pala empire and led to the incursion of gold and silver from these countries into Bengal. The powerful Sailendra dynasty, which was Buddhist in faith and which ruled over Malaya, Java, Sumatra and the neighbouring islands, sent many embassies to the Pala court and sought permission to build a monastery at Nalanda, and also requested the Pala ruler, Devapala, to endow five villages for its upkeep. The request was granted and bears testimony to the close relations between the two empires.

The Pratiharas

The Pratiharas who ruled over Kanauj for a long time are also called Gurjara-Pratiharas. Most scholars consider that they originated from the Gurjaras who were pastoralists and fighters, like the Jats. The Pratiharas established a series of principalities in central and eastern Rajasthan. They clashed with the Rashtrakutas for the control of Malwa and Gujarat, and later for Kanauj which implied control of the upper Ganga valley. The Pratiharas who first had their capital at Bhinmal gained prominence under Nagabhatta I who offered stout resistance to the Arab rulers of Sind who were trying to encroach on Rajasthan, Gujarat, the Punjab, etc. The Arabs made a big thrust towards Gujarat but were decisively defeated by the Chalukyan ruler of Gujarat in 738. Although small Arab incursions continued, the Arabs ceased to be a threat thereafter.

The efforts of the early Pratihara rulers to extend their control over the upper Ganga valley and Malwa were defeated by the Rashtrakuta rulers Dhruva and Gopal III. In 790 and again in 806–07, the Rashtrakutas defeated the Pratiharas, and then withdrew

to the Deccan, leaving the field free for the Palas. Perhaps the main interest of the Rashtrakutas was the domination of Malwa and Gujarat. The real founder of the Pratihara empire and the greatest ruler of the dynasty was Bhoja. We do not know much about the early life of Bhoja, or when he ascended the throne. He rebuilt the empire, and by about AD 836 he had recovered Kanauj which remained the capital of the Pratihara empire for almost a century.

Bhoja tried to extend his sway in the east, but he was defeated and checkmated by the Pala ruler, Devapala. He then turned towards central India and the Deccan and Gujarat. This led to a revival of the struggle with the Rashtrakutas. In a sanguinary battle on the bank of the Narmada, Bhoja was able to retain his control over considerable parts of Malwa, and some parts of Gujarat. But he could progress no further in the Deccan. Hence, he turned his attention to the north again. According to an inscription, his territories extended to the western side of the river Sutlej. Arab travellers tell us that the Pratihara rulers had the best cavalry in India. Import of horses from Central Asia and Arabia was an important item of India's trade at that time. Following the death of Devapala and the weakening of the Pala empire, Bhoja also extended his empire in the east.

The name of Bhoja is famous in legends. Perhaps, the adventures of Bhoja in the early part of his life, his gradual reconquest of his lost empire, and his final recovery of Kanauj struck the imagination of his contempories. Bhoja was a devotee of Vishnu, and adopted the title of 'Adivaraha' which has been found inscribed in some of his coins. He is sometimes called Mihir Bhoja to distinguish him form Bhoja Paramara of Ujjain who ruled a little later.

Bhoja probably died in about 885. He was succeeded by his son Mahendrapala I. Mahendrapala, who ruled till about 908–09 maintained the empire of Bhoja and extended it over Magadha and north Bengal. His inscriptions have also been found in Kathiawar, east Punjab and Awadh. Mahendrapala fought a battle with the king of Kashmir but had to yield to him some of the territories in the Punjab won by Bhoja.

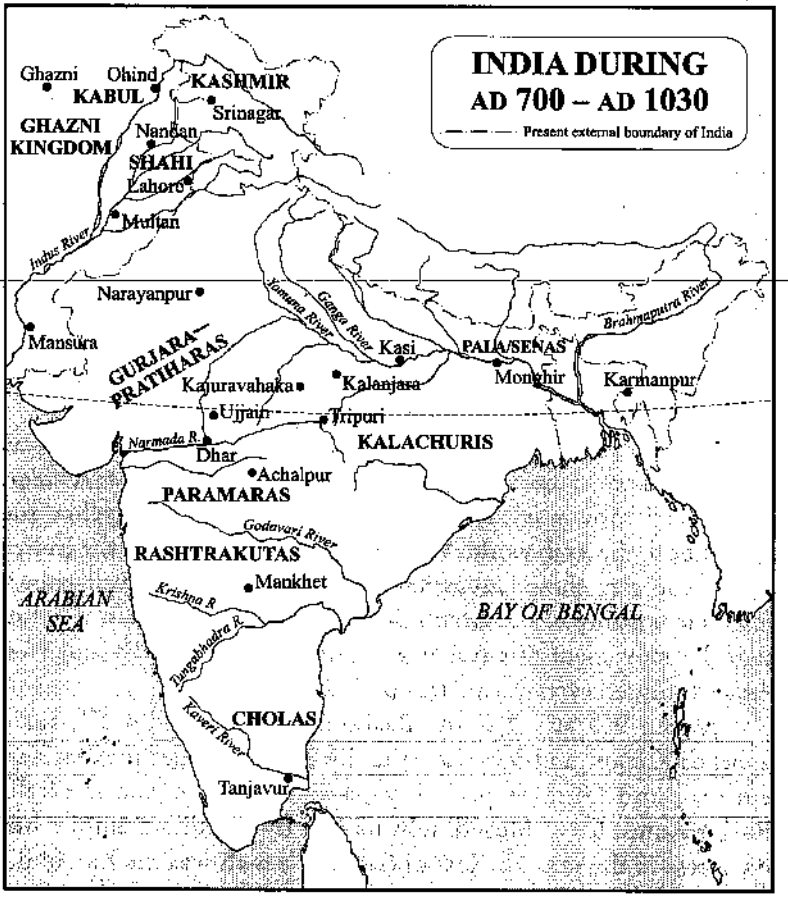
The Pratiharas, thus, dominated north India for over a hundred years, from the early ninth to the middle of the tenth century. Al-Masudi, a native of Baghdad, who visited Gujarat in 915–16, testifies

to the great power and prestige of the Pratihara rulers and the vastness of their empire. He calls the Gurjara-Pratihara kingdom al-Juzr (a corrupt form of Gurjara), and the king Baura, probably a mispronounciation of Adivaraha the title used by Bhoja, although Bhoja had died by that time. Al-Masudi says that the empire of Juzr had 1,80,000 villages, cities and rural areas and was about 2000 km in length and 2000 km in breadth. The king's army had four divisions, each consisting of 7,00,000 to 9,00,000 men: 'with the army of the north he fights against the ruler of Multan and other Muslims who align themselves with him.' The army of the south fought against the Rashtrakutas, and that of the east against the Palas. He had only 2000 elephants trained for war, but the best cavalry of any king in the country.

The Pratiharas were patrons of learning and literature. The great Sanskrit poet and dramatist, Rajashekhar, lived at the court of Mahipala, a grandson of Bhoja. The Pratihara also embellished Kanauj with many fine buildings and temples.

During the eighth and ninth centuries, many Indian scholars went with embassies to the court of the caliph at Baghdad. These scholars introduced Indian sciences, especially mathematics, algebra and medicine to the Arab world. We do not know the names of the Indian kings who sent these embassies. The Pratiharas were well-known for their hostility to the Arab rulers of Sind. Despite this, it seems that the movement of scholars and goods between India and West Asia continued even during this period.

Between 915 and 918, the Rashtrakuta king, Indra III, again attacked Kanauj, and devastated the city. This weakened the Pratihara empire, and Gujarat probably passed into the hands of the Rashtrakutas, for al-Masudi tells us that the Pratihara empire had no access to the sea. The loss of Gujarat, which was the hub of the overseas trade and the main outlet for north Indian goods to West Asian countries, was another blow to the Pratiharas. Another Rashtrakuta ruler, Krishna III, invaded north India in about 963 and defeated the Pratihara ruler. This was followed by the rapid dissolution of the Pratihara empire.


INDIA DURING
AD 700 – AD 1030
Present external boundary of India
Ghazni
Ohind
KABUL
KASHMIR
Srinagar
GHAZNI KINGDOM
Nandan
SHAHI
Lahore
Multan
Indus River
Narayanpur
Yamuna River
Ganga River
Brahmaputra River
Mansura
GURJARA-PRATIHARAS
Kasi
PALA/SENAS
Monghir
Karnanpur
Kanauj
Kalanjara
Ujjain
Tripuri
Narmada R.
KALACHURIS
Dhar
Achalpur
PARAMARAS
Godavari River
RASHTRAKUTAS
Mankhet
ARABIAN SEA
Krishna R.
BAY OF BENGAL
Tungabhadra R.
Kaveri River
CHOLAS
Tanjavur

The Rashtrakutas

While the Palas and the Pratiharas were ruling over north India, the Deccan was being ruled by the Rashtrakutas, a remarkable dynasty which produced a long line of warriors and able administrators. The kingdom was founded by Dantidurga who set up his capital at Manyakhet or Malkhed near modern Sholapur. The Rashtrakutas soon dominated the entire area of northern Maharashtra. They also engaged with the Pratiharas for the overlordship of Gujarat and Malwa as we have seen above. Although their raids did not result in the extension of the Rashtrakuta empire to the Ganga valley, they brought rich plunder, and added to the fame of the Rashtrakutas. The Rashtrakutas also fought constantly against the eastern Chalukyas of Vengi (in modern Andhra Pradesh) and in the south against the Pallavas of Kanchi and the Pandyas of Madurai.

Probably the greatest Rashtrakuta rulers were Govinda III (793–814) and Amoghavarsha (814–878). After a successful expedition against Nagabhatta of Kanauj and the annexation of Malwa, Govinda III turned to the south. We are told in an inscription that Govinda 'terrified the Kerala, Pandya and the Chola kings and caused the Pallavas to wither. The Ganga (of Karnataka), who became dissatisfied through baseness, were bound down with fetters and met with death.' The king of Lanka and his minister who had been negligent of their own interests, were captured and brought over as prisoners to Halapur. Two statues of the lord of Lanka were carried to Manyakhet, and installed like pillars of victory in front of a Siva temple.

Amoghavarsha ruled for 64 years but by temperament he preferred the pursuit of religion and literature to war. He was himself an author and is credited with writing the first Kannada book on poetics. He was a great builder, and is said to have built the capital city Manyakhet so as to excel the city of Indra.

There were many rebellions in the far flung Rashtrakuta empire under Amoghavarsha. These could be barely contained, and began afresh after his death. His grandson, Indra III, (915–927) re-established the empire. After the defeat of Mahipala and the sack of Kanauj in 915, Indra III was the most powerful ruler of his times.

According to al-Masudi who visited India at that time, the Rashtrakuta king, Balhara or Vallabharaja, was the greatest king of India and most of the Indian rulers accepted his suzerainty and respected his envoys. He possessed large armies and innumerable elephants.

Krishna III (934–963) was the last in a line of brilliant rulers. He was engaged in a struggle against the Paramaras of Malwa and the eastern Chalukyas of Vengi. He also launched a campaign against the Chola ruler of Tanjore, who had supplanted the Pallavas of Kanchi. Krishna III defeated the Chola king, Parantaka I (AD 949), and annexed the northern part of the Chola empire. He then pressed down to Rameshwaram and set up a pillar of victory there and built a temple. After his death, all his opponents united against his successor. The Rashtrakuta capital, Malkhed, was sacked and burnt in 972. This marked the end of the Rashtrakuta empire.

The Rashtrakuta rule in the Deccan thus lasted for almost two hundred years, till the end of the tenth century. The Rashtrakuta rulers were tolerant in their religious views and patronised not only Saivism and Vaishnavism but Jainism as well. The famous rock-cut temple of Siva at Ellora was built by one of the Rashtrakuta kings, Krishna I, in the ninth century. His successor, Amoghavarsha, is said to have been a Jain but be also patronised other faiths. The Rashtrakutas allowed Muslim traders to settle, and permitted Islam to be preached, in their dominions. We are told that the Muslims had their own headman, and had large mosques for their daily prayers in many of the coastal towns in the Rashtrakuta empire. This tolerant policy helped to promote foreign trade which enriched the Rashtrakutas.

The Rashtrakuta kings were great patrons of arts and letters. In their courts, we find not only Sanskrit scholars, but also poets and others who wrote in Prakrit and in the *apabhramsha*, the so-called corrupt languages which were the fore-runners of the various modern Indian languages. The great *apabharamsha* poet, Svayambhu, and his son probably lived at the Rashtrakuta court.

Political Ideas and Organisation

The system of administration in these empires was based on the ideas and practices of the Gupta empire, Harsha's kingdom in the

north, and the Chalukyas in the Deccan. As before, the monarch was the centre of all affairs. He was the head of the administration as well as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. He sat in a magnificent darbar. Squadrons of infantry and cavalry were stationed in the courtyard. Captured war-elephants and horses were paraded before him. He was attended by royal chamberlains, who regulated the coming and going of vassal chiefs, feudatories, ambassadors, and other high officials who regularly waited on the king. The king also dispensed justice. The court was not only a centre of political affairs and justice, but cultural life as well. Dancing girls and skilled musicians attended the court. Women of the King's household also attended the darbar on festive occasions. In the Rashtrakuta empire, according to Arab writers, women did not veil their faces.

The king's position was generally hereditary. Thinkers of the time emphasized absolute loyalty and obedience to the king because of the insecurity of the times. Wars were frequent between kings, and between kings and their vassals. While kings strove to maintain law and order within their kingdoms, their arms rarely extended far enough. Vassal rulers and autonomous chiefs often limited the area of the direct administration of the king, although the kings adopted high sounding titles such as *Maharajadiraj param-bhattaraka* etc., and claimed to be *chakravartin*, or supreme, of all Indian rulers. A contemporary writer, Medhatithi, thinks that it was the right of an individual to bear arms in order to defend himself against thieves and assassins. He also thinks that it was right to oppose an unjust king. Thus, the extreme view of royal rights and privileges, put forward mainly in the *Puranas*, was not accepted by all the thinkers.

The rules about succession were not rigidly fixed. The eldest son often succeeded, but there are many instances when the eldest son had to fight his younger brothers, and sometimes lost to them. Thus, the Rashtrakuta rulers Dhruva and Govinda IV, deposed their elder brothers. Sometimes, rulers designated the eldest son or another favourite son as their Yuvaraj or successor. In that case, the Yuvaraj stayed at the capital and helped in the task of administration. Younger sons were sometimes appointed provincial governors. Princesses were rarely appointed to government posts, but we do have an instance when a Rashtrakuta princess, Chandrobalabbe, a daughter of Amoghavarsha I, administered the Raichur doab for sometime.

Kings were generally advised by a number of ministers. The ministers were chosen by the king, generally from leading families. Their position was often hereditary. Thus, in the case of the Pala kings, we hear that a brahmana family supplied four successive chief ministers to Dharmapala and his successors. In such cases, the minister could become very powerful. Although we hear of a number of departments of the central government, we do not know how many of them were there and how they worked. From epigraphic and literary records, it appears that in almost every kingdom, there was a minister of correspondence which included foreign affairs, a revenue minister, treasurer, chief of the armed forces (*senapati*), chief justice, and *purohita*. More that one post could be combined in one person, and perhaps one of the ministers was considered the chief or the leading minister on whom the king leaned more than the others. All the ministers, except the *purohita*, were expected to lead military campaigns as well when called upon to do so. We also hear of officials of the royal household (*antahpur*). Since the king was the fountain head of all power, some of the officers of household became very powerful.

The armed forces were very important for the maintenance and expansion of the empire. We have already cited evidence from Arab travellers that the Pala, Pratihara and Rashtrakuta kings had large and well-organised infantry and cavalry, and large number of war-elephants. Elephants were supposed to be elements of strength and were greatly prized. The largest number of elephants was maintained by the Pala kings. Large numbers of horses were imported both by Rashtrakuta and Pratihara kings by sea from Arabia and West Asia, and over land from Khurasan (east Persia), and Central Asia. The Pratihara kings are believed to have had the finest cavalry in the country. There are no reference to war-chariots which had fallen out of use. Some of the kings, especially the Rashtrakutas, had a large number of forts. They were garrisoned by special troops, and had their own independent commanders. The infantry consisted of regular and irregular troops, and of levies provided by the vassal chiefs. The regular troops were often hereditary and sometimes drawn from different regions all over India. Thus, the Pala infantry consisted of soldiers from Malwa, Khasa (Assam), Lata (south Gujarat) and Karnataka. The Pala kings, and perhaps the Rashtrakutas, had their

own navies, but we do not know much about their strength and organisation.

The empires consisted of area administered directly and areas ruled over by the vassal chiefs. The latter were autonomous as far as their internal affairs were concerned, and had a general obligation of loyalty, paying a fixed tribute and supplying the quota of troops to the overlord. Sometimes, a son of a vassal chief was required to stay in attendance of the overlord to guard against rebellion. The vassal chiefs were required to attend the darbar of the overlord on special occassions, and sometimes they were required to marry one of their daughters to the overlord or to one of his sons. But the vassal chiefs always aspired to be independent and wars between them and the overlord were frequent. Thus, the Rashtrakutas had to fight constantly against the vassal chiefs of Vengi (Andhra) and Karanataka; the Pratiharas had to fight against the Paramaras of Malwa and the Chandellas of Bundelkhand.

The directly administered territories in the Pala and Pratihara empires were divided into *bhukti* (provinces), and *mandala* or *visaya* (districts). The governor of a province was called *uparika* and the head of a district, *visayapati*. The *uparika* was expected to collect land revenue and maintain law and order with the help of the army. The *visayapati* was expected to do the same within his jurisdiction. During the period, there was an increase of smaller chieftains, called *samantas* or *bhogapatis*, who dominated over a number of villages. The *visayapatis* and these smaller chiefs tended to merge with each other, and later on the word *samanta* began to be used indiscriminately for both of them.

In the Rashtrakuta kingdom, the directly administered areas were divided into *rashtra* (provinces), *visaya* and *bhukti*. The head of *rashtra* was called *rashtrapati*, and he performed the same functions as the *uparika* did in the Pala and Pratihara empires. The *visaya* was like a modern district, and the *bhukti* was a smaller unit to it. In the Pala and Pratihara empires, the unit below the *visaya* was called *pattala*. The precise role of these smaller units is not known. It seems that their main purpose was the realization of land revenue and some attention to law and order. Apparently all the officials were paid by giving them grants of rent-free land. This tended to blur the distinction between local officials and the hereditary chiefs and

smaller vassals. Similarly, the *rashtrapati* or governor sometimes enjoyed the status and title of a vassal king.

Below these territorial divisions was the village. The village was the basic unit of administration. The village administration was carried on by the village headman and the village accountant whose posts were generally hereditary. They were paid by grants of rent-free lands.

The head man was often helped in his duties by the village elders called *grama mahajana* or *grama mahattara*. In the Rashtrakuta kingdom, particularly in Karnataka, we are told that there were village committees to manage local schools, tanks, temples and roads. They could also receive money or property in trust, and manage them. These sub-committees worked in close cooperation with the headman and received a percentage of the revenue collection. Simple disputes were also decided by these committees. Towns had similar committees, to which the heads of trade guilds were also associated. Law and order in the towns and in areas in their immediate vicinity was the responsibility of the *koshta pala* or *kotwal*—a figure made familiar through many stories.

An important feature of the period was the rise in the Deccan of hereditary revenue officers called *nad gavundas* or *desa gramakutas*. They appear to have discharged the same functions as the deshmukhs and deshpandes of later times in Maharashtra. This development, along with the pettry chieftainships in north India which we have just mentioned, had an important bearing on society and politics. As the power of these hereditary elements grew, the village committees became weaker. The central ruler also found it difficult to assert his authority over them and to control them. This is what we mean when we say that the government was becoming 'feudalised'.

Another point to bear in mind is the relationship of state and religion during the time. Many of the rulers of that time were devout followers of Siva or Vishnu, or they followed the teachings of Buddhism or Jainism. They made handsome donations to the Brahmans, or the Buddhist *viharas* or the Jain temples. But, generally, they gave patronage to all the faiths, and did not persecute anyone for his or her religious beliefs. Muslims were also welcomed and allowed to preach their faith by the Rashtrakuta kings. Normally, a king was

not expected to interfere with the customs, or with the code of conduct prescribed by the law books called the *Dharmashastras*. But he did have the general duty of protecting Brahmans and maintaining the division of society into four states or *varnas*. The *purohita* was expected to guide the king in this matter. But it should not be thought that the *purohita* interfered with state affairs or dominated the king. Medhatithi, the foremost expounder of *Dharmashastra* in this period, says that the king's authority was derived both from the *Dharmashastras*, including the *Vedas*, and from *Arthashastra* or the science of polity. His public duty or *rajadharma* was to be based on the *Arthshastra*, that is, on principles of politics. This really meant that politics and religion were, in essence, kept apart, religion being essentially a personal duty of the king. Thus, the kings were not dominated by the priests, or by the sacred law expounded by them. Religion was, however important for legitimizing and strengthening the position of the rulers. Many of the rulers therefore built grand temples, often at their capitals, and gave handsome land-grants for the maintenance of the temples and to the Brahmans.